

Horses and bushfire – what do we know?



Chair: Malcolm Hackett OAM

Panel members: Dr Kirrilly Thompson
Dr Andrew McLean
Dr Chris Heislars

Chair

While Rohan is putting up Poll number two I'll invite our panellists to come on.

What would you do in terms of planning before a high-risk day and what actions when there is a fire?

Andrew McLean

I think that even if you're not a planner in most things in your life it's really important to take this very seriously. And don't wait for a near-miss or a lucky escape to think you really have got to get a plan together. And I say that from my own experience because in 2009 we were in Clonbinane right at the front of those devastating Black Saturday fires when it pretty much began on our doorstep in Kilmore East.

And we were fortunate because in 2005 we had a very lucky miss with a reasonable bushfire that went to the bottom of our property but that made us take action. We'd thought about bushfires before but it always seemed to be one of those things that other people have. And it was awful but that's how it was. But this 2005 scare made us have a plan. And it was that plan that saved us in 2009. Because during the 2009 fire 9 out of 10 houses on our road disappeared, and we lost two of our neighbours. Most people didn't have a plan whereas we were very fortunate because we actually had a very good plan. We had a fire tanker, we knew exactly what we were going to do and really the plan was what saved us.

We had all our horses in the indoor arena except for the stallions that were in two boxes. Knowing what you're going to do is so important. And also if you have other people's horses it's really important to make sure that it's very clear to them not just in say-so but in a written document that they're very clear about what your intentions are with the fire and that they're okay with that. Planning ahead is really everything.

Chair

Chris do you want to comment on that planning before a high-risk day?

Chris Heislars

Just to concur with Andrew and Kirrilly that a plan's important. I was in my veterinary practice on the edge of the fires around Kinglake and Strathewen and Yarra Valley in 2009 and it was fairly stark and there weren't too many plans. But the few properties that had a solid plan certainly coped a whole lot better in regards to their outcomes with regards to their animals, horses and themselves. The property owners that had no plan it was very hit and miss how things turned out for them and their animals. I think the more thorough the plan the better. I mean even just thinking about your plan and having a few thought bubbles in your head I think is of some value. But really solidifying a solid plan and as Andrew mentioned most of us aren't planners as such but there's some really good resources in particular the Agriculture Victoria website which guide you through making your own plan. And every property needs a different plan because all of our properties are quite different in their characteristics and risk profiles and the animals we have. So I'd encourage everyone to go on to the CFA website and look at their pages that cover formulating a plan that's specific to your property. These pages really just get you thinking about the issues that will become

important on that day or in the days prior to a serious event. And if you've given thought to that and in particular written it down so that in the moment of panic you just go to your plan your outcome guaranteed will be a whole lot better.

Kirrilly Tompson

And really if you haven't looked at what's available as resources it's really easy. You might be thinking there's just too much to think about, too much to plan, I wouldn't know where to start. Please don't let that stop you from starting a plan because you can go to websites like CFS, there's a Word document there, it's really basic. It's got a list of things you might do. All you have to do is delete the things you're not going to do, add anything else that you want to add, they're designed to be really user-friendly. So please don't think you've got to start completely from scratch and imagine all the things that you can't even imagine, there's some really good tools out there.

Chair

That's a good point Kirrilly. I had a look at some of those South Australian websites after you'd pointed them out to us. It got me thinking about things right across the country where people have brought their minds to this and there are useful documents everywhere really. But certainly start with your state and go looking for something that's useful.

Andrew tell us something about what your actions were when there is a fire and what things you think people should do when they know there's a fire, particularly if they've decided to stay and defend.

Andrew McLean

I think we have to really rethink the stay and defend idea, because it was a very dangerous thing to do as we found in the 2009 fire.

I think you should have a double strategy in the sense of doing what you can to defend a place in case it's a near miss, but well and truly before the fire's anywhere near. And if it's a significant fire and a very hot day and it's very windy as it was in 2009 you really should be planning to get out well before. You need to know that your horse floats okay or your truck or whatever you can hook it up. That your horse or horses will load into the float.

As Kirrilly said you've got to really have a clear triage approach in a sense - knowing what horses you would prioritize. That's a very difficult decision but you haven't got time to muck around thinking about it. And also having all of your evacuation directions in place e.g. your plan where do you go? We had only one choice in 2009 because we were at a dead-end road. We went into the state forest but we had to be very wary of anything from the north because we had to go north to get out of the fire and north was the direction that was the most problematic and scary for us because north winds are hot.

So you need to have a plan of where you would or might go and which direction you would go. That means checking out all of the possible places where you could go and depending on which way the fire came. Recognize what you would do it depends on the number of horses you have and how you would deal with those horses beforehand. If they've got rugs on for example that's a dangerous thing to have on the horse and everything about your personal protection gear as well.

Chair

I've conducted a few interviews with people about their preparations, and you mentioned rugs. Are there preparations that they must take like that Andrew and Chris if someone is unable to evacuate or has made a decision to stay.

Chris Heislars

The rug issue is a good one because there's always debate about that. I certainly agree with Andrew that across all of the fires over the last 10 years within Victoria the advice out of those has always been that horses should have their rugs off. I do understand there's a couple of companies that are making so-called fire safe rugs and I can't vouch for any of those, however we need to remember that during these fires horses are overheating. Horses are extraordinarily good at

controlling their own body temperature through sweating. Even if we have a fire safe rug it may be detrimental to the horse's outcome to have a rug on that horse even if it's a fire safe rug.

