

## Considering animals and the management of animals in emergency situations – A local perspective

Presenter: Claire Gick – City of Bunbury Project Officer  
Email: cgick@bunbury.wa.gov.au

### Abstract

When natural disasters strike, animal owners are often unprepared to deal with the needs of their pets or livestock. Fire, storm, flooding and other events can severely impact communities and the animals that live in them. Additionally, exotic disease poses a considerable threat to livestock industries in Australia.

Emergency Management planning typically focuses on protecting human life, personal property and community infrastructure and services. Recognising the positive contribution animals make to communities and the economy, it is important to include their protection, welfare and management in Emergency Management planning.

### Introduction

When natural disasters occur animal owners are often reluctant to leave the family residence, as they have not adequately planned for their pets welfare. Often animal owners are uncertain of what will become of their pets during and after an emergency event. Emergency Management (EM) planning can increase animal owners awareness of their responsibilities and can assist them to be self reliant.

Owners that must evacuate their premises and can therefore not look after their animals may need assistance from the community. This assistance may be in the form of rescue, temporary holding or reuniting affected animals. However, Heath (2001) suggests that pre-disaster planning should place a high priority on education of owners and emergency management personnel.

Local Government (LG), as part of its EM function, has a role in facilitating animal welfare and management stakeholders to plan for, prepare for, respond to and recover from emergency situations. The City of Bunbury has recently prepared an Animal Emergency Plan (AEP) as support plan to its broader EM arrangements.

### City of Bunbury Overview

Bunbury is the political capital of the South West Region of Western Australia, located approximately 200 km south of Perth. Bunbury is the largest regional city in WA and services two bulk materials handling ports.

The City of Bunbury has a population of 30,000 people, however the Greater Bunbury Area (GBA) has a total urban population of about 60,000 people. GBA includes the City of Bunbury as well as three other municipalities; the Shires of Capel, Harvey and Dardanup. These municipalities are not governed by the City of Bunbury, however, they have adjoining urban suburbs that form a broader suburban city fabric, as shown in Figure 1.

The population of GBA is growing rapidly, increasing at a rate of 3.4% p.a. since 2002. The national population growth rate was 1.4% p.a. for the same period.

As a regional city, Bunbury has a broad and diverse socioeconomic profile which includes working families, retirees, students, single professionals and an integrated Aboriginal population.

### Animal Community and Resource Audit

Within the City of Bunbury there is a range of animals that are considered as part of the EM planning process. Domestic pets feature strongly, however, there are also pockets of rural activity within the City that accommodate livestock.

There are 5,000 registered dogs, however, up to 75% of all impounded dogs are unregistered. This implies that there could be upwards of 10,000 dogs in the City, and even more in the GBA. There are no data for cat ownership or other domestic pets.

The predominant livestock in the rural sector is cattle, however, Bunbury also has an active horse and harness racing industry, and makes provision for horse agistment within its Town Planning Scheme (2001).

The animal management community includes legislative, commercial and voluntary groups. The City of Bunbury itself manages several animal management resources, including:

- 1 x indoor dog pound - 20 dog kennel capacity
- 5 x municipal rangers (multi use – fire / litter / parking / local laws / dogs)
- 1 x manager, 1 x senior ranger/emergency services, 0.4 x AMO projects
- 2.5 administration staff
- 2 x animal equipped 4wd vehicles with capture equipment

Within the broader community other assets include:

- 3 x veterinary clinics
- 2 x home based animal welfare organisations; Saving Animals from Euthanasia (SAFE) and South West Animal Rescue (SWAR)
- 3 x dog training clubs

There are no commercial kennels or catteries within the City boundaries, but there are three located within 25km of the City centre.

