

Preventing haystack fires

The major causes of haystack fires are:

- sparks from machinery and equipment
- embers from nearby fires and lightning strikes
- spontaneous ignition.

Hay can become hot enough to catch fire if it becomes damp before, during or after baling, or if it's baled while it's still green. Fires are caused by a complex series of biological and chemical processes involving bacteria and fungi in the plant material.

If heating goes undetected, the internal bale temperature will keep rising and, when the temperature reaches around 70°C, can continue to increase to the point of spontaneous ignition (approximately 180°C).

Signs of heating hay

- Steam rising from haystacks
- Condensation or corrosion under hayshed roofing
- Mould growth in or on bales
- Unusual odours (burning, musty, pipe tobacco or caramel)
- Slumping in sections of haystack.

Be aware that very hot hay may suddenly catch alight if it is pulled apart. If any part of the stack is near or above 70°C or you see or smell smoke, you should call 000 immediately and ask for assistance from CFA.

Don't walk across hay that may be heating. Charred bales inside the stack might collapse and the rush of air could cause a sudden flare-up.

Key things to remember:

- Ensure hay is fully cured before baling
- Bale and store each bale type at the correct moisture level
- Protect hay from rain, leaking roofs and spouts, and cover stacks with tarps or hay caps
- Store hay away from assets in a number of different locations around your farm to reduce impact of loss
- Create and maintain fuel breaks around haystacks
- Regularly check stored hay for signs of heating



Horses and livestock in emergencies

You can do a lot to help your animals survive fires. Here are some tips to keep them as safe as possible during the fire season.

Prepare a lower risk area:

- Could be cultivated paddocks with no vegetation, bared-out paddocks (minimal vegetation), green paddocks or a large, well-fenced sand ménage.
- Should be away from scrub or bushland to reduce heat from the fire. Farms with large numbers of animals may need to manage several low-risk areas on the property.
- Provide sufficient drinking water and feed to enable stock to remain in this area during periods of high to extreme temperatures for several days.

Other preparations:

- Make sure animal identification is up to date. Microchip and register horses on a licensed registry. For livestock, ensure your National Livestock Identification System (NLIS) and Property Identification Code (PIC) details are correct.
- If you plan to evacuate some animals, know which evacuation routes you will take, and what you will do if these are blocked. Practise with your animals and allow plenty of time – stressed animals will be far more difficult to handle.
- Prepare an emergency kit, have it on hand and ready all fire season.



On high fire risk days:

- Move your animals to your designated low-risk area. Sheep often refuse to move when conditions get very hot, so they should be moved early in the day.
- Prepare and leave instructions on your animals' care and where equipment can be found (including first aid supplies) in case someone else needs to care for them.
- Don't shut horses in stables or small yards. Horses are quite good at avoiding fire if they have room to move freely in a large area with minimal vegetation.
- Remove all equipment from animals. It can melt, heat up or catch on trees and fences as they try to escape the fire, causing serious injuries.
- Close external gates so animals don't end up on roads where they can be killed due to poor visibility. Open internal gates to allow them plenty of room to move around and escape the fire.
- Always seek veterinary care if animals are injured.





Fire season checklist

- Have a plan for high fire risk days that includes your animals. Make sure everyone who works or lives on the farm knows what to do.
- Reduce fuel loads such as grasses and trees around assets (house blocks, sheds and fences).
- Create a heavily grazed area with a water supply for stock.
- Seal all gaps on buildings to stop embers getting inside – this is the most common way to lose a property.
- Check all machinery to make sure it's clean and in good working order – many farm fires are caused by poorly maintained equipment and machinery.
- Have a system for storing and monitoring hay – purchase a moisture metre if necessary.
- Prepare firefighting equipment such as water fire extinguishers or knapsack spray pumps. Have it ready for anyone using farm equipment or machinery, and make sure they know how to use it.
- Make a list of legal restrictions on burning off and using machinery that apply to your property and display it so family and employees can refer to it easily.
- Check your property name or number is clearly visible so emergency services can find it quickly when approaching the entrance.
- Ensure easy access for fire trucks by clearing vegetation, signposting dead ends or creating turning circles. Make sure water supplies are clearly marked for emergency services.

Dial: 000 If you see smoke, flame or embers

VicEmergency Hotline

for fire warnings and updates: 1800 226 226

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