

Submission
No 149

INQUIRY INTO VETERINARY WORKFORCE SHORTAGE IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: NSW Wildlife Information, Rescue and Education Service Inc.
(WIRES)

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Executive Summary

NSW Wildlife Information and Rescue Service Inc (WIRES) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to Portfolio Committee No. 4 – Regional NSW for the Inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in New South Wales. Alongside the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector, veterinary practices provide an essential service and public good for Australia’s unique native wildlife. The ongoing shortage of veterinary staff presents an overarching challenge, impacting outcomes for wildlife and those who care for them.

The veterinary staff shortage is exacerbated by current education and training programs, and inaccessible Continuing Professional Development opportunities, which inadequately provide for the development of key skills across the handling, triage, and treatment of native animals.

Contributing to the ongoing veterinary staff shortage is a government undervaluation of the essential service provided by the volunteer rescue and rehabilitation sector and veterinary practices. There is an expectation that veterinary staff and practices will treat wildlife pro-bono, with the scope and scale of the need for veterinary services continuing to be under-addressed by government.

An effective, suitably trained, resourced, and supported veterinary sector is essential to ensure positive outcomes for our wildlife, especially in the context of the current biodiversity and extinction crisis.



About WIRES

WIRES is Australia's largest wildlife rescue organisation, and operates a dedicated Wildlife Rescue Office assisting wildlife and the community across Australia 24-hours a day, 365 days a year, providing rescue advice and assistance for over 130,000 animals annually. We have around 4,000 dedicated volunteers as well as a fleet of Wildlife Ambulances operated by full-time, professional Emergency Responders across NSW, South-East Queensland and Tasmania. These ambulances travel, on average, 40,000 kms per year and have responded to more than 11,000 rescues since October 2020.

In addition, WIRES trains hundreds of rescuers and carers annually, are dedicated to the ongoing recruitment of new volunteers and the continued training of existing volunteers. This growing network is critical for the rescue and rehabilitation of our unique native wildlife. WIRES has responded to more than 60% of all animals needing rescuing in NSW over the last 8 years. Across NSW the volunteer contribution is estimated to save the government approximately \$27 million per annum and is growing.¹

WIRES has developed partnerships and programs and provides forward-thinking national support to hundreds of projects which aim to see listed species' populations increase through protection efforts. Since the 2019-2020 summer bushfires, we have had an increasing focus on supporting projects that protect and restore threatened habitats and provide for the long-term recovery of wildlife habitat and the preservation of native species in the wild.

¹ Department of Planning, Industry and Environment (2020) *NSW Volunteer Wildlife Rehabilitation Sector Strategy 2020-2023*, NSW Government.



Structure

The terms of reference for Portfolio Committee No. 4 – Regional NSW’s Inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in New South Wales lists 14 themes. These include:

- (i) the role played by veterinarians in providing care to lost, stray and homeless animals, injured wildlife and during emergency situations.

Reflecting WIRES mission and focus, this submission addresses necessary changes to education and training and other measures government can take to address challenges across the veterinary profession and, by extension, the volunteer rescue and rehabilitation sector. These measures will contribute to reversing the current shortage of staff, increased recognition of the far-too-often undervalued care and support the veterinary workforce provides for sick and injured wildlife, and improve overall outcomes.

Key issues and challenges are addressed across the following subheadings: (1) education, training, and continuing professional development (2) the veterinary profession and Australia’s wildlife, (3) relationship with the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector and concerned members of the public, (4) time, cost, and facilities, and (5) conclusions and recommendations.



Education, Training, and Continuing Professional Development

Veterinary professionals have an ethical obligation to provide pain relief for sick and injured wildlife, an obligation which is not fully appreciated by government. Inadequate government recognition of the social value and essential service provided by veterinary staff – and the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector – are reflected in the design and limited availability of effective education, training and Continuing Professional Development programs. Implications of Inadequate government recognition are directly evidenced in the experiences of veterinary staff and detailed in the outcomes and analysis of workforce surveys.

The current design of education, training and Continuing Professional Development programs are insufficient for the development of necessary skills across the handling, triage and treatment of wildlife. A key outcome is that the current qualification-training programs – and the limited availability of accessible and appropriate professional development opportunities – present a substantive barrier to providing effective care for wildlife, with flow-on effects to veterinary practices and their staff, the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector, and concerned members of the public.

