

Veterinary responses to livestock after a bushfire

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Introduction

Unfortunately, bushfires in summer are a common part of the Australian landscape. Despite that, it seems that many veterinary practitioners have little or no experience in dealing with burnt livestock, even though cattle are common victims of bushfires.

In over 50 years in rural practice, only last year was I involved for the 1st time in local bush fires that caused significant cattle losses. In this presentation I shall discuss not only the assessment of burnt cattle, but also other issues that arose during this experience.

In recent years, we have a quite serious bushfires in the mountain country surrounding the Macalister Irrigation District. We had bushfires in 2006, 2007, 2013 and there were severe bushfires East of us in 2014. I remember a fire in the early 60s that started near Glenmaggie and burnt through to Bairnsdale and only stopped when it reached Lakes Entrance.

But in this presentation I shall draw experiences with burnt cattle in the 2013 fire outbreak.

The 2013 Aberfeldy-Seaton fires

To give an idea of how quickly the fires can move, I shall relate my personal experience with this fire. I had cattle running on dry country in the Seaton area. On the evening of 17 January, 2013, my farm manager and I looked out from my home at Tinamba and saw the red glow of the Aberfeldy fires - some 40 km away (see map on the following page).

We made the decision that if the fires continued to move towards Seaton, we would move our cattle out early in the morning.

But the fires moved much more quickly than that - by early on the morning of January 18 the bushfires had come down from Aberfeldy to Seaton and burnt through to the Lake Glenmaggie caravan Park.



Later in the day, when the fires had calmed down a little, I drove to our property at Seaton to assess the livestock and the property damage, but was stopped by a police roadblock.

That evening I had a phone call from one of my clients (a very near neighbour to our property at Seaton) who said he had a lot of dead burnt cattle and a lot of live injured cattle. I promised to try and get in next day to assess his stock, but was stopped again by roadblocks and could not talk my way through. On the Sunday there was a public meeting at Heyfield where I bought up my concerns about lack of access, and was promised that within 2 hours I would have access to these properties. But when I then approached the police roadblock, I was again stopped and no way allowed through.

I turned back and went around some back roads, only to find another police block as I got close to our Seaton. This time I talked to the police officer, explained what I was trying to do and his response was "go to it, mate. Good luck!!". A very decent cop, and common sense prevailed.

I first drove to our own property - all the fences, hay sheds, tractors and stockyards had been totally destroyed. I found the carcass of 1 steer (he had been caught in the corner of the paddock), but all of the other cattle appeared unharmed. But why access is restricted was brought home to me by the fact that when I drove in to our property the track was clear, but on the way out some 10 minutes later a very big gumtree had fallen across the track - you would not have wanted to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

I then drove to my neighbour who had called on the Friday night. He was genuinely thrilled to see me - his comment was that someone who he knew and trusted had arrived to help him. My neighbour was under extreme stress and strain at this time and it was showing. But it was not made easier by the bureaucracy. On the Sunday before I was able to get in, his wife tried to leave the property to get food for the workers on the farm. She was informed by the police that if she crossed their roadblock she would not be allowed to come back. My neighbour was so incensed by this action that he had to

be physically restrained to stop him from taking further action. I mention this because you need to realise that were not only dealing with the injured livestock, but with very severely stressed farm operators who need our full understanding and support.

Assessment of the livestock

We first drove to a wooded area where I have never seen such a horrendous sight in my professional life. There were bloated dead cattle everywhere - their abdominal walls in many cases had ruptured and the rumen was protruding. There were over 60 dead fat Angus cattle at this site and it is a sight that I shall never forget.

We had the remainder of the cattle in the yards and proceeded to assess their condition. By now it was around 4 PM and we did not have a lot of daylight. There were around 300 cattle in this mob.

Our aim was to divide the cattle into 3 groups:

1. Those that on animal welfare grounds needed to be euthanased immediately
2. Those that had obvious burns, but were assessed as not needing to be destroyed on animal welfare grounds and as having a reasonable chance of recovery given reasonable nursing.
3. Those animals that appeared normal

I should point out that on this property all of the hill country and fences had been burnt, but the houses and stockyards sheds etc. had survived. They also had some river flats which had not been burnt and could provide at least short-term feed for the cattle.

