

Community narrative: Domesticated animals

Jenny lives on a small rural property with her two dogs, five rescue chickens and three horses.

During the fires, there was a long period of uncertainty about whether the fires would come their way, and if so, when. People speculated about whether the fire could jump the river, and which way the winds would blow. The RFS and other officials did not suggest that they should evacuate, but Jenny's neighbour's son, who had professional skills in bushland management and connections to the RFS, got out all these maps and cross checked with other maps and news reports and such. He said he thought it was coming their way, and they'd better get out.

Having watched the news and seen so many reports of people saying the fires moved unimaginably fast, and seeing that some people thought they'd be OK and got caught out, Jenny made plans to evacuate. Luckily, as a long-time resident of the region, Jenny had some close friends near the coast, so she and her partner planned to take the dogs and stay there in their caravan.

It was less clear what to do with the chickens and horses. Jenny discovered from her network that there were Facebook groups popping up where you could go to, to find help rescuing different animals, so she began checking them out. She put out a post on one group's Facebook page, asking for anyone who could look after the chickens. She'd spoken with a friend who had recently done the same; someone had come and grabbed their chickens, but the chickens had ended up dying, either from heat stress, or the stress of moving, and in the end, the fires never came to their place, so they would have been safer staying where they were. But no one could predict what was going to happen or where would be safest.

Jenny knew that chickens can't just be moved around, for a number of reasons: physiological, emotional, ecological and social. They get used to their flock, used to their place, and used to the microbes around them. Messing with this can end up harming or even killing them. Jenny was really attached to her chickens, and had worked so hard to help them adjust to their new home. The thought that a poorly executed evacuation might harm them was just as stressful as the thought that the fires might come this way. After many generous strangers offered to take them, and Jenny meticulously assessed the possible evacuation site against multiple criteria, eventually she found someone who could take her chickens. This was fortunate, as it freed Jenny up to help others later on, and to this day she's still good friends with the woman who helped her out.

The situation with the horses was similar in some ways, different in others. Jenny had put a post on the Shoalhaven Horse rescue group and someone she had never met before contacted her and was up there in a few hours with their float. Jenny's friend Tamara had a small paddock the horses could go to, so they headed there rather than the showgrounds—Jenny had called the Showgrounds first, but at that stage it was still not an evacuation centre. And besides, one of her horses was really nervous and she did not think he would cope with being around so many others. She certainly couldn't be with him 24/7. It took a couple of runs to get everyone up to Tamara's but they got there in the end. Waving goodbye at the end of that day, Jenny felt the most intense relief and gratitude.

That day had given Jenny a view to a whole new world that was emerging: an informal infrastructure of community horse evacuation. Through community networking, and the generosity of time, money, resources and the energy of a whole lot of local people, it seemed a lot of animals were being moved around, hopefully to safer places, though as with the chickens, sometimes the places animals got moved to came under threat and they had to be evacuated again.

Jenny evacuated her property for four weeks, as the fire risk just didn't let up. Some people moved their horses home when they thought it was safe, only to have to move them again. At this point, Jenny was staying at her friend's up the coast with the dogs in the caravan, and having to drive every day to go and feed and check on the horses which were 40km away. So, while getting them there had been somewhat straightforward, caring for them while they were there was really time consuming and draining, especially when most days were over 40 degrees and every day was full of anxiety about the fires. This, plus the work Jenny ended up doing to help others care for and evacuate their animals, ended up being a full-time job during those few months when the fires were most intense. Jenny was lucky – as it was the end of the year, her work was quite flexible, so she could take the time off (though she wasn't getting paid, so, not that lucky). She knew other people, including her partner, who had to keep working full-time. That made all the emergency evacuations even harder.

In between caring for her horses and managing dogs in a caravan, Jenny was helping others move their animals. Someone up the road from her friends had a trailer, but they were overseas at the time, so Jenny ended up being able to use that to help others. She contacted the Shoalhaven Horse Rescue Facebook group that had helped her, but now this time, she was offering to help others. It was hard to schedule this to be convenient – it was a lot of last-minute panicked organising, all of a sudden someone's messaging and asking if you can get to this place or that place with the float, there's 2 horses, or a donkey and a horse, or a camel, or someone has one horse trailer but needs 3, how quickly can you come? It was incredibly tiring work but Jenny met a lot of amazing people along the way, and was so grateful for the help she had received caring for her animals, so how could she say no?

