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RAMBLING AROUND THE FARM – BUSHFIRE AFTERMATH

By Andy Cowan

If I had to make one sweeping generalization about the stock after the fires it would be that they are all a little more difficult to handle in the yards. The stags, in particular, are more difficult to move around in the paddock. If there is a weakness in any fence, now half the mob will take advantage of it. In the past, just the odd animal was found in the wrong paddock (usually the same one each time). This means that I have to work the animals more slowly and patiently. If the stock are too stressed, they are tempted to jump fences, especially if they seem a little lower than normal.

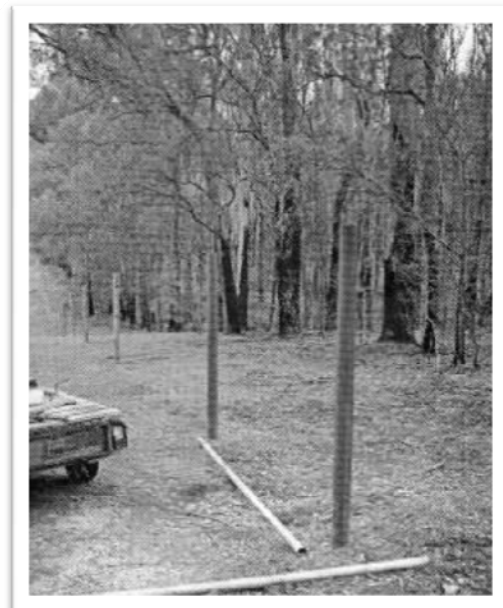
I had a mob of 28 hinds in a paddock for about three weeks. Everything was going swimmingly . . . so I decided to put a mob of velvet stags in the paddock next to them. Within two days about half the mob of stags (30) were in with the hinds. They had discovered that on e of the strainer assemblies on a curve in the fence line was not complete and the wire was a little slack and about 50cm lower. It has since been fixed!!

I might have to revise my hopes of finishing the fencing repairs by Christmas. However, I am making progress so that is good. As a precursor to writing this story, I re-read a chapter on “Fencing” in “The Deer Farming Handbook”. Although this chapter is very comprehensive, I have had to do some things differently to the recommendations given in the book.

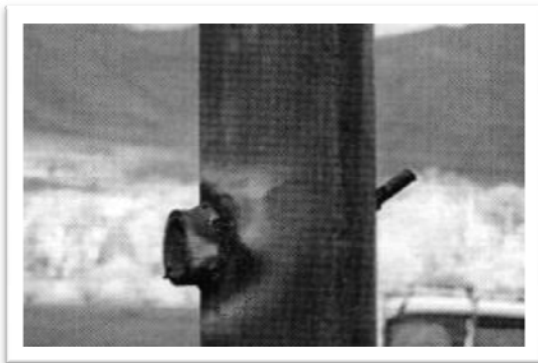
I would premise my remarks by saying that, although I hope with all my heart that it does not eventuate, I am assuming that fires will burn our area again at some stage in the future. So, with this in mind, I have taken a few precautions that may at least hold the stock within the confines of our farm, should a similar event occur.

After discussions with various property owners, I decided that all the boundary fences should have steel strainer assemblies. Although this is much more expensive than using treated-pine posts, it is aimed at substantially reducing the work load immediately after a fire. Post-fire, my main concern was health of stock, provision of water and feed, and maintenance of existing mobs in order to reduce social stress, especially on hinds and fawns.

A treated-pine strainer assembly may cost about \$30-\$40 for materials. A steel assembly will cost about \$170 for materials. I purchased used-100mm diameter steel pipe for about \$20 per metre. These were supplied in 3.2 metre lengths. I used 50mm galvanized pipe for the stays and a 3.2 metre length of this cost about \$25 (a special bushfire price – I was assured).



100mm steel pipe strainer assembly



Stay and wire fittings

I did not want the structure to be “solid” so it had to be built to give a little. Instead of using steel pins to hold the stay in place, I used a 25mm length of 40mm water pipe over which the 50mm stay could slide. The wire loops were positioned by welding 10mm rod where necessary. See picture left.

From observations made after the fires, it appeared that, depending on the tension of the existing fence, 50-80m of fence could stand up by itself without intermediary posts supporting it. The problem of collapsing fences still remains if you have a strain of any length. The longest strain I have here is about 1km. Obviously, if all the posts burn, nothing will be achieved if I simply have steel strainer assemblies.

Fortunately, many lengths of 3-4m 40mm water-pipe were donated to us. I was able to use them as intermediate posts in the fence-line – for no cost.

As time progressed, and because I am still figuring out what may be the best solution, I have decided to place these pipes where it seems most appropriate. My first priority, by taking into account the topography of the land, is to make sure I have steel posts on ridges and in valleys. Once these are in position, I can place the steel posts at suitable intervals along the fence line which is already complete. The main problem with these steel posts, and why I decided to put them in position after the fence was complete, is how to fasten the fence to them and how to keep the fence standing if all the other posts are burnt. Still experimenting with this one but I may simply weld some 10mm rod to the pips to secure the top and bottom wires. Any ideas are more than welcome!!



40mm steel post in fence-line



The strainer assembly complete

Another problem I have been having recently is that there seems to be an increasing number of deer trying to get under the fence. I am assuming that this is some sort of reaction to the fires. One of the main problems in our area is wombats. In some stretches of fencing, I may have as many as 10 diggings under a 50m length of fence. I recently found one hole that was directly under the fence. It was nearly 1m deep and about 3m long, with two main tunnels leading off it. In this situation, I have to fence for two different types of stock – deer and wombats.



10 foot x 5-6" treated pine post in wombat hole

In order to deter the deer from crawling under the fence, I need to use a hot wire. It seems that, without this hotwire, they were escaping through holes dug by wombats and made even larger by wallabies. Hot wires do not deter wombats as they just seem to dig deeper. However, I do staple old pieces of treated pine posts to the fence to act as swinging doorways. The wombats can push them out of the way but there is too much resistance for the deer, coupled with the electric fence, to proceed with the escape. The insulators I use for the electric fence are placed up to 10cm above the ground. They are set on each pine post. I have isolating switches in strategic places so that if there is a short somewhere it can be found quite quickly. The energizer is in the deer-shed so I can check the fence whenever I walk past and if there is not at least 7kV running through the system I drive around the fence and see where the short is.

The main work involved in the maintenance of this system is that I have to spray under the wires about three times a year in order to keep the grass down. I have heard of other systems where the hot wire has been set back from the fence about 50cm and is about 30cm high. The stock can eat the grass underneath the hotwire but if they try to get under the fence they get a belt on the backside. Both systems seem to work well.



Treated pine posts attached to fence



Hot wire at base of fence

My situation is further complicated by the fact that many of my fences are 20 years old. Wear and tear, deer walking the fence-line and erosion have caused the soil level to drop along much of the fence-line. Before I put in an electric fence, I go along with the post rammer and bang each post in a couple of inches to lower the fence. It is incredibly important to do such a job correctly the first time. The last paddock I electrified had a total length of about 600m. It took me 4 days to complete until I was satisfied that it was escape proof. So far, so good!!