Bushfire survival plans for small landholdings

While summer can bring fun and festivities, it is also a time to get serious about the threat of bushfire.

Many rural dwellings and small landholdings are located long distances from firefighting services, so it is essential that you are proactive about preparing your property for the threat of fire.

Fires can be extremely frightening, and may make it difficult to think clearly and make good decisions. Having a plan to follow will help small landholders avoid last minute decisions that could cost you or a member of your family their life.

The bushfire season can be a worrying time for landholders. Not only do you have your family and home to protect from fire, but there are the added considerations of pets, livestock, machinery, sheds, yards and tanks.

Preparing yourself, family and home is your responsibility. The more you prepare your home, the better the chance it will survive a fire, even if you have left well before the fire reaches the property.

With planning and effort the majority of houses in bushfire risk areas can survive most bushfires. A well prepared home will give you more protection if a fire threatens suddenly and you cannot leave.

During a major bushfire firefighters will be working to stop the fire. A fire truck may not be available to defend your home, so it is important both you and your family have taken action.

A thorough fire preparedness plan involves a number of steps including:

- identifying your assets that need protection
- determining the fire risks on your property
- minimising risk
- making plans for livestock and pets in the event of a fire
- ensuring you are prepared if a bushfire threatens.

Identify your assets

To get a sound idea of your property’s assets it is wise to complete a ‘stocktake’ of your tangible assets, including:

- buildings and machinery
- fencing and livestock yards
- water tanks, bores and pumps
- powerlines
- livestock, crops, orchards and gardens.

Also consider your ‘natural’ assets including creekside vegetation, eucalypt forest/woodland with understorey and swamp and other wetlands. Different vegetation types require different fire preparedness strategies.

Identifying risk

To determine the level of risk to your property consider:

Clean leaves and debris from gutters around the house and farm buildings.
• vegetation and its proximity to buildings
• the volume of long grass
• on-farm fuel and chemical storages
• property location, access and proximity to firefighting services
• fire history, prevailing winds, slope and aspect of the land.

Minimising risk
Minimising fire-risk is the most essential element of your bushfire preparedness plan.

Many small landholders will have a significant build-up of bush, trees and long grass that can present a dangerous fire hazard, if not managed properly. Some risk mitigation strategies include:

• Reducing the fuel load - remove or prune trees, shrubs and understorey, rake up fine-fuel, keep lawns mowed, slash long grass, carry out hazard reduction burns (a permit may be required), remove sticks, bark and leaves from gutters.
• Asset protection zones - create clear areas around assets, such as the home, and manage them to reduce fuel loads and to provide easy access for firefighters and yourself.
• Firebreaks - create firebreaks around paddock boundaries to protect crops and orchards, around buildings, fuel storage, along roads and railway boundaries and beneath high-voltage powerlines. When constructing a firebreak consider if fire permits and environmental approvals are required. The best way to create a firebreak is by spraying, cultivating, scalping or mowing.

• Grazing paddocks and sowing and maintaining lawn can also provide firebreaks. For example a lucerne paddock can provide an effective firebreak to protect key improvements and provide a refuge for livestock. Make sure firebreak construction does not cause erosion.

Prepare your pets and livestock
During a bushfire your pets will need water, shade and a safe place.
If you have livestock that can be moved out of the area, allow yourself plenty of time to move them.

If possible move larger animals to paddocks with little vegetation. At the start of the bushfire season consider slashing a paddock to create a ‘fire safe’ area.

The ideal location has a water supply, clear access, shade, is well fenced and grazed with minimum fuel to carry fire.

Other good ideas include fencing the ‘fire safe’ paddock with steel or concrete posts so it is fireproof. Also consider the implications for electric fencing if the power was to go out.

Install gates along internal property boundaries so livestock can be moved to other areas without being taken down a road.
If a fire is looming, hose animals all over and leave them wet, remove all equipment and coverings from animals and move them into the ‘fire safe’ area.

Do not shut animals into a stable or small yard. Animals are more likely to suffer minimal burns if given the maximum space and generally cope well on their own if they can move into space.

Never turn animals out onto the road to run free. This is dangerous for road users, and you may be legally responsible if they cause an accident.

Pets are not allowed into public relocation centres so you will need to consider this in your bushfire survival plan.

The Department of Fire and Emergency Services Western Australia (DFES) has developed a document to help you include your horses in your fire plan.

Develop a bushfire survival plan
Developing a bushfire survival plan is critical. Your plan must be
written down and practiced with all members of your household before the bushfire season starts.

When developing your plan decide if you will leave for a safer place or stay to actively defend your home.

You need to have a plan to ensure you are prepared and know what to do when a bushfire starts.

Your plan needs to cover a range of situations you may be faced with and what you will do if things go wrong.

