

SEASONAL ALERT

KEEPING YOUR HORSE SAFE IN A FIRE

Dr John Kohnke BVSc RDA

Bush fires have become an unwanted summer occurrence in many areas of Australia. This season is shaping up to be a high risk period as well because of the high fuel load of standing dry grass, undergrowth and leaves and twigs shedding from trees, especially Eucalypts. The devastating bush fires in Victoria in early 2009, and the recent fires in Southern Tasmania, have provided a realisation of the risk of serious injury and death to both humans and horses. Many of the horses suffered from burns to their hooves and legs although they survived the fire itself.

The Rural Fire Services in each state have recommended evacuation procedures in the face of a bush fire during the highest risk CATASTROPHIC fire danger conditions. Horses, and other animals, must also be considered during any evacuation to a safer area. If you live in an area prone to bushfires, you must adopt an evacuation plan and update it every season, depending on the fuel load in your locality.

You must abide by warnings and evacuation orders at all times. Listen to the radio on high risk days for forecast updates and location of any bush fires in your vicinity. If you have to travel through bushland to move horses, ensure that you allow plenty of time to escape and are not rushed in an emergency.

Type up an escape plan and display it in the stable tack room for all to acquaint themselves with the evacuation procedures.

There are simple guidelines to reduce both the risk of a bush fire sweeping across your property or starting a spot fire, as well as steps to minimise the harm to your horses.

1. Stables and Horse Yards

In the lead up to a high fire risk season, check any fire extinguishers and replace/recharge if necessary. Clean up leaf and tree debris in yards within at least 20 metres of the stables to reduce the combustible fuel load. Clean the gutters. Keep the stables free of cobwebs and other material (e.g. empty feed bags) which can easily catch fire. Store hay away from the outside walls of the stables – pack it so the hay is covered with sheets of iron (not plastic) or inside the stable in a protected room to prevent embers falling and smouldering on the hay. If your stable has an electric roller door, ensure that it can be raised manually by chain if the power is out during a bush fire. If a fire is approaching and you need to evacuate, fill the gutters on the stable with water by squeezing a large soft sponge wrapped in kitchen wrap into the drain holes or down pipe exits. The sponge will expand to seal off the gaps to help hold water. This may save the stables (or house) as many buildings catch fire because of hot embers falling on the roof and sliding into the gutters to ignite the timber along the gutter's inner border.

2. Identify Your Horses

Many horses are now micro-chipped, but if your horse is not, consider getting an identifying microchip inserted before the bush fire season. All horse properties in Australia now have a property number which can help to trace lost or missing horses. Take a photo of your horse(s) and keep it in a safe place so that you have a record for identification. Record your horse's brands before the high risk period.

3. Set Out an Evacuation Route

Make an evacuation plan before the fire season. Consult with your local Rural Fire Authority and your neighbors/friends to develop an evacuation plan. Identify a safe path clear of dry debris and fuel for a fire from your paddocks or stables on which you can walk your horses off your property. Have leads and head stalls ready to move your horse(s) away from danger.

4. Fill Water Tanks

Arrange to have water tanks around the stables kept topped up, or filled with water, with buckets or a petrol fire pump. Ensure you have petrol and hoses ready in good order. Water can be used to wet the ground along the escape path or reduce fire ignition around the stables. Remember the electricity may be cut during a bush fire and electric pressure pumps, unless powered by a small petrol generator, will not operate.

5. Prepare Your Horse Float or Truck for Evacuation

Ensure that your float or horse truck is prepared for evacuation – fuelled up and ready to go. It is a good idea to invest in a fire extinguisher and fire blanket, or a knapsack sprayer full of water secured in the float or truck, in case fire blocks the escape route. Take some wet bags with you to beat out any fire burning along the road edge, or the grassy middle road centre hump between the tyre tracks on your property access road or local bush track. Take extra ropes and fence droppers, or a portable electric fence or holding yard, with you in the float or truck as you may have to fence off an area to corral your horses.

Handy Hint 1: Identify Your Horses if a Bush Fire is Approaching.

In the face of a bush fire, it is a good idea to attach an identity tag to your horses' headstall or tie it in his mane. A standard plastic key tag is cheap. Write his name and your phone number (mobile) and address on the reverse side, with a black waterproof pen. Take a photo with a digital camera so that if he escapes or is taken to a holding area, you can advertise and post photos around on social media sites as a 'lost horse' in your district.

