

HORSES AND BUSHFIRE

South Australia can experience significant bushfires due to high temperatures and limited summer rainfall which can increase fire danger ratings and fire conditions. 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 horse owner needs to consider their survival plan, calmly, before the hot weather arrives.

Start your plan today – your horse is relying on you to have a detailed written and practised Bushfire Survival Plan. You may find you have already completed a lot of what is in this Fact Sheet.

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 the following in your plan:

- Decide before there is a fire, if you need/want to relocate your horses to a safer area as you may not need to move them at all. If you do decide to move them, make arrangements ahead of time for a place to take your horses. Options may include taking them to a "Horse Buddy" or placement with family and friends. The best plan is to relocate early, before a fire starts. Decide in advance which horses you will relocate and make sure that they are suitably trained for transport.
- Have a back-up "safe area" on your property where horses can be placed if you don't need to relocate them. This area should be as large as possible and may be a well grazed paddock or be created from several paddocks by opening gates. However keep main gates to your property shut to prevent horses and stock entering public roads. Ideally your "safe area" should have a dam with clear access. An alternative 'safe area' might be a large well fenced sand arena or paddock provided that there are no trees or buildings nearby that will burn readily, as shown in this photo.
- Put your Bushfire Survival Plan in a clearly visible place together with the local vet telephone number and your property's street address. Share your plan with your neighbours, so they know it too.
- Make sure that everyone who lives, works or agists at your property understands the plan.
- On days of Total Fire Ban, put 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 agistees to discuss fire contingency plans, establishing ahead of time on which people will check on and help each other and which resources will be shared.
- Set up a Bushfire Survival Plan with the landholder if your horses are agisted.
- Leave horses in well grazed paddocks if they are 'turned out' in high risk areas or - move them to a safer location during the fire danger season, if you are concerned.
- Make sure your property has a **PIC number (Property Identification Code)**, available through **PIRSA**, this will assist you to get feed and other assistance after an emergency.



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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 and rainwater tanks etc.
- Store hay, straw, shavings; scrap wood, fuel supplies and chemicals safely away from important buildings.
- Clean roof surfaces and gutters regularly.
- Don't have continuous fuel all the way up to and around important buildings and rainwater tanks.
- Develop a grazing plan to reduce the fire risk.
- Use low flammability plants on the property (see CFS Factsheet low flammability plants).
- 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.
- Consider installing a gate on your boundary fence that leads to your neighbour's property, you may organise to open this on total fire ban days and give all stock more room to move.

Prepare a relocation kit

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

- Torch, portable battery powered radio and fresh batteries
- Water bucket and feed
- Lead rope and halter
- Woollen blanket and towels
- Equine first aid items
- Temporary electric fence kit
- Anything else that you feel is essential for the first couple of days

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

Remember you and your horse may be away for a few days if there is a fire.

Prepare your horse

- Practise floating your horses if you intend to move them.
- Practise getting others to catch and float your horse.
- Move horses around the property so they know where the internal gates are.
- Remove rugs and fly veils on Total Fire Ban days.
- Practise blindfolding your horse and leading them around. If your horse is used to a fly veil, consider sewing material over the outside, so your horse is less likely to spook, as it is used to the fly veil already.



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Prepare a survival kit to stay and defend

Prepare a survival kit with essentials such as:

- Wire cutters and a sharp knife.
- 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 on a fire.
- A rake for clearing vegetation away from a fire.
- Metal Water buckets.
- A torch – it may get dark if there is a fire.
- A battery powered radio for monitoring the radio for bushfire messages (power may go out).
- Electric fence tape, rods and unit, to put up a temporary fence after the fire if needed.
- Feed such as pellets in a metal bin for emergency use.



Keep these items together in an easily accessible place.

Don't let the tools be used for any purpose other than firefighting. 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. Make sure you know each other's phone numbers or have another way of keeping in touch (UHF radios etc.).

Identify your horses

Permanently identified horses (micro-chipped or branded) will be more readily reunited with their owners if horses and owners become separated during a bushfire,

In an emergency, 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 coat, or paint its hooves. This example below can be seen easily from a distance, so passers-by may phone you or post this picture on social media sites.

Also, take a photo of yourself with your horse, so you can prove ownership if necessary.



