



SAVEM response to the Cherryville fire (11 & 12 May) The week from 11 May 2013 onward

OVERVIEW

The fire at Cherryville in the Adelaide Hills began on Thursday 9th May. SAVEM was asked by PIRSA to go to 'standby' early Friday afternoon.

The afternoon was spent collating contacts and bringing together a First Response Team. Thank you for the overwhelming positive support received.

On Saturday we were advised that response agencies and public at Uraidla would benefit from SAVEM being visible. The Coordinator, Rachel Westcott, spent that afternoon attending the public meeting at the Uraidla Institute, answering questions from members of the public, distributing SAVEM brochures and liaising with the Incident Management Team (IMT) and other agencies in the Control Centre. The boldly marked 'Homecare Vet to Pet' mobile Clinic was in the hotel carpark, and SAVEM was allocated a table in the hall. SAVEM's contact details were displayed on a whiteboard in the Control Centre, under the heading ANIMAL RESCUE. This helps us understand the positive benefits of being visible early in the fire area.

On Sunday a First Response Team spent the day in the fire ground.

This comprised Rachel, Carol, Brigitte, Jane, Tamarand, Nick, Dirk, JJ, Emilis.

We were fortunate to have a CFS Command car heading our presence in the fire ground. Thank you Nick & Tamarand for arranging this, which greatly eased our movement around the fire ground with road blocks, police and roving mop up crews.

Carol provided her LandRover Defender. These two 4WD vehicles coped with the steep wet fire tracks, with the other private vehicles including the Clinic as back up in Uraidla.

In addition to our own resources, we were fortunate to be lent binoculars and a very impressive thermal imaging camera by the CFS. The camera made Koala spotting very straightforward, although Jane beat the camera to it on one occasion. We will look to arranging permanent access to such useful items in time.

The following week involved Tamarand in the fireground, with follow up animal survey and interaction with resident.

THE FIREGROUND

The actual circumstances experienced on Sunday varied vastly from the normal expectations about bushfire. Overnight rain meant that in addition to ash and burnt vegetation, there was also mud and poor visibility in rain. The landform is extremely steep.

As a result, classic search line work was impractical.

Here, thermal imaging could pick up 'warm body' animals up to several hundred metres away from road edge access. Binoculars (and in future high resolution lens cameras) permit checking over individual animals high up in tree canopy.

The standing normal hazards included – potential limb drop from trees, hot spots, rapidly changing situations in weather and road visibility - and the volume of traffic on single lane, wet dirt roads. Not just CFS and DEWNR patrols, nor just SA Power Network repair crews, and homeowners going back; but 'rubberneckers' in surprisingly large numbers.



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SAVEM INPUTS

The Sunday was spent without getting around the whole ground or the perimeter.

The emphasis in interacting with homeowners was to show support and empathy. Time we spent with people was part of sending the message of support, rather than an exclusive focus on animal welfare.

At every opportunity, SAVEM and its role was explained, with brochures offered.

We viewed koalas in unburnt canopy above the burned ground. We assessed the bodies of wildlife caught and killed in gullies where the steep slopes accelerated fire spread and cut off escape.

We visited a kangaroo put down by police earlier in the day.

We retrieved an injured koala, and transported him for assessment at Adelaide Hills Animal Hospital in Stirling, where SAVEM vet Oliver Funnell was on duty. The koala was euthanased because of his poor body condition and extent of injuries. This documentation is being added to the data base held at Adelaide University.

A debrief was held on Sunday evening by the team at the Stirling clinic.

WHAT WE LEARN

Every step in the evolution of SAVEM broadens our understanding and capabilities.

Thank you all as your input means we can respond. (Just letting us know that you can come and particular day/time availability allows us to send in early responders, knowing their relief can be assured.)

We learn that we can be at the event earlier than we believed. (A 'first contact liaison' gets us visible at the public centre of the event at the outset, establishes contact with the IMT, and enables promotion of SAVEM's role to Emergency Services).

We learn that we can build stronger connections to resource sharing with other agencies, and that with care, we can get into the affected areas earlier.

By continuing to build public awareness, we get cues from home owners, other agencies and the media which help us target affected individual animals.

Good communication means that effective links can be established with the Zone Emergency Centre (ZEC) who can contact us as and when needed, and we in turn can seek earlier entry formally, accelerating our activation.

We fully expect awareness to take time; so handing out brochures to crews and being visible in the fire ground in a structured formal way helps build our profile in the Emergency Management sector.

There are many follow up tasks, which we brainstormed at our debrief, with one of our priorities being to target local CFS brigades during the winter, offering short information talks to explain our role, and where we fit in to the State Emergency Management Plan (SEMP).

MEDIA

Rachel was interviewed by ABC at the Saturday public meeting. On Sunday, Channel 7 news found the First Response Team in the field, and recorded lengthy interviews regarding SAVEM's work, and the techniques being used as we searched the fireground.

The public television report which aired had the animal rescue aspect fleetingly mentioned. We are following up to see if the human and animal welfare goals of our work can form a future item, as the 'vision is already in the can'.

THE FOLLOW UP

SAVEM has had 10 new volunteers register since the Cherryville fire started. A request has come from the Basket Range Primary School for a presentation on animal welfare and SAVEM's role in response to Emergencies.



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A CFS Officer telephoned the Coordinator on Monday morning, following up on our activities, noting his appreciation of our quick reporting on this web site. We were asked to contribute to PIRSA reporting ahead of their de-brief.

We intend to have a second de-brief for our own fireground crew at the end of May.

We were fortunate that Tamarand was able to give time in the fireground during the following week. She got to most of the fireground perimeter, however much of interior is inaccessible, both in the size of the fire affected area and the steep landform. She also reports "even after the rain that we have received, trees are still smouldering and falling over. No further animals were found alive. Three dead koalas were found in the gully behind the house that burnt.

In total, 23 koalas were spotted alive and well in the trees and no other wildlife was spotted."

She also spoke to residents and brochures were given out, including distribution in PO boxes at Summertown and Uraidla, and left on the counter of the Uraidla Post Office/Deli.

On Friday 24th May, SAVEM received a call from a Basket Range resident concerned about a Koala she had seen on her property, which is adjacent to the fire ground.

The Koala had been seen part way up trees in the immediate vicinity, but was spending more time on the ground, and appeared to be licking his limbs.

On Saturday, Tamarand attended and picked up the Koala, who was on the ground. He was assessed by Oliver at AHAH, and was euthanased due to his condition and extent of his injuries. Documentation will be added to that previously collected.

Contact:

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