

**Submission
No 191**

INQUIRY INTO THE 2026 SUMMER FIRES ACROSS VICTORIA

Organisation: Wildlife Victoria

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WILDLIFE VICTORIA

**Inquiry into the 2026
summer fires across
Victoria**

Wildlife Victoria
submission



2026

Submission to the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into the 2026 Summer Bushfires

1. Introduction

Wildlife Victoria welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission to the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into the 2026 Summer Bushfires.

Wildlife Victoria is a charity and is the state's leading wildlife rescue organisation. We operate a 24-hour Emergency Response Service ("ERS") and coordinate wildlife rescue and rehabilitation across the state. We manage a large network of 1,500+ trained volunteers and operate a dedicated wildlife veterinary service providing daily clinical support for injured native animals. In 2025 Wildlife Victoria handled over 189,000 calls for assistance for sick, injured and orphaned wildlife from the public and assisted 114,636 native animals across 450 species.

Bushfires have a significant and measurable impact on Victoria's wildlife. Effective wildlife response is a core component of emergency management and requires specialist veterinary expertise, trained wildlife rescuers and structured volunteer management. The Victorian community expect that bushfire impacted wildlife will receive timely and compassionate assistance, and the suffering of native animals during bushfires draws substantial national and even international attention.

Wildlife Victoria acknowledges government leadership of wildlife bushfire emergency response, as set out in the State Emergency Management Plan, and recognises that emergency coordination must occur within a robust and clearly defined framework. This submission addresses systemic deficiencies observed in the operation of the current framework, the Wildlife Emergency Support Network ("WESN"), during the 2026 summer bushfires and identifies reforms required to strengthen Victoria's wildlife emergency response framework.

2. Summary of Key Concerns

The 2026 summer bushfires provided important insights into how the WESN model functions under pressure, exposing gaps in the model and highlighting a number of areas where it should be strengthened to enhance overall effectiveness and coordination. In particular:

- WESN does not deliver end to end volunteer management resulting in less than optimal volunteer engagement outcomes and introducing avoidable risk
- Existing wildlife capability in Victoria, while substantial, is not fully leveraged
- Command, control and activation triggers would benefit from greater clarity to support more consistent operational responses

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- Communication with volunteers and partner organisations could be improved to ensure timely and accurate information flow and better engagement
- Volunteer safety and management would benefit from additional focus to reinforce best practice standards
- Wildlife euthanasia is not always undertaken by personnel with specialist expertise and training, introducing risk to both wildlife welfare and responder trauma
- Community organisations absorbed financial, reputational and operational impacts

Victoria has significant wildlife response capability. The opportunities identified will enhance integration, strengthen structure and ensure clear lines of accountability to enhance operational response.

3. End to End Volunteer Management

Wildlife Victoria manages volunteers in accordance with recognised volunteer management frameworks. This includes the full best practice volunteer involvement cycle:

1. Preparation, governance and resourcing
2. Recruitment and screening
3. Initial and ongoing training
4. Clear planning and deployment processes
5. Code of conduct and disciplinary procedures
6. Ongoing communication, support and recognition
7. Performance evaluation and feedback
8. Post incident review and continuous improvement

([Source: Volunteering Victoria](#))

During the 2026 bushfires, WESN did not perform this full spectrum of functions. The government led WESN model to date has involved prior training of a subset of volunteers, veterinarians and veterinary nurses, with no program of continuous recruitment, refresher training or skills maintenance. There are processes in place for deployment and in field response, however substantive gaps across other aspects of the volunteer management lifecycle persist.

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When deployed via WESN, Wildlife Victoria volunteers become “government volunteers”, limiting Wildlife Victoria’s ability to support, supervise, or ensure adherence to safety standards, codes of conduct or wellbeing protocols. Volunteers reported frustration arising from lack of information, limited communication and unclear processes. Wildlife Victoria needed to try to manage volunteer concerns without visibility of their deployment, exposure to trauma or operational conditions.

WESN appears to lack formal offboarding processes, ongoing health or fitness screening, regular simulations or continuous skills development – elements that are critical in an emergency response context.

4. Communication and Engagement Gaps

Under the current WESN model Wildlife Victoria is not notified by government which of its volunteers are deployed, when its volunteers are deployed, nor provided with information about communications given to them, their exposure to traumatic incidents, or the conditions under which they are operating. As a result, Wildlife Victoria must often respond reactively to volunteer issues and concerns without the necessary context, with some aspects of these issues and concerns possibly requiring ongoing management and action by Wildlife Victoria.

In contrast, requests for deployment of Wildlife Victoria veterinary staff are made directly to the organisation, allowing for coordinated rostering, continuity of wildlife patient care, and implementation of fatigue management protocols.

