THE INTEGRATION OF INFORMAL VOLUNTEERS INTO ANIMAL EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT: EXPERIENCES FROM THE 2015 SOUTH AUSTRALIAN BUSHFIRES

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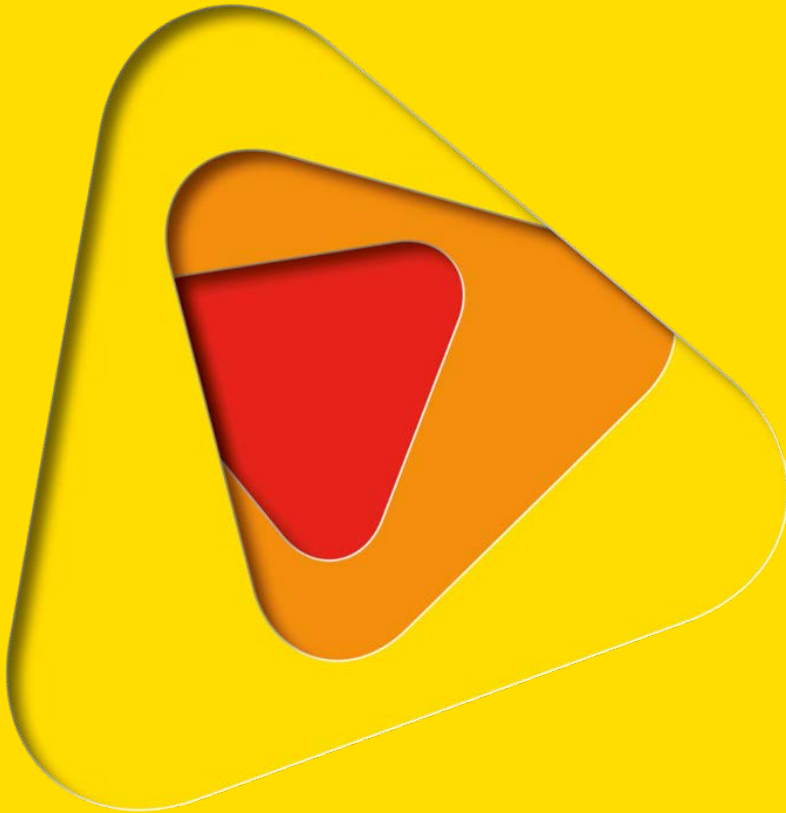**Mel Taylor[1,4], Megan McCarthy[2,4] and Greg Eustace[3,4]**
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INTRODUCTION

Members of the public are often first on the scene in a disaster and are keen to assist. It is widely recognised that spontaneous and/or loosely organised groups from local communities play important roles during disaster response and recovery, and indeed, these 'informal volunteers' often provide extra capacity and skills that are highly valued in an emergency situation. It has been reported, however, that volunteers acting outside of the established emergency management system can be disruptive and put themselves and others at risk (see for example, Liath, 2004). Nevertheless the potential for negative outcomes, whether recognised or not, does not dampen the desire of people to help and the onus is on those in emergency management to harness this resource and provide flexible and novel ways to integrate it into the emergency management system.

In recent years there has been increasing recognition of the fact that animals need to be considered and integrated into emergency management and disaster response in Australia. Moreover, it is acknowledged that such consideration poses additional challenges for traditional responding, and therefore extra preparation, knowledge and skills are required to ensure the safety of animals, their owners, and responders (Leonard and Scammon 2007; Edmonds & Cutter 2008; Austin, 2013, White, 2014). Consideration of animals also requires the integration of a broader set of official response agencies, such as primary industries, and may also include a range of secondary responders, such as RSPCA, established animal rescue organisations, and veterinary clinics. Although inclusion of these secondary responders enhances the capacity to rescue and manage animals, resources may still be stretched. Members of the public with specific interests in animals may have skills in animal rescue and/or handling that are scarce or patchy in the formal response teams, and therefore provide an additional valued resource.

Recent research undertaken in Australia as part of the Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC Managing Animals in Disasters (MAiD) project revealed that emergency response organisations and other stakeholders groups face challenges and uncertainty regarding their responsibilities and role in the management and rescue of animals and in their interactions and management of animal owners (Taylor et al, 2015). Clearly, with an extended set of organisations and agencies involved in the formal response, there is a more complex operating picture, a greater potential for ambiguity or confusion, and a greater need for inter-agency coordination.

