

RURAL AND REGIONAL PROGRAM



Year 1 Update



VfCA's Rural and Regional Program

A Voice for all Animals

For rural and regional Australia, climate change is no longer a hypothetical future threat. Whether it be drought, floods, bushfires, thunderstorms, or disease outbreaks, unnatural disasters fueled by climate pollution are impacting on the health and welfare of animals, and the people who care for them, love them, and work with them.

The veterinary industry is right at the frontlines of these impacts, not just affected by climate change in their business and personal lives, but responding to it and its effects on animals and communities. As a profession that holds a trusted place in the community, as experienced science educators and communicators, and as established advocates for animal and human welfare, vets are well positioned to provide leadership on climate change in rural areas.

VfCA's Rural and Regional Program (RRP) aims to engage with and educate practitioners on the impacts of climate change on animal health and veterinary practice, provides practical tools for sustainability in veterinary practice, empowers vets to act as climate champions in their communities and networks, and advocates for strong policy and leadership on climate action at all levels.

The Rural and Regional Program was developed primarily by the work of VfCA volunteers throughout 2022/23, and was launched as a pilot, initially in northern Victoria, in early 2023, with the appointment of myself as Regional Lead, working 0.2 FTE.

At times, as with any new movement building project, progress has felt frustratingly slow. Refinement of the program strategy plan, target audience research, funding applications and resource development including the RRP pages and blog on VfCA's website all took time, but it was with great excitement that outreach began with the program's very first visit to the Broadford Veterinary Clinic in August 2023.



Since then, momentum has built steadily both in northern Victoria, and more recently in northern NSW, where we conducted our highly successful Northern Rivers Roadshow. Visiting veterinary clinics and introducing them to VfCA and our work, building awareness of the links between climate change and animal health, has been a mainstay of the program, and has met with very positive response. An important part of this activity has also been sharing the Rural and Regional Program Survey, providing VfCA with important insights into the experiences of our profession with climate change, attitudes and concerns, and barriers to further action.



Other highlights have included:

- Attending industry and community events, including Charles Sturt University's Vet School Trade Expo, where I met many young and enthusiastic future vets
- The roll out of the RRP's In-clinic Education Program, bringing climate science and advocacy directly to rural and regional veterinary teams, as a part of their continuing education requirements
- Our well attended in-person seminar in Lismore, NSW, which brought together local veterinary professionals and community members for education and network building
- An invitation to speak at the 2024 national Australian Veterinary Association Conference about the impacts of climate change on Rural and Regional Veterinary Practice

The program faces many challenges, including the vast distances of rural and remote Australia, the conservative nature of leadership in these areas, and the competing demands faced by a veterinary industry under immense pressure from financial challenges and staff shortages. However, I'm very proud of what the RRP has managed to achieve in its first year with minimal time and resources, and look forward to seeing it continue to expand and grow into the second half of 2024 and beyond.

Dr. Elise Anderson
Regional Lead, Rural and Regional Program



RRP: At A Glance

Clinic outreach

24 veterinary teams visited
across Victoria and NSW



Events attended

GV Climate Leadership and Jobs Summit
Seymour Alternative Farming Expo
AVA Conference 2023 and 2024
Vet Expo 2023
CSU Vet School Trade Expo 2023

Educating the profession

- Launch of the RRP In-clinic Education Program
- In-person seminar in Lismore, NSW
- AVA 2024 Presentation "Impacts of Climate Change on Rural and Regional Veterinary Practice: Risks, Costs and Opportunities"



VfCA Survey 2023/24

93 total responses, including 72 specifically from rural and regional practitioners



Building relationships

With like-minded climate organisations, animal welfare and wildlife groups, universities and vet schools, and elected representatives, candidates and their offices at state and federal level.

Media

Interviews with and/or articles published in local, national and veterinary media including Sky News, the Guardian Australia, ABC Radio

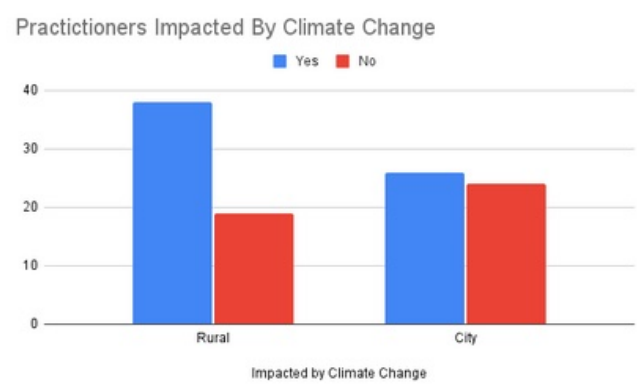


What we've learned

The Rural and Regional Program's outreach strategy means that we have spoken to vets, vet nurses and practice managers from across our two pilot regions. Listening to their personal experiences, and gathering their stories, it's clear to see that not only is climate change already a part of their everyday lives, but that they care deeply about its impacts on their business, their communities, and the animals they care for, a message that is also borne out in the survey data they and their teams have contributed.

Rural and regional vets are already feeling the impacts of climate change

Well over half of our survey respondents report experiencing climate change impacts in their professional or personal lives. This proportion increases significantly for those people who live in rural and regional areas. Impacts include experience of disasters and extreme weather, changes in disease distribution, disruptions to business and loss of income.