Where Wildlife Victoria’s volunteers are deployed without our visibility, service gaps can arise in day-to-day wildlife rescue operations across Victoria, potentially requiring out of region backfilling at Wildlife Victoria’s expense. While Wildlife Victoria is strongly supportive of the deployment of its trained volunteers, timely coordination, information sharing and pre-established processes would enable seamless statewide wildlife rescue continuity to ensure response to both day-to-day wildlife rescue and fireground response in line with community demand and expectations.

During January Wildlife Victoria issued 12 direct communications to its volunteers to fill gaps in government communication, including guidance on government regulatory requirements and bushfire protocols, particularly regarding prohibitions on self-deployment. Wildlife Victoria also received numerous calls from concerned and frustrated volunteers seeking clarity.

This communication gap contributed to:

- Volunteer frustration and anger at perceived non engagement by government
- Reduced trust between volunteers and government

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- Heightened risk of volunteer self-deployment
- Safety concerns for responders and wildlife

A reactive or incomplete approach to volunteer management elevates risk and undermines compliance with emergency protocols.

Recommendation:

Government should adopt a comprehensive end to end volunteer management framework for wildlife emergency response, aligned with recognised standards and incorporating:

- Continuous recruitment, training and skills maintenance
- Clear communication procedures
- Health and fitness assessments
- Structured offboarding
- Post-incident review processes

The framework should be aligned and integrated with Wildlife Victoria's established volunteer management systems to support consistent, safe and coordinated deployment arrangements.

Providing Wildlife Victoria with visibility of deployment requests involving its volunteers would enable the organisation to support volunteer wellbeing, advocate appropriately on their behalf, and maintain continuity of wildlife rescue services across Victoria.

Wildlife Victoria would like to expand deployment pathways and opportunities for its volunteers. This includes not only bushfire response, but expanded opportunities for trained volunteers to support surge capacity by backfilling wildlife rescue services in regions experiencing high demand when local responders are deployed to bushfire response activities or volunteers are unable to commit to extended bushfire deployments.

5. Optimising Veterinary and Wildlife Capability

Wildlife Victoria operates a 24-hour Wildlife Emergency Response Service, supported by a dedicated wildlife veterinary team and large network of experienced wildlife rescuers and rehabilitators.

During the 2026 bushfires, this capability was not fully utilised. Government-mandated WESN training for fireground deployment is not offered regularly, resulting in a limited pool of eligible personnel. This restricts surge capacity during large-scale events.

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Additionally, there is no ongoing simulation, refresher training, or workforce readiness monitoring.

Three highly skilled and trained Wildlife Victoria veterinarians were unable to deploy to bushfires because they lacked WESN certification, despite extensive emergency wildlife experience. This illustrates misalignment between existing specialist capability and government deployment requirements.

A more integrated approach would enable timely mobilisation of specialist personnel and strengthen overall response capacity.

Recommendation:

Expand integration of Wildlife Victoria's veterinary and wildlife response capability within emergency management arrangements, supported through ongoing training pathways and preparedness activities.

6. Strengthening Public Reporting Pathways and Use of ERS Infrastructure

During the 2026 summer bushfires, the government promoted multiple reporting pathways for injured and impacted wildlife, including temporary hotlines, general hotlines and digital tools such as the DEECA "Help for Injured Wildlife" app. While well intentioned, multiple channels creates uncertainty for members of the public about where to seek assistance and inconsistent service availability, particularly where channels are not staffed on a 24/7 basis.

Wildlife Victoria operates Victoria's only dedicated staffed 24/7 Wildlife Emergency Response Service (ERS), which functions as a centralised point for receiving and triaging reports of injured wildlife across Victoria all year round.

During the 2026 summer bushfires the Wildlife Victoria ERS worked in alignment with established wildlife emergency management protocols, including triaging calls and directing bushfire impacted wildlife cases in restricted zones to DEECA, and following up on those cases. In areas where access was permitted, the Wildlife Victoria service continued to coordinate incoming reports and deploy volunteer responders. Wildlife Victoria increased staffing levels, including night shift staffing, to manage an increase in incoming call volume and handled the highest number of calls to the service in its history with 1,135 calls for help received on 9th January.

Throughout this period Wildlife Victoria maintained a close working relationship with DEECA to support a coordinated response and help ensure suffering wildlife received timely assessment and care.

These circumstances highlight an opportunity to further streamline public reporting arrangements during emergencies by utilising the existing, established infrastructure in place at Wildlife Victoria saving confusion, effort and cost associated with creating and promoting multiple reporting channels. Greater coordination between government agencies and Wildlife Victoria could support clearer public messaging, reduce duplication across systems, and help ensure consistent service availability.

Recommendation:

Formally recognise and resource Wildlife Victoria’s Emergency Response Service as the primary reporting and triage service for wildlife emergencies during bushfires and other disasters, supported through a coordinated and standing partnership arrangement with relevant government agencies.

