The Australian Animal Welfare Strategy

Peter Thornber presents the Australian Animal Welfare Strategy

Abstract

Direct and indirect impacts on the welfare of animals are an important consideration during emergency disease incidents. Unforeseen animal welfare incidents can occur at any time and create significant problems and must be factored into a structured response. It is important to recognise broad stakeholder and community animal welfare interests and the need to communicate agreed emergency response policies and approaches as part of emergency planning and preparedness. The development of an Australian Animal Welfare Strategy is an important milestone in defining Australia's current animal welfare approach and establishing a framework to enhance future animal welfare outcomes.

Introduction

The Australian Animal Welfare Strategy builds upon existing animal welfare arrangements in Australia. It recognises the intimate connection between animal welfare and animal health and production.

The Strategy facilitates a national consultative approach to animal welfare that welcomes involvement of broad community, industry and government interests. It establishes a framework for sustainable animal welfare outcomes based on scientific evidence, in order to meet the expectations of the whole of the Australian community, with a focus on achieving a balance between education, extension and regulation.

The Strategy recognises that animal welfare is a complex issue. Science and ethics are both essential. Science provides the body of evidence about animals that is used for moral and ethical judgements about their welfare. At the same time, decisions about animal welfare are influenced by cultural, social, economic, and occupational health and safety considerations. Australia emphasises the importance of stockmanship, the skills and responsibilities of animal carers and their role in good husbandry, and the delivery of acceptable animal welfare outcomes.

Building an enhanced national animal welfare approach

All animals have intrinsic value. The Australian approach to animal welfare requires that animals under human care or influence are healthy, properly fed and comfortable and that efforts are made to improve their well being and living conditions. In addition, there is a responsibility to ensure that animals that require veterinary treatment receive it, and that if animals are to be destroyed it is done humanely. This responsibility towards animals does not necessarily extend to intervention in the management of individual wild animals and their populations, in which animals suffer or die as part of natural processes.

The Strategy covers the care, uses and direct and indirect impacts of human activity on all sentient[1] animals in Australia (*see Figure 1*). This includes animals used in research and teaching, animals used for the production of food and fibre and other products, companion and guide animals, animals used for recreation, entertainment and display, native and introduced wildlife, and feral animals.

The Strategy's vision is that the welfare of all animals in Australia

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1 A sentient animal is one that has the capacity to have feelings and to experience suffering and pleasure. Sentience implies a level of conscious awareness.

is promoted and protected by the development and adoption of sound animal welfare standards and practices. It provides direction for the development of future animal welfare policies, based on a national consultative approach and a firm commitment to high standards of animal welfare. The Strategy clarifies the roles and responsibilities of key community, industry and government organisations.

The benefits of the Strategy are:

- achievement of optimum, sustainable welfare outcomes for animals;

- development of a clear and consistent national direction on animal welfare;

- focus and guidance for future resource decisions to protect and promote sustainable animal welfare;

- readily identifiable and clearly defined national standards;

- demonstration and promotion of Australia's standards and performance against domestic and international benchmarks; and

- improved identification of research priorities for Australia, also taking account of international developments.

The Strategy will operate according to the open, consultative and consensual nature of Australia's democratic, tolerant and pluralist society. Australia's approach to animal welfare, through adoption of the Strategy, is to ensure that due consideration is accorded to a multitude of factors including science, practicability, culture, economics, ethics, societal values of the whole community, education and awareness, innovation and international developments. These considerations are relevant to the establishment and promotion of sound animal welfare standards.
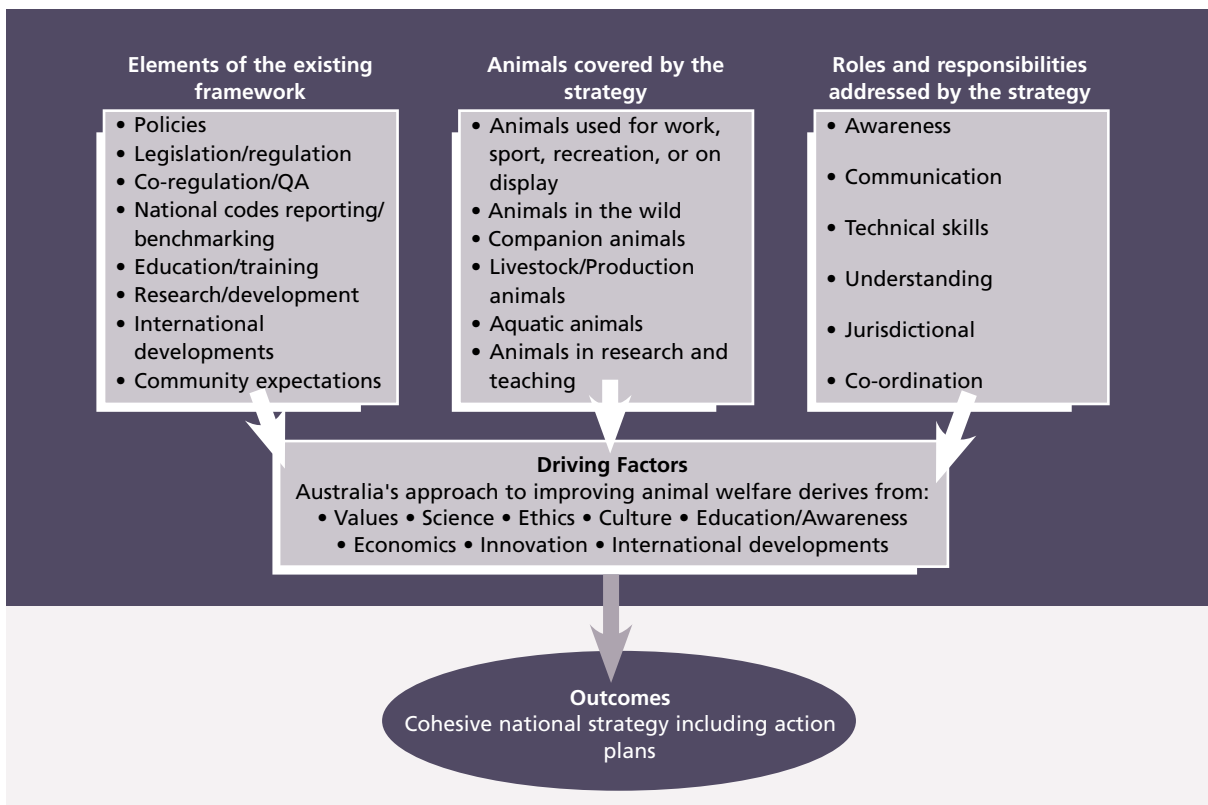
The goals of the Strategy are to achieve:

