

# SAMPSON FLAT BUSHFIRE, S.A. 2015

## SURVEY OF HORSE OWNERS' PREPAREDNESS

### AND ATTACHMENT TO HORSES



bushfire&natural  
**HAZARDS**CRC

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## EMERGENCY RESPONDERS (ERS) HAVE IDENTIFIED HORSE OWNERS AND HORSES AS A PRIORITY IN ANIMAL EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT. HORSES ARE A PARTICULAR CHALLENGE FOR RESPONDERS DUE TO THEIR SIZE AND STRENGTH, HUMAN-ANIMAL ATTACHMENT AND THE LOGISTICS OF TRANSPORTATION, ESPECIALLY IN HAZARDOUS CONDITIONS.

In January 2015 the Sampson Flat bushfire in South Australia burnt over 12,000 hectares in the peri-urban area of the northern Adelaide Hills, South Australia. (Figure 1). A survey of 120 horse owners affected by the fire was undertaken in late October, 2015 to help develop ways to improve horse owners' and horses' safety in future fires while minimising the load on ERs.



Figure 1. The Sampson Flat fire area, approximately 40 km from the CBD. The Adelaide Hills contains the greatest concentration of the SA horse population, rural living properties on acreage, and bushland and other vegetation.

### BACKGROUND

Management of animals in disasters is complex. Issues are poorly understood, particularly people's attachment to their animals. Attachment can affect decision making and behaviour, creating potential issues for public and responder safety. People may

- Fail to plan for their animals
- Risk their lives to save animals
- Fail/refuse to evacuate without their animals
- Abandon animals
- Have unrealistic expectations for animals when they evacuate
- Return early to rescue animals
- Grieve and mourn for lost animals

### WHY FOCUS ON HORSES?

- Large animals (up to 1000 kg, average of 500 - 600 kg) are logistically more difficult to transport.
- Their speed, strength and size pose danger to humans when they are fearful and in poor visibility
- Can be difficult for inexperienced persons to handle even in normal conditions
- Often agisted distant from owner's home – owners then try to reach them when in danger
- Tend to be concentrated in bushfire prone areas
- Owners may have high levels of emotional attachment (comparable with or higher than attachment to dogs and cats)
- Can be very valuable (breeding stock, bloodlines etc)
- The needs of evacuated horses and their impact on refuge place is more complex than for smaller animals
- ERs find horse owners more difficult to deal with than pet owners in general

### RESULTS

Links to online survey circulated via Horse SA mailing list, Facebook, personal networks of research team (life long involvement with horses in Adelaide).

- 94% of respondents were female (consistent with female bias in horse ownership in general horse owning population)
- 24% aged under 34, 56% aged 35-54, 20% aged 55-74
- 65% kept their horses on their own land. The rest agisted their horses in the area (about 50% of agisters lived in urban Adelaide)
- Horse owners were highly attached to their horses (Figure 2)



Figure 2. Attachment Levels Based on Lexington Attachment to Pets Scale

- 90% of respondents had a bushfire plan; only 19% had it in writing.
- 98% included their horses and other animals in their plan.
- Horse owners without a plan mostly lived in urban Adelaide
- Most landowners had planned for everyone to leave early but the most common action taken was 'wait and see'.
- 80% had horses with some form of ID (brands, microchips; temporary ID). The remaining 20% had photos.
- 24% of agisters had trouble gaining access to their horse

### CONCLUSION

The strength of horse owners' attachment to their horses represents a tool to leverage bushfire preparation and evacuation and a means of predicting their behaviour in future bushfire events.

