

Bushfire preparedness

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Introduction

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. Landholders should take measures to reduce the fire hazard on and surrounding their property. The Rural Fire Service (RFS) has a vast amount of information on hazard reduction which can be found on their website www.bushfire.nsw.gov.au. Landholders should also ensure that any firefighting equipment they intend to use is adequate and operational and that emergency plans are in place. Contact details for your local brigade should also be handy.

The experts in fire prevention are the RFS and they should be consulted if you have any questions or need any assistance in protecting property and assets from fire. Further information is available from the NSW Rural Fire Service website.

Important things to remember

Landholders should ensure that they observe the provisions of the *Rural Fires Act 1997* (view legislation at www.legislation.nsw.gov.au) with regard to obtaining permits for hazard reduction and concerning any fire bans that may be in place.

Some **important measures** to take are as follows:

- smoking should not be allowed during harvesting or when working in or near haystacks;

- areas around incinerators, rubbish dumps, fuel supplies and storage areas should be clear and these facilities should be situated in remote areas well away from other structures;
- litter and any flammable items should always be cleared away from gutters, buildings and other important infrastructure;
- on days when fire risk is high farmers should plan their working day so that they are ready should a fire break out and that equipment to be used is ready to go;
- 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;
- a list of essential telephone numbers indicating the nearest fire control assistance should be kept near the telephone;
- contingencies should also be in place if the phone lines or power is affected by fire. This can include a back-up generator and other forms of communication including two-ways and mobile phones; and
- bushfire vehicles should have access to water supplies and alternative filling systems should be available in the event of power failure. It is a good idea to have water sources clearly identified.

Using machinery

When operating machines during periods of high fire danger make sure that you have with you a full knapsack, spray pump or hand-held chemical fire extinguisher in good working order.

Take **special note** of the following:

- be extremely careful when using cutters and welders to repair plant equipment;
- ensure that the machinery components, including brakes and bearings, do not overheat. These components can drop hot metal onto the ground that can start a fire;



- incorrect usage of machinery can cause it to overheat so it is important to operate machinery correctly and know its limitations; and
- be aware that when the blades of slashers, mowers and similar equipment hit rocks or metal causing sparks, dry material may be ignited.

Firebreaks

Location

The **correct location of firebreaks** is the key to their effectiveness. Ensure legislation appropriate to the establishment or maintenance of firebreaks is adhered too (*Rural Fires Act* and *Native Vegetation Conservation Act 2003*). 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.

Construction

There are various ways to **construct adequate firebreaks** on properties including:

- spraying with herbicides;
- mowing;
- ploughing; or
- burning off.

The most appropriate method to use will depend on the location and the equipment available. Along fencelines an effective firebreak can be created by ploughing. For an even better result herbicides can be used in addition to ploughing.

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;
- any firebreak activity must be undertaken in accordance with environmental legislation and the *Rural Fires Act*. Further information of the establishment of firebreaks can be found on the RFS website at www.bushfire.nsw.gov.au
- 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.

Protection of livestock

Livestock can be saved in a major fire by taking simple precautions. Stockowners must have in place **a plan for protecting livestock** and if you do not have a plan in place, do so as soon as possible. Some considerations include:

- Know the best places where livestock can be moved to give them the greatest chance of survival. Stockowners should therefore aim to have yards, ploughed paddocks or other relatively safe areas available. Consider access to these 'safe' sites during a fire event – always 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.
- Remove any vegetation from the area around stockyards. Trees are usually not a problem if ground fuel is reduced. Sheep yarded in reasonably clean yards usually survive fairly well. The wooden fences of the yards may burn, but the yarded sheep will pack together protecting most of their number. Have water close at hand.
- Cattle and horses often survive bushfires if they are allowed to run free. They can be caught in timber areas along fencelines. If possible muster cattle and horses to a safe paddock or yard and if time allows muster the livestock to the prearranged safe areas. 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.
- 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.

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 put into place will be invaluable during a bushfire emergency.

Acknowledgement

Revised by Simon Oliver.

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ISSN 1832-6668

Replaces Agnote DAI-73

Check for updates of this Primefact at:

www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/primefacts

Disclaimer: The information contained in this publication is based on knowledge and understanding at the time of writing (November 2006). However, because of advances in knowledge, users are reminded of the need to ensure that information upon which they rely is up to date and to check currency of the information with the appropriate officer of New South Wales Department of Primary Industries or the user's independent adviser.

Job number 7247