Lismore Vet Clinic: 2022 Floods



When the regional city of Lismore was inundated by record breaking flood-waters in early 2022, Lismore Veterinary Clinic was squarely in the flood zone. This was not the first time the clinic had been flooded, but unprecedented depths of water meant that the usual strategy - moving all equipment and stock to the upper story - wasn't successful, and everything went under. Two other clinics in Lismore were also flooded, with more in the wider region directly affected.

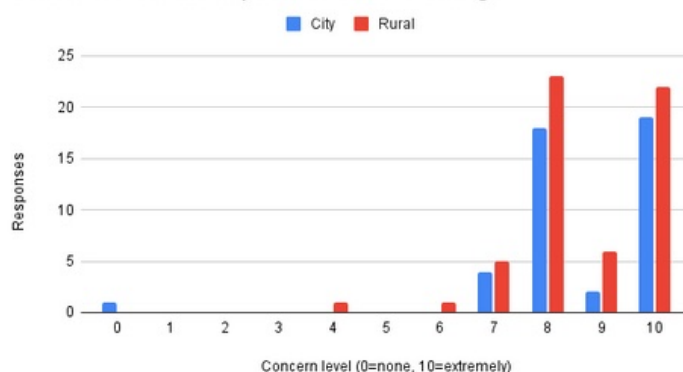
They were up and running again, albeit with limited services, within a week. In the meantime, surrounding clinics that stayed dry, such as VetLove Goonellebah stepped up to provide emergency treatment and temporary pet accommodation, reunite displaced pets with their owners, and coordinate donations of animal based goods and service.



The veterinary industry is deeply concerned about climate change

Wherever we speak to vets, vet nurses and their colleagues, they tell us that they are very concerned about the impacts of climate change. There is no divide between rural and city on this issue in our profession; in fact, our survey data shows that climate change is not an 'inner city' issue, and that concern levels are just as high amongst regional vets as with their urban colleagues.

Concern About the Impacts of Climate Change



93% of **veterinary professionals**
surveyed believe our industry
has an obligation to advocate for climate action

However they also reported significant barriers to being able to take action in their practices, with the most common being but that they lack the information, time or confidence to take up this issue, and often just don't know where to start.

Rochester Vet Clinic: adapting to changing conditions

Rochester Vet Clinic is a large rural practice located northern Victoria, where there is a large significant industry. Their clinic was flooded in October 2022, and while the water receded from the building quickly, the lingering effects of the wet, muddy conditions led to a sharp upswing in associated diseases, such as mastitis and hoof problems. It was a busy time for the team.

Practitioners in the region are also having to be vigilant to the possibility of new and emerging disease, as vector borne viruses such as Japanese Encephalitis appear in places they haven't been seen before.



Rochester Vet Clinic is currently renovating an adjacent building to expand into, and as well as building flood proofing into their design, are working to make their practice as sustainable as possible by taking part in VfCA's Climate Care Program

Angourie Road Veterinary Clinic: A sustainability focussed renovation



When Dr. Karen Teasedale and her team at Angourie Road Veterinary Clinic in Yamba, on the north coast of NSW, embarked on a major extension and renovation of their clinic, sustainability was front of mind.

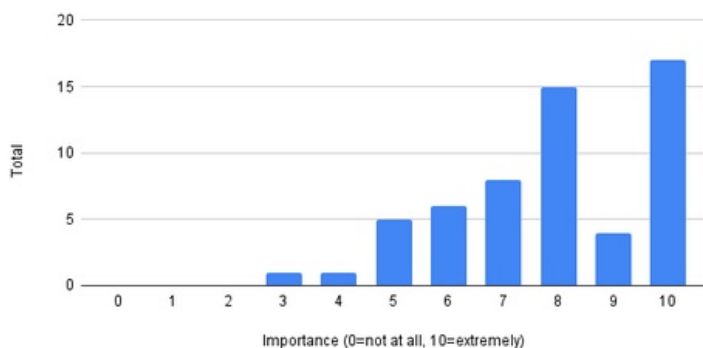
The new clinic was designed using biophilic principles; a style of architecture that mimics natural environments and makes the most of prevailing conditions to maximise the comfort of both the humans and animals who spend time in the building.

They also used a large range of salvaged, repurposed and second hand materials and equipment; everything from ex-human hospital surgical lights to marble offcuts from a commercial building site. The result is a clinic that is unique, functional, and with a low carbon footprint.



Vets and vet nurses want their workplaces to take action on climate change

How important is it to you that your workplace takes action on climate change?



Vets and vet nurses aren't just concerned about climate change, they want their industry and their workplaces to take action. Indeed, many clinics are already taking a range of steps to lower their footprint, with the installation of solar panels being common. A universal source of frustration is single use waste and lack of viable recycling options for common clinic consumables. Clinic staff are keen for practical advice to help them improve their sustainability.

What's next for the Rural and Regional Program?

- Review and update the RRP Strategy Plan
- Continue outreach program of clinic visits and in-clinic education in our pilot electorates
- Continue to build relationships with federal and state MPs in tandem with local clinicians
- Seek funding to return to the Northern Rivers to build on the work done there in 2024
- Establish regional chapters of VfCA for supporters in N/NE Victoria and the Northern Rivers
- Host advocacy workshops for regional climate champions
- Development of an online Advocacy Module to run in tandem with the Climate Care Program

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