

Cattle are common victims of bushfires in Victoria. Often large numbers are affected when left in paddocks with a high fuel load such as dry grass. Cattle are generally less affected by fires than sheep because of their superior height and speed but they can be severely burnt if trapped (e.g. by a fence).

Cattle may sometimes outrun a fire front but, suffer substantial burns to the feet and legs when crossing recently burnt ground. It is critical to seek professional animal health and welfare advice to support sound decision making.

Initial assessment

After a fire, teams from **Agriculture Victoria** are assigned affected areas to assess damage. The priority is to deal with animal welfare needs and refer any human welfare concerns to the appropriate agency. The initial concern will be to assess livestock and destroy those that are suffering.

The decision to destroy livestock should only be made on the grounds that the stock are too severely burnt to survive or that it would be inhumane to keep them alive.

Animals can be divided into four groups:

1. For immediate slaughter.
2. For salvage by slaughter at an abattoir or knackery (if practical).
3. Keep in a hospital area and nurse.
4. No further action.

In addition to injuries suffered by the animals themselves, other issues for consideration include:

- availability of feed, water, fencing and handling facilities
- the owner's ability to provide necessary care and attention
- insurance arrangements
- prognosis for future productive and reproductive performance.

Some stock will be able to walk at this stage, so they must be yarded for adequate individual inspection. Areas on the animals that will need inspection include the head, legs, inside the shoulders and thighs, and around the tail. The vulva and udder of female stock and the sheath and scrotum of males will need careful inspection. In females, burns to udder and teats are common but not generally sufficient to

warrant destruction unless associated with other areas of burn. Most will survive even if the function of the udder is lost. Cattle with suckling calves must have the teats checked.

Category 1: Destroy immediately

Animals for destruction at this stage include those with:

- Severe burns to more than 15 per cent of the body where areas of skin have been destroyed, making it split and slough away.
- Extensive damage to legs and feet with swelling of the legs and the skin dry and leathery in appearance. If hooves are coming away the animal must be destroyed as it will be walking directly on the pedal bone causing considerable pain.
- Severe burns to the face and eyes. The surface of the eye - the cornea - will take several weeks to heal. If the animal cannot see or has damaged lips or nose causing breathing difficulties, it should be destroyed.
- Injuries that could become infected. Pneumonia and local tissue infection can develop and become severe, extensive and uneconomic to treat.

Category 2: Salvage slaughter (if practical)

Cattle that do not require immediate destruction and are assessed as suitable for transportation, may be considered for salvage slaughter at an abattoir or knackery. The welfare of the cattle must be protected as a priority before salvage slaughter is considered. Always seek professional advice if unsure.

Cows with moderate burns to teats and udders are best salvaged by slaughter. Where this is not a practical option, udders with burnt teats should be dried off and teats reinspected after three to four weeks to assess the function of the teat opening.

Category 3: Keep and nurse

Mobile and alert animals with only moderate burns to less than 10-15 per cent of their body are generally good candidates for retention, provided that suitable facilities, labour, fresh water and feed are readily available. Treatment and recovery is likely to be long and arduous, with no guarantee of success. Cattle should be inspected daily, and those seen to be deteriorating must be humanely destroyed.

Consideration must be given to the following:

- A plan which may include advice from a veterinary surgeon and possible drug therapy, e.g. antibiotics. There are cost considerations with this action.
- Suitable holding yards with a soft, even surface to facilitate observation and treatment.
- Adequate supply of feed and ready access to water and shade. Burnt animals are reluctant to move and usually do not feed for a few days. They generally regain appetite after about a week, when they should be given high-protein feeds such as good lucerne or meadow hay, or green summer crops or lucerne, to aid healing.
- Daily attention for at least the first 10 days.
- Be aware of the potential for flystrike both on burnt areas and on the feet.
- The skin of the sheath and scrotum of male animals should be specifically examined after about four days. Remove any scabs that have formed and may be causing urinary obstruction.
- Cows with calves at foot will need special attention. Burnt teats may mean the cow will reject a young calf which will die without some intervention.

Category 4: Animals without apparent damage

These are cattle that are apparently undamaged or have minor singeing of the hair and facial area but with sound feet. They should survive but must be re-assessed in five to seven days. Particular attention should be paid to breathing difficulties caused by smoke inhalation which may take some time to become evident. Stock must be yarded to ensure adequate inspection.



Cow with badly burnt udder and legs requiring destruction.



Animal with separation of the hooves at least one week after the fire and requiring destruction.



Burns to the sheath and scrotum, requiring nursing and re-assessment after seven days.

Further references

- Assessing sheep after a bushfire
- Disposing of carcasses in response to bushfire, flood or drought

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