



## **Pets and bushfire – what do we know**

Chair: Malcolm Hackett OAM

Panel members: Dr Mel Taylor  
Dr Rachel Westcott

### **Malcolm**

What's the best action for goats? Usually they're in a well grazed area surrounded by an electric fence. They jump 1.2m with ease.

### **Rachel Westcott**

They do, I've owned goats. I don't currently have goats but I do know what they can do. And it depends how many you have. And we only had two so we had a portable pen on wheels that we could put them in that had a mesh roof so they couldn't jump out. And we put that in a safe paddock. If you've got several, once again you may need over time, to have a fenced area with a 1.5m high fence that animals can go in and they'll be unlikely to jump out. We have an irrigated orchard with such a fence. These things are expensive and they don't happen overnight. But this is the importance of thinking about things that you might need to gear your property up for over the next two to five years.

### **Malcolm**

I have to leave the sheep behind. Is it best to just open all gates within the property? They are e tagged.

### **Mel Taylor**

Opening internal gates is fine. Please never ever open external gates onto roadways. Some people still think that that is an okay thing to do. But as most people on this forum know smoke means that you have very poor visibility and you end up with a horse on the front of a fire truck and that doesn't help anybody. So opening internal gates is very good. Some of the people I spoke to when I was doing my research made sure that they moved their livestock and their horses from paddock to paddock routinely so that the animals knew their way around all the paddocks and knew where the dams were and the gates were and all those sorts of things. Let them get used to your whole property.

### **Malcolm**

Here's an interesting one. How can we get our cat inside and into a carrier?

### **Mel Taylor**

Rachel you made a good point earlier about getting used to it at a time when it doesn't involve something negative happening at the end of it. So whether it's crating your dog or whether it's putting your cat in a carrier. I leave my carriers out so the cats get used to going in them and actually like to sleep in them with the doors off. It's not quite so hard to get them in afterwards.

## **Rachel Westcott**

Yes absolutely Mel. That's terrific and that's absolutely correct. Feed them in the carrier. I know the common joke is dogs have owners and cats have staff. Remember you are the boss. You are in charge. The cat doesn't call the shots, you do. Cats should be inside at night anyway whatever your local council regulations are. Use that time as an advantage for training and feed them in the carriers. It might take some while. It takes patience and it takes kindness and it takes a bit of coercion and love. But they can be trained to do that.

Worst case scenario use the scruff on the back of the neck because that's nature's handle like when their mom was carting the kittens around by the scruff. And going in the carrier bottom first is the quickest and easiest way if you absolutely have to do something in a hurry. But there's no substitute for good training over time.

## **Mel Taylor**

And if you've contained them in the bedroom that helps because they can't scarpers.

## **Malcolm**

I think that's really important. We lost a dog in the 2009 fires because I couldn't find him inside the house when it was filling with smoke and I looked and looked with no result. I should have had him on a lead and tied inside the house. I thought it would be all right roaming around. Also with that thing on cats I have had some success in wrapping them in a towel so that they are not scratching me if they've never been in a cage before.

What's the effect of smoky air on pet health? If we leave early but the air is smoky should we delay our return and for how long? Where can we get information concerning air quality?

## **Rachel Westcott**

Smoke does settle reasonably quickly. As the fire front goes through the smoke is hot. And if animals are breathing a lot of smoke then it's very likely to have respiratory injury, that's treatable but it can be severe. It does need prompt veterinary assessment - usually fluids and antibiotics and pain relief. It's effectively a burn of the mucous membranes internally.

Particulate matter in the air is probably less of a problem once visibility is back to normal. But if an animal is in a safe paddock and a fire front goes through and there's a lot of smoke then it does need veterinary attention very very promptly.

Once again your aid department. The veterinarians from primary industries and aid departments will be tier two responders. And they'll be in as soon as the control agency (who are the fireies) will let them in. They can do assessments of animals and whoever else from the veterinary response. Agencies will be able to do that for you as well. And once roads are open taking animals to your regular clinician as soon as you can.

## **Malcolm**

If a property has a registered Property Identification Number (PIC) will the property be checked by rangers and authorities after a fire event for injured livestock if the residents are unable to get back to their property?

**Rachel Westcott**

Not without you making a request. There's always a hotline. Primary Industries in South Australia has a bushfire hotline which is open all the time. If you leave livestock behind then a call to the hotline that will be registered and the assessment teams will go to that property and assess those animals. But you have to find the hotline.

**Malcolm**

What's the biggest threats to a dog survival in a bushfire situation? Smoke inhalation, heat stress etc. What items should I include in my dog's survival kit? Is there a specially designed mask that I could put on my dog to help cope with smoke?

**Rachel Westcott**

I think all of the above. And plenty of wet towels is always a good thing. These days humans or people are very used to wearing PT masks. So make sure you have your PT masks in your to go kit. Because they will be very helpful with particulate matter for people. I'm not aware of any similar products for dogs or other animals. Getting them out is the best you can do. Humidifying the air once you can with some misting is always a good idea. If they have been exposed to a lot of smoke then getting them assessed as soon as possible because they may need treatment.