A lot of the time they were moving animals at night, because it was too hot and too dangerous in the daytime. Sometimes they had to fit more horses in the floats than the float was supposed to fit. Then there was the traffic. Sometimes everyone had to drive so slow because of the poor visibility, and Jenny remembers one time the highway just backed up with horse floats everywhere, going so slow when they wanted to move as fast as possible to get away from the rapidly encroaching fire threat.

There were some really stressful and upsetting moments. Sometimes Jenny was helping someone who'd really left it too late – not their fault, the fires came out of nowhere and moved so fast – but then they were trying to load the horses in a really panicked situation, which just stressed the horses out more, and of course then some of them wouldn't get on the trailer. It took everything she had to remain calm in those situations when the smoke was getting really dense. One person she was helping ended up getting kicked by a horse, and had to go to hospital for surgery. That was just one of many injuries sustained by humans or other animals during that time.

Another huge source of stress was when roads were closed. You'd want to get to a place to pick up horses or take them to the person who had offered to have them there, but the road would be closed. That meant begging the fireys or whoever was managing to let you past. Sometimes they did; sometimes not.

One time they finally got the horses on and then the ute wouldn't start, because there was not enough oxygen in the air as the fire got close, or something. It was incredibly stressful, but luckily they got out of there in time. At other times, Jenny would drive past properties where it seemed the humans had evacuated and had left the animals. Jenny and the others she was working with didn't know what to do – should they go in and open the gates, let the animals out so they can at least move themselves if they want to? Should they try and get them in trailers and take them somewhere? Who and where were the owners? Maybe they had a plan and were just out at the moment? That was one of the hardest things— not helping itself, which was of course really challenging, but when you wanted to help and weren't really able to. That was tough.

Apart from moving the animals, then there was making sure they all had enough food and water, and their other health and emotional needs were taken care of. Because she had access to a float, Jenny was mostly transporting horses, but there were others with utes just driving around the region moving hay from one place to another, filling troughs, keeping certain animals away from others they didn't like, trying to keep track of who's horse was who's, and such.

Throughout this experience, Jenny noticed a couple of patterns. People who'd waited too late or whose places were suddenly hit by fires that went way beyond the prediction maps had the most stressful experience, and were most likely to have lost their animals. For some people, in places where its one road in, one road out, and surrounded by bushland, in some cases they just couldn't risk trying to move the animals, and so the owners had to just open gates, evacuate themselves and hope for the best. For those folks, leaving was very difficult.

It was so much easier for people who had close friends or family with land in a safer region, and for those who had access to forms of animal transport. Of course, it was such an expensive exercise too, so those who didn't have spare money to be transporting and then feeding their animals elsewhere were in a much harder situation. In the middle of disasters it can feel like you are in the middle of a nightmare and then you are still having to deal with all of the other normal pressures. Money and resources don't magically appear even when they are needed most.

The whole thing was incredibly well organised while also being pure chaos. There was no planning in advance, not at a community or government level. No one knew what the right thing to do was, or whether you could go to the showground, or if that would be safe, or whatever. If there had been a plan, or better preparation and communication, or someone you could call for advice, or a website to go to with some basic information, it would have all been easier. But all the formal planning was about humans, or assumed the emergency wouldn't be as bad as it was. Like maybe you could have taken chickens to the showground, but not given how horrifically hot it was all the time.

But while this was really chaotic, there were some phenomenal people in the community who had spreadsheets and trucks, scheduling evacuations and tracking who was going where and when; it was really an astounding effort, moving hundreds, even thousands of animals around the region – and then, eventually, back after the rains came. When everyone finally got home, Jenny felt like she wanted to sleep for a thousand years. But there were animals to look after and work to get back to and then the rains and then COVID.

Thinking of the generosity of everyone involved in this really warms Jenny’s heart, but knowing how taxing it was for everyone makes it very stressful to think about whether they could do it again, if they needed to. And of course, despite these huge efforts, not every story had a happy ending. Some animals were so stressed they just couldn’t keep going after the trauma of the evacuations. Some got burned and others injured in the process; of course, many died in the fires.

Jenny knows they all learned a lot from the experience, but that a lot more work, including better planning and better resourcing of communities by the government, is needed for when, not if, there is a next time.