

# Update on the Australian Bushfire Crisis

Extreme temperatures and months or years of severe drought have led to unprecedented wildfires in Australia. It is estimated that more than a billion animals have perished.



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Record-breaking temperatures and months to years of severe drought have led to unprecedented bushfires in Australia, with over billion animals estimated to have perished.

The bushfires this season are unique in that multiple, large fires occurred simultaneously and joined up to form “superfires”. We are also in the middle of a serious drought in Eastern Australia that has created an extraordinary amount of fuel for the fires. According to the Bureau of Meteorology, we have had one of the hottest and driest summers on record. <http://www.bom.gov.au/climate/current/statements/scs72.pdf>

What also sets these fires apart from previous ones is the fact that they have affected such a large proportion of populated areas. Approximately 16 million hectares have now been burnt, which is about 8 times larger than the 2018 Californian wildfires.

The toll on animals, humans and the environment has been devastating. According to the Australian Government Crisis Coordination Centre incident

brief, as at 21 January 2020, six firefighters and 23 members of the public have died in the 2019/2020 bushfires, over 3000 homes have been destroyed, and over 25000 livestock in New South Wales and Queensland have been killed or euthanased as a result of the fires.

Professor Chris Dickman, from the University of Sydney’s Faculty of Science, estimated that over 1.25 billion mammals, birds and reptiles had been killed by the fires as of January 8. Prior to the bushfire crisis, Australia had the highest extinction rate for mammals. A number of species, including the Kangaroo Island dunnart, have had at least 80 per cent of their habitat and range affected by bushfire.

## **THE EFFECTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE**

“What we’re seeing are the effects of climate change,” he said. “Sometimes, it’s said that Australia is the canary in the coal mine with the effects of climate change being seen here most severely and earliest. We’re probably looking at what climate change may look like for other parts of the world in the first stages in Australia at the moment”.

In addition to the fires, the quality of both fresh and marine water has been impacted by runoff, fire debris and ash, fire retardant and dead animals. Because of the drought, water was already scarce in most fire-affected areas and water in dams and tanks was used for fire-fighting. Lack of water is emerging as a significant One Welfare issue.

Bushfire smoke contributing to significant air pollution has affected major cities along the eastern coast (Sydney, Melbourne, Canberra), a stark reminder to urban dwellers of the extent of the tragedy.

## **VETERINARY RESPONSE**

Our professional association, the Australian Veterinary Association (AVA), and NGOS such as Vets Beyond Borders (VBB), provided rapid responses

*I love a sunburnt country,  
 A land of sweeping plains,  
 Of ragged mountain ranges,  
 Of droughts and flooding rains.*

*I love her far horizons,  
 I love her jewel-sea,  
 Her beauty and her terror  
 The wide brown land for me!*

**Dorothea MacKellar (My Country, 1904)**



C. Drew

**FIGURE 1.** Fire has destroyed the habitat of numerous species.



R. Johnson

**FIGURE 2.** Brushtail possum rescued from a forest fire with superficial burns.

and support to veterinary team members and animals impacted by the fires, but the situation continues to develop. The impact on wildlife and ecosystems may take months and even years to comprehend. It is not known how many species have been threatened or lost. Once the fires abate we will know more.

It appears that the major volunteer requirement is currently for veterinarians and vet nurses with wildlife experience. VBB has received requests from both NSW and Victorian emergency response coordinators for such volunteers.

There are many stories of hardship, loss and grief. In our state of New South Wales the Rural Fire Service, a band of thousands of volunteers, fights fires. Led by Commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons, a most capable and dauntless leader.

Veterinarians and their staff in fire regions have coped with property loss, interruption of business and significant emotional and physical stress. The Australian Veterinary Association Benevolent Fund is supporting AVA members, non-members, staff and families who have experienced loss and trauma. We also have a 24-hour counselling service free to members. The support from our international colleagues has been heart-warming with donations to our fund, offers of material and personal support. If we are to reduce the impacts of extreme events like this in the future, we need our government to acknowledge the climate emergency that is occurring now, phase out fossil fuels and invest in clean, renewable energy.

Further work needs to be done in the area of leadership and overall strategic planning for disasters of this scale. Many teams have flown in to assist from far and wide, but in some cases a lack of coordination has led to doubling up on efforts. In NSW, processes directly involving VBB are being developed and refined.

## WE HAVE TO ACT

According to Ben Cox, CEO of Vets for Climate Action (VFCA), the fires show how urgently action needs to be taken on climate change.

“The world is still emitting gigatonnes of carbon each year,” he said. “Organisations like VFCA are

advocating for the change required to limit warming to 1.5 or 2 degrees C, instead of the 3, 4, or 5 deg C we appear to be tracking towards. The bush-fire implications of a 3-5degC warmer Australia are difficult to comprehend.”

“More than one billion animals perished in these fires, and witnessing this devastation has taken a toll on many of us, particularly those who have been on the ground helping in any way they can,” he said. “We understand how damaging this grief can be, so Veterinarians for Climate Action is organising a vigil event to commemorate the horrific summer just gone, with the intent of providing an opportunity for people to mourn, connect and create hope. The event details are on our facebook page, and if you’re in Australia we’d welcome you to participate.” Hÿ



C. Drew

**FIGURE 3.** Many animals have been affected.