

# RMP – Before the Fire

In times of crisis, 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 ever lies in the path of an advancing bushfire. The key to survival is forward planning and self reliance.

## Leave or Stay? ... It's Your Decision

Fire Authorities emphasise that bush fire protection strategies include forward planning. You are responsible for developing a survival plan for your family and horses. Leave or stay? ... it's your decision. The first and most important thing to decide is whether you intend to stay on your property if there is a bushfire. Assess your risk from a fire and understand how safe your property would be if a fire occurred in the immediate area.

If you decide you will leave, with or without your horses, you must do it early on a high-risk day and in advance of knowing there is fire in your area. The announcement of a Total Fire Ban should be the trigger for your decision. Late evacuation can be deadly. The risk of losing life and property during a bushfire is influenced by:

- the location, aspect and accessibility of your property
- the amount, type and location of surrounding vegetation
- the condition and placement of buildings availability of water
- your physical capabilities and those of family members and employees.

Everyone's situation differs according to the size and nature of their horse enterprise. That's why each and every horse owner needs to develop an individual survival plan, coolly and calmly, before the fire season arrives.

**Have a Plan** If you live in a high risk area it is essential to develop a fire safety plan before the fire season. This may include a plan for early evacuation of horses to a safer district. Horse evacuations present unique problems. Make arrangements ahead of time for a place to temporarily relocate your horses. Options may include showgrounds, sale yards, parks, racetracks, pony club grounds or placement with family and friends.

Identify several possible retreat routes from your property in case fires block your escape. Decide in advance which horses you will evacuate and make sure they are suitably trained for transport.

Identifying a "safe" area on the property where horses can be placed if evacuation is not possible or practical. This area should be as large as possible and may be a closely grazed paddock or be created from several paddocks by opening gates. Ideally it should have a dam with clear access. An alternative "safe" area might be a large well fenced sand ménage provided there are no trees or building nearby that will burn readily.



Post your plan in a clearly visible place together with the telephone number of the local fire brigade and your property's CFA map reference. Make sure that **everyone** who lives, works or agists at your property understands the plan. On days of Total Fire Ban, putting your horses in the designated "safe" area or, if you work away from the property, you might do this the night before.

## Things that may help your RMP:

- Contact the Rural Authority in your area.
- Have an annual meeting with neighbours, friends or other mutual interest groups to discuss fire contingency plans and establish ahead of time who will check on and help whom and which resources will be shared.
- Set up a bushfire emergency plan with the landholder if your horses are agisted.

- Leave horses in well grazed paddocks if they are on “weekenders” in high-risk areas, or moving them to a safer location during the fire season.
- Reduce Fire Hazards

### Reduce fire hazards before the fire season starts:

- remove all fire fuel such as excess grass, sticks, leaf litter etc for 20 to 30 metres around buildings
- store hay, straw, shavings, scrap wood, fuel supplies and chemicals safely away from important buildings
- clean roof surfaces and gutters regularly
- create firebreaks in strategic locations
- develop a grazing plan to reduce fire risk
- a well maintained garden and well watered lawn will help protect the house
- use fire-resistant plants on your property
- post “no smoking” signs in and around the stable and in vegetated areas as appropriate
- make sure chainsaws and other equipment are fitted with an Australian Standards approved spark arrester
- if you live in a high risk area , invest in a rainwater storage tank, a sprinkler system and a firefighting pump
- consider erecting fireproof fencing, ie steel or concrete posts, particularly if you own a stallion
- if your fences are electrified, make sure the remainder of fences are “horseproof”, as often power is out during a bushfire.



### Maintain a Fire Cache

Tools to have on hand at your property:

- a ladder long enough to reach the roof of buildings in case 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
- a rake for clearing vegetation
- water buckets
- a torch
- a battery-powered radio for monitoring news

Keep these items together in an easily accessible place. **Don't let the tools be used for any purpose other than fire fighting.** Mark them with red paint if necessary. Make sure **everyone** who lives, works, or agists at your property know where the cache is located.

### Prepare an Evacuation kit

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

- wirecutters and a sharp knife
- torch, portable radio and fresh batteries
- water bucket
- extra lead rope and head collar   woollen blanket and towels
- equine first aid items
- whatever else you feel is essential for the first 24 hours.

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

### Identify Your Horses

Microchipped horses will be more speedily reunited with their owners if separation occurs during a disaster. In an emergency at the very least 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 hair coat or paint its hooves. Neckbands, hip stickers and identification tags on leather head collars can also be useful.

### If Fire Threatens Decide Quickly

If you decide to evacuate with or without your horse/s, this decision must be made very early. Late evacuation is a deadly option. Once the fire is

close, visibility will be very poor and travel will be hazardous. Fallen trees, powerlines, abandoned cars and even firefighting 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 Safe Attire**

In the event that a fire threatens you, whether you decide to evacuate or stay, the right clothes can help shield you from radiant heat, burning embers and flames:

- cotton fabrics are essential. 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, while cumbersome, are essential to protect your hands from painful and disabling burns
- leather boots are the safest footwear. Tennis shoes or rubber shoes will melt, causing serious burns
- wear a damp cotton scarf or handkerchief "banditstyle" to shield your nose and face
- goggles will help protect your eyes from smoke and burning embers.

**A word to the wise: condition your horse to your strange appearance ahead of time!**

### **Fire-safe Gear for Horses**

The same principles for fire safe clothing apply to your horse:

- don't use synthetic (nylon or plastic) halters or lead ropes. These may melt and cause serious burns to your horse and its handler
- Leather halters and cotton lead ropes, while generally not as strong as nylon, will be safer
- don't use nylon fly masks or other synthetic tack or equipment.

## **Just do it!**

It has been shown time and time again, if you don't take the above precautions within the next 24 hours, the chances are very good that you won't do anything at all to prepare for a fire emergency.

