

HORSES AND BUSHFIRE

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

The reality is that bushfires are like cancer. They exist. They will happen. They may happen to you or they may not. Prior and proper planning and preparation (sorry Pat or whoever coined this wonderful phrase) 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 one can, as well as being armed with knowledge and understanding of wildfire behaviour can make a huge and positive difference.

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 all can have similar danger and devastating effects. So if you are nowhere near the bush or living on the town fringe or surrounded by grassy plains, the risk of fire still exists.

As there are many well-researched and informative sources of information of wildfire behaviour available to all of us I will not repeat the key messages here. But I will urge everyone to have a good study of the information available. 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.

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. Assess your water supply; is it fire proof? Is it independent of the electricity supply, which often fails in a wildfire? Do you have an area that is safer to move your horses to if threatened? 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.

One of the most important things to do when a fire threatens is to get dressed in protective clothing. DO THIS FIRST! Everyone in the household should be dressed on natural fibre, loose fitting complete cover clothing. Hats, goggles, gloves and facemasks are all essential apparel. And what about 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 rules apply. Natural fibre (cotton/canvas), loose fitting, body rugs, neck rugs, and head rugs. But no synthetics. They melt. A 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 and feet are common and often fatal. Removing the horse from the path of the fire well before the front arrives is a much better option.

Leave a halter on? Again you must weigh up the options. One side of the argument says that nylon ones will melt and/or the buckles will heat up and burn the horse's face. Try it. Lay a halter on your arm or leg and stand near a heat source till either of the two scenarios happens. They wont, as your arm/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 use rope halters anyway 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 (breaking a golden rule here) so 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 may be anyone who brings them back under control. A task that is a lot easier if a halter/headstall is already on the horse.

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 tootsies and butts. So if these guys are faced with a wall of flames I am hoping their reaction will be more predictable.

Once the fire front has passed through your property, the party is far from over. Most houses and outbuildings are lost in the hours after the fire. Hours of patrolling for smouldering fires is essential. Keep drinking plenty of water. Applying first aid to injured animals, destroying ones who are suffering and beyond help, checking in with family, friends and neighbours and patrolling 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 fence accidents. It seems that high-energy panicky humans caused a lot of high-energy panicky horses. Prior and proper preparation and planning.....

Dealing with a fire is a hot, exhausting, physically, mentally and emotionally challenging experience. 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!

Extraordinary situations require extraordinary actions. Let's face it, for many of us a wildfire 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 wildfire.