



Pets and bushfire – what do we know

Chair: Malcolm Hackett OAM

Panel members: Dr Mel Taylor
Dr Rachel Westcott

Malcolm

You both mentioned the less common pets. I was speaking with someone the other day who had goldfish. There was a lot of problem evacuating the family and the goldfish. And I believe the goldfish died because the temperatures were so extreme. What precautions should you take for those less common pets?

Rachel Westcott

It's a case of deciding if you're going to take them or leave them. If you're going to take them you need to think through a way of transporting safely and maintaining all the conditions that they require e.g. aeration, temperature, cleanliness and food. If you're got goldfish for instance in an aquarium go and talk to an aquarium shop and find out what kind of equipment they might have that would be portable. If you have to, have two containers to possibly divide them up. That might be a bit tricky but think it through. Decide if you're going to take them or leave them. And then you have to find a way of doing that safely and ahead of time.

Malcolm

Mel do you have anything to add there?

Mel Taylor

I noticed one of the attendees mentioned GADMC (Global Animal Management Disaster Conference) we had recently. One of the presentations was about evacuating fish. She was talking about large numbers of fish and using sock nets so you didn't disrupt the protective coating surface of the fish too much when you were moving them from one thing to another and having some air space and aeration around to protect them.

Rachel Westcott

Fish are some of the most challenging.

Malcolm

That's good advice I guess for all of those less common pets is talk to people you know who have pets and find out how to move them.

Mel Taylor

Often the container's the key thing. Different animals have different needs. Thinking about what you can move them in and having something available is good.

Malcolm

Now it seems to me that one of the hardest challenges is how do you make those decisions about what pets or what animals are you going to leave behind. This of course isn't just a practical question, it's a deeply psychological and emotional one. How do you make that decision?

Mel Taylor

It's always easy to say, and Rachel brought it up to in an ideal situation, you would bring all your animals and take them all to safety. And that would absolutely be the number one. But there are things you can do to help give them the best chance. There are safer places to put them within the house if you need to do that. I'm not sure about chickens, whether it's better to let them out or to keep them together. I've heard different theories from different people.

With some of the outdoor animals I've heard people bring those up towards the house because often the home is fairly well protected or it often doesn't have as much planting around if people have done their preparation. So it's a little bit safer there.

Or the safe paddocks that Rachel mentioned. But the stories I've heard have been ones where people were about to leave thinking they were taking the cat and the dog and then suddenly the kids pipe up what about the goldfish? Or what about the chickens? And that's where I've talked to people and they said we weren't planning to take the chickens but the kids were upset so we just grabbed the box from under the stairs that had the wetsuits in it, chucked those out, put the chickens in there and made some holes at the top, stuck them in the back of the car and we went. So there's a fair bit of creativity going on sort of last minute. My thought about the goldfish in some ways would be if you're talking about a kid's goldfish then pack the goldfish with you in the best way you can. And if the goldfish doesn't make it you could at least tell the kids that you tried. And I know that sounds a bit sort of morally bold but it's easy to beat yourself up so much afterwards about what you should have done or what you could have done. I guess I'd think of that as well.

Malcolm

Would you be able to add anything Rachel?

Rachel Westcott

If you have a dozen pet animals, lovestock as we call them, it's going to be very hard to move them. And you can't move your animals every week to somewhere that's safer. There are going to be times when you might take your best show jumper or your favourite donkey or the kids' pet dog. You might say yes we're going to take animals 1, 2 and 3 and then animals 4 to 12 might have to stay. So it's a case of if there are going to be some that are going to stay think through very carefully about where they're going how you can provide for them. And bringing them up to yards with sprinklers with an independent water supply and pump is one really good way of looking after them.

So think about where they're going to go. Not down the back paddock next to the National Park. Bring them up to yards with an independent water supply and sprinklers is one way that's really worth doing. Plant that, irrigate it if you can with alfalfa or something green and give them the best chance. There's still going to be smoke. There's still might be respiratory injury but they might be less likely to get burned.

Malcolm

And those examples you gave Mel of kids and their animals they want to take with them highlights the importance of the family making the plan together and talking through even the difficult decisions together, so everyone's on the same page.

Mel Taylor

And often if you give the kids something to do during that rather busy period of actually taking care of the animals. You can put the animals in the back bedroom and get the kids to stay with the animals to look after them. Keeps everything out of the way, while you get on with making your preparations.