

Nursery Papers

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Protecting your business against fire

The fire season is nearly upon us once again. Many of our nursery businesses are in or near forested areas and even for those that aren't, fire is still a risk. Have you considered a fire safety plan for your business? Would your staff know what to do if a fire was heading your way, or worse still, was at your nursery?

Fires, like any other emergency, are about risk management. This month's *Nursery Paper* looks at how proper planning can help you reduce the effects and even eliminate the risk of a fire before it occurs.

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Protecting your business against fire

With good Spring rains and subsequent growth in bushland and around your nursery, the risk is again high that there will be dangerous bushfires this season. Even for those nursery businesses that are not in or near forested areas, fire is a significant risk. Have you considered a fire safety plan for your business? Would your staff know what to do if a fire was heading your way, or worse still, was at your nursery?

Fires, like any other emergency, are about Risk Management. Risk management means identifying specific needs and responding to them to reduce vulnerability. This month's *Nursery Paper* looks at how proper planning can help you reduce the effects or eliminate the risk of a fire before it occurs. So what should you do?

Minimising fire risk

Reducing fire fuel is an essential part of farm management. The ferocity of the fire depends on the weather, slope of the ground and amount of fuel available to burn. Clearing

volatile fuels such as grass, fallen leaves and bark from around farm buildings will lower the intensity of the fire. To prepare for the fire season, ensure that you:

- Remove overhanging trees and clear leaves and twigs from roof gutters
- Make use of watercourses and other natural features as firebreaks
- Isolate potential fire sources such as incinerators and rubbish pits, chemicals and fuel stores
- Assess your water supply and storage in terms of quantity and availability for fire fighting
- Most importantly, develop a fire safety plan. The decision to stay or evacuate depends on whether adequate preparations have been made. It is not always safe to evacuate immediately. Make sure all staff know about your plan.



In most bushfires, the mains water supply is likely to fail and electric power supplies will probably be cut off. Do you have access to a reserve water supply such as tanks, a dam or swimming pool?

Nursery Papers

December 2005 Issue no. 11

Gardens and landscapes

Good landscaping around your nursery can reduce the risk of fire damage. If well designed and maintained it can provide a green safety zone around your nursery or buildings. It can decrease fire intensity, reduce wind speed and turbulence, catch flying embers and sparks and shield from radiant energy.

- Trees should be located a sufficient distance away from buildings when fully mature to reduce overhang
- Reduce fuel by maintaining gardens
- Use smooth-barked trees and prune lower branches
- Plant low flammability plants
- Plant wind breaks.



Regardless of whether or not your business is in or near a forested area, fire remains a risk that deserves carefully planning.

Machinery, tools, vehicles and fires

Machinery, vehicles and power tools are often the ignition point for fires. You need to ensure that all staff are aware of this and take adequate precautions. Consider the following to prevent your equipment being responsible for starting a fire:

- Welders, grinders and chainsaws create sparks that can ignite nearby fuel or vegetation
- Tractors and other vehicles can spark – have spark arrestors fitted to exhausts
- Consider bash plates underneath tractors and other equipment – there may be a build-up of rubbish that might spark
- Always have water or fire extinguishers on hand when using machinery in fire season.

So if you have a fire safety plan in place, great! Just check that it is still appropriate. Use the checklist provided and get your staff involved. Discuss your safety plan with staff and run a fire drill. Get to know your local fire brigade and have them come out and do an emergency audit of your business. If a fire does approach your nursery business you will probably not have power or mains water. Are you prepared?



Machinery, vehicles and power tools are often the ignition point for fires. Ensure staff take adequate precautions this fire season.



Your bushfire plan should consider who will take care of your pets in the event of a fire.

Nursery Papers

December 2005 Issue no. 11

Developing a bushfire plan

All people who live in bushfire areas should develop a Bushfire Survival Plan. It needs to be well thought out and should include a set of actions to address the risk. You will need to make some tough decisions about what you will do on a high fire risk day or should a fire threaten your nursery. Each business is different so it is important that you develop a plan that suits your business. Will you stay and actively defend or will you go?

