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RE: Submission to the NSW Volunteer Wildlife and Rehabilitation Strategy

Thank you for the opportunity to input to the Consultation Draft of the NSW Volunteer Wildlife Rehabilitation Strategy. This submission is on behalf of IFAW (The International Fund for Animal Welfare), a global non-profit organisation that protects animals and the places they call home. With offices in 15 countries and projects in over 40, we rescue, rehabilitate and release animals into secure landscapes around the world.

IFAW Oceania has a long historical involvement with the wildlife rehabilitation sector in Australia, in particular in NSW via the NSW Wildlife Council (NWC). We played a key role in its initial establishment, along with councils in other states and were a founding and ongoing sponsor of the Australian Wildlife Rehabilitation Conference.

We have maintained a fruitful ongoing relationship with the NWC and partnered with them on the development of a Wildlife Rescue App to enable members of the public to easily locate their nearest wildlife group if they find an injured animal. We attend regular attending meetings of the Council and we are encouraged to see it go from strength to strength.

IFAW acknowledges that the true nature and value of this emergency and community service is often hidden and we would like to see it given the acknowledgement and resources that it deserves. We are encouraged by this plan to support and strengthen the sector and commend the NSW Office of Environment and Heritage (OEH) on recognising both its worth and its potential. We are also pleased to see that there is significant funding support via the NSW Koala Strategy and the Environmental Trust to implement the strategy.

The engagement and consultation of stakeholders was comprehensive and the survey data incredibly valuable. We are encouraged to see a high-level of compliance observed via the audit. We are pleased to provide our comments on the draft strategy document below:

### **Volunteer support and culture**

IFAW supports improving standards of governance and providing support to volunteers and leaders, both old and new and recognise the importance of initial induction, ongoing support and the need for succession planning.

As a founding supporter of the NWC, IFAW is pleased to see it acknowledged in the strategy as the peak body. We were disappointed when WIRES chose to leave the Council as we believe that this

weakened its fundamental purpose as a unified voice for wildlife rehabilitation in the state. We strongly support the aim of facilitating a unified peak body and our preference would be to see WIRES and the NWC reform as a single body. An advantage of a single peak body, as we are sure you are aware is that there is just one point of contact for yourselves. It will also make it easier in terms of attracting better access to funding. If this isn't achievable, then an advisory board may well be the way to go. IFAW would be keen on being part of such a body.

The aim of improving standards of governance is a good one however we do have concerns as to the practicality of adopting Volunteering Australia's National Standards for Volunteer Involvement and feel this could add an additional demand on already overburdened groups, particularly the smaller ones.

We believe that the concept of patron is a good one to further advocate publicly the value of this service. It would be important to ensure that this person is an advocate for the entire sector, as opposed to endorsing individual groups or species.

### **Standards of care and training**

IFAW supports the aim of improving standards of care and training, for volunteers and for vets.

A mentoring and support system is a great idea in order to improve volunteer retention rates and provide support to new and existing volunteers in what can be a demanding and stressful role. IFAW fully acknowledges and empathises with the incredible emotional, physical, mental and financial toll that wildlife rescue and rehabilitation can have on individuals and groups. Any efforts to improve communication and team work and reduce conflict, politics and negativity (both within groups and between different groups) would be of huge value.

IFAW fully supports the development of wildlife training resources for the veterinary profession and is pleased to see significant funding assigned to its development. Veterinary training for wildlife is an area that IFAW has been engaged in for a number of years and has held workshops in WA, TAS and VIC in partnership with the Australian Veterinary Association (AVA). IFAW would be delighted to collaborate and input to this important initiative. We do feel that it's important that vets are trained up to treat a range of wildlife species as opposed to focusing on koalas exclusively.

Promoting stronger compliance is definitely a good outcome however, we would recommend that the internal auditing process is kept simple and accessible and not too onerous. Most volunteers are time-poor and very much focused on the practical job at hand, often juggling a lot of other commitments. Too burdensome an administrative demand imposed on them could cause existing volunteers to leave or potentially deter new volunteers from joining. Perhaps funding and assistance could be considered to support groups undergo this process...

### **Knowledge and information access**

IFAW is in support of the move towards streamlined reporting and improved access to data. We believe that wildlife rehabilitators play a huge and valuable citizen science role and that this crucial

data could be better utilised to track trends (in disease, roadkill hotspots) and inform prevention and intervention actions. IFAW would fully support the annual public release of the data collected.

