

# Assessing teats following a bushfire

Dairy heifers and dry cows that have survived a bushfire should be assessed for damage to teats to determine their likelihood of successfully entering or re-entering the milking herd.

**Warning:** This document contains pictures of cattle burnt in bush fires which may cause distress to some people.

This document has been prepared as a guide for farmers and veterinarians make decisions about the future of female dairy cattle suffering burns to the teats and udder following bushfire. The short- and long-term welfare of affected animals should always remain the primary concern. Animals that are suffering should be humanely euthanased without delay.

## Experiences from Ash Wednesday and St Patrick's Day Fires

Veterinarians who inspected large numbers of dairy cattle following the Ash Wednesday (1983) and St Patrick's Day (2018) fires in south west Victoria were asked to provide recommendations regarding teat and udder burns in female dairy cattle.

All agreed that teats appeared to be more susceptible to burns than other parts of the body. Whilst some animals with teat damage had visible burns or hair singeing on parts of the body (e.g. inner thigh, ears or tail brush), there were a very high number of 'normal' looking cattle that had burnt teats upon closer examination.

Teat damage was associated with a very high prevalence of blind or slow-milking quarters in animals that were retained, and clinical mastitis at around calving time was common when heavily pregnant animals were affected. In many herds, even mild teat damage carried a poor prognosis for a successful subsequent lactation.

It is recommended that all surviving female dairy cattle have teats and udders assessed as soon as possible even if there is no obvious signs of injury or fire exposure to other parts of the body.

### KEY MESSAGES

Teats of surviving dairy heifers and dry cows should be assessed following a bushfire

Animals without evidence of burns to other parts of the body may have still suffered burns to teats

The future milking prospects for animals with evidence of teat burns is poor

Teat sealing trailers and tipper crushes allow teat assessments to be done safely and efficiently

Teat and udder damage to female dairy cattle resulting in loss of function may be covered by insurance

## How to conduct teat assessments

Safely examining the teats of heifers that have not yet entered the milking herd can be challenging. The safety and efficiency of examining heifers may be improved by using specially designed teat sealing trailers or foot trimming "tipper" crushes. Veterinary practices servicing large numbers of dairy farms usually have access to such trailers.

Teats should be assessed both visually and via palpation. Female dairy cattle with visual burns to the teat skin or any evidence of hardening or thickening of the teats should be considered for culling.

**Figure 1** Portable teat sealing trailers provide a safe and efficient working environment for assessing teats of heifers.



## Should I keep her?

Animals with moderate to severely burnt teats have a very poor prognosis for successfully entering the milking herd and should be culled. Even if teat burns heal satisfactorily, the associated scar tissue formation and teat canal stenosis or closure will inhibit normal machine milking.

If feed, water and other resources allow, farmers may consider retaining animals with mild (i.e. first degree) burns but the prognosis is difficult to predict. In one herd where heifers with mild teat burns were retained, around 50% were still unable to be milked normally after calving following the St Patrick's Day fires.

Factors such as the genetic merit of the animal, age, pregnancy status, meat withholding periods (e.g. for dry cows treated with antibiotic dry cow therapy) and whether the animal is fit to load will influence the decision.

## Other considerations

Examination by a veterinarian is often required for insurance claims. However, animals that are suffering should be humanely euthanased without delay. Photographs and detailed records of teat damage should be collected at the time of assessment. It is also worth asking your insurer if you can lodge claims for animals with bushfire impacts that may not be evident until after they have calved and enter the milking herd (e.g. blind teats).

**Figure 2** Sloughing of the skin of severely burnt teats. Scar tissue formation and closure of teat canals will mean this heifer will be unable to be milked (Bega Valley fires 2020).



**Figure 3** Burnt teat ends. While these burns look mild, closure of teat canal will mean this heifer will be unable to be milked (Upper Murray fires 2020).



**Figure 4** Severely burnt teats ends. Closure of teat canals will mean this heifer will be unable to be milked (Bega Valley fires 2020).



**Figure 5** Dry cow with extensive burns to teats. She was retained as she was within two weeks of calving and could not be transported. (St Patricks Day Fires 2018)



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