Surveys of veterinary professionals provide a clear illustration of the need for change. For example: a self-assessment survey designed and facilitated by the New South Wales Government found that only 40% of veterinary practices ‘strongly agreed’ that they understood wildlife triage and treatment, and only 47% considered the professional services they were able to provide for wildlife to be of a high standard.² These responses correlate with a survey of wildlife rescue and rehabilitation volunteers, which found that only 50% considered that their local veterinary practice understood wildlife triage and treatment protocols.³

The direct and very close alignment in results of surveys are indicative of the depth and professionalism of the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector, their capacity to provide effective care, and experientially-informed understandings of the essential service and public good provided by veterinary practices and staff.

² Haering, R., Wilson, H., Zhuo, A. & Stathis, P. (2021). A survey of veterinary professionals about their interactions with free-living native animals and the volunteer wildlife rehabilitation sector in New South Wales, Australia, *Australian Zoologist* 41(2) 254-282.

³ Haering, R., Wilson, H., Zhuo, A. & Stathis, P. (2018). Towards a more effective model of local wildlife care with the volunteer wildlife rehabilitation sector, *Australian Wildlife Rehabilitation Proceedings*.



These survey findings are supported by further research, with a lack of knowledge of triage and treatment protocols specifically identified as a key barrier to providing effective treatment and care by veterinary practices and staff.⁴

Alongside the survey results, broader research highlights how the skills shortage – an outcome of the current design of education, training and Continuing Professional Development programs, limited availability and inadequate government recognition of the social value of the essential service provided by veterinary staff – contribute to the lack of availability of appropriate and effective medical treatment, directly and negatively impacting on wildlife care, overall welfare and survival rates.

The Veterinary Profession and Australia's Wildlife

Notwithstanding current structural factors, including shortcomings in education, training and continuing professional development programs for the development of essential skills on handling, triage and treatment of wildlife, veterinary professionals provide an invaluable and essential service for sick and injured wildlife – and support for the similarly under-appreciated by government public good of the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector.

Contrasting with government under-appreciation of the public good provided by veterinary professionals, and the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector more broadly, long-available data confirms the social and economic value of pro-bono services and products provided for wildlife by veterinary practices and their staff. For example, published and accessible research discussing these issues go back more than 30 years⁵. Findings reflect that of the broader volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector, where more than 65% of respondents to a 2019 survey felt that they, and the wildlife they care for, were neglected and unappreciated by governments.⁶

A broadly held underappreciation by government of the public good and essential service provided sits in stark contrast to a willingness amongst veterinary professionals to assist wildlife

⁴ Barnes, E. & Farnworth, M.J. (2017). Perceptions of responsibility and capability for treating wildlife casualties in UK veterinary practices. *Veterinary record* 180: 197–199.

Orr, B. and Tribe, A. 2018. Animal welfare implications of treating wildlife in Australian veterinary practices. *Australian Veterinary Journal* 96(12) 475–480.

⁵ Sikarskie, J.G. (1992). The role of veterinary medicine in wildlife rehabilitation. *Journal of Zoo and Wildlife Medicine* 23(4), 397–400.

⁶ Englefield, B., Candy, S., Starling, M. & McGreevy, P. (2019). The Demography and Practice of Australians Caring for Native Wildlife and the Psychological, Physical and Financial Effects of Rescue, Rehabilitation and Release of Wildlife on the Welfare of Carers, *Animals* 9(12), 1127.



in need. For example, results from a New South Wales Government survey found that close to 75% veterinary practices were willing to take in sick and injured wildlife.⁷ Many of these veterinary practices and staff provide treatment services well beyond ethical obligations for pain relief and euthanasia.

