



## **Bush Fire Emergency Rescue, Treatment and Rehabilitation Plan 2023-24**



**October 2023**

# Bush Fire Emergency Rescue, Treatment and Rehabilitation Plan 2023-24

## 1. Background

Possumwood Wildlife is a wildlife rescue, treatment, rehabilitation and release organisation located on the Lake George Escarpment on the southern NSW tablelands. It is a registered charity with DGR status. Its principals each have more than 23 years' experience helping injured and sick wildlife.

In December 2020, Possumwood Wildlife became the first licenced general wildlife veterinary hospital in NSW. All staff are volunteers. We believe it is the only general wildlife veterinary hospital that is actively involved in rescue, emergency and surgical treatment, rehabilitation, translocation to release to the wild, and training and research into wildlife injury and stress (refer Fig1.). We believe this wholistic approach to wildlife health enables more successful outcomes to be achieved. Possumwood Wildlife assists animals within a 250km radius of its facilities.

This plan draws on our experiences from previous bush fires, notably the Carwoola fire in 2017 and the Black Summer Bush Fires of 2019-20 where we worked alongside Vets For Compassion. A total of 45 animals were brought to Possumwood Wildlife from these fires to be treated and rehabilitated. These included kangaroos, wallabies, wombats and possums. They included animals of all sizes. A high level of success was achieved in treating and rehabilitating animals impacted by these fires. Our success rate, measured in terms of return to the wild, was around 90 percent. This Plan details the capacity and capability of personnel and facilities at Possumwood to rescue, treat, and rehabilitate wild animals of all kinds impacted by fire in the Monaro and South East NSW

Fig: 1:



## **2. Principles**

These principles guide the treatment and recovery process at Possumwood Wildlife:

- Do no harm.
- Procedures are based on successful Australian wildlife experience,
- Animals are given as much time as it takes to recover to a level where they can subsequently be released to the wild.
- It is recognised that treatment and recovery from fires requires attention to stress relief in addition to burns treatment.
- It is recognised that all animals are different in their response to trauma and in their treatment and rehabilitation requirements.

## **3. Facilities**

Possumwood Wildlife has a fully equipped licenced veterinary hospital that can treat all wildlife species. It has an additional emergency triage building with a secondary treatment facility and inside recovery facilities (nearing completion) with a capacity of up to 30 animals. Indoor recovery is important in minimising stress levels and disruption, and for maintaining good hygiene particularly during inclement weather. As a triage and treatment centre during the Black Summer fires, Possumwood Wildlife showed it could handle large numbers of injured animals at any one time.

Outdoor recovery facilities at Possumwood are extensive comprising enclosures for different species, for small animals, mothers and babies and large animals.

Release site facilities include a nine acre and a three-acre enclosure with shelters opening on to a 1800 acre sanctuary.

## **4. Personnel**

All personnel at Possumwood are volunteers. There are no paid staff. The hospital team (veterinarians, vet nurses, animal rehabilitators and carers) works with the veterinary superintendent and come from Sydney, Brisbane, Melbourne and work alongside in-situ Possumwood staff. The veterinary superintendent and the hospital licensee select the personnel involved in wildlife trauma recovery. The staff need to be experienced in wildlife treatment and care. Learning on-the-job with wildlife is not appropriate in trauma emergency situations.

## **5. Rescue**

Wildlife rescue in situations of trauma requires experienced personnel with the right equipment and PPE. The Possumwood Wildlife rescuers, including seconded rescue personnel, have extensive rescue experience over many years with different species in different trauma situations, including in fire zones. Tranquiliser gun capacity and drone capacity is available. Animals are sedated and transported to the Possumwood Wildlife emergency and triage centre as soon as possible.



## 6. Treatment

At Possumwood, fireground trauma treatment takes two forms: physical treatment, and stress treatment. The two are interrelated.

### 6.1 Physical treatment

- **Initial treatment**
  - On arrival from the fireground any foot leather hanging off is trimmed and feet are cleaned with normal saline and gauze. Silvazine cream is applied liberally, then impregnated gauze (eg jelonet), NAD, synthetic soffban and vetwrap is applied.
  - Subcutaneous fluids (NS) @ 3%. Betamox & baytril are given for two weeks.
  - A compounding gel comprising chloramphenicol and gentamicin is applied to the cuticle of the toenail of burnt feet.
- **Blood tests**
  - Are carried out to measure renal function, CK, cortisol. If there is any infection a swab is taken and sent for culture to identify the pathogen and antibiotic sensitivity.



- **Frequency of dressing changes**
  - First 1-2 weeks every three days to once weekly depending on condition of burn. If burn is stable, then once weekly is adequate. Dressings changed immediately if they get wet.
- **Sedation for dressing changes**
  - Injectable **not** inhalational requiring pre sedation by darting. We use Zoletil (1-2mg/kg) & Xylazine (2-3mg/kg) IM by rapid hand injection when the animal is otherwise distracted.
- **Ongoing treatment**
  - Weekly dressing changes with IM sedation by hand injection using the above protocol.
  - No toenail infections should occur. No amputations of distal toe bone are required. If the nail toe bone is necrotic it will self-amputate cleanly.
- **Analgesia**



### Vet Surgery



## 6.2 Stress Treatment

- Our experience is that stress cortisol levels of those rescued from wildfires drops significantly when brought into care where the care regimen involves:
  - Indoor care to minimise environmental stressors.
  - Housing that allows engagement between kin.
  - Dressing changes and medication intervention is kept to a minimum.

## 7. Recovery and Rehabilitation

- As far as is possible this should occur indoors, Regular changes in personnel is not advised. In rehabilitation, animals have physiotherapy and exercise, dressing changes, and ongoing medication.
- Monitoring an animal's behaviour should be observed by a regular carer.



## 8. Release

Possumwood animals have access to 1800 acres of wildlife sanctuary land that has several large enclosures for macropods and wombats. Once given the all-clear to return to the wild, animals are moved in social groups to the release site enclosures where they stay until they become accustomed to the local environment.