

**Bushfire Resilience Inc.**

**Black Saturday, 2009. Horses**

**Interview with Simon Bray, equine veterinarian**

**Interviewer: Malcolm Hackett OAM**



**Malcolm**

Hello, my name is Malcolm Hackett and I'm here with Simon Bray who had a veterinary practice in Kinglake during the time of the Black Saturday bushfires. He's generously agreed to share with us his personal experience of that fire event and also what he observed in the fate of animals following it.

First off Simon could you tell us a little bit about what preparations you made on your property?

**Simon**

Fortunately Malcolm, we'd been in a situation where we'd had a fairly substantial bushfire in 2006 come through and threaten Kinglake, so that was a good wake up call. And also, my parents when we lived in Chum Creek had been very paranoid about bushfires. So, we had some equipment from them and we had a plan in place even though it wasn't written down. We'd gone through it and worked out what we were going to do. We had a sprinkler system for the garden which in the event of a bushfire and time permitting we would start up and use to wet everything around the house. And we also had sprinklers on the roof of the house, all attached to a petrol fire pump that was under cover. And we had a generator that had been plumbed into the house so that if we lost power we were able to fire that up and run the fire hoses at front and back of the house. They utilized the house water tank whereas all the other water that we required came from the firefighting tank for the garden and the animals. We made sure that they were as full as possible over that period.

**Malcolm**

And who was there on the day?

**Simon**

On the day we were all at home and all the animals were at home but we'd heard about the fire at Kilmore East earlier in the day. I thought we were going to get away without bushfire at all. At about 11:30, 12 o'clock coming back from the veterinary practice up the street and then as I turned down a driveway to drive to home I could see above the ridge in the Kinglake East what looked like a huge storm coming. And that stretched over probably getting close to half the horizon in its breadth. I had a bit more of a look and went down to the house and worked out it wasn't a storm; it was smoke. And at that stage we got everything going and got our plan into action.

My wife daughter and all the animals were at home. The horses had been grazing the paddocks close around the house on purpose, so they were pretty bare, to reduce fuel. We moved them into the stables at that point so that they were partially protected, and we could grab them easily and move them out if possible.

**Malcolm**

What were those stables made out of?

**Simon**

The stables are made from wood, and they're in a big shed which we'd had extended. We were able to close doors at each end of the shed. And we also had a fire hose back and front of the shed that would run off the petrol pump. With the fire, my daughter's friend's parents came around and collected her and a couple of our domestic animals and we were fortunate enough that Kim Hunter, one of the

Rangers, had always said to us that if there was anything that she heard about that was life threatening like bushfire she would let us know as early as she could, which she did. She rang Jenny and said if you want to get any animals off the mountain you need to do it now.

We already had the float hooked up to the car at that point. We got the first two horses because there were four that we wanted to take off the mountain if we could. It was probably around 3:00 - 3:30 when I came home and told my wife about the imminent threat so she popped the horses on the float and took the first two, turning down from the top of the slide down the Melba highway towards Yarra Glen. What we didn't know was that she would have to drive through fire to get through to Yarra Glen and then through to Yarrambat which was where she was ultimately heading.

She was lucky enough that the CFA were down at the bottom of the hill in Dixons Creek. They sprayed the car and the float as she went past and she just kept going. When she turned right to go through Christmas Hills she thought "Am I really doing the right thing here?" But fortunately the fire had only gotten within about a kilometre of the Eltham Yarra Glen road, so she was able to get through. She passed her father going the other way with the float. He was only 72 years young so he'd come to help. He went up the slide and came to our place and picked up the next two, the girls' ponies, and left as soon as he could. He also went to go down the slide on the Melba and all the cars were flashing their lights at him, saying "You can't," so he did a U-turn and came back to the top of our road in Gordon's Bridge Road. The black smoke hit at about that stage so he rang my wife and asked "What do I do?" She said, "Go back to the slide as fast as you can, turn left and just go to Yea." I'd organised for the horses to be put up at the vet at Yea for the night.

### **Malcolm**

Did you have any other horses left then?

### **Simon**

Yes, we had the two geriatric horses that had progressed up to being close to the house. And when the stables were free we put them in there and took everything off them in the way of rugs, tack, head collars and fly veils. We shut the doors at each end and put wet rugs down under the bottom of the doors. We'd already had all the baths in the house filled up with water, and closed everything up as best we could.

