

**Submission
No 131**

INQUIRY INTO VETERINARY WORKFORCE SHORTAGE IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: Byron Bay Wildlife Hospital

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Inquiry into the veterinary shortage in NSW

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Byron Bay Wildlife Hospital (BBWH) is the only all-species wildlife hospital operating between Sydney and the NSW-QLD border. BBWH's professional veterinary team operates seven days a week from a fully equipped, veterinary hospital licensed by the Veterinary Practitioners Board of NSW. All of its infrastructure, staffing, equipment, operations, and costs of doing business have been achieved by raising over \$6 million in cash, in-kind and volunteering contributions entirely from donors and sponsorship, at no cost to the NSW Government. Its services are provided to licensed wildlife rescue organisations and members of the public free of charge.

Recently the NSW State Government revoked a previously announced funding grant of \$6 million over four years reserved for Byron Bay Wildlife Hospital (BBWH). The purpose of the grant was to support BBWH to provide veterinary treatment and rehabilitation services to injured, sick and orphaned wildlife, and to educate the community about the importance of these services to the protection of wildlife and biodiversity across the state. In a letter from the Department of Planning & Environment, the reason given was that our grant did not represent 'value for money'. This advice was received one week before the funding grant was due to commence (1 July 2023).

This has been a huge disappointment. The \$6 million funding grant announcement gave our organisation the confidence it could continue to operate and provide high quality care for injured, sick and orphaned wildlife. Our fundraising efforts could in future focus on innovation, infrastructure and growth, rather than simply to stay afloat. The timing of the government's decision leaves us uncertain about operating into the near future. The reduction of a \$6 million grant to zero, and advice that there is no middle ground, implies that BBWH's work is worthless. Despite this, our aim is to continue to operate at our current, if not expanded capacity, to meet demand. We have been sustained by overwhelming support received via national media coverage, social media commentary, emails, and a public petition which at the time of writing had over 10,300 signatures.

Impact of the current legislative and regulatory framework on veterinarians

The Biodiversity Conservation Act states that NSW's wildlife is the property of and protected by the Crown. The Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1979 stipulates that if someone has a protected animal in their care, they are responsible for seeking veterinary treatment, and they must present it to a veterinarian or a licensed wildlife rehabilitation group. Despite this, there is an expectation that volunteers and veterinarians donate their services without compensation. This legal and regulatory framework relies on volunteers, concerned members of the public and veterinarians donating their time and professional services to treat animals owned by the state is unsustainable, and unfair. It demeans the value of the time and resource invested in obtaining veterinary and veterinary nursing qualifications, research, professional development and running a professional, licensed veterinary practice.

Burn-out and mental health challenges facing the veterinary profession.

Veterinarians in Australia have a suicide rate almost four times higher than the general population. The study 'Suicide in Australian Veterinarians' found that nine out of eleven cases of intentional self-harm between 1990 and 2002 were in rural areas. Stress, depression, and work-related burnout are common causes, due to clinical procedures, long hours, on-call work, and treating animals they lack resources for. Being required by law to treat wildlife exacerbates this.

Veterinarians who volunteer their time to help wildlife in regions affected by floods, economic pressures, and housing affordability are particularly vulnerable. Being able to refer wildlife patients to BBWH's veterinary professionals with the skills, knowledge and resources to effectively treat native animals reduces stress, anxiety, and mental health issues among general practice veterinarians. Access to mentoring from skilled wildlife vets can alleviate mental health issues and potentially save lives.

General veterinary practices receive no payment for treating wildlife. No other profession is expected to donate their professional services in this way. The OEH's Review of the NSW Wildlife Volunteer Wildlife Rehabilitation Sector estimates the minimum value of free veterinary services to wildlife in NSW each year at \$1.8 million.

BBWH's average cost per patient of \$555 (initial consultation, assessment, anaesthesia, X-rays, fluid therapy, pain relief, overnight hospitalisation) can be used to estimate that between \$144,300 and \$288,600 in equivalent labour and materials costs are foregone for a single veterinary practice to provide this service, for which they are not paid. Every wildlife patient admitted means revenue is foregone from not being able to treat a domestic pet, livestock or companion animal for which they are trained equipped and paid.