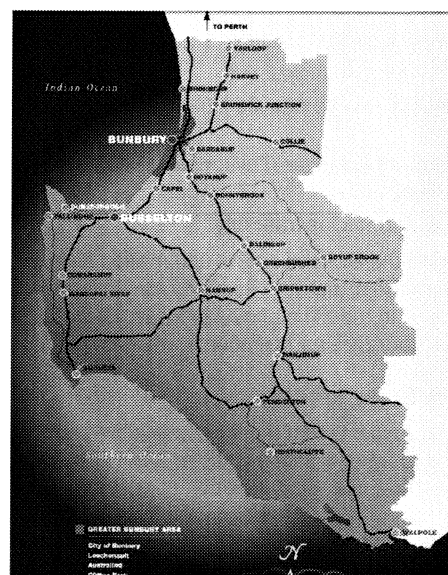


Figure 1: Greater Bunbury Area locality plan

## Emergency Management – Risk Assessment

The City of Bunbury has been an early council to address Emergency Management and Lewis Winter our EMO has been awarded nationally for his EM planning. As part of its EM plan, a thorough risk assessment was undertaken and identified the following high risk events that could affect the GBA:

1. Flood – There are numerous low lying areas within Bunbury that can be flooded following upstream rains, ocean rises or local pooling. In these cases domestic animals and livestock often cannot retreat to safety and intervention is required.
2. Fire – There are numerous areas of remnant vegetation that are often subject to natural ignition and arson attacks. In these cases, native animals may flee the fire but then become disoriented in unfamiliar territory. Fire also causes risk for pets in yards and livestock.
3. Storm – Whilst not in the same category as Tropical Cyclones, Bunbury has experienced several mini tornadoes over the last three years, resulting in serious property damage. The principle risk to animals is fatality or injury. A secondary risk is damage to fencing and subsequent loss of animals or stock.

The plan has been enacted and is in regular review. The ongoing review has identified the need to make specific provision for animals in EM planning and implementation process.

## Identifying Stakeholders

Stakeholders that have an interest in animal management are a valuable resource. Kerry-Witt (2000) supports bringing stakeholders together as they contribute to emergency planning. Stakeholders can provide information, advice, resources and skills. Stakeholders may be within or without the EM plan area and may be actively or passively involved in animal management.

Identifying stakeholders can take a number of iterations as each stakeholder can add additional information on the stakeholder group, informing the planning process of others with an interest in the plan. This is supported by Tapley (2007) who outlines a number of benefits of working together with interested stakeholders. Eventually, the following stakeholders were identified and consulted in the preparation of the plan:

- Veterinary clinics
- Community groups and clubs (dogs, cats, horses & ponies)
- Pet shops and pet service providers
- Animal welfare and wildlife rescue groups
- Neighbouring municipalities
- Emergency service providers (police, SES, Fire and Rescue etc)
- Government Agencies (Environment & Conservation, Agriculture etc)
- Trotting and Racing fraternity

Consulting with the stakeholders is undertaken as an ongoing activity rather than a "tick list" item and as such the stakeholders remain involved in the EM planning process. Stakeholder 'buy in' to the plan encourages participation and ownership of the plan.

## Animals in Emergencies

Heath (2000) suggests that the single most common reason people return to an evacuation disaster site is to rescue their pets. Recognising this as a fundamental feature of EM requires ongoing dialogue with agencies, community groups and other affected stakeholders. Feedback from meetings, discussions and situational debriefings has identified the following additional anecdotal information regarding animal owners:

- Most people do not have an emergency plan for themselves or their pets
- People are reluctant / unprepared to evacuate without their pets
- Most evacuation centres ban animals and have no provisions for their housing or relocation
- Outside, unleashed or untrained dogs are difficult to contain and transport
- People who have been evacuated cope better if they have a pet to care for
- Multiple pet residences are more complex than single pet residences

The last point is supported by Heath (2001) who suggests that the more pets a household owned, the higher the risk of household evacuation failure was.

Finally, it was noted that as with all things EM, care, control and management of animals involves the understanding of multiple agencies and groups.

