

Horses and bushfire – what do we know?



Chair: Malcolm Hackett OAM

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

Chair

What are the essentials to have packed in our grab bag in a float or vehicle on the day?

Kirrily Thompson

Yes there are lists that you'll find online, mostly they include some veterinary supplies, spare halters and lead ropes, buckets and enough food for several days.

Relocating is hard, there was a lot of work involved for me tending to horses that had been moved to other properties. In one situation my friend had taken in about eight horses and they were all living on her dressage arena for a week and I think we might have gone through her whole summer water supply and she had to buy in more water after that.

When I evacuated horses to Morphettville Racecourse I evacuated early because it was catastrophic day, it meant the horses were in stables in extreme heat conditions and I was driving to and from them in extreme heat conditions.

Magic Millions were amazing in opening up their facilities for horse owners. There's no way it would have worked without the dozens of volunteers who were walking around all day filling up people's water buckets for horses. Some people left horses there and they had to go to their job, care for the family, or had to go back to their property.

So it's not just about thinking or planning for what you need to do to get your animals out but how you're going to care for them in the days after, and from a long-term perspective the more you have socialized your horse to live with other horses the more simple you can keep your feeding regime. The more simple you can keep your rugging regime means your horse is going to be much more resilient if they're in an evacuation situation or scenario.

Chair

Chris can you give us a quick rundown on the possible medical issues to look for post-fires?

Chris Heislars

We got a couple of days to talk? In reality I think most horse owners are educated enough to realize when their horse has a significant issue that needs veterinary treatment. And if and when that happens then of course that horse should be taken to a veterinary clinic or a veterinarian comes out. But the problem with the fire situation as we all know is that getting that horse out and/or getting a veterinarian in is often difficult if not impossible for sometimes many days.

So I guess for brevity rather than talking about all of this equality the main things to remember are that smoke inhalation is a relatively minor issue in Australia with a bushfire situation compared to in the United States where they have a lot of barn fires. Horses certainly will suffer some effects of smoke inhalation and that will present as coughing, generally coughing, shortness of breath, there's really nothing that can be done about that on the property. And even in a veterinary hospital it's a bit limited. We're waiting for the lung to repair but thankfully with our experience in 2009 and pretty much every bushfire since in Australia the smoke inhalation issue rarely is a major problem unless horses have been stabled through that fire situation.

There is another topic of discussion in regards to preparing your property for fire if you plan to put your horses in a stable situation. The main thing that we see post-fire is of course burns and we see them around the coronary bands, up the flanks, the perineum, face, around the eyes, and the eyelids etc.

The most valuable first aid treatment for burns is cold water therapy. Now I understand that post-fire cold water might be limited, however there might be a dam you can walk your horse into and use buckets etc or hopefully in your pre-planning you've ensured that you will have access to running water.

So the 48 hours post-fire when the burns are acute, between two and four times a day cold hosing of the burns areas is most valuable. Severely burnt areas should have an emollient cream put on them. It's important to have in everyone's tool kit a cream such as Sorbolene cream, a soothing emollient cream.

Manuka honey for your deeper burns is a no brainer, I say Manuka honey that's expensive. You can use any honey but Manuka honey is purported to be better than normal honey. But honestly the results with normal honey are very good. Remember that honey will attract insects and that's a problem, so really wounds that are treated with honey should be underneath a bandage. So having bandage materials having honey having a Sorbolene cream or a Vitamin A cream for the lightly burns areas and cold water.

They are the core things that you need on hand and bandaging materials. And of course, as soon as you're able to, get your horse seen by a veterinarian where the more advanced treatments may be put into place. I should say anti-inflammatories, there's a lot of inflammatory response to these wounds these burns and to give a horse a little bit of Bute is certainly a benefit, but there needs to be careful because some of these horses with severe burns are very prone to kidney issues etc. So definitely Bute in a moderate dose if you have some on hand, antibiotics I'd say no, not necessary, not of any value whatsoever, unless the horse is systemically ill which is actually quite rare. It comes with much deeper wounds. I think that's probably all I've got to say on that unless there are other questions specific.

