

Pets and bushfire – what do we know?

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Chair

Dr Rachel Westcott of the South Australian veterinary Emergency Management Incorporated is our final presenter. Thanks Rachel.

Rachel Westcott

I'm a veterinarian. I lead South Australian Veterinary Emergency Management.

My focus tonight is on the veterinary things with a little bit of overlap with what Mel has touched on.

Preparedness is everything. And this starts well before fire season. And now we're in that new normal, the new reality of extreme weather events happening more often. The new normal is that preparedness is a year round activity. And we're looking at the safety of people and animals.

I will look through the One Health lens. One Health being the concept that acknowledges that the health and wellbeing of people, animals and the environment are intricately connected. We're looking at the safety of you and your dependent others, human and animals. As Mel touched on your animal is your responsibility. So you can't expect the firies to save your animals because the hierarchy of protection is life, property, environment. And that is intended to mean human life. Animals and livestock can be property of course. And a farmer can ask for livestock to be protected as an asset over a house or over a hayshed etc. Those conversations can move in a fairly dynamic way.

Wildlife is part of the environment. Wildlife is lowest on the pecking order of priorities. What can you do? Things that you can do as you work through your preparedness, which is happening especially now in peace time in the winter time. Develop a relationship with your local veterinary service. So that means having good contact quite frequently with your local veterinary service. Take your pets at least annually and preferably every six months and even if that's just to weigh them on the clinic scales. And if you have the ability to do so, purchase food and over the counter medications at that clinic.

And when you're doing that take pets with you as a training exercise. That has the added advantage of overcoming that clinic anxiety of animals who don't like going into the vet clinic. We hear that quite a lot. I run a mobile practice and I see a lot of animals who are socially very upset about going into a vet clinic. So regularity and getting them in there as often as you can. But medications are something that can cause some anxiety for animal owners during emergencies. And it's important to remember that medications supplied by veterinarians is strictly controlled by legislation. And animals on long term medication will require repeated medication, animals to be seen six monthly and often every three months depending on individual circumstances and the conditions the disease or the multiple problems that animals might have. A good relationship with your local clinic will go a long way to helping manage medication needs and wellbeing in an emergency.

Prior to the fire season or at any time during the year discuss the possibility of securing an emergency supply of medication. And that means making sure you have enough repeats. Particularly a lot of people now use online pharmacies. I have a lot of clients that I write prescriptions for and that use an online pharmacy so that they are able to manage their medication when they run out quite easily. And often it's cheaper as well. So make sure you have enough repeats of a prescription. Because as mentioned, we're not able to hand over medication if you haven't planned ahead.

But if you have a good relationship with the local vets then you're more likely to obtain at least enough quantity of medication to see you through if you genuinely haven't had enough time to make an appointment. And we all know in the business and the pressures of 21st century life that sometimes it's too hard to get in there in a timely way.

Things that might affect your access. There will be road closures and these are for your safety. Falling trees kill people and we saw that tragically last year at a fire in the southeast of South Australia where a fire fighter was killed. Because the fire front has gone doesn't mean that the fire ground is safe to enter. And it's falling trees that are the biggest thing. Obviously fires will be happening in areas that are forested and densely timbered. So these are real problems until the arborists and other agencies can get in there and assess what kinds of things need to be dealt with to allow owners and landowners to get back in.

There might be a lot of animal owners, animals, and owners needing help. There could just be the sheer numbers. There will be damage and destruction to infrastructure including perhaps the veterinary resources and veterinary clinics. There'll be transport issues with damage to vehicles. You might have your own vehicles damaged or unable to be driven for whatever reason. All these things need to be factored in. And it's far better to do that and think this well through well before you're in that position where you have to do something in a hurry. Because doing things in a hurry is a recipe for disaster.

It is a really good idea to make sure that you can leave early. The best plan is to leave early. That's not always possible when you're thinking about things at this time of year. But plan to leave early and get out of the way.

And the things you will need. Collars and leads that fit that have ID that won't come off when the animal pulls away. How many times I've seen animals in my clinic that make a dash for it and the collar just comes off. So make sure that you've got kind of a harness or a lead or a halter or whatever you use because animals will be stressed in these kinds of unusual situations. They'll pick up on your anxiety as well.

