

# **Wildlife Roadstrike Inquiry**

## **Submission by Manfred Zabinskas OAM**

### **Wildlife Shelter Authorisation 13074458**

### **Owner/Operator of Five Freedoms Animal Rescue**

### **Dated 2<sup>nd</sup> June 2025**

#### **BACKGROUND & CREDENTIALS OF MANFRED ZABINSKAS OAM**

My background includes 25 years of experience as a Design and Industrial Engineer that involved project management, Quality Assurance, Risk Assessment and Occupational Health and Safety. While engaged as a professional engineer, I completed a Bachelor of Science (Environmental Management) and began to focus on animal welfare. I commenced operating my commercial business in 2007 called Five Freedoms Animal Rescue to provide humane management of animals that are in conflict with humans in their homes, on public land or on major construction and land development sites. A safe and successful capture and the wellbeing of the animal is the driving force of my business.

My background also includes over 20 years of experience as a licensed Wildlife Shelter operator where I was directly involved in the rescue and care of many species of wildlife, predominantly kangaroos. Care involved the raising, treatment and rehabilitation of countless orphaned joeys, injured and sick juveniles, and adult kangaroos of all sizes. Provision of care and rehabilitation provided me with a wealth of experience relating to kangaroos that included wound assessment and treatment, management of stress, and behavioural requirements for individual animals. I received extensive training from specialist Veterinarians.

In 2005, I received the Herald-Sun 'Pride of Australia' medal in the Environmental Category for my contribution to animal welfare and in 2020 I was awarded the Order of Australia Medal.

#### **Qualifications, special training and Licences**

- Bachelor of Science (Environmental Management)
- Wildlife Husbandry & Rehabilitation Course, Victoria University
- Firearm Safety Accreditation, including Tranquilliser Guns (National)
- Wildlife Controller Licence (Licence No. 12387386-CX)
- Wildlife Shelter Permit (DEECA Authorisation No. 1307 4458)
- Gun Licence Category A & B Longarm, Victoria. Licence No. 478-221-20B
- Gun Licence Category C, Victoria (tranquilliser). Licence No. 478-221-30C

## **General Comment:**

The subject of wildlife roadstrike is extremely complex, poorly understood, and not well addressed. I therefore welcome this inquiry and the efforts to address this issue, and for the opportunity to make a submission.

Obviously, a reduction in roadstrikes would be the first and highest priority. However, I appreciate that this goal is extremely challenging and requires a multifaceted approach. In the meantime, rescues and wildlife rehabilitation must continue and these two aspects have their own challenges and complexities. Because of the number of other submissions that already address many of the Terms of Reference, and the volume of detail that would be repeated, I will focus on specific issues for which I have most experience and knowledge – rescues and rehabilitation. I have attended roadstrike victims almost every day of my life for over 30 years and estimate that I have attended over 20,000 roadstrike events. Most were for kangaroos.

## **TOR – Wildlife Rescue and Rehabilitation Efforts.**

### **Roadstrike rescues:**

The first point I would like to make is that roadstrike rescues are mostly conducted by volunteers, at their own cost. Victims are usually macropods (kangaroos or wallabies) who are the most difficult victims to deal with. Most rescues require euthanasia of the animal. In years gone by, this task was primarily carried out by the police or council rangers, but police and rangers were generally not trained for the task, not qualified to assess injuries, not diligent in checking pouches for orphaned joeys, and often not accurate in shooting, especially when using handguns instead of rifles. Police are unable to commit the required time to locate and track animals that aren't immediately found and are often diverted to matters of greater importance such that the injured animal is left to suffer. It was for these reasons that volunteers took it upon themselves to perform rescues. It was necessary. Attending roadstrikes, however, can be dangerous. Injured animals can be large and defensive, they are often mobile on and near public roads, and the use of firearms is unavoidable. As rescuers became more equipped and available to attend roadstrike rescues, the responsibility was gradually deferred to unpaid volunteers. Police now rely heavily on volunteer involvement, and rangers rarely attend injured wildlife nor carry firearms these days.

To legally conduct roadside rescues using firearms and tranquilliser guns, volunteers must have the appropriate firearms licences, Public Place Permits, and insurance. During the process of obtaining licences and permits, applicants must provide Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), and Safe Work Method Statements (SWMS) that both relate to risk assessment and public safety. Suitable rifles cost from \$1000 to \$3000 or more, good dart guns cost \$4000 to \$5000 and a stock of a variety of tranquilliser darts can be thousands more. Captive bolts cost nearly \$500. Insurance costs around \$1000. Additional costs include gun safes (for legal storage), rangefinders, and consumables such as drugs, charges (for captive bolts), ammunition, and of course the cost of attending rescues – vehicle costs, fuel

and lost wages. Needless to say, the cost for volunteers to provide this community service is exorbitant and prohibitive.

There is a great emotional toll. Many of us attend road trauma victims, and continue to attend such incidences, because we know no-one else will, or that it won't get done properly. Also, there is often a pouch joey or dependent at-foot joey that will need assessment or rescuing and be taken into care. So, it is important that rescues are only conducted by personnel with wildlife knowledge and experience and the ability to assess wounds and the viability of joeys. It is only volunteer rescuers that make themselves available 24 hours per day, 7 days per week. It is the rescuers that have the networks and contacts to deal with wounded animals and joeys. The solution, therefore, is to ensure we have enough rescuers to spread the work and share the load, and to cover when individuals need a break.