The ambiguity surrounding official responsibilities for animals in disasters, a more distributed response system, and increasing media coverage of animals in the wake of recent disasters may have contributed to the public perception of a vacuum in emergency response in this area. Although an association is unproven, this may also have led to an increase in the number of 'emergent groups' forming to rescue, support, and assist in this area. In recent years social media have created additional platforms for response and volunteerism that have enabled people to offer support from afar; people can co-ordinate volunteer activity and disseminate information in unprecedented ways (Meier, 2013). Many of the informal volunteering groups that focus on animals in disasters have a prominent social media profile, which is their main avenue for disseminating information. These groups typically focus on providing disaster response for animals; coordinating informal volunteers to help rescue, move and temporarily re-house animals, providing animal owners with information and advice ahead of, or during, disasters, and encouraging the donation of supplies and funds to support veterinary care.

Despite their keen interests in the area, there have been reports that such groups may not have sufficient knowledge of the official emergency management policies and plans that are in place and the actions that are triggered in the event of an unfolding disaster. It is also reported that some groups have, on occasion, disseminated incorrect information and have issued their own warnings, and

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therefore may have been disruptive to the official response. Furthermore, emergent groups often have weak or evolving organisational structures and little or no integration into the official emergency management system. This lack of integration leads to poor situational awareness, with misunderstanding about the timing and intentions of official actions and a lack of accurate or timely information.

From the perspectives of these informal volunteering groups, the lack of integration can create frustration. In the context of animal emergency management, there is often a sense of urgency that action is needed, an enthusiasm to 'do something' and a rising concern for animal welfare. At such times decision-making can be adversely impacted and risky or emotionally-charged situations can arise.

PROJECT

This research presentation will discuss the initial findings of a project that aims to understand how these emergent informal volunteering groups integrate with established animal welfare and veterinary organisations, and the formal emergency response agencies.

The goal of the study is to identify the challenges for, and strengths and limitations of, informal volunteering in the context of animal emergency management. It is anticipated that the findings of this research will advance dialogue in this area, enabling solutions to be identified and improvements to be made to the integration of this potential resource in emergency management.

This research project aims to explore the following research questions:

- What are the issues and challenges for:

    o Official responders who interact with these informal volunteers?

    o Established animal welfare/rescue groups who interact with these informal volunteers?

    o Those who coordinate (facilitate) informal volunteer activity?

    o On-the-ground volunteers?

- What role do social media (Facebook and Twitter) play in the work of emergent informal volunteer groups?

- How do these emergent informal volunteer groups see their role?

- What are the perceptions and experiences of those in official response capacities?

- Are these groups filling a gap (perceived or otherwise) in the current official emergency response?

- How can we improve the interface between emergent groups and emergency responders to improve emergency management when animals are involved?

The January 2015 Sampson Flat bushfire in the Adelaide Hills, South Australia will be utilised as a case study to explore the research questions. The proposed research presentation will focus on the first two questions above, and will discuss the initial findings from in-depth semi-structured interviews that will be undertaken with participants from the following groups:

- Coordinators/administrators of emergent informal volunteer groups who were disseminating information and mobilising volunteers during the bushfire to assist with animals.

- Members of established animal organisations who were involved in the response, but who don't specialise in disaster response in their core business/activities, e.g. Animal Welfare League, RSPCA SA, local council shelters.

- Members of the volunteer group South Australian Veterinary Emergency Management (SAVEM), who are veterinary health professionals with a level of emergency management training and who were responding as part of the official emergency response.

- Trained emergency services personnel and personnel from key government agencies (CFS, PIRSA, DEWNR), including those in decision making roles and those who encountered informal volunteers 'on-the-ground'.

This research will be further strengthened by documentary research, including the analysis of online media/news articles, government reports, social media content, such as Facebook posts and Twitter feeds, and other relevant sources that will provide important context to this research presentation.

The study findings will be important in enabling an increased understanding of the role, position, motivation, skills and knowledge of emergent informal volunteer groups and the roles of these volunteers in disaster situations. Identifying areas where informal and formal volunteers and responders might assist each other could help save the lives of people and animals. Moreover, there is a dearth of knowledge on the specific needs of animals and their owners in a disaster situation, and this research will help to provide important insights into the skills required when dealing with animals in disasters, the scope for integration of informal volunteers in the emergency management system.

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