Have a muzzle if there's any chance of being aggressive. Because being aggressive is just a by-product of anxiety and fear. Take your usual food and water because you might be in a place that you're not used to. And be prepared to be in a place where you're not used to and the water supply might be quite different and cause tummy upsets as with food. Make sure your carriers are working well ahead of time. That is the catchers work. That the latches work. The fasteners are all in good condition. We've talked about medications. Take coats and bedding with familiar scent for animals who find comfort in having the familiar scent of their home bedding.

You might need a vaccination certificate. Have your microchip details. Another thing that's worth considering is keeping a collapsible cage or pen with you in your own to-go-kit. We're not going to talk about people's to-go-kits tonight. But if you've got a collapsible pen in your car ready-to-go your animal will be safe because there will be aggression in stressed animals. That will keep them

safe - your animals safe, other animals safe. Overcome potential insurance issues. Practise putting them in their carriers and pens and trailers and flights from time to time. Just do that routinely. And that way it doesn't become something that's a big issue that they'll be fearful of when something's going on.

If you've got chickens. We've talked about chickens tonight and the dogs as well. And you'll see in the picture of our front door you'll also notice there's a galvanized bin filled with water during the summer. And our mop buckets which are our ember and ash buckets as well. And there's the dog. That's actually not her carrier. She had the bigger one. But these are all the sorts of things that are worth doing to keep anxiety and stress and save time.

And a few other things that you might like to consider. And you've probably thought about all of these from other information from other webinars. But it's worth mentioning again because all these things come with the One Health lens and they all affect your animals and help you look after your animals as well.

Keep your vehicles fuelled up routinely. Keep a power bank charged up for phones and torches. Have your local emergency app downloaded on your phone. And another important thing to do to remember is it's worth keeping some cash in your wallet. Because if power goes down there's going to be a lot of issues with paying for things or obtaining goods when you need them. It's really a good idea to have some old fashioned cash in your wallet as well. Practise your plan and use checklists. And print those checklists in large font because you might mislay your glasses. And it can be very frustrating if you can't quite read who was posted at what if you don't have a list that's readable.

Print your emergency and family contacts. The old fashioned hard copy might be really useful. Be familiar with checking your local weather services. The Bureau of Meteorology of course has MetEye which has all your local weather conditions. And it's definitely worth doing that.

All of this will help keep your animals safe as well. Apart from the fire front there are lots of other things that are dangerous and can put you and your animals in danger, radiant heat being the biggest killer. Of course smoke inhalation and respiratory injury. We see a lot of respiratory injuries in animals that have not been able to be moved or not been able to be moved quickly enough.

For burns there's not a great deal of veterinary treatment that owners can do, but cold running water is probably the best thing. That means of course you need to assess your own access to water and pumps and a power supply. If animals have usual medications keep them on that medication. If they have pain relief medications for other conditions make sure they have that as well. But don't try to treat burns (treat, debride, bandage and dress) yourself. If roads are closed and you find that you have been trapped, cold running water and when can, get a clinician to see your animals.

So many people have different kinds of animals. We'll talk a little bit later on about the more unusual pets. Fish and frogs and reptiles. Think through about what you're going to do. If you have a portable habitat that you can take with you. I spoke to one person during my research where they put their snake in a pillowcase, no one knew that the snake was in a pillowcase. It wasn't a venomous snake. It was a completely harmless snake quite happy to curl up in the pillowcase under her desk at work. And things like that can certainly make a safe way to transport an animal.

As Mel said, relocating to family and friends is always the best plan. And have that plan and make sure that it's brought up to date every year. That the same people who could take your animals last year can do it this year. By the time you smell the smoke you've got 5 to 10 minutes tops. So the waiting until you smell the smoke is really not a good idea. And people have died by leaving things

that long. But if you have goldfish or five horses all of this takes time. So it is really important to think of all this through at least 24 hours beforehand by watching the weather forecasts. Knowing about a bad dangerous day (and it's not necessarily even a catastrophic day because plenty of bad fires start on High or Extreme fire danger days.

