

A Fire Plan for Your Livestock

Fact Sheet series for the
Small Rural Landholder

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The Issue

The best way to reduce the possibility of panic on a high fire risk day is to have done all the preparation prior to and during the fire season.

Then, in the event of high fire risk days or an actual fire threat, there will be only a small number of strategic tasks necessary to secure livestock and farm infrastructure.

The purpose of this note is to build on that information with some practical tips to protect livestock from fire on smaller farms.

Introduction

Many lifestyle farms, own some livestock that are effectively seen as pets and, therefore, they have an emotional connection for the owners, who may regard those animals as family. In the event of a direct fire threat this may then distract those owners from dealing with the threat to their own family in an effort to save these animals.

Dedicated “safe” area

To minimise this problem it makes sense to have a dedicated location, paddock or yard, which during the summer months, will be a designated ‘safe’ place should a fire event occur. It should have either minimal or no fire fuel and if possible be located in a green fodder crop or pasture.

The area ideally should be fenced with non-flammable materials so livestock will not be left to escape on to neighbouring properties and roads; a scenario that often happens following destruction of fences during fire. Alternatively where existing fences are timber, a late winter spray with a broad-spectrum herbicide, along the fence, will significantly reduce grass growth which fuels the burning of fence posts.

The area also needs to have a water point capable of holding sufficient amounts of water to meet the needs of those animals. If the water supply is coming from a source which may be interrupted by fire, such as an electric pressure pump, then the water trough should hold sufficient water for livestock for several days.

In recent drought years, landholders have been encouraged to build dedicated stock containment areas to minimise degradation of pastures and soils. This strategy ensures a paddock or yard can be allocated to provide feed, water and shelter whilst protecting important grazing areas of the property.

Such a containment area could be suited to also double as a safe area for livestock should there be a threat of fire. By having either a stock containment area or a dedicated safe area for livestock, landholders can include this strategy in their fire plan i.e. on high risk fire days livestock are routinely moved into those secure areas, in the knowledge that they will be safe. Then owners can direct their focus to other aspects of their personal fire plan.

Planning for Horses

The peri-urban areas around Melbourne and larger regional centres are populated with thousands of horses and owners across hundreds of agistment properties.

When it comes to fire planning, this puts them into a different risk category because of a number of factors. Many of these animals are located on agistment properties, where in the event of a fire threat it is highly probable horse owners may attempt to enter a dangerous fire zone to rescue them. This would clearly represent an unacceptable situation for police and firefighters who would have to divert further resources.



A cultivated paddock is a good stock containment area.



Another example of a good stock containment area.

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The challenge

To get EVERYONE who needs a plan to actually put their mind to that task and have the discussion within families and communities.

Experience tells us that for those who HAVEN'T had those discussions and practised their plans, the likely outcome will be panic and poor decision-making.



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Agistment fire plan

To reduce the likelihood of this scenario it makes sense for these agistment properties to develop a fire plan. The plan should be inclusive of all the owners, provide a safe place for the horses and peace of mind for the owners. This would also discourage any need for dangerous rescue attempts.

Property managers and horse owners would need to have a clear understanding of the plan including a communications strategy using modern / social media to keep all parties informed. Local pony clubs could play a vital education, facilitation and communication role, so their members are better prepared and less likely to be involved in high risk and dangerous behaviour.

A useful idea for horse identification, in the event of fire, is to use a can of water based spray paint to brand a phone number on the side of the horse in case it does become distressed and escape.

Fodder and Shedding

Another important consideration is to ensure that once chances for livestock survival are improved by these strategies, there will need to be fodder reserves available in the event that paddocks are left as burnt ground. This can be the most difficult challenge for hay stored as rolls in the open is subjected to ember and ground attack by fire.

For all shedding, but in particular hay sheds, fuel loads around the sheds needs to be removed and preferably the perimeter sprayed in the winter to provide a bare earth or gravel buffer surrounding the shed. Where hay is stored in closed sheds, attention should also be paid to covering any openings that may allow ember attack into the hay. Be careful not to have hay stored too close to any safe area for stock, should it catch fire and threaten the safety of livestock.

Plastic wrapped silage rolls provide less risk from fire through ember attack and higher moisture content but these will need to be stored on a bare earth area to further reduce the risk.

Summary

The unfortunate reality is that people who best understand the need for planning and preparation before each fire season are those who have experienced the destructive power of bushfires. If you haven't got a fire plan and don't put your mind to it now you probably won't do it later and will react to the situation rather than respond with clear management strategies to minimise impact of loss.

The Country Fire Authority (CFA) has a comprehensive amount of excellent information on how to develop a fire plan for homes, individuals, farms, livestock and pets.

Visit www.cfa.vic.gov.au



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