

Hunter Wildlife Rescue, NATF Inc response to the draft NSW Volunteer Wildlife Rehabilitation Strategy

Hunter Wildlife Rescue would like to thank OEH for drafting this strategy and allowing us to comment. We thank all the OEH staff that were involved in bringing this strategy together. We did find that the timeframe to comment back was far too short for a volunteer group to respond, especially when we are all coming out of the busy season of wildlife care. This year has seen many of us more overloaded than other years due to weather conditions such as bush fires and heat stress events.

While we support many of the proposals put forward we do not support all of the proposals. We do hope this strategy will help to strengthen the ability of the sector to perform more effectively but also show that OEH is willing to support the wildlife sector by playing a more prominent role in wildlife in NSW and in the volunteers who form the backbone of rescuing, caring and rehabilitating our wildlife and play a major conservation role in NSW.

We do not believe that OEH understands the high demands placed on volunteer wildlife groups in NSW. Many groups struggle with daily activities let alone run an organisation with unpaid positions relying on volunteers. We hope to see more support and improvements from OEH from this draft strategy due to a larger demand of animals needing assistance over the past years.

Hunter Wildlife Rescue, NATF Inc.

Hunter Wildlife Rescue (HWR) was one of the first licensed wildlife groups in NSW, the service area we cover is four local government areas of the lower Hunter. We have seen the wildlife sector grow throughout the years as we have also seen the increase in the number of animals needing assistance, from loss of habitat, impacts of humans and the increase in disasters. HWR carry out Disaster Response where many other groups cannot. We have in place an MOU with both DPI and IFAW to conduct this work in search, rescue, and recovery and have disaster response training for fires, oil spills, heat stress, storms, and floods. HWR has an approved team of member trained for all events, proudly we can say that this has earned HWR great respect from many government agencies and the general public.

Our president was a founding member of the NSW Wildlife Council and still holds the position of chair to this day. HWR was also involved in the National Wildlife Conference in 2004, where our president was the chair of the conference committee.

HWR is committed to helping and supporting improvements in the wildlife sector and because of this commitment, we have provided feedback for this draft strategy.

Improving Standards of Governance

HWR is concerned this may bring more work to already overloaded volunteers in the wildlife sectors, many groups are already struggling now to meet the demands that are expected of them. We believe the best way to improve standards of governance is to help improve groups sharing resources already in place. The NSW Wildlife Council is working with groups towards developing a shared resource database. It would be a welcome sight to see

government offer to fund governance resource development, so all groups could have access to a pool of documents that can assist the groups with the accreditation process.

We support the strategic plan to improve the standards of governance such as having leadership policies for group leaders, as we believe this will benefit the groups in improving their management system.

Bullying is a huge issue in the wildlife sector and needs to be addressed. Mental health and members general health and wellbeing are often overlooked in the wildlife sector. We would like to see OEH address these issues as a matter of dire importance and bring in programs and outside support services to help the wildlife sector.

Facilitating a Unified Peak Body

As a founding and current member of the NSW Wildlife Council (NWC), we see the invaluable role the NWC has played in bringing the groups together to positively benefit the wildlife sector. By working together and in collaboration with NPWS and OEH, the council aims to positively improve and support members and the advancement of best practice in the wildlife sector. We feel that WIRES not being a part of the NWC weakens its fundamental purpose of being the peak united voice for wildlife rehabilitation in NSW.

NWC was the driving force behind bringing together the codes of practices for species, these ensure best practice in animal welfare in NSW. The codes of practices were positively received by the wildlife sector, who felt they were well overdue.

HWR would recommend that the NWC grow in the future by having an advisory panel or other members of outside groups sit on the NWC. With panel members, for example, being from RSPCA, IFAW, DPI, etc and others outside wildlife groups however we have concerns that this may take away operation from the wildlife sector and members who are directly related with the groundwork of rescue and rehabilitation. We believe a paid part-time position in the NWC would be a positive step in moving forward.

Improving Funding in the Sector

Groups that do many different species often find it hard to access funding as most funding goes to either high icon species like the koala or endangered species and very little too common species. The common species such as the lorikeet and brushtail possum make up the large majority of animals that require care as seen in the data. We would welcome any opportunity to secure funding through government assistance.

Funding to pay for vaccinations of carers would also be highly valued as many of our members are dealing with animals potentially affected by zoonotic diseases such as Q fever and Lyssavirus.

Standards in Training

HWR has developed well-designed training courses and materials composed by highly trained and experienced members. HWR runs training internally however regularly has guest speakers brought in to present training. We also open up our training courses to other wildlife groups, many have given us very positive reviews post course attendance.