Kirrily Thompson

Chris, is there any risk for introducing a horse to a paddock that has recently been burnt out? And I'm thinking in terms of grazing, horses picking at new grass or picking at the ground where the fire has been through? Is there any risk for colic or other problems there?

Chris Heislars

No significant risk. I mean the colic risk is because of the associated stress and the change in feed. In that situation you don't really have an option but to introduce them to the new feed or alternatively to put them in a garden and feed them on hay. There won't be any new pasture growth in those paddocks for quite a while. In effect the risk is negligible. And I think there's far more benefit in letting that horse walk around and pick up what they can pick up.

Andrew McLean

I think also in terms of introducing them to a new place straight after the fire. If it's a paddock it's really a useful thing to walk the horse around first and show the horse the perimeters because as we all know when you let horses into new paddocks they often become really highly aroused and start prancing about or galloping about. So I think that is a useful thing to do before you let them go. And the other thing is don't be afraid of letting horses go with other horses because that's often people's biggest fear. They say, "Oh no this horse is he's really aggressive or she is and won't get along with the others or never has, it seems to pull faces at other times." But our experience was very different to that in 2009 we put 30 horses in the indoor arena for six days because all our fences had largely disappeared, and after six days we had one bite mark on one horse. And that was it.

And I think we underestimate how clever horses are socializing. Often we hold them back and they look like they pull faces rather like dogs do. It's a different kettle of fish when they're together. So that can often be dangerous when people start hesitating about really minor things. And the other point I thought I'd add to the list of things you take if you're taking your horse away, apart from

buckets and things that Kirrilly mentioned and the medical things that Chris mentioned is also a couple of extra lead ropes because you never quite know. If you go to saleyards for example you might discover that actually there's no gate and lead ropes make quite good temporary gates.

Chair

Why do we concentrate on evacuation and not preparation of our property? Kirrilly you might want to say something about this and Andrew you've been through the experience. Why focus on evacuation rather than preparation of the property?

Andrew McLean

In our experience the fires were very bad for many people in various places, Kinglake and Marysville. We had two fires on that day. The first came from Kilmore East just down the road. The fire went right through our property - on the south side of our house while the indoor arena was further north. In the afternoon the fire came back along the north side and it just left this small area of our house and indoor arena which had a lot of embers falling on it but we had a good fire plan so we managed to put those out. We were lucky because we didn't have a full fire front onto the indoor arena, stable area or house. Had that occurred it would have been a very different thing, we would have been much better to have evacuated and I think because you don't know the outcome, fire is so tricky and unpredictable, I think it's much better to plan to get out.

Chair

I've got a question I guess follows that up. And that's in light of what Kirrilly was saying before and it's related to evacuation fatigue. That might mean that people do move their horses off the property on high-risk days but that eventually it's likely that they'll stop doing that and they'll wait until they see a fire on its way. Is that something Kirrilly where there has been any research?

Kirrilly Tompson

It's very likely. I've thought about this a lot. There's been some summers in South Australia where you feel like every day is being forecast as a catastrophic day. What are you going to do? We know that not being in front of a fire is the best way to not have your life threatened by a fire. Evacuating requires a lot of work, staying away requires a lot of work, not everybody is in a position to be able to evacuate, this is just the world we live in. People of course are going to get evacuation fatigue.

My big concern about evacuation fatigue is where someone evacuates the day before a catastrophic forecast and there is no fire, nothing happens, my main concern is that people will feel silly for having gone to the effort of moving. I think we really need to keep patting each other on the back. "Well done. You evacuated." We don't want people to think I did it for nothing, every time you evacuate you've practised, every time you evacuate you've learned something new, every time you evacuate you've got more experience.