IFAW believes that post-release monitoring is an absolutely crucial and often neglected aspect of wildlife rehabilitation, whilst recognising that the main obstacle is funding. Such monitoring, if done properly can be hugely resource intensive. So we are happy to see that funding will be provided towards the post-release monitoring of koalas and would like to see this extended to other species. Again, this is an area that IFAW would be keen to collaborate in.

### **Community awareness and recognition**

Whilst IFAW understands the attraction of and the rationale behind the concept of a single wildlife rescue number, we also recognise that it is a controversial one amongst some groups and has caused some unease and uncertainty as to how it will work on the ground. As we understand the proposal, the caller will initially not speak to a person but go through an automated process which is of concern as this could put off some people and, in stressful times such as these, many people prefer to talk to a person. A single rescue number, funded by paid for by the government, may well be attractive for some groups as it would save them the expense. But others who have an efficient system that works well and is staffed 24/7 would be less likely to want to change.

Again, while standard road signage is a good idea in principle, this could cause confusion for members of the public in areas where there is existing signage pointing to specific local groups. Any moves to bring in such system will require strong communication with the groups and a collaborative approach.

IFAW commends any efforts to further educate the wider community about the value of wildlife and rescue and rehabilitation.

### **Government support and regulation**

IFAW supports an accreditation system in principle, particularly if it reduces red tape and ensures more consistency with services provided, within a more flexible framework. We are pleased to see that there will be a transitional approach to accreditation as we appreciate the process could potentially be a big ask for smaller groups.

In terms of the accreditation process, we note that the self-assessment checklist (attachment 2) only provides the option for a tick or a no tick, which is understandable in terms of ensuring efficiency in assessment. However, it does not allow for the opportunity for a group to respond provisionally to a question e.g. 'No, but we are working towards it'. Some groups may not for instance be able to 100% commit to being able to 'provide emergency rescue service within 1–2 hours of request for assistance (within daylight hours 9am–5pm)?' as this may not be realistic in some instances, particularly with more rural and remote groups that cover a larger area and it will depend on the nature of the rescue, its location and available resources.

The lack of such a flexibility or sliding scale of responses could force some groups to tick a box but not feel completely comfortable in doing so. Or conversely others may choose not to tick a box as they don't want to provide false information but as a consequence this could adversely affect their chances of successful accreditation. It is also unclear what are the consequences are of not ticking

some boxes. We particularly support enabling groups to transport animals interstate for treatment and rehabilitation, removing the red tape involved with obtaining additional approvals.

IFAW supports OEH's aim of providing continuing strategic support and funding to the sector to help implement the plan over the next three years.

IFAW is encouraged to see significant funding being committed towards the implementation of this strategy from the \$4.05 million in the NSW Koala Strategy and fully supports efforts to improve the sector's access to funding. We note and support the recruitment of two new project officers and the funding of \$1.5million from the Koala Strategy towards veterinary training, but it would be good to know exactly how the remaining funding will be allocated. IFAW is also interested as to how continued funding will be guaranteed that extends beyond the life of the koala strategy.

Likewise, the strategy states that you will 'work with the Foundation for National Parks and Wildlife to develop a business case for allocating the \$1.2 million funding provided by the Foundation'. Does this mean that the funding will definitely go towards the sector, it's just a case of deciding where it goes, or does it mean that you still need to submit a bid to secure it?

We are pleased that you will continue to allocate \$25,000 per year towards public liability insurance.

IFAW would like to see remaining funding allocated towards practical support for volunteers.

Potential areas include the possibility of funding vaccinations - lack of vaccinated rescuers can inhibit response levels to emergency events such as flying fox drops. Some groups play an active and pivotal role in disaster response and we would like to see increased government funding support for this significant additional expenditure and community service.

Funding of other basic costs such as fuel and animal feed would be incredibly useful, as would assistance towards administration. Subsidising veterinary treatment of wildlife, perhaps by allowing vets to claim some or all of the costs of treating wildlife would be of huge relief (which could also provide an additional tax benefit/incentive to vet practices).

We also commend your intention to advocate for the sector across other NSW government departments. Perhaps there is an opportunity for extending this advocacy interstate to your counterparts to encourage the adoption of a similar approach with a view to increasing consistency on a national level.

In conclusion IFAW would like to thank OEH for its ongoing support of the sector and for developing such an ambitious and robust strategy to ensure its resilience into the future. We look forward to working with you and the NWC in its implementation.

Yours sincerely



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