## Developing the Animal Emergency Plan

The City of Bunbury initiated its EM animal management planning in June 2006. Within our City of Bunbury rangers, the question of animal management was posed. Specifically the following EM planning gaps were identified:

- How to evacuate people with pets?
- How to rescue animals during an emergency?
- Where to accommodate animals during an emergency?
- Preparing people to manage their own animals during an emergency
- Prioritising high risk areas – flood zones, ocean frontage, forest edges
- Identifying multiple animal owners – breeders, farmers, community groups
- Prioritising assistance – seniors, the disabled, mental health patients
- Prioritising service – will a CoB staff member be available to assist animals?

These gaps were used to form the basis of the draft Animal Emergency Plan. We found that it was useful to briefly look at other plans, write up our own swiftly and then allow it to be critiqued thoroughly. That way we had something in place to use if we needed, even if it wasn't yet the perfect version.

## Features of the Bunbury AEP

The AEP interacts with the EM Plan and includes the following features:

- A person nominated to be Animal Welfare Coordinator (AWC) within the Incident Management Group (IMG)
- An Animal Welfare Team (AWT) to enact the plan
- An Animal Operations Centre – a location to direct actions from
- Primary Pet Shelter location nominated and backup shelters identified
- Contact numbers – updated regularly
- Asset register – crates/cages, cars, animal handlers, food, kennels etc
- Checklists of responsibilities for AWC and AWT
- Pro forma for impounded public displays, register of incoming animals
- Running cost sheets for expenses

## Stakeholder Review

The draft AEP was reviewed by stakeholders as a means of testing the sensibility of the plan for EM planning, preparedness, response and recovery. The City of Bunbury invited stakeholders to comment using various media and initiated an AEP review workshop to analyse, assess, dissect and ultimately comment on for suitability in an implementation phase.

The workshop provided a forum for stakeholders to listen, learn and share information on the AEP. Twenty people attended the workshop and provided useful information to improve the workability of the AEP.

As a stimulus for discussion, stakeholders were shown images following Hurricane Katrina in 2006 which included animal evacuation, animal rescue techniques, animal rescue equipment, identification techniques, temporary shelter facilities and feeding stations. Moving video footage of animal rescue in "Hope Rising" challenged the stakeholders to question whether the Bunbury community could address its critical animal management issues and whether it would be ready for an emergency.

These points were also the subject of rigorous debate amongst stakeholders, particularly with respect to service prioritisation, methods of operation and expected levels of animal care.

## Continuous Improvement

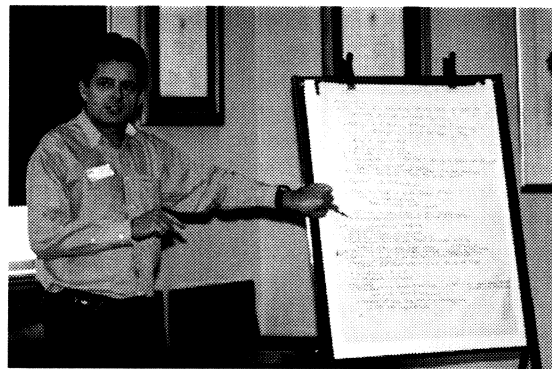
Planning for animals in emergency situations is an ongoing exercise. If a plan is to be useful it should not be done once and stored for posterity. Planning itself is a dynamic and strategic process that requires an implementation phase to activate the plan.

Since reviewing the AEP, many issues have been identified for further clarification and resolution. Some issues are simple items to improve operations, whilst others are more complex, including:

- Don't assume animal owners or welfare handlers have even basic understanding of EM systems
- Establishment of an animal welfare "hotline"
- Train volunteers in IM systems, chain of command.
- Have the EM kit ready (located in pound / office / main stakeholders)
- Cats and dogs in cages/crates permitted on bus evacuations
- Training and practice for staff and volunteers in documentation, animal identification, animal handling and triage
- Printed instructions – e.g. "Due to {event} we are evacuating your area. You may bring your small pet with you to the evacuation centre. It will be cared for by a ranger or animal carer. Please bring identification and vaccination certificates for your pets". These can be distributed by emergency response personnel
- Multilingual translations of animal evacuation instructions
- Ranger / AMO priorities – determine animal rescue priority in house
- Identification of AWT – uniforms, badges, vests etc

## Multi use shelter

A significant gap identified in the AEP is the need for a multi use animal shelter. As documented above, there is no kennel or cattery within the City of Bunbury. The three kennels/catteries in close proximity to the City are small and operate as commercial enterprises. Without authority to second their use, any use of these facilities would be dependent on the cooperation of the owners.