Handy Hint 2: Ensure That You Can Arrange Room on a Horse Float

Many of the horses which were burnt in fires could not be evacuated because they were unable to be transported off the property in the period before the fire. Arrange with friends to share a float(s) and pre-arrange a collection or pick up point with a safe evacuation route to a park or a bush fire safe holding area. Relocate mares and foals and aged horses as early as possible from the predicted high fire danger area. Fires can spread very quickly and you may not have time once a fire is raging near your property and the air is full of falling embers and burning debris. Horses can become frightened by the smell of fires and smoke in the air and it may be difficult and unsafe to attempt to move them without the risk of injury to them or you as a handler.

If you have to leave horse(s) behind, try to ensure the safest possible area – e.g. a paddock with a dam of water and a clear space around it with the gates open as a possible escape route if the horse(s) need to get away from the fire or smoke.

Handy Hint 3: Organise Food and Water in the Safe Holding Area

It is important to ensure that your horses have food and water ready at the holding area. Pre-arrange for enough hay for 3-5 days and drums of water to be stored at the holding area or a nearby property. Transport feed bins, water tubs, rugs and extra head stalls and lead ropes to the holding area. Be aware of snakes sheltering in the holding area as they attempt to escape the fire. Other animals may find refuge in the cleared area too and it may be necessary to provide them with water and food.

❖ **Don't Leave Your Evacuation Until the Fire is Raging**

If high risk conditions are forecast, move your horses to a cleared area – e.g. paddocks with minimal Eucalypts and Pine trees – deciduous European trees are safer as they are less likely to catch fire from ember showers. Quickly sweep up and pile up any dead leaves under the trees. Wet the pile with water and cover with a tarp or iron. Act early and move your horses.

❖ **Protect Your Horses during Evacuation**

If you have to walk your horse(s) to safety in the midst of a fire storm, or following the fire, you must keep your horses as safe and protected as possible.

1. Use only leather headstalls (plastic/nylon ones can melt) and long cotton lead ropes – wet the ropes.
2. Remove plastic fly shields – fit string veils and wet them before moving the horses near the fire.
3. Cover your horse to protect him against skin and hair burn by hot air with a cotton or canvas rug – wet it thoroughly to prevent the horse's body from being burned – do not use a synthetic rug.
4. Dampen towels to hold over his nose and head.
5. Wrap the hooves in strips of old towels or cotton bandages – saturate the towelling/bandages and take a full watering can of water to regularly wet the hooves when walking on hot ground. Wet the horse's mane, tail and legs before walking out.
6. Protect yourself with sturdy boots, gloves and hat and wet your clothes to prevent them igniting from ember showers.
7. You should wear a face cover as hot winds are generated by bush fires which can burn your skin and eyes. A wet muslin flap attached to the brow band and hanging down over the horse's eyes and nostrils, may reduce him inhaling hot air and airborne particles which could damage his nose and lungs.
8. Stay Calm. If you become over-excited from the stress, your horses (and dogs) will sense your agitation and become frightened and unpredictable. If you have a nervy horse, lead it with a quiet horse and perhaps consider giving a course of **Kohnke's Own Mag-E®**, including double doses mixed in 20 mL water and 20 mL cooking oil, as a slurry over the tongue, if there is a risk of a fire approaching, to help him cope with the situation.

Handy Hint 4: Carry a Torch and Mobile Phone

It is mandatory to have a torch if the smoke is thick or if the fire is burning at night. Ensure that you have a torch with new batteries or fully charged cells, ready to go during the evacuation. Carry a fully charged mobile phone with you so that you can contact Fire Authorities, family or friends during the evacuation. Add the contact numbers for the local Fire Controller into the phone.

Disclaimer: The recommendations in this information sheet have been presented as a guideline based on the veterinary experience and knowledge of the author, Dr John Kohnke BVSc RDA. Whilst all care, diligence and years of practical experience have been combined to produce this information, the author/editor, Dr John Kohnke, accepts no responsibility or liability for unforeseen consequences resulting from the hints and advice given in this alert.

The information in this information sheet or part thereof is copyright. We encourage its use in newsletters and other horse/pony club or associated bulletins, provided that permission is sought from the author by email at info@kohnkesown.com prior to publication. ©Copyright 2013

Kohnke's Own®

NOTE: Your local council will have strict procedures in place for evacuation. Consult your guidelines.