

TRANSCRIPT

STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING

Inquiry into fire season preparedness

Melbourne — 19 July 2016

Members

Mr David Davis — Chair

Ms Harriet Shing — Deputy Chair

Ms Melina Bath

Mr Richard Dalla-Riva

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Witnesses

Ms Mhairi Roberts (affirmed), Animal Welfare Policy Manager, and

Ms Lara Griffin (affirmed), Continuous Improvement Manager, RSPCA (Victoria).

The CHAIR — I welcome the RSPCA officers Lara Griffin and Mhairi Roberts. If I can ask you to make a short presentation, and then we will follow up with some questions.

Visual presentation.

Ms ROBERTS — Thank you. We would like to thank the committee for the opportunity to speak today on behalf of RSPCA Victoria. The terms of reference for this committee state that the focus is the impact of preventative burns on threatened species. The RSPCA considers the welfare of all animals should be taken into account when planning a preventative burn and that the welfare impacts should be reduced as much as possible. The RSPCA believes that wherever human activities have the potential to have a negative impact on wild animals, whether directly or indirectly, we have a duty to ensure that they are conducted in a way that causes as little injury, suffering or distress to the animals as possible.

The information that is available on DELWP's website relating to consideration of animals during planned burns is not comprehensive and assumes that all planned burns move slowly, are not as hot as bushfires and have low flames. We do not believe that this is always the case, and therefore protocols are needed to protect animal welfare. Protocols and risk assessments should also be made publicly available. DEDJTR should also be engaged in case a planned burn becomes a fire emergency and there is a need to activate the *Victorian Emergency Animal Welfare Plan*.

Ms GRIFFIN — Thanks, Mhairi. DELWP has a publicly available wildlife rescue protocol detailing how wildlife should be rescued after fires. It is dated October 2010. I know that they are doing some work on revising this. Unfortunately, however, comparable response protocols for livestock, horses and companion animals are not available from DEDJTR, and these should be developed. This is in relation to when it becomes an emergency situation.

These protocols should include who is responsible for resourcing response activities, communication, data gathering and reporting protocols and procedures to be followed. Examples are the different species that have been affected and the humane euthanasia methods for those animals, treatment protocols for those animals that can be saved — for example, how to set up a triage site. Also ongoing training opportunities should be made available for personnel participating in emergencies for the assessment and treatment of animals affected by fire. Most vets do not have experience with burns or with the effects of fire on animals, so that would be very valuable.

Also looking at resources, the RSPCA may be requested to provide resources in emergencies, and we are required to prepare and maintain relevant documents in relation to the *Victorian Emergency Animal Welfare Plan*, but we have not been resourced to do so, and our staff would not be insured if we were required to respond. So we do not have dedicated emergency roles as the state government does.

Additionally, in emergency situations RSPCA experience an interruption to business continuity, mostly at our Burwood facility. Historically, what happened with Black Saturday was we had hundreds of people coming to the Burwood facility to donate goods and money — whatever — and we have limited resources to be able to manage that, the people part of it and also the actual items that are donated to us. They are just some of the issues that we wanted to flag. Also, if we are required to establish triage sites, where do we get the consumables from — the pharmaceuticals that we would use — and how is people's time compensated?

Ms ROBERTS — Therefore the RSPCA has the following recommendations: that DEDJTR develop protocols and procedures for on-the-ground animal welfare support activities — including triage sites — livestock, horse and companion animal rescue; protocols and procedures for preventive or planned burns, which include minimisation of animal welfare impacts and which should be publicised; and that there is a need to resolve the gap regarding provision of indemnity insurance for non-government personnel. Thank you.

The CHAIR — Can I thank you for your submission and for the information provided today. I must say I am quite staggered in fact that there are not protocols and procedures relating to animal welfare support activities, including triage sites and livestock, horse and companion animal rescue. From what I understand you are saying, in fact there are protocols with respect to wildlife, which is as it should be, but you are saying there are not such protocols and procedures with respect to those domestic and livestock animals.

Ms GRIFFIN — When I have requested, DELWP very kindly shared their draft protocols for response to wildlife emergencies. I have not been given those protocols in relation to livestock and companion animals from DEDJTR, so I cannot say whether they do or do not exist, just that they have not been made available — —

The CHAIR — They are not public.

