

## **Community narrative: Farmed animals**

Farmers have long lived with the reality that drought, fire and flood are ever-present threats to the stability and ease of farming in Australia. Over time, Australian farmers have developed strategies to farm in changing climates.

When the Black Summer Bushfires approached, farmers like Clive were among those best prepared to protect animals in the catastrophic fires that were about to unfold. Like many farmers, he comes from an intergenerational farming family and has a deep sense of communion with the land. Clive, his wife Lydia and their kids are deeply connected to the local community and to the broader farming community in the Shoalhaven.

2019 was the latest in a series of tough years for farmers in the Shoalhaven. Extreme heat and drought had made farming very challenging and there was general acknowledgement that the entire community was set to face a horrific fire season. As with generations of farmers before, Clive had experience fighting fires as a member of the RFS. The current crew all knew about what was coming and had spoken about the demands the fires would place on them—Clive had had some yarns with a few of the boys over the weeks leading up to the season. The knowledge the older generations had passed down through anecdote and legend became recurring topics of conversation.

Still, Clive couldn't fathom there having been a fire like this before. While he could draw on his knowledge of the land and farming, he felt like he, personally, was wading into unknown territory.

Clive, Lydia and the family had an emergency plan for the farm that they'd developed through consultation with local fire services, industry, and government bodies. They'd fine-tuned these plans over time, drawing on knowledge and past experience to figure out what worked and what didn't. Having these emergency plans ready to activate provided each of them some peace of mind, though the scale of the fires that were approaching and the news that was coming in felt unprecedented and frightening.

Clive and his eldest son Ryan were the ones responsible for putting the plan into action. They knew to ensure that they had excess feed ready, for 'if and when' access to local suppliers was cut off. They had sprinkler systems installed and water tanks filled, so they could contend with disruptions to water access that were sure to come. They knew that to protect farmed animals during the fires they would have to have safe paddocks where large sections of grass had been irrigated with town or bore water, or paddocks that had large, fire resistant, concrete platforms. They hoped that these measures would be sufficient, and that they'd ensure their animals survived. Making the extreme decision to relocate hundreds of them to safer pastures hours away would be an option until it wasn't. Generally, it was too costly to consider. They'd see how they went.

Clive was nearing the end of a day's work in December when he felt the first waves of panic surge. The fires had been burning for months and he felt them getting closer. He was tired after a long few years and felt worried about whether he would have the strength to change gears when the fires came. He wanted to protect his family, which ultimately meant evacuating them, but at the same time he needed support on the farm. Ryan would stay with him even if the others evacuated. One farmer can't protect over five hundred cows and hundreds of chickens alone.

The initial spike of panic faded briefly, but it flared up again as the days went on—hotter, more smoke, more catastrophic fire alerts. When he went out to assist other farmers in his community who needed some help tamping down the peat-fires or doing more last minute prep, he left Ryan in charge of the property. They stayed in contact on two-way radios instead of their cellphones, to avoid losing reception at a crucial moment. And it was a two-way street—on one of the worst days, a guy who lived about half an hour away had appeared as though out of the blue to help, without even being asked.

In the middle of it all, Clive was cut off from wi-fi and phone reception for weeks and was unable to access the main road to get into his local town centre in the days and even weeks after the fire. The two-way radios he and Ryan used ended up being useful to be able to talk to others who had clued onto the same thing. They formed a makeshift brigade for each other, seeing as a few of the others had never been visited by one of the official ones.

Through the long, dark days, Clive and the family kept milking. Stopping milking was of course not a choice. The cows seemed ok. Production dropped a couple of times, but basically everything kept running despite the general calamity. When one day a tanker had trouble getting through because roads were closed, it all worked out in the end, and he hadn't had to dump the milk. Anyway, the insurance companies exist for a reason!

The physical cost of pushing through with the physical labour of milking cows, feeding and watering animals, and ensuring the house and sheds would be protected from the worst of the fire was something Clive hadn't experienced before in his life. The mental load of keeping track of it all, in the heat and the dark, was also heavy.

With only one generator on the property, they had limited access to and high demand for electricity. Ryan and Clive had to move the generator from the house, where it was used to keep food refrigerated, to the water pump to ensure the cattle and chickens had water, to milking shed to keep the milk cold. Setting alarms to wake up in the middle of the night to move the generator from site to site was exhausting work. As the smoke became heavier and the fire a greater threat, that exhaustion began to settle deep in Clive's body. He and Ryan took turns keeping watch, but Clive let his son sleep when he could. He could see the toll this was all taking on him.

Some of the key things that Clive noted along the way were mainly to do with how local community and connection to place got mucked around by some changes that had been building

for a while. The control of the fire service being shifted hours away, to Sydney, and that definitely didn't help. If you don't know how the local environment functions, you're liable to get caught out when the fire does something unexpected. And to be fair to the RFS, if you build a big house in the hills, at the end of a tiny road—well, they are going to have trouble getting to you.

But there were some things closer to home, and to Clive's heart, too. Lots of land development going on these days, taking some land right out of production, and driving up the costs of farmland generally. For years now, the local farmers had been seeing waves of people buying places and being around for weekends or holidays but not ever really putting down roots. Sometimes they would pitch in, say join the RFS, and make the effort to get to know people, but a lot of the time that wasn't the case. It wasn't all bad—far from it—but it changed how the community came together.

When the blazes began to die down, Clive was able to take a deep breath, and take stock.

While the cows that they had cared for during the fires all survived, sadly many of Lydia's chickens did not. Most of them died during a particularly ashy night, due to a combination of extreme heat and smoke inhalation. The morning they had been discovered, between sorting the generator and getting the milking done, Clive hadn't had time to really process what had happened.

The La Nina weather pattern that swiftly started in the wake of the fires led to intense rainfall and a swift climate shift again, which meant more widespread impacts on farmed land.

As Clive started to build his strength back up after the fires, he was faced for the first time, with an outbreak of three-day sickness, or 'Bovine ephemeral fever' among his cattle. These impacts in the wake of the fires were particularly hard to contend with, as Clive had already been through so much by that stage. And he was again faced with things that required urgent and immediate attention. Beyond this, his crops were impacted by large numbers of insects that Clive had never seen before on the farm. The insects would go through an entire grassy paddock in a night, further exacerbating issues with growing enough food for the cows.

With the fires in the rearview mirror and the rains, then the Covid-19 pandemic coming through and causing a whole new set of problems, Clive knows there will probably be issues with the land or the animals, caused by the fires, that just haven't been discovered yet. But until he has to deal with them—there's more than enough to be getting on with.