Relationship with the Volunteer Wildlife Rescue and Rehabilitation Sector and Concerned Members of the Public

Alongside the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector, veterinary practices provide an essential service for our wildlife. An effective working relationship is important for wildlife rehabilitation.⁸ The volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector itself provides a significant public good, which is of high value to the environment, the broader public and government across social and economic measures, and its benefits to wildlife.⁹

Without the essential service provided by veterinary practices and staff, Australia's sick and injured wildlife would suffer in their hundreds of thousands every year, and many more would succumb to injuries. The number of successful releases would significantly decrease. An analysis of the wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector found that the time volunteers selflessly provide averaged 32 hours per week, with some individuals providing up to 100 hours a week of care. Reflecting the challenges of rescue and rehabilitation, and repeated exposure to traumatic injuries, 25% of volunteer wildlife carers who responded to a national survey described experiencing moderate to severe grief.¹⁰ These figures provided a broader indication of the relationship between the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector and veterinary practices, impacts of the ongoing shortage of veterinary staff on volunteer capacity and wellbeing, the public good, and wildlife outcomes.

⁷ Haering, R., Wilson, H., Zhuo, A. & Stathis, P. (2021). A survey of veterinary professionals about their interactions with free-living native animals and the volunteer wildlife rehabilitation sector in New South Wales, Australia, *Australian Zoologist* 41(2) 254-282.

⁸ Haering, R., Wilson, H., Zhuo, A. & Stathis, P. (2021). A survey of veterinary professionals about their interactions with free-living native animals and the volunteer wildlife rehabilitation sector in New South Wales, Australia, *Australian Zoologist* 41(2) 254-282.

⁹ Haering, R., Wilson, H., Zhuo, A. & Stathis, P. (2018). Towards a more effective model of local wildlife care with the volunteer wildlife rehabilitation sector, *Australian Wildlife Rehabilitation Proceedings*.

¹⁰ Englefield, B., Candy, S., Starling, M. & McGreevy, P. (2019). The Demography and Practice of Australians Caring for Native Wildlife and the Psychological, Physical and Financial Effects of Rescue, Rehabilitation and Release of Wildlife on the Welfare of Carers, *Animals* 9(12), 1127.



These impacts are not limited to the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector. An analysis of 2016-17 data on recorded wildlife rescues in NSW noted that close to two-thirds of injured native animals were taken to a veterinary practice by members of the public.¹¹ Whereas this does not take away from the importance and underappreciated role of the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector, it is indicative of the scope and scale of pro-bono services provided by veterinary professionals, the social value and public good of these essential services, and underreported extent of impacts if the ongoing shortage of veterinary staff is unaddressed by government.

In short, there is a strong and invaluable relationship across the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector, veterinary practices and the broader public. The professional service provided by veterinary practices and staff is an essential component of this relationship and impacted by the current staff shortage. If the situation continues to be unaddressed by government, sick and injured wildlife will suffer from poorer outcomes. As will the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector and the broader public.

Time, cost, and facilities

The current costs of rescue, triage, assessment, treatment, and rehabilitation of sick and injured wildlife is borne by the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector, veterinary staff and practices. A survey conducted by the NSW Office of Environment and Heritage estimated the direct annual financial costs incurred by veterinary practices and staff. With 86% of practices providing free assessment of wildlife and 90% providing euthanasia without charge, there is estimated economic value of more than \$1 million in 2017.¹² This figure sits in addition to an estimated saving to government of \$27 million by the services provided by the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector in 2018.¹³ The social and environmental value is much greater.

An analysis of findings of a NSW government survey of veterinary practices and staff noted that the cost of providing these services was a significant and ongoing challenge. One that they – and the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector – should not be required to bare.

¹¹ Haering, R., Wilson, H., Zhuo, A. & Stathis, P. (2021). A survey of veterinary professionals about their interactions with free-living native animals and the volunteer wildlife rehabilitation sector in New South Wales, Australia, *Australian Zoologist* 41(2) 254-282.

¹² Office of Environment and Heritage (2018). Review of the NSW volunteer fauna rehabilitation sector. Unpublished draft discussion paper, NSW Office of Environment and Heritage, Sydney NSW.

¹³ Haering, R., Wilson, H., Zhuo, A. & Stathis, P. (2018). Towards a more effective model of local wildlife care with the volunteer wildlife rehabilitation sector, *Australian Wildlife Rehabilitation Proceedings*.



These figures highlight year-on-year increases in the number of native animals rescued and requiring care, largely due to the far-reaching and expanding impacts of several anthropogenic factors and increased public concern.