1. an enhanced national approach and commitment to ensure high standards of animal welfare based on a concise outline of current processes;

2. sustainable improvements in animal welfare based on national and international benchmarks, scientific evaluation and research, taking into account changes in whole of community standards; and

3. effective communication, education and training across the whole community to promote an improved understanding of animal welfare.

Specific objectives and strategies have been identified under each of these three goals. These include:

- involving all key stakeholders in ownership of the Strategy and in the development and implementation of animal welfare standards that have a strong scientific basis.

- improving consistency of legislation and administration across jurisdictions and the enforcement of agreed standards.

- building a shared understanding of respective roles and responsibilities.

- improving the collection and reporting of animal welfare

Figure 1. The Strategy—an overarching national strategic framework

Elements of the existing framework

- Policies
- Legislation/regulation
- Co-regulation/QA
- National codes reporting/ benchmarking
- Education/training
- Research/development
- International developments
- Community expectations

Animals covered by the strategy

- Animals used for work, sport, recreation, or on display
- Animals in the wild
- Companion animals
- Livestock/Production animals
- Aquatic animals
- Animals in research and teaching

Roles and responsibilities addressed by the strategy

- Awareness
- Communication
- Technical skills
- Understanding
- Jurisdictional
- Co-ordination

Driving Factors
Australia's approach to improving animal welfare derives from:
• Values • Science • Ethics • Culture • Education/Awareness
• Economics • Innovation • International developments

Outcomes
Cohesive national strategy including action plans

data as a basis to benchmark Australia's animal welfare outcomes.

- enhancing the attitudes, skills and knowledge of animal carers and handlers and all other people whose actions have a potential effect/impact on animals such as wildlife or introduced animals by developing, where appropriate, national training competencies and standards.
- promoting and facilitating the inclusion of animal welfare studies in the curricula of educational institutions.
- creating national Internet sources for national, state/territory and local animal welfare information and establishing a process of national consultation with the general community on nationally important welfare issues.
- monitoring developments in animal welfare in other countries.

Roles and responsibilities

Under current constitutional arrangements, legislative responsibility for animal welfare within Australia rests primarily with State and Territory governments. All States and Territories within Australia have contemporary and comprehensive animal welfare legislation. Local governments have legislation relating to the management of companion animals. The Federal Government has responsibility for trade and international agreements.

Australia has a strong existing framework to establish and enforce acceptable animal welfare outcomes and has contemporary and comprehensive animal welfare legislation and enforcement at national, state, territory and local levels. National codes of practice and auditable industry quality assurance programs are also in place and provide a sound basis for the humane and responsible use and treatment of animals. The Strategy aims to promote and refine the framework used to protect the welfare of animals.

The Strategy further defines animal welfare roles and responsibilities for individual animal owners and users, livestock animal industry groups, community animal welfare groups and governments.

All people who have animals in their care have a responsibility to ensure that they have adequate knowledge and skills to apply to the welfare of animals. These people have an enduring obligation to seek expert assistance where necessary to ensure the welfare of animals.

Implementing the strategy

Once the Strategy is agreed, an Implementation Plan will be developed in consultation with key stakeholders. This plan will incorporate specific action plans as required with nominated lead agencies to deliver the specific objectives under the Strategy. It will also identify any additional resources and funding required to implement the Strategy. It will provide a basis for national co-ordination of the Strategy with the associated reporting on progress of implementation.

The Primary Industries Ministerial Council will assume responsibility to monitor, review and report implementation progress. The National Consultative Committee on Animal Welfare, the nationally representative committee of key stakeholders, will continue to advise the Australian Government on developments under the Strategy.

Conclusion

Australia has developed its current world-class emergency animal disease system based on consensus among key stakeholders who understand their roles and responsibilities. It is important to clearly define animal welfare policies and communicate them before emergency events. The issue of animal welfare in emergency planning and response will be further refined as a specific issue under Australia's emergency animal disease arrangements and the Australian Animal Welfare Strategy.

Author
Peter Thornber has qualifications in agriculture, veterinary science and teaching. He has extensive domestic and international experience in the management of animal health. He has been involved in emergency animal disease management since 1989 and managed the national emergency animal disease program at Animal Health Australia for three years.