



**NSW WILDLIFE
INFORMATION
RESCUE AND
EDUCATION
SERVICE Inc.**

19th March 2021

Committee Secretary
Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

RE: Submission to the National Emergency Declaration Act 2020 Review

NSW Wildlife Information, Rescue and Education Service Inc. (WIREs) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the National Emergency Declaration Act 2020 Review and discuss its potential impact on our native wildlife and their habitat.

WIREs is Australia's largest wildlife rescue organisation, and WIREs' mission is to actively rehabilitate and preserve Australian wildlife and inspire others to do the same. WIREs operate a dedicated Wildlife Rescue Office assisting the community and wildlife 24/7 and WIREs have 28 regional branches with over 3,500 volunteers involved in wildlife rescue, rehabilitation, information and education. Annually, WIREs provide rescue advice and assistance for over 100,000 sick, injured, orphaned, and displaced animals and normally run around 100 wildlife training courses for thousands of participants.

During the devastating 2019-2020 bushfire, WIREs was actively involved in a range of emergency response aspects from receiving reports of injured or affected wildlife on a 24/7 basis, on the ground in search and rescue efforts, and care and rehabilitation of injured and displaced fauna.

Due to the influx of support from the public WIREs has been able to extend our wildlife rescue advice and assistance service to support calls 24/7 for all species, increase national support for wildlife rescue and rehabilitation, partner with drone organisations to search and survey habitat post-fires, and fund projects to support the restoration of habitat and recovery of native species across Australia.

2019-2020 'black summer' Bushfires

Despite rescuing and rehabilitating wildlife for almost 35 years, nothing could have prepared WIREs or the Australian community for the devastation of the 'black summer' bushfires. Millions of hectares of land were destroyed, much of which was threatened species habitat and almost 3 billion animals have been estimated to have been killed or displaced¹.

By January 2020, the world knew that the scale and severity of Australia's fire season was unprecedented, as was the tragic toll on native animals. Whilst responding to the emergencies on the ground, in the first 12 weeks of 2020, there were over 86,000 calls to WIREs' 1300 number, over 4 million visitors to WIREs' website and over 500,000 emails from individuals wanting updates and offering to assist. In the wake of the devastating 2019/2020 emergency events, WIREs began providing significant national support for wildlife, supporting over 240 projects to assist with wildlife rescue and care across every state and territory. WIREs are also working with major partners to support the long-term recovery of wildlife habitat and the long-term preservation of native species in the wild.

The bushfire season of 2019/2020 is unlikely to be a one off event. The size, intensity and frequency of bushfires across Australia has been increasing over the last 30 years. The black summer exposed significant gaps in Australia's arrangements for managing

¹ WWF-Australia. 2020. *Australia's 2019-2020 Bushfires: The Wildlife Toll*. Interim Report. WWF-Australia.



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a major emergency, both on the ground in the operational phase as well as the recovery stages.

Weaknesses in National Emergency Response for Wildlife

Effective preparedness is vital to improve and deliver a more structured and organised approach to future emergencies. Both government agencies and non-government organisations must contribute and work together to improve outcomes and have a more consistent and effective approach. To improve outcomes for wildlife and habitat, it is vital to ensure that procedures and protocols are in place across the rescue and rehabilitation sectors as well as established wildlife processes for other organisations and governing agencies working in emergency response.

Weaknesses in the current legislation include:

- Lack of access to current documentation detailing policies, protocols and management systems relating to emergency response.
- Inconsistent levels of coordination and planning for native wildlife affected by an emergency.
- No clear structure for or overarching body operating in the interest of wildlife.
- Lack of a robust rescue and rehabilitation response capacity nationally.
- Key firefighting mitigation strategies led to higher losses of wildlife and habitat, which led to devastating biodiversity destruction
- Poorly organised wildlife triage centres set up and coordinated by inadequately trained personnel, leads to significant animal welfare issues

Native animals are deeply valued by the community, both in Australia and internationally. We have a duty to ensure they are better protected in the future and this is a significant opportunity to implement changes, that are urgently needed to preserve remaining species forever.

Improvements suggested:

- Address need for better communication management and community engagement, between governing agencies, wildlife organisations, vets, volunteers, media and members of public.
- Recognise need for consistent protocols, policies, structured management systems and training related to wildlife response in the field, including search and rescue.
- Improve communication with emergency service personnel coordinating field efforts and advising on access to fire grounds.
- Ensure there are processes in place to reduce risk, pro-actively protecting wildlife, particularly threatened species and critical areas of refuge and habitat.
- Clarify set regulations and protocols for deploying veterinary teams and setting up triage centres in an emergency. This should include appropriate veterinary standards for treatment and care.
- Establishing systems that will facilitate ongoing increases in national rescue and capacity.
- Utilising technology to increase efficiency and effectiveness, ensuring the fastest possible rescue response for all impacted animals.
- *Division 2 – Definitions ‘nationally significant harm means harm that:’ should include”:*

(b) (vi) significant loss of biodiversity or protected habitat.





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A national approach is needed, for the critical continued protection of our unique fauna and flora. It is vital that wildlife and habitat are included as a key focus area in the future planning of any national natural disaster response. The scale and loss following the recent bushfire crisis, is on an ecological scale that will have impacts on populations well in to the future. It is unknown yet whether all species currently at risk can be saved from extinction. There is a real risk that within decades, iconic species, including koalas, may vanish from the wild.

To ensure the long-term future of native species it is vital that wildlife and wildlife habitat are included as essential focus areas in all future planning for disaster responses. A strong, consistent national approach to rescuing, rehabilitating, protecting and preserving wildlife is also needed, one that will support all communities, states, rescue organisations and environmental groups, to work better together for the benefit of wildlife across Australia.

Taking into account the above information, WIRES encourages the committee to develop emergency response procedures that will better plan for longevity of threatened ecosystems and the wildlife dependent on them.

Yours sincerely,

Leanne Taylor, WIRES CEO



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