Ms GRIFFIN — They are certainly not publicly available. I have been advised by DEDJTR that for companion animals I should refer to local government, but really those protocols are not publicly available either. In our opinion there should be a framework within which everyone fits — —

The CHAIR — There may be variations at a local government level, perhaps.

Ms GRIFFIN — Yes.

The CHAIR — Just in terms of vets, I know that many vets play a significant role when there is a fire, both with wildlife and with domestic and stock animals. Is there assistance to them at that point?

Ms GRIFFIN — I think if you are registered through the AVA, and the AVA manages all vet personnel who would be involved in an emergency incident. If they are vets that have come from RSPCA that are not necessarily registered through the AVA, it is different. So it is not the same — —

The CHAIR — So the AVA becomes the coordinating body in some way, so we maybe should actually have them to give us some evidence, but that is a separate point. The situation in other states: do they have such protocols for wildlife and domestic and stock animals?

Ms ROBERTS — I am not sure, but we could go and ask our other member societies and provide feedback at a later date if that would be okay.

The CHAIR — That would be very welcome, because we may not have to see everything reinvented from scratch, but I will put on record now I think there should be such protocols and I think they are urgently needed.

Ms SHING — Thanks, Mhairi and Lara, for your presentation and for coming today to provide additional information to the committee. I was just having a look while you were doing your presentation at the way in which other jurisdictions operate to resource provision of care not just to companion animals but to livestock — care, welfare, triage and euthanasia. I would welcome your perspectives on how other areas that are affected by bushfires and major emergencies — so the States, for example, and Canada — deal with similar sorts of challenges around often a suburban/urban interface with rural and regional areas, where you can often get a situation that escalates beyond control in a bushfire situation but also where planned burns can impact upon the health and wellbeing of animals more generally.

What is your view on the way in which things should operate beyond what you have had said already around the need to develop protocols, procedures and guidelines in the way that you have described them? I am happy to take it on notice if you would like to provide some further — —

Ms GRIFFIN — Yes.

Ms ROBERTS — That might be good.

Ms SHING — The reason that I ask is that there has been an awful lot of work done overseas in relation to how it is that we take care of livestock, companion animals and fauna more generally in dealing with bushfire and emergency fire and planned burn response where in fact there are unforeseen consequences that arise that affect animals. If you are in a position to provide some additional information and again to benchmark what it is that the RSPCA would like to see happen in Victoria as it relates to other jurisdictions, that would be useful.

Ms GRIFFIN — No problem.

Ms SHING — Beautiful. Thank you very much.

Mr BARBER — The way I seem to understand this is that there are emergency events — unplanned fires — and then there are planned fires, there are domestic animals and there is wildlife, and if I am reading this

right, there is really only a plan for emergency events and maybe wildlife in relation to planned events. Can you tell me how it works in practice?

Ms GRIFFIN — My understanding is obviously there is this overarching emergency animal welfare plan for Victoria, and sitting underneath that I have seen DELWP protocols for the treatment of wildlife in emergency fire situations, but I personally have not seen anything for planned burns.

Ms ROBERTS — No, I have not seen anything for planned burns either. As far as we can tell there is nothing that is publicly available and nothing has been shared with us for how animals would be considered prior to a planned burn. There is some information on DELWP's website, which obviously anyone can access, but it does not go into a lot of detail, and it is not particularly comprehensive, so it was hard for us to try to determine how animal welfare is considered fully and whether or not a risk assessment is conducted prior to a burn that also incorporates animal welfare, not just the impacts that it might have on the people as well.

Mr BARBER — Because the burns themselves, I mean, anyone knows when they are. There is a website telling you when it is going to happen.

The CHAIR — Not the animals.

Mr BARBER — Koalas do not have web connections. So there is the risk assessment up-front. That is good. What do you think should happen during and after the burn, then, that currently is not happening or you are not aware is happening?

Ms ROBERTS — The DELWP website just states that they have conducted some research, and they did mention that they leave refuge areas, but we would be really interested to know whether or not the animals are utilising the refuge areas and whether the animals can actually move away from the front. It does mention that kangaroos can jump over low flames, but we would also have concerns about how large the fire is and if there was a planned burn that did go out of control, how they would manage the animal welfare impacts. Obviously if it did become an emergency, they would have a protocol in place, but in terms of how they would go through a step-by-step system prior to a planned burn, we are just not aware. So we probably cannot make comment on it.

