

HORSES AND BUSHFIRE

By Glenn Wilson

The Black Saturday fires in Victoria have redefined what is understood about bushfire behaviour in Australia. One hundred and seventy three people died, over two thousand homes were destroyed, thousands of kilometres of fencing burnt and sadly many hundreds of horses died or were burnt or injured.

Anyone living in a rural area is at risk of such devastation. You, your family and your animals could suffer as a result of not planning and preparing a realistic bushfire survival plan. Whilst such a plan is not a one hundred percent guarantee of survival, a well researched, practiced and timed plan that also allows for a change or changes in circumstances (a plan B) will afford a better survivability chance.

Each summer much of Australia experiences a bushfire season. In some areas bushfire season includes spring and autumn too. Whatever the time of year, being prepared and having a good, well practised Bushfire Survival Plan for you, your family, your home and importantly your horses, pets and livestock, can make the difference between life and death.

A critical point to remember is that not all bushfires are survivable! The safest place to be if a bushfire is burning is nowhere near it. Whilst this may seem impractical to many, facing a bushfire (staying and defending) is fraught with risk and danger. Depending on the severity of the fire, a well prepared property and properly equipped and trained team of firefighters may, in some circumstances, be able to protect people and buildings. Protecting our horses from bushfire add some inherent risks to all concerned. Again, the safest place to be if a bushfire threatens is well away from the area.

Horse Reactions. Horses by nature are flight animals. Their reactions to flames, noise and smoke as well as the increase of vehicle traffic, including fire trucks, helicopters and people trying to flee, may be unpredictable. Some horses panic and some are quite cool about all the commotion. On the day we must allow for the worst case scenario though. Many horse owners have been burnt or have died trying to save their horses. Many horses miraculously survive bushfires but sadly many die or suffer burns that are fatal.

Prior and proper planning and preparation and thinking about the best things to do before, during and after a bushfire event will make the experience less harrowing and increase your own and your horses' chances of surviving unscathed. It will be scary facing flames, smoke, embers, heat and wind, but having considered all that you can, as well as being armed with knowledge and understanding of wildfire behaviour can make a great difference. Staying and defending your property and horses is a high risk decision and should be well considered before taking this option.

Also, in this article I use the term 'bushfire' which is a homogenous word that includes all sorts of fires. Wildfire, grass fire, bushfire, scrub fire, out of control burn off's; whatever the fire type, they can all have similar danger and devastating effects. So even if you are nowhere near the bush or living on the town fringe or surrounded by grassy plains, the risk of fire for you and your horses still exists.

Get the facts! Then apply them to your own personal situation. Have a good cram of the CFA's website www.cfa.vic.gov.au or if you are in Victoria, attend one of the community Fire Ready Victoria meetings. Details of these meetings are also on the website. NSW residents can specifically go to www.rfs.nsw.gov.au and follow the 'preparing your property' link and 'family fire plan' link as well. 'Are you at risk' should also be studied. All the key messages are similar though.

Rural Fire Brigades and their volunteers are also a wealth of information and support when it comes to planning for bushfire survival.

Preparation. Once you have armed yourself with knowledge and facts (as opposed to hearsay and urban myth, as there is a lot of that out there too) it is time to apply it to your own personal situation. Have a good hard look at the work you can/must do around your property to reduce fuel levels (grass, leaves twigs and shrubs). Assess your water supply; is it fire proof? Is it independent of the mains electricity supply, which often fails in a bushfire? Do you have a bare area that is safer to move your horses to if there is a risk of fire threatening your property? If you plan to leave and it is safe to do so, **leaving early is the safest option!** Where are you going to go? Does your alternative safer place have facilities for your horses? Are your sheds and stables safe or are they firetraps? How do you propose to protect your stored hay? What fire fighting equipment do you have and what can you improvise using a bit of creativity? Mops and buckets, wheely bins, super soaker water pistols, garden sprayers, wet hessian bags are just some of the 'amateur' fire fighting equipment that have been used to save lives and homes. Also consider what forms of communication you are going to rely on to get information and to stay in touch. Is your phone independent of the electricity supply? What radio station will you listen to for updates and weather information? Do you know the Bushfire Information Line for your state or area?

The most important things to do when a fire threatens is to get dressed in protective clothing. **DO THIS FIRST** even if you plan to leave. Everyone in the household should be dressed in natural fibre, loose fitting, complete cover clothing. Hats, goggles, gloves and facemasks are all essential apparel also. What about protective clothing for the horse? To rug or not to rug? My personal feeling is; if it is good enough for us then it must bear some consideration for the horse. Same dress rules apply. Natural fibre (cotton/canvas), loose fitting, body rugs, neck rugs, and head rugs. But no synthetics! They melt and burn. Take off fly veils. A cotton or canvas rug will reduce the amount of burning on the horse from embers. It will also protect the horse from radiant heat to some degree, although burns to horses' faces, legs and hooves are common and often fatal. Removing the horse from the path of the fire well before the front arrives is the safest option.

