

Project Black Cockatoo – Phase II Report

Date: April 22, 2025

Prepared by: Dr Campbell Costello, BVSc

Phase II Project Partners:

- Charters Towers Lions Club
 - Charters Towers Rotary Club
 - Channel Country Helicopters
 - Boehringer Ingelheim
-

1. Executive Summary

Project Black Cockatoo – Phase II was launched in response to ongoing flood impacts across western Queensland, continuing the mission to provide veterinary care to isolated and severely affected communities. From April 17 to 20, 2025, veterinary services were delivered by bush plane to areas still inundated or recovering from major flooding, particularly along the Cooper and Wilson River systems.

This stage built upon the momentum and findings of the initial deployment, expanding logistical capabilities with the support of local service organisations, rotary clubs, private donors, and industry partners. The aerial approach once again proved critical in reaching remote communities and delivering urgently needed animal care, medications, and moral support.

2. Objectives

- Provide follow-up veterinary care to livestock and equines impacted by prolonged flood conditions
- Deliver and distribute veterinary medications and consumables to isolated communities
- Address vector-borne disease risks and livestock health issues such as three-day sickness

- Support flood-affected residents through animal welfare services and mental health reassurance
 - Advocate for the formal integration of veterinary services in disaster recovery frameworks
-

3. Mission Timeline & Activities

Thursday, April 17, 2025

- Aircraft VH-JNG was packed with veterinary supplies, swags, and personal equipment, then refuelled in Charters Towers.
- Flew to Winton to collect additional veterinary medications. Additional drugs were ordered directly by equine owners via the Longreach Veterinary Clinic.
- Reached Noccundra Airstrip; due to inaccessible roads and uncertain airstrip conditions at Nockatunga Station, supplies were left in the hotel cold room.
- Community members requested follow-up veterinary visits. Mosquitoes were in plague proportions; concern over vector-borne disease was high.

Medications Delivered:

- 8 x 100ml Metacam (Boehringer Ingelheim, 20mg/ml)
 - 3 x 250ml Troy Meloxicam (20mg/ml)
 - 1 x Iodine wound spray
-

Friday, April 18, 2025

- Flew over Nappa Merrie Station, noting severe flood impact around the Nookabooka waterhole. GPS data on stranded livestock was relayed to fodder drop helicopters in Innamincka.
- Observed significant structural damage at Nappa Merrie and Innamincka Stations. The Dig Tree airstrip was submerged. Severe damage to Burke and Wills Bridge and road was noted.

- Landed at Innamincka Township; used "Bush Telegraph" to liaise with local cattlemen and relay supplies to surrounding stations via helicopter.

Community Concerns:

- Long-term isolation of properties
- Mosquito-borne disease outbreaks
- Lack of access to animal healthcare

Medications Distributed:

- Gidgealpa & Innamincka Stations: 15 x 100ml Metacam, 2 x Equine Meloxicam Paste, 1 x Iodine Spray, 3 x Oticlean
- Nappa Merrie: 8 x 100ml Metacam, 2 x Dermotic Wound Sprays
- Omicron Station: 4 x 100ml Metacam (reporting active three-day sickness)

Returned to Quilpie for refueling and debriefing with helicopter crews.

Saturday, April 19, 2025

- Departed Quilpie for Thargomindah; responded to requests for small animal and equine care.
- Nooyeah Station's airstrip was still unusable; medications were delivered via helicopter.
- Inspected extensive flood damage across Thargomindah. Community members shared stories of personal loss, including the flooding of the newly built post office and damage to homes.

Medications Delivered to Nooyeah Station:

- 8 x 100ml Metacam
- 1 x Equine Meloxicam Paste
- 1 x Oticlean Spray

Departed for Eromanga to support the rodeo and provide veterinary consults to local producers. Multiple reports and concerns regarding ongoing three-day sickness and station isolation.

Sunday, April 20, 2025

- Visited Nockatunga Station to assess one of the few surviving horses after the Wilson River flood.

Case Study: Clumper Mare

- Severe lacerations and hoof trauma, profound weight loss (approx. 350 kg)
- Found 10 km downstream by helicopter pilot after being swept away by flood waters
- Daily treatment maintained by staff flying in medications with helicopter, “boiling billy” to clean wounds with clean water; prognosis poor for full recovery, possibly paddock sound only
- Owner emotionally affected; 20 horses presumed drowned including 12 foals, 12 yearlings, and a family pony

Departed Nockatunga and returned to Townsville (3.5-hour flight).

4. Key Observations & Concerns

Animal Welfare

- Three-day sickness remains active across several properties
- Livestock malnourished, stressed, and in some cases unreachable for days. For some livestock this will most likely be the case for weeks and/or months.
- Equine injuries due to flooding were common and often severe

Disease Risk

- High risk of vector-borne diseases due to mosquito infestation
- Elevated zoonotic disease risk (leptospirosis, melioidosis) persists

Infrastructure & Access Issues

- Multiple airstrips still inaccessible
 - Roads severely damaged or impassable in key locations (e.g., Innamincka, Nappa Merrie)
-

5. Community Feedback

- Emotional impact of veterinary visits was substantial; presence of a vet provided hope and human connection
 - Multiple communities requested future visits and a formalised veterinary response mechanism
 - Veterinary consultations helped manage not just animal health, but also human mental wellbeing in disaster zones
-

6. Recommendations

1. Formalise Veterinary Roles in Disaster Recovery

- Veterinary assets must be included in recovery and rebuild stages of natural disasters
- Funding must be allocated for remuneration, fuel, consumables, and temporary accommodation

2. Veterinary Supply and Fuel Caches

- Establish and maintain veterinary supply hubs in regional towns (Quilpie, Charleville, Longreach)
- Secure AV gas reserves in key locations to support air-based deployment

3. Mental Health Support Through Veterinary Presence

- Veterinary visits provide critical reassurance to residents and staff who've endured weeks of hardship and isolation
 - Animal care must be recognized as an essential service with direct human wellbeing benefits
-

7. Conclusion

Project Black Cockatoo – Phase II demonstrated the continued value and impact of rapid-deployment veterinary services in disaster-hit rural Australia. The mission not only addressed urgent animal welfare needs but also reinforced the role of veterinary presence as a pillar of resilience in the bush.

Moving forward, a permanent framework must be developed to embed veterinary resources into state and federal disaster response mechanisms—particularly as climate extremes become more frequent.

Prepared by:

Dr Campbell Costello, BVSc

Pilot & Veterinarian

Outback & Airborne Veterinary Services - outbackvets.au