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Agistment of Livestock that have been Affected by Bushfires

Often in the aftermath of fire, the most suitable (or only) alternative is to agist livestock away from affected properties. This Agriculture Note briefly describes some factors to consider in this circumstance.

Agistor or agistee - ask questions

Although there may be considerable pressure to move stock off an affected property due to the lack of feed and/or water and limited or non-existent containment areas or handling facilities, asking questions prior to the movement of stock is likely to benefit their health and welfare in the long term.

Are the stock fit to travel?

Often emergency agistment can only be found some distance from the affected property. It is important that if there are any doubts of the health or ability of stock to cope with being transported, they are assessed by a veterinarian or DPI animal health staff.

Who will be responsible for the husbandry of the stock whilst on agistment?

Whether it be cattle, sheep, goats, alpacas, horses or any other livestock, it is imperative to establish clearly who will be responsible for the day to day husbandry of the stock. This may seem obvious but in an emergency situation that may involve the assistance of a number of different agencies, incorrect assumptions may be made, as the priority is to move stock quickly.

Owners of stock should ensure both they and the agistor understand and agree who will check the animals each day, who is responsible for providing supplementary feed if necessary and who is responsible for providing any treatment required by fire affected stock.

It may not be possible for the owners of stock to attend to them daily as they try to resurrect their lives/livelihoods. Consequently, it is important for those offering agistment to recognise the potential time commitment on their part.

Owners of stock should also notify the agistor of their preferred veterinarian in case stock become unwell or are injured during their time on the property. These decisions would preferably be made prior to stock arriving on the agistment property.

Where fences have been destroyed by a fire and stock have been roaming freely, unintended matings may have occurred leading to inadvertent pregnancies in stock.

Ideally a written agistment agreement should be signed between the two parties to provide written clarification of all responsibilities. An example of an agistment agreement can be found at www.dpi.vic.gov.au/new-landholders.

Although not in the scope of this Agriculture Note, responsibility for the costs associated with the agistment should also be clear from the onset of the agistment arrangement.

How can I protect my stock from diseases whilst on agistment/agisting someone's stock?

When either agisting someone's stock or seeking agistment for one's own stock, it is important to consider how to prevent potential disease spread if other stock are present on the same property. Taking some simple precautions from the onset of agistment, may save considerable disease control costs at a later date.

Although it may not always be possible in an emergency situation, ways in which to protect agisted stock (and/or other stock on the same property) are to:

- (1) Request/provide as much information about the health of the stock as possible prior to agistment (i.e. ask for/provide the relevant Animal Health Statement for that species)
- (2) Confine livestock from different properties to specific paddocks, or as a minimum, quarantine introduced animals in specific paddocks until their disease status can be determined.

Some specific diseases/pests that could be introduced into a herd/flock during agistment are:

1. Virulent footrot

Although sheep may not be showing signs of lameness, they may be carrying *Dichelobacter nodosus*, (the bacteria that causes virulent footrot), on their feet. Keeping this in mind, along with the fact that this bacteria will only survive for up to seven days in the environment, precautionary management to prevent its potential spread between mobs of sheep should be undertaken.

2. Lice

All livestock species are susceptible to their own particular species of lice. Sheep lice, in particular, may prove difficult and costly to eradicate once established in a flock. Although recommended, inspection of a sample of sheep that only have a small infestation of lice will not always result in their detection. The best means of ensuring lice do not spread to other mobs of sheep is to keep the mobs separated until it is conclusively determined that the sheep are lice free.

3. Johne's disease

Sheep, cattle, goats and alpacas are all susceptible to Johne's disease. Johne's disease is an insidious disease which can be present for years in a herd or flock prior to being detected. The bacteria that cause Johne's disease can also survive in the environment for up to twelve months.

Generally, cattle only become infected with the cattle strain of the bacteria, and sheep only with the sheep strain. Goats may become infected with either the sheep or cattle strains of the bacteria. To date, alpacas have only been found to be infected with the cattle strain. Although there have been no clinical cases of Johne's disease reported in alpacas in Australia for about ten years, they are susceptible and will become infected with adequate exposure to the bacteria.

The best way to avoid infection of an agisted herd/flock (or other stock already on the property) is to run them as separately as possible, keeping in mind that bacteria may still be present in pastures for twelve months after agisted stock have left the property.

Participants in the CattleMAP, SheepMAP, GoatMAP and AlpacaMAP programs should be aware that movement of stock to unassessed land may jeopardise their program status. Although the priority concern is to provide food and safe enclosures for livestock after a fire, movement in consultation with their MAP veterinarian is ideal if possible.

4. Intestinal parasites

Although not an immediate concern given the damage and loss associated with a fire, if agisting stock off an affected property, it may be advisable to drench stock as they arrive at the agistment property (i.e. during their quarantine period) and again on their return home.

Feeding agisted stock

If supplementary feeding of agisted stock is required, any dietary changes should be gradual. Grain feeding should be introduced slowly in order to prevent grain overload.

Also keep in mind that livestock may be introduced to different pasture types. These may include potentially toxic weeds that stock, that are likely to be hungry after their ordeal, may not have been exposed to previously. Perennial ryegrass staggers is most prevalent at the time of the year that bushfires are most likely (i.e. late summer/early autumn). Anecdotal evidence suggests that alpacas may be quite sensitive to staggers, as they have been detected with staggers on properties where other livestock species have not appeared to be affected. All agisted livestock should be monitored when grazing potentially dangerous pastures.

Do I have to record stock movements if agisting after a fire?

In the event of a fire affecting livestock, the highest priority is their health and safety. National Livestock Identification System (NLIS) regulations still do apply to the relevant species (e.g. cattle movements should be registered on the NLIS database, and sheep and goats should be NLIS tagged) but animal welfare should take priority in the event of a fire. NLIS requirements can be addressed once stock are relocated and their welfare is assured.

Further References

For further information on biosecurity and specific livestock diseases, www.dpi.vic.gov.au

Example agistment agreement www.dpi.vic.gov.au/new-landholders. (Click on Fact Sheets link).

Animal Health Australia, www.animalhealthaustralia.com.au

Pasture associated staggers in alpacas - Australian Journal of Experimental Agriculture 48(8) 1099-1104

Contact/Services available from DPI

Contact Customer Service Centre – 136 186

Further References

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