

CFS FACT SHEET

HORSES AND BUSHFIRES



South Australia can experience significant bushfires. With high temperatures and limited summer rainfall come conditions of high fire danger. During bushfires, people worry not only about their family and property but also about their livestock and pets.

There are steps that horse owners can take to prepare themselves in case their property is threatened by bushfires. The key to survival is forward planning and self reliance.

Everyone's situation differs according to the size and nature of their horse enterprise. That's why each and every horse owner needs to consider their survival plan, coolly and calmly before the hot weather arrives.

Just do it! If you don't take the precautions outlined below within the next 24 hours, the chances are very good that you won't do anything at all to prepare for a bushfire. Do it today rather than wait for it to happen.

Prepare a Plan

If you live in a bushfire risk area it is essential to develop your Bushfire Survival Plan before the fire danger season. Include plans for your horses such as:

- A plan for early relocation of horses to a safer area. Horse relocations present unique problems. Make arrangements ahead of time for a place to temporarily relocate your horses. Options may include showgrounds, sale yards, parks, racetracks, pony club grounds or placement with family and friends. Identify several possible routes from your property in case fire blocks your route. Decide in advance which horses you will evacuate and make sure that they are suitably trained for transport.
- Identify a 'safe area' on your property where horses can be placed if relocation is not possible or practical. This area should be as large as possible and may be a closely grazed paddock or be created from several paddocks by opening gates,, however you will need to ensure that the main gates to your property are secure to prevent horses and stock entering public roads. Ideally it should have a dam with clear access. An alternative 'safe area' might be a large well fenced sand ménage provided that there are no trees or buildings nearby that will burn readily.
- Posting your Bushfire Survival Plan in a clearly visible place together with the local vet telephone number and your property's map reference
- Making sure that everyone who lives, works or agists at your property understands the plan
- On days of Total Fire Ban, putting your horses in the designated 'safe area' or, if you work away from the property do this the night before
- Having an annual meeting with neighbours, friends or other mutual interest groups to discuss fire contingency plans and establish ahead of time who will check on and help whom and which resources will be shared
- Setting up a Bushfire Survival Plan with the landholder if your horses are agisted
- Leaving horses in well grazed paddocks if they are on 'weekenders' in high risk areas of moving them to a safer location during the fire danger season.



Prepare the property

Reduce fire hazards before the fire danger season starts:

- Remove all fire fuel such as excess grass, sticks, leaf litter etc for 20 -30 metres around buildings
- Store hay, straw, shavings, scrap wood, fuel supplies and chemicals safely away from important buildings
- Clean roof surfaces and gutters regularly
- Create fire breaks in strategic locations
- Develop a grazing plan to reduce the fire risk
- Use fire resistant plants on the property (see CFS Factsheet Fire Retardant plants)
- Make sure chain saws and other equipment are fitted with an Australian Standards approved spark arrester
- Invest in rainwater storage tanks, sprinklers systems, a fire fighting pump, and consider fire proof fencing i.e. steel or concrete posts , particularly if you own a stallion
- If your fences are electrified make sure the remainder of fences are 'horse proof' as often power will be cut during a bushfire

Prepare a relocation kit

Equip a plastic rubbish bin (with lid) with the following:

- Wire cutters and a sharp knife
- Torch, portable battery powered radio and fresh batteries
- Water bucket
- Extra lead rope and head collar
- Woollen blanket and towels
- Equine first aid items
- Anything else that you feel is essential for the first 24 hours

Store the kit in an easily accessible location and don't use it for anything but emergencies.



Prepare a survival kit

Prepare a survival kit with essentials such as:

- A ladder that is long enough to reach the roof of buildings in the event of a roof fire
- A minimum of 30 metres of pre-connected garden hose (or adequate length to reach all parts of your buildings) with a spray nozzle
- A shovel for clearing vegetation and throwing dirt
- A rake for clearing vegetation
- Water buckets
- A torch
- A battery powered radio for monitoring the radio for bushfire messages



Keep these items together in an easily accessible place

Don't let the tools be used for any purpose other than fire fighting. Mark them with red paint if necessary.

Make sure that everyone who lives, works or agists at your property know where the kit is located.

Identify your horses

Permanently identified horses (micro-chipped, branded or identified by a drawing which includes whorls and white markings) will be more readily reunited with their owners if separation occurs during a bushfire,

In an emergency at the very least be prepared to 'paint' your name and phone number on the horse itself using livestock grease crayons like the ones used to number horses in endurance rides, or clip similar details on its hair coat or paint its hooves. Neckbands, hip stickers and identification tags on leather head collars can also be useful.

Days of fire danger

Consider the options and whether you intend to relocate your horses

Remember to relocate early in the day or even relocate the horses to a 'safe area' the night before.

Leaving late is a deadly option. Once the bushfire is close, visibility will be very poor and travel hazardous, fallen trees, powerlines, abandoned cars and even fire fighting vehicles can easily block roads. Even quiet horses may panic in a float filled with smoke or when exposed to the noise of sirens.

