

Vets to the rescue!

In the wake of an increase both in the number and ferocity of bushfires that have occurred throughout Australia in the last few years, Tasmanian vet Angela Offord felt it was important to have presentations on techniques and strategies for treating domestic animals and wildlife burned or traumatised in bushfires included in last November's Australian Veterinary Association Tasmanian Division annual conference.

"Given we had a serious disaster in Tasmania last summer, we wanted vets and veterinary nurses to have an opportunity to learn from the experts about a range of topics related to animals in extreme situations," Offord, who helped organise the conference, said.

A direct result of the report into the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria was for that state to implement a bushfire response strategy. All states are now developing plans for assessing and managing animals affected by bushfires, and following last January's bushfires, Tasmania's private veterinary sector, with assistance from the International Fund for Animal Welfare, has established Veterinary

Emergency Response Team Tasmania, or VERTTas. That vets are keen to know more about animal welfare issues following natural disasters is evidenced by the attendance of approximately 150 vets at a burns seminar held recently in Victoria, and a further 240 vets who enrolled in the webinar course.

"There was a huge response to the recent Victorian seminar and accredited workshop on treating flood and fire-affected animals given by Anne Fowler, and it included a lot of new graduates, which suggests inclusion in the curriculum of this aspect of animal care needs to be considered. Vets need to have this knowledge, particularly for wildlife when there are so many different species which may need treatment," Offord said.

While vets generally know what to do with large and small domestic pets in the event of an approaching fire, for those animals that may need to be treated at the fire site, a greater awareness of where evacuation centres are located, including those areas designated for animals, is essential.

In order to minimise the risks to both safety and stress for humans



Picture Bert Knottenbeld

and animals, a coordinated team effort between pet owners, vets and emergency service workers is necessary, while having good preparation and a bushfire plan is vital, according to veterinarian and animal behaviourist Katrina Ward, one of the speakers at the Tasmanian conference.

"The human-animal relationship is very strong and people will risk their lives in order to stay and protect their animals from disaster, or returning earlier than it's safe to do so, either to rescue, or ensure their abandoned animals are safe. At no point can we under- or over-estimate the regard in which an animal

owner holds their pet, and keeping animals safe is as important for human well-being as it is for the animal's safety. This has been proven repeatedly in disasters worldwide," Ward said.

As well as giving thought about whether animals can be safely and readily moved or not, consideration should also be given to their compatibility should they be required to share emergency accommodation.

A cat that has never lived with a dog would find a dog-filled house extremely stressful, for example. Providing social support by being with a pet, during and after a stressful event can buffer *To page 30*

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the effects of the trauma, for both animal and human, while being prepared to put animals in a safe place in advance of a crisis decreases risk-taking behaviour in animal owners.

"If animals experience an adverse experience, whether psychological or physical, they may show behavioural changes. These could manifest as sickness behaviours, (withdrawal, lack of enjoyment, inappetence) or other mental changes such as anxiety or altered pain perception. There may also be detrimental effects on the animal's memory, learning, and the ability to recover from future minor stressful events. Personality changes, such as increased aggression or over-attachment have also been reported. These changes may be seen immediately, or many months after such an experience," she said.

■ ANNE LAYTON-BENNETT

Technical Large Animal Emergency Rescue (TLAER) courses are available for vets interested in rescue work.