Mr BARBER — It would probably be ad hoc in a sense. If those running the burns do not know it is their job to look out for injured wildlife and then do something, then it is ad hoc in the sense that maybe a local vet starts receiving animals, or may be a local wildlife shelter is aware of the burn and decides to go there after. Your local — I should not say shelter, I should say — rescue people decide to go there after the burn is declared safe and it is made a public access area again. Is that what you think would probably happen then?

Ms ROBERTS — I am not sure.

Ms GRIFFIN — I am not 100 per cent sure. I mean even if it was an unplanned fire, that call is made by emergency services. So I am not sure how that would work for a planned burn.

Mr YOUNG — Thank you for presenting today. Ms Shing already touched on some of the questions that I wanted to ask, and you endeavoured to go back and find some answers on what your idea of protocol would be. Has that work already been done? Does the RSPCA have a document or a piece of work that they have previously done to get to a point to say to a department: 'This is what we think your protocol should look like'?

Ms GRIFFIN — I was tasked with putting together an emergency plan in alignment with the expectations from the Victorian state government. I subsequently found out that that requires alignment with the AIIMS incident management structure. We personally would not take on the role of any of those AIIMS functions. We would slot in underneath, as part of a field team or under the command of the operations manager or the incident controller at the site. But again we are not resourced to put together this plan. We do not have dedicated roles. It is not my particular area of expertise, and so I could be honest and say we are struggling a little bit to put that plan together.

Also in the absence of how these things are going to work on the day — so if we are asked to do something: 'Are you able to establish a triage site?', how do we do that, as an example, or even if we were asked to provide support in the assessment and treatment of animals, what is the protocol for that? Is it a POCTA-authorized officer and a vet, or is it just one? How is that going to work, and what are our responsibilities in relation to that? Does that answer your question?

Mr YOUNG — To an extent, yes. What work has the RSPCA done in relation to previous burns or previous fire events that would suggest that there are animals being impacted adversely and on what level, and what assessment of that — and where do we go from here to start mitigating those risks?

Ms GRIFFIN — I think we can only go by past experience. I think Black Saturday was a massive event for RSPCA, something that we had not experienced before. So we have really just tried to base this current plan on what happened in the past, but there have been changes. Obviously we have got this plan in place now — the state government plan — so I think advances have been made in that respect, but it is really just tidying up those gaps and holes where those things are unknown. Even down to how communication is going to work between the government and the RSPCA, particularly in response to avoiding what happened last time — for example, when we did have hundreds of people turning up at Burwood; how can we coordinate that better so that we are getting the right things coming in and managing that big impact on the RSPCA.

Mr YOUNG — In terms of the obvious influx of activity after those events, can anything be done to look at how big that event actually was? Have you investigated how many instances there were of animals being brought in so we have got a number or an idea? I cannot myself put an idea about what the actual impact is without seeing some statistical stuff to suggest that this many animals were impacted.

Ms GRIFFIN — We do not keep that data. That would all be kept by the government — by DEDJTR, I would expect.

Ms ROBERTS — And we are also only one component of that response team as well. So we did have people that went and assisted with that, but we would not have been able to tell you a complete figure anyway because we only had certain personnel on the ground. You would have to talk to the departments that were overseeing the activities that would hopefully have records of all of the people and the activities they were undertaking.

Mr YOUNG — But you would have records of your own people and their activities at the time?

Ms ROBERTS — We would have to go and check.

Ms GRIFFIN — Yes.

Mr YOUNG — If some of that could be provided specifically around that event, since you have mentioned, that would be great.

The CHAIR — And vets too; we will talk to them.

Ms GRIFFIN — Certainly it has prompted me to ask the question going forward: what are the requirements for data gathering for personnel on the ground at incident sites, because it should be consistent and we should all be capturing the right information, the same information? And that should be directed from DEDJTR in that instance.