Veterinary staff provide these essential services pro-bono in addition to regular work hours and workload, regularly foregoing lunch and other breaks, including working afterhours, on evenings and weekends.

As these essential services do not generate an income for veterinary practices, treating wildlife is seen as a personal activity and responsibility – reflecting ethical obligations. Compounded by the undervaluing of these services by government, the costs of this public good is effectively offloaded onto individual staff across the state.

The welfare of wildlife is directly impacted by these services being individualised and provided pro-bono – an outcome of an under-appreciation of these essential services and their public good by government support, and an associated lack of government support. Wildlife are often exposed to long wait times and left unattended in boxes/carriers for extended periods before receiving assessment, triage and treatment. This is exacerbated by the nature of injuries, routinely requiring pain relief, and leading to further suffering.

An additional concern is that many practices do not have and cannot afford to set aside separate spaces specifically designed to provide safe spaces for wildlife. An outcome is that wildlife can be co-located with domestic animals (i.e. cats and dogs) which can further increase psychological stress and lead to poor recovery outcomes.

In structural terms, there is an unmet need for government incentives to subsidize the cost of veterinary practices and staff to continue to provide professional services for sick and injured wildlife – a key issue this inquiry is well placed to consider suitable options to address these key challenges and the outcomes for wildlife.

In addition, centrally located and government supported, facility-based organisations with species group focus and designed around rescue and rehabilitation have significant potential to address a number of these challenges: reducing the cost burden on veterinary practices and staff. These changes can lower risks associated with the current over-reliance on pro-bono veterinary services to wildlife, and flow on effects for the wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector and the public more broadly.



Conclusion

Veterinary practices and staff provide an essential service and public good for our wildlife, supporting the invaluable work of the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector. This comes at a significant financial cost burden which is under-appreciated by government. The ongoing shortage of veterinary staff presents an overarching challenge, impacting outcomes for wildlife and those who care for them.

The design and structure of current education and training programs fall short in providing for the development of key skills across the handling, triage, and treatment of wildlife. A need to develop these key skills is further impacted by inaccessible and cost-prohibitive Continuing Professional Development opportunities.

The undervaluation of the essential service provided by the volunteer rescue and rehabilitation sector and veterinary practices creates an expectation that veterinary staff and practices will treat wildlife pro-bono, a cost that cannot continue to be met without adverse impacts on these services and the wildlife that come into their care.

The Inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in New South Wales presents an opportunity for necessary change. To lay foundations for the development of an effective, suitably trained, resourced, and supported veterinary profession. Foundations with long-term benefits, and providing means to address the current workplace shortage. Alongside a supported volunteer rescue and rehabilitation sector, these changes are essential to ensure positive outcomes for Australia's unique native wildlife and the broader public good, especially in the context of the current biodiversity and extinction crisis.

Recommendations

1. Building the capacity of veterinary professionals is essential to address increasing numbers of sick and injured wildlife requiring treatment.
2. Education and training:
 - a. Graduate and postgraduate education programs in veterinary medicine include specific knowledge and skills to triage and treat sick and injured wildlife,
 - b. Associate Diploma, Diploma, Certificate level and other training programs include specific knowledge and skills to triage and treat sick and injured wildlife,
 - c. Increased opportunities across practical training and education programs including specific knowledge and skills to triage and treat sick and injured wildlife,
 - d. The current cost of education and training be assessed to determine impacts on retention and attrition rates across the profession, and



- e. Government incentives be determined to address the prohibitive costs of Continuing Professional Development opportunities including specific knowledge and skills to triage and treat sick and injured wildlife.
3. Government incentives and other support to address the costs of treating sick and injured wildlife be determined, seeking to address current challenges and risks. Measures including the following to be considered:
 - a. Incentives for veterinary services who dedicate time and expertise to treating wildlife.
 - b. Funding for veterinary practices to provide a separate holding and treatment spaces dedicated to wildlife, to avoid stress for wildlife exposed to predatory/domestic species.
 - c. Financial compensation for veterinary services in emergency events.
4. A network of strategically located and government-supported facilities and treatment centres be developed, in consultation with the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector.

Yours sincerely,

Leanne Taylor CEO