At that point, my daughter's friend's father had agreed to stay back with me, as he was a lot younger than my father-in-law, and assist, which was fantastic. I had Proban overalls and goggles and a builders labourers hat and welding gloves and the whole works, while poor Christian got some of my work overalls and things. We got the torches ready with hay band on them so we could carry them around. And I had a list in my head as to what I needed to do and how to work my way down through that list to the bottom and then I'd just go back up to the top and start again.

### **Malcolm**

And what sorts of things were on your list?

### **Simon**

The main thing to consider was wetting down the area around the house. I have to do it in batches because the pump will only drive so many sprinklers. I did that and worked my way around the house as I normally would just watering the garden. The gutters on the shed and the stables had already been plugged and were full of water. I made sure everything was closed. Basically the list was about going around wetting down the garden, and the house with the sprinklers. I made sure that it was all happening and working and they were already damp to start with.

### **Malcolm**

The wind and the heat were horrific on that day. Were the sprinklers on the house being effective or was it being blown away?

## **Simon**

The sprinklers on the house were all put in with copper piping and they were the harp-type sprinklers with the bit in the middle that spins around. They throw out decent droplets of water rather than mist or spray. They were pretty effective and we had them on the eaves and under the eaves of the house onto the veranda. About 25 altogether on the house. They were good. We were lucky, because when the fire came to us the wind had changed. Earlier in the day what alerted us to the problem was that when I'd gone up to the clinic it was after 1 o'clock and the phone rang. I knew it wasn't security because I'd already spoken to them. I wasn't going to answer the phone because it was after hours, but then I thought I'd better. It was the fellow from around the road at the back of the clinic. And he said "Look there's a fire at Mount Disappointment, and there's a fire at Toorourrong Reservoir." He said they had a northerly behind them. He said, "In my opinion they're going to join up and when the wind changes that will come up and take out Kinglake." So I thanked him very much.

That's when I rang my wife and she told me to get back home as fast as I could, and we went to do our fire plan which was about 3:00 to 3:30. When it did come through from the south we had some cleared paddocks with some grass in them, so it came from the forest and became a grass fire, coming at us from the south. We had a big row of conifers along the fence line near the border. Even though they are meant to burn and not be ideal they're very established and big and acted as quite a good windbreak. That really cut the wind down so we didn't have to deal with those huge winds, although they were bad enough anyway. We also have a garden with a lot of deciduous trees feature trees in it. I felt that they were good protection too for the house as everything was so green.

## **Malcolm**

When that wind change came were you getting spot fires driven in front of it or did it come as a front across?

## **Simon**

There were spot fires and they started in the neighbour's paddock, not far from the huge lake that we have adjoining a couple of neighbouring properties. We could see it starting as a grass fire from the spot fires and then it went from there and became very smoky. It was grey-white smoke at about 6:15 in the evening. It wasn't very long before it turned to black smoke, and we really could not see very far at all. It had gone through by about 20 past 7, and was starting to become light. As I was working my way round outside going from one place to another I was thinking it must be very close because it's getting very bright, but I'd forgotten that it was daylight savings, and it was just the sun coming back. But before that it would have been very difficult without torches. As part of my list, I went into the stables every so often with a fire hose and a torch and sprayed the horses on each side and everything inside the stables.

## **Malcolm**

And how were they behaving? Were they stressed by the situation?

## **Simon**

Yes. One was stressed and one wasn't. I just spoke to them quietly and told them not to worry. I said "We'll do our best and get through it," and made them very wet. Then I said, "I'll see you in about half an hour", then closed the doors and went on to the next task.

## **Malcolm**

So, when the fire front came, what was the sequence of events for you?

## **Simon**

Well, I don't actually know at what time the fire front came through because the flames went down. We were lucky and it was described by many people as like a wild animal hunting for food. We didn't see flames hundreds of feet high or anything like that. I wasn't ever quite sure when the front was coming

through, but it went down each side of us. We have bush block going up the ridge on the other side of the creek. It took that out and it took all the trees in between our paddocks, and the boundary trees, and then went down the road as well the opposite side of our property to the creek and it burnt all our paddocks and fences.