Most rescuers don't have firearms nor dart guns. They use basic rescue techniques that involve blanket capture. Sometimes, blanket capture is not possible because an animal is too large or mobile, it can be dangerous and lead to personal injury, and it is horrifically stressful and painful for the injured animal. Failed rescue attempts could mean that an animal flees and may not be found and will consequently endure prolonged suffering. This adds to our emotional toll. For these reasons we need more rescuers to have access to firearms and dart guns.

Rescuers could be enticed or enabled should funding be available for expensive rescue activities involving firearms and dart guns. Paying rescuers for shooting or darting on a callout basis would allow for costs to be recovered and compensate for lost income when sacrificing many hours on rescue attendances. Some organisations such as Wildlife Victoria and Vets for Compassion currently contribute to the costs for darting, but their financial support is reliant on a volunteer's involvement with that organisation and is subject to whether funding is available and ongoing. This cost places a financial burden on not-for-profit wildlife charities. To my knowledge, no funding is provided to rescuers for attending injured animals that are despatched using rifles. While it would seem appropriate that local councils should pay for personnel to deal with injured animals within their shire, I worry that this would be overcomplicated and cause delays to timely responses to animal emergencies, especially as councils cannot be contacted after hours. I believe that the response coordination to roadstrike cases is best managed through animal welfare organisations such as Wildlife Victoria, who have emergency response structures in place, but who should be provided perpetual government funding to pay rescuers.

Dart guns are the most effective and appropriate tools to deal with roadstrike macropods, and for many other situations. It allows the safe capture of animals for a proper examination and assessment of injuries, it enables capture of escaped and at-foot dependent joeys, and it reduces the need to use rifles in public places and near roads. Also, and very importantly, dart guns require less accuracy than normal firearms which reduces the stress and anxiety of ending an animal's life in a clean and humane manner. It means a rescuer can capture an animal who can then be easily euthanised, or the rescuer could transport a darted animal to a vet or other person for despatch if they are not mentally able to perform the euthanasia themselves. In comparison to shooting an animal with a rifle, tranquillising is visually less brutal and traumatic for the rescuer and for on-lookers, including children that might be present. But there is a huge complication involving the use of dart guns. Tranquilliser drugs

can only be supplied and authorised by veterinarians who have consulted over the animal being rescued. The same limitation applies to sedatives required for hand injection of blanket captured animals, and pole injecting of animals such as those caught in wire fences. This is extremely limiting and problematic because vets cannot possibly be available for each and every rescue, day and night. If an animal is being rescued to simply enable euthanasia, then veterinary involvement isn't even required.

A practicable arrangement for drug supply and authorised use is desperately needed. I suggest that appropriately qualified and experienced rescuers be permitted to carry certain drugs (diazepam, Zoletil and xylazine) specifically for rescue purposes. This would still require involvement of a vet. A targeted training course could be developed for the safe storage, handling and administration of the drugs. Where possible, remote consultations with vets can be had via mobile phone, including facetime and by sending images or videos. If contact with a vet is not possible, advice about drug use and the animal's circumstances could be provided within 24 hours. We need a practicable solution. The problem for rescuers to access and use animal sedatives is causing major prolonged suffering, animal welfare and public safety issues.

#### Wildlife Rehabilitation:

As for rescues of roadstrike wildlife discussed above, rehabilitation of injured and orphaned wildlife is carried out by unpaid volunteers as well. Shelter operators and foster carers take in many animals that are the consequence of roadstrike, mainly in the form of orphaned pouch young or dependent macropod at-foot joeys. Some injured adult animals require care and rehabilitation also, but most victims are too severely injured to save and need to be euthanised.

The care of macropod joeys is very intense, stressful, long-term and expensive. At our East Trentham Wildlife Shelter, we specialise in the care and rehabilitation of kangaroos. Even at our modest shelter, our operating costs alone equate to around \$45,000 per year. Many wildlife shelters in our region have closed over recent years due to the emotional and financial stress of caring for animals. It is often overwhelming. The reduction in shelters and carers has placed extra pressure on those still operating, such that the burden for those of us remaining is even greater.

Every year, DEECA offer grants to shelters and carers, usually up to a maximum of \$3000. While these grants are very welcome, this financial support doesn't come close to covering costs. Furthermore, grants are not guaranteed for each carer every year and only a part of the grant can be allocated to consumables. Many shelters close because they simply can't afford to keep operating, or the added stress from financial hardship is too much to bear. We have been very fortunate this year to have received major funding under a Targeted Wildlife 2024-25 Enviro Grant, which covers all of our operating costs (consumables) for one year. This grant has allowed us to take in more animals and be home more often to manage the shelter instead of working away most days to earn income. I already worry about our ability to continue operating when this funding expires.

I know numerous people that would be happy to dedicate their lives to rescuing and caring for injured and orphaned wildlife if they could afford to. We desperately need these new carers, and we need to allow existing carers to continue and for them to be able to take on more animals. But we need consistent and realistic funding for this to happen. The welfare of our wildlife and the welfare of our wildlife carers are in crisis.

Given that most of the animals (especially macropods) that come into our shelters are the direct or indirect consequence of roadstrikes, it seems appropriate that financial help to shelters should be linked to road use. I understand that the concept of adding just a \$2.00 levy to vehicle registrations in Victoria would cover all shelter operating costs across our state. I feel that this would provide a completely fair and sensible solution for a sustainable future for wildlife care, and which demands serious consideration.

Good luck with the inquiry and for future positive outcomes, and thank you again for the opportunity to make a submission.

Yours sincerely,

A black rectangular box redacting the signature of Manfred Zabinskas.

Manfred Zabinskas OAM  
Authorised Wildlife Shelter Operator  
Owner/Operator of Five Freedoms Animal Rescue