Everyone’s bushfire survival plan will be different depending on individual situations and circumstances.

Some people in your family may need to leave early, especially if they are sick, elderly, young children or have a disability, while other family members may stay behind.

If you are going to leave early, decide when this will be. Have a backup plan in case you cannot leave in time. It is too late and too dangerous to leave when roads are closed and filled with smoke.

Make sure everyone in your family knows where your safe place is and how to get there. Consider what will happen if you or your family are at work or school.

Also think about what will happen if some of your family is at home and others cannot get back to the house.

You should have the right equipment to actively defend your home, protective clothing for all members of the household and a well prepared property.

Don’t forget to also consider what you will do with your pets and livestock if there is a bushfire.

**What you need to think about**

Is your home defendable? Is it in a location that makes it difficult or dangerous to actively defend? Who could be home when a bushfire occurs? Does your household include elderly relatives, young children or people with a disability or illness? Can these people be relocated? Who will care for them?

Staying to actively defend your property can be very demanding.

Do you have the skills, knowledge and capacity to check for and extinguish spot fires up to 10 hours after the fire front has passed? Are you physically, mentally and emotionally prepared?

Do you have the right equipment and resources to put out fires around your property, such as a sufficient water supply, fuel and a portable pump and generator?

Relocating at the last minute can lead to serious injuries or death.

If you plan to leave early for a safer place, do you know where you will go and how you will get there?

You may not have to travel far to find a safer place.

**How will you know when to leave?**

Your plan to leave needs to be based on a series of triggers – leaving at the first trigger (extreme or catastrophic fire weather forecast) is the safest option.

Do not wait for a warning before acting.

Not hearing a warning does not necessarily mean there is no threat. You should watch for signs of a bushfire, especially smoke and flames.

**Do you have a backup plan if your situation changes?**

When the fire danger rating is catastrophic or extreme it may not be possible to actively defend your home.

On these rare days fires can be so bad that even well prepared and well constructed houses that are actively defended will not survive.

What would you do in those circumstances?

Being involved in a bushfire can have long lasting psychological and emotional impact.

Fires can be extremely frightening, and may make it difficult to think clearly and make good decisions.

Having a plan to follow will help you avoid last minute decisions that could cost you or a member of your family their life.

DFES offer a bushfire survival plan template to assist you in developing your own plans.

Develop your plan as a family and make sure you write it down. If you are by yourself you may like to form a plan with a neighbour. Give everybody their own tasks and have a list of actions to take if there is a bushfire.

Keep your bushfire survival plan in an easy to find place and make sure everyone knows where it is.

Practice your plan regularly and review it every year.

**Fire danger rating**

The fire danger rating provides advice about the level of bushfire threat on any given day. It is
Supporting your success

based on the forecast weather conditions.
The higher the rating the more likely people will die or be injured during a fire.
Only well prepared, well constructed and actively defended homes may offer any safety up to the category of extreme.
You will need to consider in your bushfire survival plan if your actions will change at different fire danger rating categories. At each rating the fire behaviour and potential impact on you will be different.
Check the fire danger rating via the Bureau of Meteorology website or DFES.

**Picture yourself in the middle of a bushfire**
In the event of a bushfire and before the main fire reaches you, your home may be surrounded by showers of sparks and embers.
This can happen for several hours. Embers will collect in corners of your house and will need to be extinguished.
It is likely there will be strong winds and as the fire gets closer burning leaves and bark will begin to land around your home.
Thick, heavy smoke will make it dark and you may not be able to see.
Breathing may be difficult and your eyes will water and may become red and sore.
It will be very hot and you will need to wear your protective clothing.
The fire will make a very loud roaring noise that you may find scary. The burning, crackling and roaring of the fire will be in addition to howling strong winds and sirens from emergency vehicles.
You may lose power, telephone and water services.
The fire front will normally take 5-15 minutes to pass your home.
This is when radiant heat given off by the fire will be at its highest.
When it is uncomfortable you should shelter inside your home.
At this time you will need to check the inside of your house for spot fires.

**Protective clothing**
If you choose to actively defend, it is important to cover as much of your body as possible with non-flammable clothing, such as loose fitting clothes made from natural fibres (as shown below):

- long sleeved shirts of heavy cotton, pure wool, cotton or denim
- trousers, jeans or overalls
- sturdy leather shoes or boots without elastic sides and woollen or cotton socks
- wide brimmed hat
- work gloves
- handkerchief or piece of cloth to cover the mouth and nose from ash and other particles
- goggles or glasses.

If you live on a property it is essential that you prepare yourselves and your property for a bushfire.
Take the time to identify the risks and draw up a bushfire plan, it could mean the difference between saving your home and your life.