

# RMP – After the Fire

Deal with spot fires first. As soon as it is safe check your horses for burns and other injuries to see whether veterinary attention is required.

## Possible Problems

Horses commonly only suffer facial burns, presumably obtained when they turn and run through the fire front. Other possible injuries include burns to other areas of the body, smoke inhalation, damage to coronets, and burnt and swollen eyelids, which reduce effective vision in the short term. 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 of different species, depending on the nature of the fire and the 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 surface 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 or burns sustained during the fire.

If an insured horse has to be destroyed, make sure the insurance company is notified as soon as practicable.

## First Aid

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

## Skin Burns

Skin burns produce severe inflammation, indicated by heat, pain and swelling. Thus first aid must be anti-inflammatory, ie 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 and water (if available), shade and to soft, even ground if their feet are burnt. The

veterinarian will assess the degree and depth of the burns and treat accordingly. Treatment may include injections to relieve pain, reduce inflammation and prevent infection, and intravenous fluids may be given to counteract shock. Anti-inflammatory creams may also be supplied. Check all burnt areas regularly for fly strike. The horse should be kept warm and comfortable and coaxed to eat and drink. Careful nursing is of utmost importance to recovery. Horses with quite severe burns will often respond well to intensive treatment but this can be time consuming and very costly.

## Smoke Inhalation

A common cause of death in fires and in the days afterward is complications from smoke inhalation. 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 particularly if they have burns around the eyes, singeing of the mane and forelock, muzzle burns and a soot-stained discharge from the nose.

## Re-entering Burned Areas

Care must be taken introducing horses to burned areas. There may be hot spots that could flare up without warning. Partially burned structures and trees may be unstable and suddenly fall over. Make sure the fencing is secure. Check for ash pits - areas where root systems have burned underground - downed power lines and dangerous debris before turning horses out in a burned paddock.

## Develop and Practice your Fire Safety Plan Now!

The distress of having a horse burnt in a bushfire can be magnified by the lack of readily available first aid measures. This can be compounded if the fire destroys facilities and prevents any form of communication to seek help. Good forward planning will protect the safety and wellbeing of your horses if you live in a high fire risk area.

**Carefully consider the needs of your animals when developing your household survival plan, develop your fire safety plan now and practise it regularly!**