Cooperation and goodwill of kennel/cattery owners may depend on the nature of the emergency event, the relationship the owners enjoys with the emergency service personnel and councils or the financial capacity of individual enterprises to provide community services.

It was determined that an ideal planning outcome would be the future construction and operation of a multi use animal shelter. In order for the shelter to be viable it needs to have a year round function that can be adjusted to accommodate additional animals during emergency events.

In discussion with stakeholders, some of the criteria required for a multi use animal shelter are:

- Central location within suitable land use zoning
- Address routine animal handling operation to be able to upgrade for emergencies
- Identify overflow options – neighbouring municipalities, other facilities
- Establish agreements of use (Memo's of Understanding for multiple users)
- Support pets and livestock – separation requirements, feeding requirements
- Adequate office space and IT capacity
- Opportunity for expansion

The planning for this shelter will be included in our Companion Animal Management Plan, in construction currently.

## Lessons Learned

In any planning process, the proof is usually in the pudding. Until this plan is used in an actual emergency event, its robustness and rigour will remain subject to speculation and assumptions. However, even the EM planning and preparation process provides opportunities for learning.

In preparing the AEP, some of the noticeable lessons include:

- Don't assume the stakeholders will all participate – although 20 stakeholders attended the AEP review workshop, over 40 people were invited. This indicates that there might be a significant number of useful ideas that could add value to the AEP that are not included.
- Don't assume that all stakeholders will agree on the importance or the urgency of the AEP. The workshop provided a forum for some rigorous debate about the importance of animal welfare within the context of EM generally. With priorities given to human life, personal property and community infrastructure and services, many of the traditional emergency service providers viewed animal welfare and rescue as a subspect to their core business. This disparity of interest is demonstrated by Jennens (2007) who highlights the futility of groups working to different agendas.
- The principal client of the AEP cannot talk! The preparation of the plan relies on human ideas and assumptions about animal welfare. In wildfires, for example, animals often find their own way to safety. Human contact may add stress to fleeing animals and emergency intervention may not be warranted.
- Emergency Management knows no boundaries. The City of Bunbury is a geographically small area, however, its emergency planning must consider the role and functions of neighbours. Courtesy and communication are required.

Flood, wildfire or storm will probably strike at some time in the future. A large multi council disaster may or may never occur. While the intentions of the plan can be practiced, the robustness of this plan can only be tested in a real situation.

## Conclusion

It is important to include provision for animals in Emergency Management planning. Animals form a significant part of our community, adding social value to domestic life and contributing to the economy.

Emergency Management planning has traditionally focussed on saving human life, protecting personal property and preserving community infrastructure and services as fundamental priorities. Given that animals are an important part of our social and economic fabric, their protection must also feature in Emergency Management planning. Chaseling (2007) goes further, suggesting that when authorities plan for pets they should recognise that most owners consider pets "family".

Planning is a pre-emptive activity undertaken to address past lessons learned from other emergency situations. Response and recovery efforts by emergency management agencies are quickly undone once the people they assisted decide to return to disaster affected areas to search for and rescue their pets and livestock.

These lessons demonstrate the need to include animals in EM planning. The message regarding animals in emergencies is clear – they must be included in EM plans for the plan to be able to address its other priorities effectively.

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## About the Author

Claire Gick has been involved in animal management in Western Australia for over 15 years. Claire has been active over her career in various canine training (agility, obedience, showing), small animal veterinary nursing (including a period as practice manager), municipal ranger (domestic animal management and law enforcement) and animal management consulting.