Wear appropriate attire

Irrespective of whether you intend to relocate early or stay with your property, the right clothes can help shield you from radiant heat, burning embers and flames:

Cotton fabrics are essential. Synthetics can melt and cause serious burns

Wear long pants, a long sleeved shirt with sleeves down or a woollen jumper and a wide brimmed hat

Sturdy leather gloves are essential

Leather boots are the safest footwear, tennis shoes or rubber shoes will melt causing serious burns

Wear a cotton scarf or handkerchief, 'bandit style' to shield your nose and face

Goggles will help protect your eyes from smoke and burning embers

Fire –safe gear for horses

The same principles for fire safe clothing apply to your horse:

Don't use synthetic (nylon or plastic) halters or lead ropes. These may melt and cause serious burns to your horse and its handler. Leather halters and cotton lead ropes while generally not as strong as nylon, will be safer

Don't use nylon fly masks or other synthetic tack or equipment.

When a bushfire threatens

You should plan on the basis that you will receive no official warning that a fire is coming. You must be aware that fire-fighters will be concentrating their efforts on controlling the fire. When fire comes your way, your personal safety and that of the people working with you must be your first concern, so:

- Try to remain calm and alert, think clearly and act decisively
- Pay attention to weather conditions and fire behaviour. Watch for sudden change in wind direction or



speed, a dramatic change in air temperature or humidity, or smoke and ash or burning embers dropping around you

- Monitor the weather forecasts and media broadcasts, especially local ABC radio for emergency information
- Maintain good communications with the people you are working with give clear instructions and make sure they are understood
- Cooperate with fire-fighters and other emergency services. Your safety and the safety of emergency services personnel are their paramount concern.

If your property is closely threatened by a bushfire and you cannot move your horses to a safer district:

- Fill troughs, baths, sinks and metal buckets (plastic ones melt) with reserve water for later use
- Turn off power and gas and disconnect electrical fences
- Remove all equipment from your horse. Rugs burn, plastic headstalls melt and metal buckets may get hot
- Move your horses into your previously identified 'safe area'
- If you take horses out of stables, close the doors to prevent them running back into their perceived 'safe area'
- If you are shifting fractious horses when a fire is very close, temporary blindfold over the eyes may help
- If hoses are still operational wet tails and manes or drench the horse in water if it has to pass near or through fire.

Remember give plenty of room for your horses to move. Past experience of bushfires indicates that horses will suffer minimal burns if given maximum space. They will gallop through flames, or around their edges, and stand on the blackened, previously burnt area and remain there until the fire has passed.

Do not shut horses in stables or small yards. Never turn them out on the road. They will be in danger from traffic and the fire. There is also the risk that they may cause a car accident, leaving you legally responsible.

The main fire front usually passes relatively quickly, (10 – 20 minutes in bushland and few minutes for grassfires). There is little one can do during this time. While humans might gain confidence from the nearness of humans and a calming voice, you cannot provide this assurance when smoke is everywhere and the sound of fire is deafening. Go inside the house and do not put your own life in danger.

Your horse will cope well on its own if it has a chance to move in open space.



Remember to give plenty of room for your horses to move.

After the fire front has passed

Deal with spot fires first. As soon as it is safe, check your horse for burns and other injuries to see whether veterinary attention.

Possible Problems

Horses commonly suffer only facial burns, presumably because they turn and run through the fire front. Other possible injuries include burns to other areas of the body, smoke inhalation, damage to eyes, and burnt and swollen eyelids. It is also important to check for other injuries sustained during the fire such as lacerations



from running into fences etc.

The nature and extent of burns can vary widely between animals of different species, depending on the nature of the fire and degree of exposure. Some may be more severely burned than others in the same group. Situations which may warrant emergency destruction on humane grounds include:

Severe burns to greater than 50% of the body surface with severe charring of limbs, muscles or facial tissues

Animals suffering from severe smoke or flame inhalation resulting in acute respiratory distress, as shown by facial burns, laboured breathing, frothing at the mouth and nose, and coughing

Animals which are down and unable to rise due to injuries or burns sustained during the fire.

If an insured horse has to be destroyed, make sure the insurance company are notified as soon as practicable.

First Aid

Veterinarians will most probably be working under emergency circumstances and communications may be disrupted so expect some delay before help arrives. You must therefore be prepared to monitor the progress of your horses and to administer appropriate first aid while you are waiting for professional assistance.

Skin burns

Skin burns produce severe inflammation, indicated by heat, pain and swelling. Thus first aid must be anti-inflammatory i.e. cold water delivered by a hose or gentle sponging if you still have access to a water supply. It is also important that horses have ready access to feed and water, shade, and to soft, even ground if their feet are burnt.

The veterinarian will assess the degree and depth of the burns and treat accordingly.

Smoke inhalation

Severe smoke inhalation can cause delayed lung damage, which may not be immediately obvious, Horses may appear normal after the fire but in 3-4 hours can become anxious with rapid, sometimes laboured, breathing and an elevated heart rate. These horses need urgent veterinary treatment.

Re-entering Burned Areas

Care must be taken introducing horses to burned areas. There may be hotspots that could flare up without warning. Partially burned structures and trees may be unstable and suddenly fall over. Make sure the fencing is secure. Check for ash pits –areas where root systems have burned underground –downed power lines and dangerous debris before turning horses out in a burned paddock.

Prepare and Practice your Bushfire Survival Plan now!

The distress of having a horse burnt in a bushfire can be magnified by the lack of readily available first aid measures. This can be compounded if the fire destroys facilities and prevents any form of communication to seek help.

Good forward planning will protect the safety and well-being of your horses if you live in a high bushfire risk area.

Carefully consider the needs of your animals when preparing your Bushfire Survival Plan and practise it regularly.

Information adapted from State of Victoria, Department of Primary Industries leaflet – Horses and Bushfires.