Bear in mind too that pets of any kind may not be accepted into relief centres. That's for a number of reasons primarily for human safety and for insurance issues. But bear in mind that they may not be accepted so you do need to make other plans. So how to get help? This will depend a little on your local jurisdiction's arrangements. Australia being a federation of many jurisdictions. In South Australia I lead SAVEM and we're a formal part of the state emergency management plan. And when SAVEM is activated there will be clear instructions about how to get veterinary help for animals particularly if roads are closed and your local clinician can't access your property.

So find out ahead of time from your local authorities who will provide help for animals, how to contact them and how that all fits into the local scheme of things. Once roads are open and the local veterinary services can access you or you can access them have the visit to your local physician as soon as possible. And once again your relationship with your local veterinarians will go a long way to having that done effectively and efficiently.

Little bit about wildlife. So inevitably there wildlife will be affected. And access to care for them and care for them may not be quick because activations for groups like mine SAVEM we're a tier two responder. Tier one responders are the fireies, police, ambos and the SES. So once tier two access is obtained which may take 48 hours to act for affected wildlife. For a start you really shouldn't be on the fire ground. But if you are on your property and you stay to defend don't try and catch or treat wildlife yourself. These are wild animals and they can be dangerous especially if they're stressed or injured.

Capturing wild animals can lead to serious injury and illness to them or their death. Capture myopathy is a kidney disease is associated with muscle breakdown. Those sorts of things can cause a slow death over weeks for injured wildlife. A fire ground is not the place for people who are not fire ground trained because it can lead to human death. And that is the last thing we want. People die on fire ground doing things that are well intentioned but not well thought through from a dynamic risk assessment point of view.

Do not do this. I think Mel had a still from this video as well. All you're doing is putting yourself at risk and people at risk who may come to rescue you. It's really very foolish to go in without any protective personal clothing personal PPE or PPC. And what this woman was actually doing there on that fire ground is really beyond me. And the danger to her and the others who were there was extensive and serious and got a lot of media attention as a hero. But not a hero. Very foolish and should not be there.

What you can do is accurately note the location the species and the number of animals and use that information to pass up to whoever is responsible for animal (the animal response in an emergency). So use the location app. what3words is one that we have used at SAVEM quite successfully. There are other GPS apps of course and other things you can do. But what3words is useful because it is linked to the Emergency Plus app. Emergency services are using what3words fairly routinely now. And pass that information on to the relevant responders. In South Australia SAVEM is one of those responders.

But never put yourself at risk to save an animal no matter how hard that may be. Human life is more important. And if you're injured then nobody's going to win. And everything might go completely pear shaped. So this is the Emergency Plus app. And you'll see at the bottom of the screen that comes up on your phone in the bottom left is a what3words location. And if you look at

that it's very very useful. There are three words-- it's a three word code separated by a dot for every 3 square metre on the planet. So it is an extremely useful app to give an accurate location very quickly. I'd encourage you to have a look at that. So the link is there and it's also at the end of this slide. It works offline. You don't need phone reception. So it's one thing that is really useful to have with you.

A few other things that are worth thinking about. In the broader picture of things think about fire safe paddocks and firebreaks. If that's alongside a boundary fence with a neighbour your firebreak can be double the size. You need to think about sprinklers with pumps and water supply. And vegetation planting around assets is something that's really worthwhile. There are a number of publications out now with low flammability gardens and plants and how to suppress the fire front using the kinds of plants that will do that.

If you're on a rural property think about the proximity of flammable crops because things like canola stubble will burn a lot faster than a legume crop for example. And if there are sheep in a canola stubble it would be a really good idea to move them out of that stubble on a bad fire danger day move them out into a safe paddock or a paddock planted with leguminous crops like alfalfa.

It's a good idea to make a five year plan because all this takes time and money. But talk to your employer, your neighbours and the local fireies. It's a lot of work. But it is as mentioned at the beginning this is the new reality of all the things that we have to make as routine as buying groceries and fuelling your car is to make our preparedness just part of our normal life.

The key messages. Prevention and preparedness is key for safety for survival and for achieving resilience. So that's really through a One Health lens. There's a few links here that will be on the presentation.

Talking about road closures in South Australia we have the Tier system. You probably have similar things in other states.

The what3words and the Australian Red Cross has some excellent resources.