In all of the horses that we saw in 2009 and also that other veterinarians have seen since, the severest burns are not on the trunk of the horse, they're the legs, face, perineum, and other areas where rugs are not really going to protect anyway. So I think rugs is a really important one.

Andrew can speak more authoritatively on this than I can, but horses are flight animals. They don't think about things too much, they react to a situation, they will run away from a fire. When they can't run any further and the fire front's at them they tend to jump the fire and go on to burnt ground. So in other words having open paddocks with low pasture that's been well eaten out and opening adjoining paddocks up so that horses have an option of where to go. More often than not horses fare quite well through a fire if they have that available to them. Now that's very different of course in a situation where it's a small property that is surrounded by heavy vegetation, we need to think about other options.

I think planning for an open area with short or no pasture, ensuring an adequate water supply because we may well not be able to see these horses for four or five days. There needs to be pre-thought put into having water for these horses for that period of time and a huge one I think is making sure our horses are identified, I would hope every horse has a microchip and that microchip is registered with a central registry.

Kirrily Thompson

Yes I would add to that. Chris has just reminded me. Sometimes you see photos of people who've written their mobile phone number on the horses' hooves as a means to reconnect horses with owners. Instead of doing that I would recommend painting, getting stock paint and putting a phone number on the side of the horse, something that is very visible from someone in a vehicle from far away who doesn't have to bend down to look at a small telephone number written on horses' hooves. Of course, microchipping is really important and I think there is a role to play for the proposed traceability register for horses for being able to reunite horses with their owners and that goes for floods as well as fires.

Chair

Chris you mentioned having fodder and water and so on for horses remaining on the property. What things would you have in your recovery kit.

Chris Heislars

Super important there is enough water to last a horse for five days because it's quite likely we won't be able to get to our horses. Or if we can we might not be able to get to somewhere to get water sources, particularly people on rural properties that are on tank water and rely on pumps etc. that may or may not be functioning. So a very good water source supply available and having roughage, because of course when the fire goes through everything's gone.

And the most important thing they need is roughage number one, so it's hay. Now clearly in preparation for a fire you need to make sure your hay is stored somewhere where it's not going to burn. And that comes into your fire plan. Hard feed is important and it's a different topic again but horses that suffer severe burns require huge amounts of extra protein and energy. I guess those horses will generally be coming under the treatment of veterinarians and that can be helped to have some bags of high protein high energy feed in stock and ready to go is absolutely worthwhile. But you need to plan to make sure that your water and your feed is stored in a situation where it's not going to be burnt.

Chair

Andrew anything you want to add?

Andrew McLean

Yes I agree very much with Chris. And I think checking your local CFA and also your Shire Council for information about not only refuges but also where fodder stations are, for example that's something that comes up. We were a fodder station after the 2009 fires and so we organized delivery of hay and anything else. There was so much donated it was quite remarkable in terms of feed and gear but just having that knowledge is really important. The thing that's different about a fire compared to a flood is that floods abate very slowly whereas once the fires gone through the area and it's now a day or so later there's a lot you can do. It's really important to know what you're going to do because there may not be water. It may be that some of the pipes have burned, there could be catastrophic effects on food and water. So it's really important to think about it and plan ahead.

The other thing that I think is important just because we talked about the horses behaviour is don't think that you know the horse is going to be a gallant leader of all of the others and take them to a safe place. It is a little bit hit and miss from all of the research that I've done about this because they're flight animals. When they get to a certain level of anxiety and arousal it can be pretty random, they will often head towards the fire. But the difference between horses and us in their hearing is that horses hear higher frequencies than humans do and they don't hear so much low frequency stuff. The crown fire is quite low frequency, it's up to 400 hertz but the ground fire with burning twigs is very high frequency - sounds up to 15 kilohertz. That is really scary to horses.

I think everybody knows how horses hate crackling sounds of microphones and any kind of snapping. That's why clucking makes horses aroused and makes them go. So those things are worth thinking about in those kinds of fires and grass fires are also very noisy in that area. So my point is that the horses can hear things that we can't hear and that can definitely change their behaviour. And that's again why planning is important, it does sound quite odd to think that you could plan before a fire but in most cases and certainly in 2009 we did know the day before that we were in for very high winds and also very high temperatures and I think that's information enough to get cracking on your plan.

Chair

Thank you Chris, Andrew and Kirrilly for that discussion.

We're going to have a look now at our poll results.

Rohan if you could launch that for us.

Andrew any comments on the outcomes of the poll?

Andrew McLean

Well first of all I think it's fantastic that people have practised loading when it's dark, maybe that's just because they've loaded their horse when it's dark anyway. But I think that is also a really important thing because the horse may very well seem to load quite well in light, but when it's half dark or dark that might be a different proposition. So I'm really pleased to see that some people have already done it. I think it's something that we should all do because if we plan to move them we shouldn't expect a fire is going to occur in the daytime, it can happen at any time of the day.

Kerrilly Thompson

And if people just Google videos during bushfires. The northern area of Tasmania had really bad fires about five or six years ago. I remember the footage shown someone was on the beach - one minute it was day, but as the fire passed it was almost like night. So it can be during the day but the fire can cause the sun to completely disappear. It's really important you try and immerse yourself in as much vicarious learning about what it's like, to be in a fire.

And Andrew has already spoken about the sound of a fire. Some times in our minds we imagine what a fire to be like and you don't know unless you know. Get online have a look at some videos and have a look at what happens to the environment during a fire event - radiant heat, ambient heat and the physical impact that that can have on people.