Make sure your property has a **Property Identification Code (PIC)** number and that your horses are listed as being on that property. Obtain this from **Primary Industries SA (PIRSA)**. All properties with one or more horses are legally required to have a **PIC** number. A **PIC** number will help **PIRSA** to identify which properties should have what animals on them, aiding in both planning and recovery.

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Days of Total Fire Ban or fire danger

Remember to move horses to a “safe area” either on or off the property, either early in the day or the night before.

If you are leaving the property, open all “internal gates” if possible.

Remove rugs, halters, fly veils etc. from your horse.

Fill troughs, baths, sinks and metal buckets with reserve water for later use if needed and fill extra water containers and leave at the property in case you can't return because of a fire.

Decide before there is a fire whether you will stay or leave early. Leaving late is a deadly option. Once the bushfire starts or 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

If you have chosen to or are forced to stay with your property, the right clothes can help shield you from radiant heat, burning embers and flames.

Cotton fabrics are essential as 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

Remove all rugs, halters and fly veils from your horses.

When a bushfire threatens

You should plan to receive no official warning that a fire is coming. When fire comes your way, your personal safety and that of the people with you must be your first concern, so:

- **Remain calm and alert, think clearly and follow the actions you have written on your plan.**
- Pay attention to weather conditions and fire behaviour. Watch for sudden change in wind direction or speed, or smoke and ash or burning embers dropping around you.
- Monitor the weather and media broadcasts, especially local ABC radio for emergency information.
- Give people you are working with clear instructions and make sure they are understood. Give them a written list of actions to follow.
- Cooperate with fire-fighters and other emergency services **if they turn up**. Your safety and the safety of emergency services personnel are their main concern.
- Fill troughs, baths, sinks and metal buckets (plastic ones melt) with reserve water for later use.

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- Turn off power and gas and disconnect electrical fences.
- **If time**, move your horses into your previously identified 'safe area' on the property.
- Close the doors to stables/sheds to prevent horses from running back inside.
- If you are shifting a scared horse 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.

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.

Never turn horses out on the road as 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. **Go inside the house and seek shelter from radiant heat - do not put your own life in danger.** Your horse will usually cope well on its own if it has a chance to move in open space.

(There is a lot to do if there is a fire – how much can you do the night before a bad day?)



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

After the fire front has passed

Embers will be lodged in areas outside and will start spot fires. Deal with these spot fires first. As soon as it is safe, check your horse for burns and other injuries to see whether veterinary attention is needed. Some health issues will take hours or days to show up, so monitor your horse's health closely after the fire.

Possible Problems

Late relocation of horses is a risk to both you and your horse's life.

Do not leave relocated horses on their own in public places, expecting others to know how to care for them.

Strangers may want to offer to help float horses away, be clear about whether or not you want help. If you do not give permission and they take them anyway, this is "horse theft" and should be reported to police.

Horses may stray from the property if the fences are impacted. Using Social Media sites has proven in the past to speed up reuniting horses and their owners.

Horses commonly suffer only facial burns. 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, 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 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 (broken limbs) or burns sustained during the fire.

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First Aid

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

- Skin burns produce severe inflammation, indicated by heat, pain and swelling. 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, water and shade, also soft and even ground if their feet are burnt. The veterinarian will assess the degree and depth of the burns and treat accordingly.
- 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.
- If an insured horse has to be destroyed, call the insurance company as soon as practicable.
- Some symptoms do not show up until days later, so keep monitoring your horse's health.

Re-entering Burned Areas

- Care must be taken returning 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 all fencing is secure and free from potential injury causing areas (broken wires, sharp stakes).
- Ground under trees may give way suddenly –areas where root systems have burned underground. There also may be downed power lines and dangerous debris.
- Animals that are normally “friendly” may be aggressive because of injury.
- Water may be contaminated with ash or firefighting foam, so check that your animals have access to clean water.
- Feed such as hay should be placed off the ground, so animals are not eating grit or ash with their food.

Prepare and Practise your Bushfire Survival Plan now!

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.**

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Thanks also to “**Horse SA**” for valuable input into this Fact Sheet – see www.horsesa.asn.au

For more local information on emergency response and recovery for animals, see **South Australian Veterinary Emergency Management (SAVEM):** <http://www.savem.org.au/>

For information on **PIC** numbers: <http://www.pir.sa.gov.au/>