Do you leave a halter on? Again you must weigh up the options. One side of the argument says that nylon halters will melt and/or the buckles will heat up and burn the horse's face. Try this: Lay a halter on your arm or leg and stand near a heat source till either of the two scenarios above happens. They won't. Your arm or leg will tell you to move away from the heat well before the nylon melts or the buckles heat up enough to burn. Natural horse people and others use rope halters so this is less of an issue, although most rope halters are made of a synthetic material. But really, will the synthetic rope melt before the horse is cooked? Again *my* personal preference would be to leave a halter on the horse if a fire risk threatens (breaking a golden rule here). If the horse needs to be moved or controlled by anyone, all that is required is a piece of string/rope or even a belt. Horses do escape during fires and it could be anyone who brings

them back under control; a task that is a lot easier if a halter/headstall is already on the horse.

ID Your Horse. Consider also some form of fireproof identification for your horse. Microchipping, freeze branding, a tail tag with your contact details in permanent marker or even engraving your phone number on their near side front hoof at the beginning of the fire season will allow a stray horse to be united with its human.

According to several people I have spoken to who have actual (as opposed to anecdotal) experience about horses and bushfires, horse reactions are as varied as human reactions. Some stand and get burned, some panic, some calmly evade the flames and some flee. I surmise that a horse's reaction could be related to prior experience. Whenever I am burning off I make a point of bringing the horses to the fire. In fact I reckon in winter they huddle around a bonfire warming their butts. So if these guys are faced with a wall of flames I am hoping their reaction will be more predictable. But I can't be sure on the day.

Be Aware. Staying aware, informed and alert to a bushfire risk is up to you. You cannot expect a warning and in fact a fire may start on your or your neighbour's property and you will be facing the flames before even the emergency service knows about it. Be aware of the weather, fire risk and any changes or trends forecast. Do not expect a fire truck either. Days of Severe, Extreme or Code Red-Catastrophic forecast should ring serious alarm bells and be a trigger to activate your Bushfire Plan

During The Fire. If you decide to stay and defend, dealing with a fire is a hot, exhausting, physically, mentally and emotionally challenging experience. You must be prepared and physically and mentally capable. Look after yourself. Drink plenty of water before you get thirsty. Look after anyone else involved. Evaluate the situation minute by minute and avoid at all costs the last minute temptations to either flee the fire or go and save the horse. Both these options can be deadly!

After The Fire. Once the fire front has passed through your property, the work is far from over. Most houses and outbuildings are lost in the hours after the fire. Many hours of patrolling for smouldering fires are essential. Keep drinking plenty of water. Apply first aid to injured animals, put down ones who are suffering and beyond help, check in with family, friends and neighbours and patrol for smouldering fires some more. Have rest breaks. Support each other.

Early treatment of burns and injuries to horses is critical to maximise the chances of recovery. Learn about horse first aid now and be prepared to apply it. After the 2003 Alpine fires in Victoria, the local vets were busy. Not treating burns on horses but treating injuries from rushed floating mishaps, horses fighting, kicking and biting strange horses and also fence accidents. It seems that high-energy panicky humans caused a lot of high-energy panicky horses. Many horses suffered burns during the Black Saturday fires and veterinarians were overwhelmed trying to treat all that needed attention. First Aid carried out by you, the owner, may save the horse.

Recovery and ongoing care. If you and your horse survive the fire, having and implementing a post-fire plan will make life much easier. Your fences may have been burnt, your feed supply may be gone. Your float may be destroyed and water may be unavailable in your horse area. Plan before each fire season for all these scenarios. Can your horses be relocated to another area that has horse friendly paddocks, feed and does not face the risk of fire? Is someone else

available with a horse float who can move your horses? Have you arranged for someone with suitable hay to supply you after the fire? If in the unfortunate occurrence that your horse died in the fire or had to be put down after it, have you the contact details of someone with a backhoe who can come and bury the body?

All of this is going to be hugely emotionally, physically and financially draining. One of the great things learnt from major bushfires is the value of counselling and support. To mitigate the mental trauma suffered, trained and experienced people are there to offer support and help. Make use of them. Talk about your ordeal - don't try to tough it out by yourself. And be thankful that you did survive and can live to tell your grandchildren about it.

Extraordinary situations require extraordinary actions. Let's face it, for many of us a bushfire is an extraordinary situation. Having the best information, developing a really well thought out and well practised Bushfire Survival Plan, considering all options and selecting the best ones for you and allowing for contingencies and Murphy's Law will all combine to increase the chances of you and your family (and that includes your horses), surviving a bushfire.

Bushfire Survival Plan – Do It Now!

© Glenn Wilson – September 2009
E. waterfallcreek@bigpond.com