7. Strengthening Command and Coordination Arrangements for Wildlife Response

The wildlife response sector would benefit from a more clearly defined command, coordination and activation framework, comparable in structure to that used within the firefighting sector. For example, the Country Fire Authority operates under well-established command protocols and activation triggers, providing clarity in roles and decision-making during emergencies in a multi-agency response. Developing a similarly structured approach for wildlife response presents an opportunity to enhance coordination and effectiveness across all actors in response.

During the 2026 fires, activation thresholds, boundaries of responsibility and requisition processes for personnel presented as unclear, undefined and inconsistent outside government, contributing to community confusion, duplication and reputational impacts for responding organisations.

Instances of interstate organisations attempting to operate in Victoria further complicated coordination. While additional support can be valuable in large-scale emergencies, the absence of a coordinated framework to manage external involvement led to challenges in aligning these efforts with established local services. This, in turn, created additional pressures for local veterinarians and responders, who were already competently delivering critical services within their communities. A structured and well communicated governance approach would safeguard the role of specialist local capability and ensure that any external assistance is integrated effectively and safely.

Recommendation:

- Establish a clear command and coordination framework for wildlife emergencies spanning all actors in response, with defined roles, activation triggers and requisition pathways.
- Integrate specialist wildlife organisations into this framework to lead wildlife rescue, treatment, and rehabilitation activities in partnership with government agencies.

8. Wildlife Euthanasia and Role Clarity

Wildlife Victoria understands that a significant volume of wildlife euthanasia was undertaken by Victoria Police during the bushfire response. While this reflects the challenging and difficult circumstances faced during large-scale emergencies, it highlights an opportunity to further clarify roles and ensure that wildlife euthanasia is undertaken by appropriately trained and authorised personnel wherever possible.

Police officers are not typically trained wildlife specialists, and undertaking euthanasia in emergency contexts may present both wildlife welfare considerations and risks to police member's psychological wellbeing.

Clearer activation pathways and earlier deployment of wildlife veterinarians would reduce reliance on non-specialist personnel.

Recommendation:

- Prioritise the deployment of trained wildlife veterinarians and authorised specialists to perform wildlife euthanasia during emergencies.
- Provide targeted training and support for police or other agency personnel where their involvement is unavoidable.

9. Organisational and Reputational Considerations and Public Communication

The 2026 bushfires placed significant operational and reputational demands on Wildlife Victoria. The organisation was required to respond to increased volunteer concerns, undertake additional communication and stakeholder engagement, and address community perceptions regarding wildlife response activities during the emergency.

These pressures were, in part, influenced by broader uncertainty around roles, responsibilities, and activation processes. Where these elements are not clearly defined, community organisations may experience reputational impacts despite not having direct control over deployment decisions. This can also affect volunteer confidence and engagement, as well as broader organisational capacity.

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In addition, incorrect perceptions of limited visibility or involvement of Wildlife Victoria during the response had flow-on effects for fundraising and resourcing, further contributing to operational strain during an already high-demand period. In some instances members of the public thought they had engaged Wildlife Victoria when in fact they had not.

These observations highlight the importance of clearly defined roles and formal integration of specialist organisations within emergency management arrangements, to support both effective service delivery and accurate public understanding.

Recommendation:

Formally recognise and integrate Wildlife Victoria's role within Victoria's wildlife emergency response arrangements. Provide clear, consistent public messaging on authorised responders and activation pathways, supported by structured communication with landholders and the community during bushfires.

10. Recommendations for Reform

Wildlife Victoria recommends:

1. Implement a comprehensive end-to-end volunteer management approach aligned with recognised volunteer management standards for bushfire deployments.
2. Ensure early and expanded utilisation of Wildlife Victoria's veterinary and volunteer capability during emergencies.
3. Formally recognise and resource Wildlife Victoria's Emergency Response Service as the primary public reporting and triage service for wildlife emergencies during bushfires and other disasters, supported through a standing partnership arrangement with government agencies.
4. Adopt a clear command and control framework for wildlife emergencies, ensuring specialist wildlife organisations lead wildlife rescue, treatment and rehabilitation.
5. Restrict wildlife euthanasia to trained professionals and provide appropriate wildlife euthanasia training for Victoria Police or other agency personnel where involvement is unavoidable.
6. Provide clear public guidance on authorised wildlife operators and activation processes, supported by a structured communication framework for landholders and the community.
7. Formally recognise Wildlife Victoria's role within emergency management planning to strengthen clarity, reduce operational and reputational pressures, and improve emergency response outcomes.

11. Conclusion

Victoria possesses substantial wildlife rescue, veterinary and volunteer capability; however, the 2026 bushfires demonstrated that this expertise is not being optimally integrated within the current WESN model. Reform is required to ensure strong governance of the wildlife sector during emergencies, clear accountability, proper volunteer management, effective utilisation of specialist expertise and improved wildlife welfare outcomes.

Wildlife Victoria stands ready to work with government to design a more structured, accountable, and effective wildlife emergency response framework during bushfires.