Ms BATH — Thank you, Mr Young; you have just asked some questions that I was going to ask. That is very good. Going on from that, I guess what we have just heard is that there needs to be set up both a quantitative — so numbers of dead or injured animals — and also a qualitative, the types and range of species et cetera. So that is what I am hearing. Would you agree with that comment?

Ms GRIFFIN — Yes.

Ms BATH — Data collection, probably. So then my other question, which you may not be able to answer today, is: in relation to threatened species and involvement or commentary by the RSPCA to DELWP in terms of prescribed burns or preventative burns, do you ever make comment to other government bodies in relation to threatened species?

Ms ROBERTS — If we were asked to provide comment, then we would, but it would just depend. I think it would normally be if they put out for consultation that they were developing a document and they asked us for our input, we would definitely provide it.

Ms BATH — The other thing that I would like to clarify is: do you see your role as an advisory role primarily, or in terms of bushfire preparedness could you see it more as an operative role on ground, or is it a mixture of both?

Ms ROBERTS — I would suggest it would be a mixture of both. We would want to be involved in the planning processes, but also we would be able to assist with the operative side as well. We do have POCTA authorised officers who, if we had the resources, would be able to assist in emergencies predominantly, I would think not, in planned burns unless an emergency situation arose from that.

Ms BATH — And I guess liaising with Wildlife Victoria would be an important part of that as well. Do you liaise? Do you have conversations?

Ms ROBERTS — Yes, we do liaise with Wildlife Victoria, but I believe the department in that respect would probably liaise with them directly if it were a wildlife issue, because we probably would not be the middleman in that respect. But we do liaise with them ourselves on other wildlife issues. We do have quite a good relationship with them.

Ms SHING — I just have one further question arising from the answers that you have given to Mr Young in particular. I note that Agriculture Victoria does have work that they do in relation to providing information to stock owners — so on livestock and how to manage livestock after an emergency. Is there any capacity for the RSPCA to be involved in the work that is done after an emergency in dealing with stock owners to assist with the triage process, the treatment process and liaising with treatment from vets and other departmental staff, because there is a big interface there in terms of the work that you do on the one hand, as far as the reactive process, the systems that are required and giving guidance about how to improve them? But on the other hand we have also got stock owners, and we have got the department — so DEDJTR officers as well on the ground and can assist with stock owners' understanding of what to do. Is there any capacity for you to feed into that?

Ms GRIFFIN — Historically we have done that, and that is certainly the expectation in accordance with this plan going forward — that if we are able to provide resources, that we would be involved with that. Certainly historically we have had our officers being given properties to assess after a fire.

Ms SHING — So that is the assessment framework on the one hand. That is obviously going to take resources, and that would be working with stock owners and alongside, potentially, departmental staff. How would that enable you also — and this is an eternal question of resourcing and what the demands are on the work that you do — to actually then meet the challenges of non-domesticated animals, whether they are companion or livestock animals, in responding to emergency situations, so smoke inhalation, burns et cetera?

Ms GRIFFIN — I am not 100 per cent sure what your question is?

Ms ROBERTS — Are you asking if we have — —

Ms SHING — What would the impact be on your operation if you were to become more involved in the way in which livestock and companion animal issues are managed after an emergency and working with stock owners versus the non-domesticated animal and fauna impact of planned burns or emergency incidents?

Ms ROBERTS — I suppose it would be dependent on our resources at the time. It is not probably something we could really comment on in advance. We have not been resourced to assist with that type of work especially for our authorised officers. Their predominant work is under the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, so that is their main focus. So if there were a large number of cases and seizures at that time with companion animals or hobby farms or that type of work that we are required to undertake under that piece of legislation, that could potentially quite severely restrict any other activities we might be able to assist with in other areas — if there was that type of event.

Ms SHING — So the work under the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act and that regulation would take precedence over the work that you would do with non-domesticated fauna and the fallout of animal welfare issues in that space? Is that correct, just so that I am understanding correctly?

Ms GRIFFIN — I believe so. Certainly when I have asked that question of a government representative I have been advised that we would have to ensure we maintained our business as usual operations.

Ms SHING — Thank you very much. That is very helpful.

The CHAIR — Thank you. I am very appreciative of your contribution. Again, the secretariat is likely to be in contact for some further information.

Ms GRIFFIN — Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.