I have talked about the things to take with you. We keep coming back to this same key message that preparedness is everything. Preparedness is king. Decide what you're going to do. And avoid being in that position where you're doing things at the last minute because inevitably that's a recipe for disaster.

**Mel Taylor**

Can I ask a quick question of Rachel that kind of follows on from that? Are there dangers for animals once you get back if a fire has gone past? Maybe it hasn't impacted your property too greatly. Are there dangers there for things like dogs that people should be aware of?

**Rachel Westcott**

You mean if the property is safe, but animals have been outside?

**Mel Taylor**

Yes. When they've maybe running around?

**Rachel Westcott**

If there's burnt ground obviously. Burns to extremities and paws potentially. If there's no burnt ground, then observing. Everyone knows their own animals very well. Pick up on things that are not normal and the subtle changes you pick up on very quickly. If you think that things aren't quite right then chances are they probably aren't quite right. Get them checked out. And vet practices get very very busy in these kinds of events. My team has teams of people door knocking going from house to house and responding to calls when things like this happen. And you can easily have teams on a fire ground for 20 hours a day.

But the local clinics will do all they can to see extra people and give animals checkups. So once roads are open getting them to the local clinic as soon as you can is a good idea. If the fire's been and the wind's been in your favour and if property is not burned then chances are plenty of animals are going to be fine, although a bit stressed

### **Malcolm**

It says an entrepreneurial opportunity there for the dog mask person.

What recommendations would you make for commercial boarding kennels in a bushfire prone area? And secondly what are your recommendations for horses?

### **Rachel Westcott**

Once again they need to have their own bushfire survival plan up to date practised and able to be put into action when necessary. It can be really challenging. I have personally had experience in the 2015 Sampson Flat Bushfire where a boarding kennel was burned out and it was absolutely horrific. Those businesses need to have their own Bushfire Survival Plan in place. It's probably a good idea to inform clients about that, what they would do, where they would take animals and what would happen. In the Sampson Flat Fire evacuation of the kennels dogs tied up at a fence post played outside the fire station. A lot of them were okay but plenty weren't. So it comes down to having that plan and if you're going away in the summer and your animals are going into boarding it might be best to choose a facility that's not in the fire danger area.

### **Mel Taylor**

There are a few grey areas here aren't there? Because handing your animal over to somebody else there's quite a lot of blame and other issues go on afterwards. Agistments and things like that, especially informal ones can be messy if something goes wrong. I think as an owner you want to make sure you've done your own homework to ensure you know what would happen if there was a fire. If it looks like it's prone for that sort of thing. For the evacuation of horses for example on agistment you want to make sure you know what the plan is and who's around. Or if you're expected to get there quickly to get your animal because that's often in the plans.

### **Malcolm**

Certainly we know from the horses webinar that in some cases the agistment people expect people to come in. In other cases that's the last thing they want. So you need to know what's expected of you.

Where can you go with four horses, two mini ponies when fencing can be an issue, a dog, four cats and two people potentially for multiple days? There are no places of last resort nearby. I have no family or friends in safe areas that I could stay with given the animals we have to look after.

### **Mel Taylor**

I know the horse owning fraternity talk a lot about buddy systems but that isn't an instant fix for the person who's asked the question. Finding networks of people to try and play some of those animals is helpful. The last thing the emergency services want in these situations is for a lot of helpers to come in. Like the horse owners with agistments we were just talking about. They don't want those people heading into danger at the time when everybody is evacuating as best they can.

## **Malcolm**

Rachel any comments?

## **Rachel Westcott**

Final message. Prepare, prepare, prepare. I've talked to a number of people in a similar situation and I'm very sympathetic. But you do have to try and find a way. As mentioned your animals are your responsibility. You do need to find a way to either to keep them safe either on the property or move which ones you can. There are a number of people in a similar situation where they feel as though it's just too hard and it's hopeless trying to move animals or take them somewhere else or get help. But they get a huge amount of comfort from having their animals and they have a wonderful relationship with their animals. And that's incredibly important. If you can, safe paddocks that kind of infrastructure. Talk to the local fire agencies and the community engagement officers because they may be able to put you in touch with people who can help. After preparedness I'd put communication as the next most important thing on the list.

## **Mel Taylor**

I think they're happy to attempt in some areas to have databases of people willing to take animals. And I know that can be a bit tricky but I recall Jenna Kelly having something like this in Victoria for a while and the Bushfire Foundation trying to get something similar up. The challenges are always getting people to volunteer to do these things ahead of time when there's an opportunity to have that contact with people. Check them out beforehand to make sure they're the sort of people you want having possession of your animals for a while.

These things do pop up quite spontaneously at the time. But that's obviously not ideal in terms of the context of what we're trying to do here which is get preparedness ahead of time. But there may be some opportunities perhaps through some of those approaches.