1) LEAVE EARLY – If your decision is to leave early, your plan needs to include:

- When you will leave
- Where you will go
- How you will get there
- What you will take with you
- What you will do with your pets
- Who you have told about your plan.

2) STAY AND DEFEND – If your decision is to stay and defend your property, your plan needs to include:

- Where you and other staff members will be
- What you will do if your children are at school when the fire starts
- Who will look after your pets
- How you will protect your property
- How you will protect yourself
- How you will know what is going on during the fire.

A well thought out bushfire plan should address all these issues. Make sure everyone in the business knows the plan and what their roles are. And remember – always stick to your plan!

Imminent danger

If the worst happens and a fire is approaching you should:

- Advise your local fire brigade (dial 000). Do not assume someone else has notified them
- Fill knapsacks, all available buckets, hand basins, baths and tanks with water
- Close all windows and doors in all buildings
- Wet towels and block gaps between doors and floor
- Have buckets of water in the ceiling with a ladder at the manhole
- Block downpipes and fill gutters with water
- Park the car and any trucks in a clear space, facing outwards with windows closed
- Unlock all doors but leave them closed
- Remain calm and co-operate with fire fighting officers. Keep staff, children and pets inside, away from the approaching fire
- Put on protective clothing (wool and pure-cotton). Cover arms and legs, strong boots, etc. Wear a protective mask or damp handkerchief and remember to keep it damp
- Assemble and test the fire fighting equipment
- Wet down roof, gardens and buildings – especially on the fire side
- Keep watch for spot fires on or around the house
- Drink small quantities of water frequently to prevent heat exhaustion

Once the fire has passed

- Check buildings for small spot fires, smouldering material or glowing embers
- Check inside the roof and around the exterior of each building. Check furniture as well. Keep checking for several hours
- Check all staff are accounted for



David Daly of Conifer Gardens Nursery is a volunteer fire-fighter with the Victorian Country Fire Authority (CFA).



Have you discussed fire prevention with staff, family and neighbours? It is essential that everyone involved in the business knows the fire safety plan and what their roles are.

Further information

This article is an introduction to what you need to do to prepare for the real risk of fires. There is more you need to know. Each state has its own emergency fire service and are equipped with a lot of useful information, including planning guides.

State	Website	Emergency Phone
Victoria	www.cfa.vic.gov.au	000
South Australia	www.cfs.org.au	000
Western Australia	www.fesa.wa.gov.au	000
Northern Territory	www.nt.gov.au/pfes/fire	000
Queensland	www.fire.qld.gov.au	000
New South Wales	www.bushfire.nsw.gov.au	000
ACT	www.firebrigade.act.gov.au	000
Tasmania	www.fire.tas.gov.au	000

Fire season checklist

Most fire brigades recommend that you have a checklist at your business to help you prepare. It should include the following issues:

- Keep a note of the telephone number of your local fire brigade and ensure all staff know to dial 000
- Ensure you know the whereabouts of your staff
- Have your fire extinguishers checked for pressure annually by your local fire authority
- All eaves and roof vents should be boxed in or covered with fine wire mesh
- Screens or shutters should be installed and underfloor areas enclosed, if possible
- Ensure external building timbers have a sound coat of paint
- Secure roof and clean gutters of dry leaf debris
- Store flammable items well away from buildings (eg. agricultural chemicals, timber, boxes and paper, flammable liquids etc)
- Point LPG gas tank valves away from buildings
- Check that fire-fighting equipment is operational (eg. portable diesel or petrol pump, taps, nozzles and that hoses should reach all sides of the building)
- In most bushfires, the mains water supply is likely to fail and electric power supplies will probably be cut off. A reserve water supply is recommended (eg. tanks, dam or swimming pool)
- Do you have battery-powered radios handy to aid communication?
- Is fire prevention part of your whole farm business plan?
- Have you discussed fire prevention with staff, family and neighbours?
- Are machinery exhaust systems fitted with spark arresters? Are your staff aware of the risks of using machinery and power tools in the summer months?

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