We welcome the development of more standardised training for groups throughout NSW. We understand that this is an issue that the NWC has wanted to address for some time. Our request that if a standardised model is implemented that it be affordable for all within the wildlife sector. The mode of delivery of the standardised training is also a concern as many people will have different learning requirements, some will want face to face training with notes or manuals and others in more remote areas may want online training. We are also mindful that there are members that don't own computers or have no internet and they must not be disadvantaged. A standardised approach to training will have to ensure that the training needs of ALL members are met.

We feel government funding should be given to the peak body to allow them to develop training for groups on common species.

Mentors and Species Co-ordinators

HWR supports and agrees this should be in all groups. We have had this in place for years and it works well and improves the level of care for the animals. We also have support roles within the group such as area coordinators and a new members coordinator. A key priority of HWR is ensuring our member's mental health and wellbeing is cared for and our members feel supported, therefore we will be soon introducing a health, wellbeing and support officer.

Training of Vets and Vet Nurses

HWR is excited and gives our full support to provide more training opportunities for our vets and vet nurses. This is very much needed and we feel this will have a significant impact on wildlife rehabilitation.

Update Triage and Treatment

HWR attends and conducts regular specialised training courses to update our members on current treatment protocols. These courses are facilitated by very experienced long term carers and occasionally by wildlife vets. We support this proposal as it means our wildlife will get the current best practice care.

Compliance

HWR supports proposals to promote better compliance.

Reporting of Fauna Data

HWR supports proposals to improve data access but feels there needs to be a more standardised code. Any changes need to be well designed and not place more burden on volunteers.

Post Release Monitoring

HWR strongly support any release monitoring. HWR has been involved in post-release monitoring of koalas, gliders, brushtail possums, birds, echidnas, marine sea birds, and marine sea turtles. The post-release data gave us a better insight into what happens post-release and allowed us to better streamline our practices so that we get the best outcome for the animal.

Single Wildlife Number in NSW

This proposal concerns us greatly. Some of our concerns are will it operate 24/7? Will we lose our current hotline and how will our hotline be affected? Will it be too confusing for members of the public? How will groups that overlap or service the same area be affected? What will happen with signage and existing signage? Is it just creating another step in getting an animal help? These concerns we feel must be addressed before a single wildlife number is introduced.

Community Education

HWR fully support an educational program for the public. There is a vital need for the public to be educated on the plight of our wildlife. We suggest OEH look at materials already available and also partnerships with other organisations.

Accreditation of Volunteer Wildlife Rescue and Rehabilitation Groups

HWR supports the proposal that wildlife groups meet six accreditation categories (governance, training and support, standards of care, service capacity, record keeping, and vet services). We do not wish to see any more financial or administrative burden placed on the groups to achieve accreditation.

More Flexible Policy Framework

HWR supports the current model used in NSW. We strongly disagree with the proposal to allow members to reside outside the boundary service areas of a group. We believe that if this was to be implemented it must be within a certain distance from the boundary of the group and done with an MOU with both groups. We feel this is a very dangerous proposal as it raises many issues. Our concerns are how can you inspect, monitor, mentor, support and provide training to the members that reside outside the borders of the group. We see this could also bring conflicts between individuals and groups. Groups struggle now to manage volunteers in their own service let alone managing members well outside their areas.

HWR feels that many groups are struggling with the large size of their service area, we believe that these groups need more support from OEH. If the group still cannot manage than we would support a new group licensed being formed in that area.

HWR supports home-based care but also supports more centrally based facilities such as wildlife hospitals. We feel both work well and should remain.

We feel that better government cooperation between states would make transporting animals across the state for treatment, rehabilitation and release much easier and more beneficial for the wildlife. We support the removal of input and export licenses currently needed as long as it is the best practice for the animal.

Accreditation

HWR understands the need for accreditation and supports the proposal.

Welcome Kits

HWR supports the proposal that groups all have new members welcome kits as it will provide support to new members and orient them to the policies and procedures of the group.

Wildlife Rehabilitation Award

HWR does not support this proposal as we believe all our members play a vital role in our group, no matter how big or small. We feel that by introducing this proposal it will cause conflict within a group.

We thank you for allowing us to comment on the draft strategy and hope it will have a great outcome for our NSW wildlife and the wonderful wildlife volunteers who give 24/7 to make a difference and give every native animal a second chance.

Kind Regards,

Hunter Wildlife Rescue, NATF Inc.

Management Committee