I don't have a simple fix for fixing the fatigue part, but this is the world we live in. And this is part of horse ownership and maybe that's not for everyone and there are alternatives in Australia. You don't have to own your own horse to enjoy horses. Be aware that you may get evacuation fatigue in a season of a lot of evacuations. You need to be aware that fatigue might be impacting the way you respond to the next event. It may come in as a kind of a bias and it may bias you to think, "I'll be right," or, "It won't be that bad." And so you've got to somehow develop your own strategies for picking up on your own bias that may be a result of that fatigue.

Chris Heislars

I think evacuation is obviously the ultimate but we shouldn't feel guilty by not being able to evacuate every time in particular. In our work situations a lot of people have multiple horses. 10, 20, 30, 40, 50 horses and evacuation on a regular basis is just not practical. But that comes back to the most important thing - even though evacuation might be part of our plan, there is a fall back plan - a very solid property plan. Even if we plan to evacuate sometimes the circumstances mean that we won't always have time to evacuate. So we do need that solid property plan as well.

Kirrily Thompson

There was a question earlier about why do we emphasise so much evacuation and not property planning. And what Chris has just said is it's not an either/or scenario. You could plan the passive defence of your property or active defence of your property - they're two quite different scenarios. The more information you can get the better. Have a plan A or if I can't execute that, put plan B into action. I set up my property to have an eaten out area to put the horses, and I do have a place that I can take shelter whilst the fire passes.

Andrew McLean

I agree and I think so much of it depends on the nature of the fire and the conditions on that day. I think what's important to say in this seminar is don't kill yourself or others over your horse. And that means have a certain cut off e.g. the horse may not load on the float on that day. Don't put other human lives or your own at risk by persisting, because often if you persist it things get even worse and everybody's highly aroused and it becomes more dangerous. You will practise, you've done it in the day and in the dark and you've got all your gear organized but make sure that you have a plan B, that if it doesn't work, you've still got to in some circumstances to get out.

Chair

Kirrily, someone's asked here whether having a horse on a property significantly increases the risk to the owners of being caught out in the open, is there any research that you know of on that human behaviour?

Kirrily Thompson

No research that I can point people to. The difficulty with some of the research is in the very tragic cases where people have died we don't know what their plan was to be able to form any kind of conclusion about the role of what plan they had in that particular outcome. We would hope that if horse people were going to stay on their property and defend that they'd thought through things to minimize the extent to which they were likely to be outside. If that's what that question was pointing to.

Chair

A question for both Chris and Andrew. Where would people find out more about horse behaviour during a fire? Where should they go looking, any particular research?

Andrew McLean

I think Googling it. There's so much information online now that it's really not difficult to find that information.

Chris Heislars

I agree. Just with a caveat that there is a lot of really good information on Google but there's also a bit of wacky information too. So just look at the site that you're looking at and making sure that it's a credible reference essentially.

Kirrily Thompson

Yes. And for people who aren't aware of Google Scholar, if you go into Google and you type in Google Scholar you'll be taken to a version of Google which will mostly search academic papers and peer reviewed articles, so that's a good way to make sure that you're getting some well supported and evidence-based information.

Chris Heislars

I think as horse owners we all want to learn more and more about horse behaviour, whether it's regards to bushfire or handling our horse on a daily basis riding issues etc. I think horse behaviour is a really super interesting subject that people will probably enjoy looking into.

Andrew McLean

Another important thing to know is that when horses are all different so they don't always follow the rules. That's why the most important thing to do is to have your horse really well trained to do all of the things that you need to do and make sure all the horses, if you do plan to move a lot of horses, you've got the means to do it. Make sure they are well enough trained and they've practised it well enough to do it.

The other thing I think is worth mentioning. In the pre webinar survey one of the things that stuck out clearly to me was that so many agistors don't necessarily have a fire plan, so people actually have their horses agisted somewhere but there's not necessarily a written plan. I think it's really important to urge them to do that and emphasize the importance of having a clear plan and ask them what they intend to do and get out.