

## **Bushfire preparedness**

Fire is a problem in most summers in Australia, but particularly so after good seasons where spring rains have produced abundant growth and in very hot dry summers where the vegetation becomes tinder dry. Despite rainfall events which may occur sporadically over the bushfire season short periods of hot, dry weather will lead to pastures drying off and becoming prone to bushfires.

Being prepared is a key to minimising the impacts of fire on your property and livestock. Take measures to reduce the fire hazard on and surrounding your property. Ensure that any firefighting equipment you intend to use is adequate and operational and that emergency plans are in place.

It may often be the case during a fire emergency that there is little or no warning with no time to consider anything other than human safety. However, at times when fires are not an immediate threat fire preparedness should be considered. Strategies and plans will be invaluable during a bushfire emergency.

### *Be prepared*

- Locate incinerators, rubbish dumps, fuel supplies and storage areas well away from other structures.
- Where possible, prepare a firebreak around the home. Trim branches so that they are well clear of the house. Clear litter and flammable items away from gutters, buildings and other important infrastructure. Keep grassed areas (especially those around the house) short/green.
- If engaged in firefighting operations, suitable non-flammable clothing should be worn including a long-sleeved shirt, full-length trousers, suitable footwear, hat and eye protection.
- Keep a ladder nearby for roof access (both inside and out).
- Have water hoses available and ensure they will reach all parts of the house and garden. Where water is not connected, obtain a high pressure pump.
- A list of essential telephone numbers should be kept near the telephone.
- Contingencies should also be in place if the phone lines or power are affected by fire. This can include a back-up generator and other forms of communication including two-ways and mobile phones.
- Fit wire screens to doors, windows and vents (to prevent burning embers from entering the house). Enclose any gaps, roof eaves and the under area of the house.
- Keep a battery operated radio and spare batteries.

### *Firebreaks*

The correct location of firebreaks is the key to their effectiveness. There are laws regarding where and how firebreaks can be placed so it is important to contact your local RFS brigade before establishing a firebreak. Firebreaks can be considered for the following situations:

- along boundaries of paddocks where a firebreak would help to isolate flammable crops such as wheat;
- around wood lots or windrows where ground vegetation tends to accumulate;
- along fencelines where a firebreak serves the dual purpose of reducing fuel and providing access for vehicles during bushfire emergencies;
- around haystacks and outbuildings;
- around the homestead;
- beneath high-voltage powerlines; and
- along road and railway boundaries.

There are various ways to construct adequate firebreaks on properties including spraying with herbicides, mowing, ploughing or burning off.

Note the following:

- ensure that the construction of a firebreak by ploughing will not allow erosion to occur after rainfall as this can limit access to the fire as well as damage the environment;
- an effective method of creating a firebreak around the homestead is to ensure that the home paddocks are grazed heavily in summer. Alternatively, plant lawn and mow it regularly;
- a lucerne paddock will provide an effective firebreak and can be used to protect key improvements or provide safe refuge for livestock;
- hazard reduction may be used to remove unwanted vegetation, reduce fuel or create firebreaks;
- if burning off, ensure adequate mopping up is done to ensure that the fire does not flare up into a full-scale bushfire; and
- property protection can often be improved through consultation with neighbours and local authorities.

#### *If a Bushfire Approaches*

- Phone the bushfire brigade – do not assume they know about the fire.
- Fill baths, sinks, buckets etc with reserve water and turn off any gas and power.
- Remove curtains and move furniture away from windows.
- Place pets in one room of the house that is easily accessible to evacuate the animals if required. Preferably have cats in cages.
- Wear protective clothing that covers the body area, solid boots or shoes, a hat or woollen balaclava and gloves.
- Plug downpipes with rags and fill all roof gutters with water. Hose down walls, garden etc. on the sides of the house facing the 'fire-front' and watch for spot fires.
- Inside, close all windows, doors and block crevices and gaps. When the fire front arrives, bring hoses inside with you. stay inside, away from windows, while it passes (usually 5-15 minutes).
- Quickly extinguish any fires, which may have started in, on, or under the house and check inside the roof cavity as well.
- If the house is alight and can't be extinguished, move away to safe burnt ground. Don't leave the area, wait for help. Listen to the battery radio for official information.
- Damage to, or destruction of fences and stockyards is likely. This can limit your option in controlling and managing livestock and feral animals. However, in the short term the major single issue will be the nutritional requirements of your animals.
- After a flood or fire event, government assistance is available under the Natural Disaster Relief Arrangements (NDRA). This joint State/Federal assistance package provides a range of assistance measures for landholders, including emergency funding for replacement of household items, subsidies for the transport of fodder and livestock deemed necessary as a result of the disaster, and low-interest loans. Other assistance is available from local councils and other organisations. Full details and contacts for these programs are usually published during or immediately after a disaster event.

#### *Protection of livestock*

Stockowners must have in place a plan for protecting livestock. Some considerations include:

- Know the best places where livestock can be moved to – aim to have yards, ploughed paddocks or other relatively safe areas available. The perimeter of the paddock should be either ploughed or graded to prevent the spread of fire into it. This area should be as close to the home as possible so that it can be monitored regularly and should have a dam and sprinkler system. Consider access to these 'safe' sites during a fire event and have an alternate access point to these if one is cut off. It has been demonstrated that lucerne paddocks are effective as a safe haven for livestock during fires.

- Have equipment readily available for cutting fences to allow trapped livestock out in emergency situations.
- If warning is given early enough, consideration to transporting stock to a safe place should be considered. Consider what impact this will have on any quality assurance program that you administer on your property. Wherever possible, make special arrangements to maintain your stock's status and market access.
- It is important to have fodder reserves at hand or at least know where fodder can be accessed quickly. If all pasture is lost it is important that emergency reserves are available to maintain livestock.
- Water will be vital for livestock and firefighting. When establishing waterpoints be wary of running poly pipe above ground as it will burn in fires and cut off valuable water supplies.

### *Nursing burnt livestock*

Animals that are injured should be placed in a 'hospital' paddock or yard where they can be inspected regularly and nursed.

Points to consider and ensure are:

- place stock on the softest, most level ground available, especially if their feet are burnt;
- provide ready access to good-quality feed and water. Burnt animals are reluctant to move and usually do not feed for a few days. They should be given high-protein feeds such as good lucerne or meadow hay;
- inspect animals often enough to ensure they are able to move to water and drink. Animals which are unable to drink should be euthanased;
- try to provide access to good shade;
- check all animals regularly for signs of flystrike, both on burnt areas of the body and on the feet, and treat if necessary;
- remember to control worms especially after rain; and
- some animals may benefit from long acting antibiotics to treat secondary infections - seek Veterinary advice.

Re-examine and reassess stock daily for at least a week after the fire and then 2-3 times weekly for a further 2-3 weeks. Particular attention should be given to mobility, inappetence and development of respiratory signs.

Dr Jane Vaughan has written an article on assessing and caring for alpacas after bushfire. Remember that alpacas are very stoic animals – they will mask symptoms and attempt to remain as mobile as possible to avoid becoming an easy mark for predators. However they can also respond very well to treatment, and make remarkable recovery from illness or injury. Having a first aid kit for your animals is essential in the event of an emergency. Speak to your vet or an experienced breeder you know to find out what items you should have on hand.