

## **RSPCA Qld Submission to the Queensland Floods Commission of Inquiry**

This submission discusses issues related to the planning and preparation for disasters such as the recent flooding in SE Qld, and the response to the event in areas of concern to the RSPCA, namely animals. Our main focus is the welfare of all animals caught up in the disaster or in some way affected by it.

This submission focuses on domestic pet animals and wildlife. Livestock was the responsibility of DEEDI.

### ***Planning and preparation***

- In general there has been a lot of work put into planning over the last 18 months with RSPCA involved along with essential services, Department of Health, Department of Communities, SES and councils.
- Although RSPCA was represented no real planning occurred with respect to animals. Issues that were not considered included:
  - Where pet animals would go (no animal evacuation centre(s) identified)
  - How they would be housed (no portable cages, food, food bowls ready to be deployed)
  - How to deal with people who would not leave flooded or threatened areas without their pets (rescue people on the ground did not know what to do in these situations)
  - How to deal with injured or threatened wildlife
  - Who would pay for RSPCA rescue and emergency work

### ***Response***

- The overall messages sent out were clear and helpful but insufficient and inconsistent when it came to messages about animals. The public, police and SES workers were unsure about what to do about animals. Even when they said that animals could be taken with the people they were not allowed on helicopters, for example.
- The communication between the State Disaster Management Group and RSPCA was good.
- Communication between DEEDI and RSPCA was good with joint teams from DEEDI and RSPCA responding in various areas and cooperating well.
- On the ground, however, there was a breakdown in communication about animals between the police, SES and local Disaster Management Groups, and the RSPCA rescue workers.
- People on the ground did not know who to contact about animal issues as they arose.
- DERM appeared ill-prepared. Initially there was no way to contact DERM officials with calls about wildlife and DERM Officers seemed reluctant to become involved.
- The general public were often referred to websites for information but the websites could not cope with the number of visits.
- The preparedness of the councils involved varied markedly with some being well organised with advanced planning in place and others with no preparation in place at all.
- Access to flood areas for RSPCA inspectors was restricted resulting in delayed assessment of what was needed in a specific area and arranging to meet those needs. This led to animals being lost, people reluctant to leave their animals and the whole rescue operation being hampered. Also, people risked their lives either to stay with their animals or rescue workers risked theirs

when they had to carry out more risky rescues later on. Elderly people, people from non-English speaking backgrounds and people with no family located locally were particularly vulnerable to problems in this area.

- Traffic congestion caused serious problems for RSPCA workers travelling to assist with animal rescue and evacuation.
- RSPCA Veterinary and other accredited staff (e.g. accredited to perform euthanasia) from other states do not have their qualifications recognised in Queensland so could not always help out to their full capacity.

### ***What we need in the future***

RSPCA Qld would like to include in its submission some suggestions for improved preparedness in the future.

- The RSPCA needs to be involved at the very beginning of a response to an emergency so that animals are considered right away. For example, when an evacuation centre is being identified and planning put in place, whether animals can accompany their owners to the site or must go to an alternative pre-identified site must be discussed and decided on.
- All disaster planning must include planning about animals including wildlife.
- All agencies responsible for responding to emergencies must be trained about what is to happen with animals.
- A basic preparedness model should be developed and all councils required to follow it (RSPCA Qld can help with this).
- When power and communication infrastructures are being restored after an emergency, animal facilities such as the RSPCA shelters need to be on priority lists as it is essential for animal and human health that such facilities have the ability to care for the animals and adequately clean the facilities.
- RSPCA inspectors must have right of access similar to SES staff to be able to adequately help in emergency situations.
- RSPCA must be funded to carry out services to animals during emergencies.
- Staff from interstate have the ability to come to Queensland to help out and their qualifications or accreditation recognised during the emergency.
- Council pound holding periods should be extended to up to 30 days during an emergency to allow animals to be reunited with their owners.