



VELD FIRES AND LIVESTOCK: GUIDELINES FOR FARMERS

Veld fires can often affect large areas and hundreds or thousands of livestock can be severely injured or killed. In the aftermath, quick and appropriate sensible action is needed to both limit losses and minimise animal suffering. All involved must work together as a team to achieve the best outcomes. If there is a Disaster Management Plan and Team for the area, this should be the preferred way to co-ordinate responses. If not, a Disaster Management Plan should be introduced for the area, for use in the future.

For livestock, the prognosis depends on the severity of the burns and other injuries and it is essential to make assessments of affected animals in a systematic way. Based on investigations undertaken in Australia, animals should be categorised into three groups.

Mildly or lightly affected animals

These animals would be breathing easily and normally, with little or no coughing or breathing difficulty. They walk easily and are able to eat and drink normally. Hair or wool may be scorched and the skin only lightly scalded (first degree burns) over limited areas of the body. These mild, superficial burns may be treated, and provided that animals are given good care, shelter, food and water, the prognosis for them is very good.

Moderately affected cases

These animals may have some difficult or heavy breathing and coughing, but are able to walk, stand, eat and drink. They may have more severe burns (second degree) over more extensive areas and reactive subcutaneous oedema. Skin on the legs could be mildly affected or not involved. Hooves may show some sloughing. If these animals are properly treated and cared for until they are well on the road to full recovery, their prognosis is good.

Damage to the teat openings can result in a later inability to suckle calves, lambs or kids.

Severely affected animals

This group will usually exhibit severe breathing difficulties and coughing due to smoke inhalation; in addition or alternately, they cannot walk, eat or drink. There may be severe (third degree) burns over extensive areas, and any severe burns on the lower legs are a particularly bad sign. Since the prognosis in these cases is poor, even with heroic treatment, it is rational and humane in many cases to advise euthanasia to end suffering.

Allocation of cases to these 3 categories is of necessity somewhat subjective and must be made considering the best interests of the animals as well as the owners.

Treatment

The decision to treat animals more intensively has to be taken keeping several factors in mind. The number of animals, the availability of appropriate medication, responsible people to carry out daily evaluations and treatments, the costs involved and the value of the animals must all be considered. Animals failing to respond may have to be reassigned to a lower category.

Treatments used will depend on the decisions of veterinarians, but the following should be of use as a guideline:

- For mild to moderate burns consider using topical emollients, creams, wound remedies or antiseptics. Some may have to be used off-label. For severe burns in very valuable animals, registered products are indicated.
- Systemic antibiotics are strongly recommended in all cases where the lungs may be compromised, or secondary infection is a danger. This can save many lives.
- Analgesics should always be used wherever possible because of the severe pain that results from burns. However, if an animal that has been treated with some analgesics dies, its carcass can pose a danger to vultures and therefore the carcass must be disposed of safely.

In spite of an apparently poor prognosis some animals can recover, provided proper care and treatments are given. Sloughed hooves are not a death sentence, provided proper daily care can be given. This included protective bandaging, antiseptics, bedding, food and water. The hoof can form again within a few weeks although it may be deformed to some extent.

Emergency slaughter

Only livestock that comply with the Meat Safety Act Regulations that specify the criteria required for acceptance of animals for emergency slaughter at abattoirs may be transported. On no account can badly injured and unsuitable animals be dispatched to abattoirs as this will lead to further needless suffering and rejection at the abattoir. Consult with the nearest abattoir on the suitability of livestock for emergency slaughter beforehand.