**Malcolm**

So you were able to stay outside and patrolling and so on?

**Simon**

Absolutely. On a few occasions I yelled out to Christian - because we were working independently and separately - just to let him know that I thought perhaps a front was coming through because of the noise or the sound and so on but I couldn't tell. We were able to stay out and keep an eye on things and just kept trying to wet everything and put out as many of the small fires as we could that were starting in the garden. I started with a mop because we had big barrels of water at each end of the house. I put the mop and I just had a sea of embers and sparks coming at me and little bits being set alight in the garden and the bushes and so on. And I just thought "Well this isn't much use," so I threw that away and I grabbed the knapsack and picked that up, but it was very stiff mechanism on the knapsack and it was a pencil beam of water and I just thought after I had used that for a couple of minutes, "I'm going to have a heart attack if I keep doing this, so that's not much good either, and besides it's nowhere near good enough". And it wasn't till I got the fire hoses - we'd unrolled them and had them out on the veranda laid out all ready to go; it was just a matter of flicking the valve and getting them into action. That made a difference. And we felt that we could do something, and we'd walk up and down the veranda as well just soaking under the eaves, even though the sprinklers were going, because I just ran them on the house at the most critical times, soaking the veranda and eaves.

**Malcolm**

You said you had a dedicated tank for the sprinklers.

**Simon**

Yes.

**Malcolm**

How many thousand litres or how many gallons?

**Simon**

About an 8,000 - 9,000 gallon tank.

**Malcolm**

Alright, so a big tank.

**Simon**

Yes, a big tank. And it's the main tank for the property for the garden and the stock. And that was pretty full, and we were in emergency able to pump up from the creek into the tank to replenish it. So, I had the pump going from the creek up to the tank and that was about the same size pump; a six and a half horsepower Davey, pumping up to the fire fighting pump.

**Malcolm**

So, you felt reasonably in control of what was happening or were you thinking this could all go pear-shaped?

**Simon**

I felt in control. But I do remember standing with the horses thinking "well I don't know what's going to happen here. And if it does go pear-shaped and they just find me and the remains of the shed and the horses or whatever how ironic it would be because of the Garry Owen story, where a man died trying to look after his wife and the horses. That's what the Garry Owen competition at the Royal Melbourne show was all about". So I was thinking "Well it's going to be ironic if that happens and hopefully it won't happen." But it was interesting because I didn't have time to be scared. I was too busy. And also, the other thing that struck me was some of the thoughts that came into my head about people in similar situations. What I was thinking as I was going down to drive to try and extinguish some of the fence posts if I could with the fire hose - and that wasn't much use - but I was thinking about the pilot that landed the plane on the frozen Hudson, how he was so cool and calm under pressure. That was the story that popped into my head.

**Malcolm**

It's interesting isn't it?

**Simon**

Yes, it's crazy.

**Malcolm**

So, you've certainly got a plan and the plan appears to be working. You've got someone else there who's working with you. Was there a point where you felt like this is over, or the embers and the spot fires and things just kept you going for how long?

**Simon**

The black smoke was clearing around 7:20 - 7:30 and we felt that things were settling down a little bit by then. Also, I felt that apart from embers and so on there wasn't a lot left to burn around us and I'd made the garden so wet prior to the fire and during it that as I trudged around the garden I was getting tall with the mud on my boots. At that stage, probably between 8:00 and 10:00 we gathered ourselves together and had a bit of a mini conference about what we were going to do from then. We ran out of water from the tank at about 20 past 10 and that was a bit of a shock. We still needed a supply of water.

We had the house-tank water for the house but that didn't go anywhere else. So I went down to the pump at the creek and that was pretty scary because I thought it might have just run out of petrol after three hours or more of pumping. We took a jerry can half-full down into the fire zone with a wet towel over it and we had all our fire gear back on. We got to the pump and realized that the inlet pipe was about 18 inches long if that and the outlet pipe was about the same and both very melted. I said to Christian "Let's get out of here. It needs more than petrol" So we stopped and we were able to relax a little bit, but we kept patrolling afterwards, and we didn't stop to have any food or anything like that till probably 12:00. I ate my lunch at 12 at night. Then we decided that one of us would stay awake while the other person patrolled. And it was easy to see if anything was catching or fires were starting from embers at that stage because it was dark. Then we'd swap, so one of us was always up patrolling.