Role of, and challenges affecting, veterinary nurses

Vet nurses play a crucial support role for veterinarians. They are responsible for triage, patient admission, and assisting with veterinary treatment including X-Rays, fluid therapy, and assisting veterinarians carrying out surgical procedures. They require specific skills and vaccinations to handle a variety of native species, many of which can be dangerous and venomous. Vet nurses struggle with low wages. Combined with inflation, cost of living and housing unaffordability, BBWH is struggling to find experienced wildlife vets to work weekends and casual shifts because the wages are not adequate. This is putting extra pressure on the current staff and leaving a gap in care, at times when the wildlife care groups and rehabilitators need it the most.

BBWH is helping to educate and train the next generation of veterinarians. In 2022, BBWH provided work training placements for 20 vet students. At a best estimate, approximately 15% of the vet and vet nursing team's work hours are spent supervising, instructing and evaluating the work placement tasks of these students. Based on BBWH's budgeted wage and salaries for its full time, part time and weekend veterinarians and nurses, \$80,250 p.a. in wages and salary expense is provided in training services, excluding superannuation costs.

This amounts to in-kind value of about \$4012 per student trained. There is no compensation for this. There are limited other opportunities for wildlife training within Australia.

Role of veterinarians in providing care to injured wildlife and during emergency situations.

Outside of Taronga Wildlife Hospitals, Byron Bay Wildlife Hospital is the only all-species wildlife hospital operating in NSW. It's work plays a crucial role in the process of rescue, treatment, recovery, rehabilitation and release of native animals.

Wildlife veterinarians require specific training, skills and experience in the physiology and anatomy of native animals to provide effective care. They reduce the burden on general practice veterinarians who often do not have the skill, time or resources to treat native animals presented to them by members of the public. In its three years of operation, BBWH has established excellent working relationships with GP vets accepting referrals of native animals in the same way a General Practice doctor would refer a human patient to a specialist. It works daily with all wildlife rescue organisations in the North Coast of NSW including WIRES, who represent over 30% of all patient admissions.

Byron Bay Wildlife Hospital has been custom-built inside a 22-wheel semi-trailer. Its mobility means it can be deployed as part of the State Emergency Management Plan (EMPLAN) to provide immediate veterinary triage, treatment and care for wildlife impacted by natural disasters such as bushfires, floods, oil spills, disease outbreaks and mass strandings. This helps respond to the acceleration in wildlife crisis events associated with climate change.

BBWH's veterinarians had first-hand experience treating wildlife at the epicentre of the 2022 Northern Rivers floods, triaging and treating over 425 native animals from flood-impacted areas of the Northern Rivers from March to June 2022. Predominant species affected by the floods presented by licensed wildlife rescuers and members of the public included echidnas, bandicoots, possums, water birds, sea birds, freshwater turtles, and reptiles. BBWH's veterinary team observed a notable difference in presentations indicating the animals have been directly impacted by the floods.

For example, echidnas would normally be in their burrows at that time of year, however in the space of one week, BBWH treated five echidnas found under flood debris or having been hit by car after seeking higher ground in the aftermath of the floods. There was a noted an increased incidence of freshwater turtles and bearded dragons found on beaches or in areas away from their usual habitat.

Significant numbers of mammals, reptiles, seabirds and land-based birds were found water-logged, dehydrated and exhausted. There was an increased incidence in wildlife being attacked by domestic pets likely due to seeking refuge near homes.

BBWH participated in the EPA's Listening Workshops aimed at developing a Wildlife Sub-plan to the Enviroplan that forms part of the NSW EMPlan. BBWH's vet team, driver and community education staff provided insights into the resources, protocols, skills, roles and responsibilities required of stakeholders responding to wildlife impacted natural disasters like the 2022 Northern Rivers floods on wildlife.

On Saturday 1 July, BBWH's veterinarians were asked by the NSW Government agency National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) to assist in a multi-agency rescue attempt on a stranded humpback whale near Lennox Head. Three BBWH veterinarians were the first medical personnel in attendance. Other agencies assisting NPWS were Seaworld and ORRCA. The multi-agency effort lasted all day. Despite this level of collaboration and expert care, unfortunately the ocean conditions, risk of potential predation and the whale's physical exhaustion and trauma meant it did not survive. The NSW Government makes no recognition or compensation for this work treating native animals that are their legal property.