1. Grounds for immediate euthanasia

- Extensive damage to the legs and feet with swelling of the legs and the burnt skin having a dry and leathery appearance. The hooves were starting to separate out the coronary band.
- Severe burns to more than around 10 to 15% of the body - this skin was likely to slough.
- Severe burns around the face and eyes so that the surface of the cornea was dry and damaged.

2. Grounds for assessing that the animals could survive with reasonable nursing

- These animals had less than 10 to 15% of their body covered by moderately severe burns.
- They do not have the severe separation of the horns at coronary band - although in some there was some separation at the heels.
- The animals looked bright and alert.

The problem arose as to what to do with the approximately 35 animals that were assessed as requiring immediate euthanasia. By this stage an officer from the Department of Primary Industries, and an officer of the local shire, had arrived and they started to work through the various options for destroying these animals and disposing of their carcasses. I suggested that before they explore these options, I should ring our local knackery and see if they could help. Even though it was late on Sunday afternoon, the knackery operator had no hesitation in offering to bring in all of his off duty staff and their trucks so that they were able to very quickly and efficiently euthanase these cattle and take them back to the knackery for processing.

The prompt euthanasia and removal of these cattle was massively appreciated by the owner of the cattle - it was at least one pressure point removed from him.

There were approximately 50 cattle that we assessed as animals that should at least be given a chance and given nursing. The most severely affected animals were treated with procaine penicillin and given pain relief. The less severely affected animals were treated with intramuscular procaine penicillin for 3 days and the whole mob was then reassessed.

A further 5 or 6 were subsequently removed for euthanasia, mainly because they had started to become lame due to suffer severe separation of the horn at the coronary band.

I continue to reassess this mob of cattle every 3 to 4 days until they were close to back to normal. It was noted that some of these animals had suffered moderate burns to the teats and it would be necessary at a later stage to assess whether or not these teats were likely to be functional. But at least they could survive and sold as fats if need be.

We also reassessed the animals that we had classified as suffering no apparent damage. At this subsequent examination we found a few that had obvious burns of the udder and teats, but they did not require treatment. A few were suffering from some separation of the horn at the coronary band at the rear of the hoof, but not severe enough as to cause lameness.

There were no bulls in this mob of cattle, but I recognise that if bulls had been present it would be necessary to carefully evaluate both the sheath and scrotum.

Lessons I learned from this experience

The fact that we were not able to gain access to our livestock for 2 ½ days after the fire caused great frustration. It was worse than this for my neighbour who needed professional help urgently, and at a much earlier stage. I did a fair bit of work with the media to try and have this situation improved and was given assurances that at least DPI staff would come in with the first people to enter the fire scenes. What caused massive angst in our area was that the media was allowed into the fire area before support services such as veterinarians and other advisors were allowed in.

The people whose properties have been burnt out are under enormous stress and need as much support as we, and other agencies, can give them. Bureaucracy should not be seen to make it more difficult for them.

Even though I consider myself as a reasonably experienced veterinarian, I had not had experience with such a situation and while resources from the Victorian and New South Wales DPI were of great assistance, I think it would be great if the ACV were to pull together as much information as they could on this issue and have this available on a website that can immediately be accessed by any veterinarian faced with a situation such as the one I was confronted with.

While an initial assessment can be made on all the animals, it is necessary to revisit this assessment on several occasions.

Having said that, I think it is important to be definite in the initial decisions that you make - these animals need to be euthanased and they need to be euthanased now.. I think my client was grateful that the decision as to whether or not to destroy his livestock was not on his shoulders - he readily passed it to me and wanted definite decision from me

While caring for the livestock that were injured during the fire is of great importance, we also need to recognise that resources such as fodder and fences to hold in stock may not be available and we need to know who to call on to assist with this situation.

There are likely to be other veterinarians in this audience who have more experience with dealing with burnt livestock than I have and I would very much like to hear of their experiences and their views on how such a situation can best be managed.

Conclusion

I think it is relatively uncommon for veterinary practitioners to be confronted with such a situation. While some resources are available to help, my view is that it would be terrific if the ACV (and ASV) were able to pull together a range of information that could be useful for those veterinarians who find themselves in this situation.

Further reading:

Assessing cattle after a bushfire

www.depi.vic.gov.au/fire-and-emergencies/recovery-after-an-emergency/livestock-after-an-emergency/assessing-cattle-after-a-bushfire

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