## **Rachel Westcott**

I think in South Australia too Horse SA has a pretty good network of looking after horses and putting horse people in touch with horse people. So there may be something similar in other states. There's a new horse evacuation centre Horse SA has funding for near Murray Bridge as part of the Murray Bridge Racehorse Complex. There are yards being built there that horses can be taken to. So I think the local horse groups are really good at helping out in that respect and the fire agencies.

## **Malcolm**

We've got a question here from a person who has two small parrots in an outside aviary. And they're interested to learn what's necessary as a preparation and actions before a bad fire risk day. Outside aviary. You've mentioned sprinklers. I guess that's one of the things but what else can you do with an outside aviary?

## **Rachel Westcott**

Well it depends on how large it is too. Sprinklers misting shade cloth. Birds are very sensitive to heat and smoke. Their respiratory surfaces are very very delicate and can be very easily damaged. At the Kangaroo Island fire when I was there in 2020 near the Southern Ocean Lodge. That huge resort was burned out. There was one area near the staff quarters that hadn't been burned but the

ground was littered with dead birds because they just fell out of the sky because of the heat. They are very sensitive to heat. It is a case of cooling humidifying shading as much as you can. And once again it comes down to ensuring you'd have an independent powered and adequate water supply.

### **Malcolm**

Mel you touched on this before but is it wise to just open chicken runs so the animals can look for their own shelter? Or is it better to leave them locked up? And for example 10 chickens that are used to being free range. To leave early with that number of chickens and find accommodation would probably be difficult so they're most likely going to stay at home.

### **Mel Taylor**

You hear of all sorts of stories about animals that go and do find their own places of refuge and are safe. If they're familiar with the property then you'd have to make that decision on leaving versus taking and the stresses involved on the people and animals involved in doing that. If there's a dam or a pond or a water supply and they're used to free ranging there's probably a reasonable chance that some of them would be okay. But it depends on what facilities they're in. If they were in a run where you can put sprinklers on that's there that might be safer than letting them out. But people know their own animals best and they know their own animals well.

### **Rachel Westcott**

I've certainly spoken to people who've been through terrible fires and have lost chickens but then have had a couple just turn up and they've got no idea how they managed to survive but they did. And then people have all sorts of theories for what sense animals may or may not have about the right things to do. I've talked to certainly people with horses who reckon that their horses knew where to go and what to do and others who had animals that clearly didn't have a clue. I don't know what the general thoughts are about whether animals really do have an instinct for the right thing to do with these situations. But certainly some survive.

### **Malcolm**

Do evacuation centres allow pets? I think you've said some do, some don't. I guess the thing to do there is find out what your local council's evacuation centre rules are in advance.

### **Rachel Westcott**

Generally in South Australia state relief centres don't take animals but it is the responsibility of Primary Industries to find places for animals. So in our last response which was the River Murray flood response we had a lot of portable cages based at primary industries headquarters in Adelaide. And we had other kennels and boarding facilities out of the flood area lined up with places to take animals. So there are plans in place to do that, but it does vary jurisdiction to jurisdiction.

Generally though expect that relief centres won't take animals. And that's for good reasons because dog bites and children going to pet a dog that's stressed that bites all those sorts of things. Those practical things have to be considered. Find out. Do your homework. Find out what your local authorities, councils, RSPCA, primary ministries departments plans are. A lot of that information is on their websites but certainly talking face to face with people sometimes is a good idea too.

## **Mel Taylor**

In New South Wales things have changed or changing all the time. And I suspect after the Black Summer fires and now the floods in New South Wales there's a lot of improvements that weren't there 5 10 years ago. But I think you can typically make the assumption that they won't take animals. In the past it's always been the case with human evacuation centres in New South Wales that the requirement to house animals only happens once the human evacuation centres open. That was always an issue when it came to try and leave early with animals because there was nowhere to take them because they weren't triggered until the humans were turning up with animals at the human evacuation centres.

And also there's a reluctance often to give the location of some of these evacuation centres ahead of time especially in places like the Blue Mountains where there's one road in one road out. So depending where the fire is coming from you don't want people heading to the place that they think the evacuation centre is going to be if that's actually in the line of fire. So there are some issues there. Also I think that there's more local work going on with holding areas for larger animals. So in my area in northwest of Sydney, Castle Hill will open up and have places you can take your larger animals but you have to stay with them and that's the issue.

If you're staying with your animals to look after them that means, maybe if you're a couple with kids that means the other partner is having to take the kids to the human evacuation centre where they're getting food and information but you're not being fed because you're with the animals. So there's a heap of issues that go on which can make it more complex if you stay with your animals.

## **Malcolm**

By the sounds of it the main thing is do your research. Thank you Mel and Rachel for really informative and challenging presentations. And I'm sure your responses particularly on personal responsibility will motivate many in our audience to reassess their plans for preparing and managing their pets in the face of a threat from bushfire.