**Malcolm**

Now in the days following I imagine you would have seen an awful lot of both domestic animals and horses and so on that had been through the fire? Any experiences there that you would want to share with us?

**Simon**

Well, the main thing was that I felt in general that the horses dealt with the situation much better than the people did. They just seem to have an instinct as to know what to do. Most of the stories I heard were third person but they related stories as to how they dealt with what was going on and how they

survived. It was incredibly interesting. I heard about horses going bush and a lot of them came back from say Strathewen, in Eagle's Nest Road for example. But also, I heard of horses sheltering in the lee of a concrete water tank to try and look after themselves. The mature horses in another situation almost formed a circle with the foals on the inside of the circle to try and protect them and they just kept them within the inside of the circle.

In another situation horses had been allowed to go into the garden which was around the house where it was green, and they were protected in that way by being around the house and the deciduous trees and the greenery. So, there are lots of really amazing stories about how they handled it. And unless they were very young horses or on their own or old and infirm horses or they were directly in the path of the main fire front travelling quickly such as up Bald Spur and up from Strathewen to straight up the hill, mostly the horses did quite well from what I heard.

I saw quite a number of horses with superficial burns, but we were able to manage them. The horses that were more severely burnt tended to be in areas between their back legs, their groin region, and those sorts of places where they'd have to travel across pasture that was burning. So, they did get burnt underneath and those were the exposed areas. But of the horses that survived that were referred down to the University of Melbourne Veterinary hospital for example I think there weren't a lot that were referred down there that they had to deal with, which was good.

**Malcolm**

And what about stress? Were there many horses where their stress meant that they succumbed to other injuries?

**Simon**

One of the main injuries that occurred with them was with their hooves. If their hooves were burnt in a moderate or major way then they wouldn't survive after that, so that was a problem.

**Malcolm**

People have mentioned to us about removing shoes because they're going to conduct heat, was that an observation that you agreed with?

**Simon**

Well, it's hard to say. You have to remember that farriers often hot shoe them and they put on shoes that are red hot. It's only for a very short time though and I think that's probably the problem with having shoes on. If it remains constantly hot and it's super-heated ground then that would be a problem for them if they had to stay on that hot ground. It would be transferred up through into the hoof and kill off the tissue. However, I think it would be difficult to remove the horse's shoes with the fire front looming. It's not something that I'd be recommending.

**Malcolm**

There are a lot of other things you could spend your time on I presume?

**Simon**

Yes. If we had our horses out in the paddocks and there was the possibility of a fire in the area and we didn't have time we would probably remove anything that was on them. Because otherwise that's going to cause more problems I think, by burning on them if it catches fire. And also open the gates.

**Malcolm**

Now I've heard this a lot.

**Simon**

Within the property. Yes.

**Malcolm**

So, within the property, because there's always that concern about them bolting out. So that experience then of horses knowing those gates and moving their way around the property as it burns perhaps.

**Simon**

I think so. I think our horses would have a pretty good idea of where they can go on the property. If the gates were open then they'd probably get together and they would have a chance of moving to the least dangerous places.

**Malcolm**

Would you put them together first or just let them find their way?

**Simon**

In our situation we now have sprinklers on the stables as well and a dedicated pump for that. We'd put the horses inside having removed all their gear and any horses that weren't able to go inside we'd probably put within the garden around the house. And we would try and protect them that way. But the ones that would go into the stables where there's a sprinkler system on the roof wouldn't be put together just because that could be a problem in itself with respect to injuries.

**Malcolm**

And as you did in the past would you intend to remove some animals from the property, or would you defend them on the property?

**Simon**

Now that we're even better set up we would try and stay on the property and look after the horses on the property.

**Malcolm**

When you were treating other people's animals, horses in particular after the fires, other than injuries, what other sorts of conditions did you confront?

**Simon**

Probably the most prevalent one was airway damage from the smoke inhalation. People commented on their horses coughing and seeming to have problems with that respect. And it certainly was very prevalent. So many of the animals had been exposed to that dense smoke.

**Malcolm**

Certainly true for people so it makes sense that animals should experience it too. Did those problems improve with treatment or were they sort of intractable?

**Simon**

Mostly we could treat them and they would improve. But it did mean that there was some permanent damage to many of the horses. And horses are athletes and have a huge capacity to move air and huge lung capacity etc. So, it really does make a difference and some horses seem to develop an equine asthma as a result of this smoke inhalation. So, if they were high performance animals that could rule them out of going on and competing in the future. But I saw a lot of horses for those types of conditions.

**Malcolm**

What is the psychological damage from their experiences?

**Simon**

I think that depended a lot on what they experienced and also the temperament of the horse involved. But I certainly did note that there were several horses that seemed to have been affected by it and reacted to situations after that differently and more perhaps explosively or in a way that was unexpected, compared to how they'd been before. So, it certainly seemed to have an effect on some of them.

**Malcolm**

Did people see horse survival of the kind you were describing before where animals would look after themselves or look after each other? Did that equate with temperament as well or did it tend to be variable?

**Simon**

I think that was pretty much across the board. And I think that's an innate thing that horses have. And provided they physically can both with respect to themselves they're able to get to where they want to go or get away from the fire to a safer area, they'll do that and they do it without all the sorts of things and concerns and worries that we have, when faced with the same situation. So, it's like they've got a switch in their brain, which just flicks in that type of catastrophic situation and so they mostly coped fairly well.

**Malcolm**

So, opening internal gates, closing external gates so they don't get out onto the road where they're going to get killed by falling trees or passing trucks or something is going to give them some area that they can look after themselves?

**Simon**

Absolutely. And even if they can't shelter somewhere in dams for example or in an area that's less likely to burn or get as hot or shelter from the radiant heat they'll move and they'll gallop from an area. They'll go through smoke and flame if necessary to get to an area that's burnt and so that's why I think it's important if you can have everything open. And when I say open if people were opening gates they really need to open them as wide as they can so that the horses don't hurt themselves going through them, because they'll often go through them if it's more than one horse together, they don't think about that sort of thing, and they can cause horrendous injuries. That's really important. And as you also said, keeping the external gates closed or closing off the property so that they don't get out on the road, because you don't want them hurt in that way or interfering with emergency vehicles either. It's very important.

**Malcolm**

You mentioned that your wife and father evacuated some horses. Now that you're set up differently, could you describe what those differences are. Would you defend the horses at home now or would you still remove them?

**Simon**

I think we would keep them at home and try and defend the property and the horses within the property at home. We've got more horses than we can move, and you don't know where to move them, unless you've got a plan already, but you would need a couple of contingencies, because the place where you might have thought that you were going to be taking them might be cut off by fire or a fallen tree or whatever. You just don't know, so, from that point of view when you're on a property in the country it's a very difficult decision. I know a lot of people that left their properties and their horses and that's affected them for the rest of their life too, but they had to do it. They said it was like losing or leaving members of the family. A very hard decision. Having said that they were leaving their property



too late. But we've learned a lot since then and learned what we should be doing and when. Our personal decision would probably be to stay on the property.

**Malcolm**

And it does sound very much from your experience that the fire plan you made for your property, and most people think of their home, actually needs to extend to the stables and the out paddocks and where you're going to place animals so that everyone's included.

**Simon**

Yes. I think in that situation with a fire if you're going to stay and the animals are staying because they're stock, you would try and have them as close to your place of last refuge as you possibly could where you don't have to travel very far to look after them, because it's really important that you can get to shelter. That you have the best shelter you've provided as quickly as possible. That's an important thing in a fire situation. Therefore you would have your animals as close as possible too so that you didn't have to be travelling around your property because I heard a lot of stories about people almost losing their lives because they were caught up in a barbed wire fence and they couldn't see and were too far away. I think if you're going to stay and defend then you need to have a plan so that you're as close to your place of last refuge as possible, whether that's your house or whether you've got a bunker, whatever it is that you can defend.

**Malcolm**

Thank you Simon. I think I've learned a lot and I hope our viewers have learned a lot through your experience and I'm hopeful that they'll go on and make the sort of plans that you had and work on some of those recommendations. So, thank you very much.

**Simon**

Absolutely. And thank you for giving me the opportunity to discuss this.

**Malcolm**

Pleasure.

**Simon**

Thank you.