
Development Assessment & Planning

Best Practice Guide to Bushfire Protection

Upgrading of Existing Buildings

INTRODUCTION

Bushfire is a major challenge for the community. It has been a natural part of our landscape for thousands of years and remains an ever-present threat. Due to historic settlement patterns and the need to provide housing for people, development has occurred in areas that are bushfire prone, placing lives and property at risk.

Improved land use planning and construction of buildings in bushfire prone areas are intrinsic to the fire management strategies of Wagga Wagga City Council.

Through a working relationship with Council and the NSW Department of Planning, the Rural Fire Service (RFS) has been able to refine and implement bushfire protection for new developments through the NSW planning system. Since the introduction of these planning and building regulations in August 2002, all new development on bushfire prone land in NSW must comply with the requirements of *Planning for Bush Fire Protection 2006* and *Australian Standard 3959-2009 – Construction of buildings in bushfire-prone areas (AS3959)*.

This means that people who are building or renovating have a clear direction on how to design and build their homes to be better protected from the impacts of bushfires. The types of protection measures include asset protection zones (vegetation management), access, landscaping, water supply, building design and construction. These measures assist building survival during a bushfire. They also contribute to the safety of fire-fighters and members of the community occupying buildings during the passage of a bushfire front.

Unfortunately, the majority of buildings in bushfire prone areas pre-date these regulations, meaning that most existing houses are at an increased risk of damage or loss from a bushfire.

With this in mind, a practical guide has been developed for those living in bushfire prone areas who may wish to take the opportunity to upgrade their existing building to increase its resilience from bushfire attack.

The guide provides a range of options that homeowners may wish to consider in determining the level of protection appropriate for their circumstances and risk. These include minimal protection measures such as basic ember proofing, establishment of Asset Protection Zones (APZs) to higher level protection measures such as re-building or upgrading construction elements of the building.

While this guide identifies protection methods, it is vital that such building enhancements are considered in conjunction with any upgrade works undertaken, consideration of other bushfire protection measures such as maintenance of Asset Protection Zones, services and landscaping

The guide is not intended to be a comprehensive bushfire assessment of the risk to your property or an indication of compliance with *Planning for Bush Fire Protection 2006* and *AS3959-2009*. In this

regard, home owners are advised to seek professional advice with regards to further upgrades or reconstruction to improve their resistance to bushfire attack.

For further assistance, details regarding suitably qualified consultants can be found on the RFS website www.rfs.nsw.gov.au.

IS UPGRADING MANDATORY?

Upgrading of existing elements of the building to *Planning for Bush Fire Protection* is not mandatory. However, in the interests of achieving a better bushfire outcome, it is strongly recommended to improve existing elements including upgrading buildings.

Anyone whose land is bushfire prone should have regard to this document for practical guidance in protecting your property against bushfire attack. For all new developments on bushfire prone land, following the Development Application process or the Exempt and Complying Development process, the advice in this document should be applied as a minimum standard to the existing situation. This is in addition to any other bushfire protection measures that may be required by the development consent or complying development certificate.

These upgrading measures will contribute to making your home safer against the impact of the different elements of attack in the event of a bushfire; however, they form only part of the solution. Undertaking routine property maintenance and preparing a Bushfire Survival Plan are other important parts to your bushfire protection and survival.

UPGRADE PROVISIONS

85% of houses are lost from ember attack. The following provisions are designed to give existing buildings improved protection from ember attack during a bushfire event. Ember attack can occur over distances greater than 100 metres from the bushfire front. Any gaps, cracks or areas where embers and fuel can lodge (leaves, twigs, debris), significantly reduces a building's resistance to bushfire attack.

To mitigate against ember attack you should consider the minimal upgrades as detailed in the table below. Additional protection measures may also be considered and this will be dependent on the individual circumstances of the building commensurate with the level of threat from bushfire attack. The potential level of threat to the property from bushfire attack should also be taken in to account when deciding what level of protection should be used. Factors to be taken in to consideration include the isolation of the development and how easily you can react in the event of a bushfire.

Owners are cautioned that existing buildings may contain materials made from asbestos or have painted surfaces that contain lead. These materials should be handled in accordance with appropriate guidelines.

BUILDING ELEMENT	MINIMAL PROTECTION MEASURES	ADDITIONAL PROTECTION MEASURES
GENERAL	Seal all gaps (>3mm) around the house (excluding subfloor) with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • appropriate joining strips; • flexible silicon based sealant; or • mesh with a maximum aperture of 2mm, made from corrosion resistant steel, bronze or aluminium. 	Install a bushfire sprayer system. (Please contact a bushfire consultant or relevant industry expert to discuss options)
WALLS	Install sarking with a flammability index of not more than 5 behind weatherboards or other external cladding when they are being replaced for maintenance or other reasons.	Replace wall materials with non-combustible materials
		Install sarking with a flammability index of not more than 5 behind weatherboards or other external cladding.
SUBFLOOR	Removal of combustible materials and keeping areas clear and accessible.	Enclose subfloor with non-combustible material.
DOORS	Install weather strips, draught excluders or draught seals at the base of side-hung doors.	Replace external doors with non-combustible or solid timber doors with minimum thickness of 35mm.
		Replace or over-clad parts of door frames less than 400mm above the ground, decks and similar elements or fittings with non-combustible material.
		Install weather strips, draught excluders or draught seals at the base of side-hung doors.
VENTS & WEEPHOLES	Seal vents and weepholes in external walls with mesh (with an aperture size of 2 mm) of corrosion resistant steel, bronze or aluminium.	Seal vents and weepholes in external walls with mesh (with an aperture size of 2 mm) of corrosion resistant steel, bronze or aluminium.
ROOFS	Seal around roofing and roof penetrations with a non-combustible material.	Replace fascia and roof materials with non-combustible materials.
		Seal around roofing and roof penetrations with a non-combustible material.
	Install sarking with a flammability index of not more than 5 beneath existing roofing when it is being replaced for maintenance or other reasons. If installed, gutter and valley leaf guards shall be non-combustible.	Install sarking with a flammability index of not more than 5 beneath existing roofing.

WINDOWS	Install mesh with a maximum aperture of 2mm, made from corrosion resistant steel, bronze or aluminium to all external doors and openable windows	Installing appropriately tested shutters to doors and windows; or Install mesh with a maximum aperture of 2mm, made from corrosion resistant steel, bronze or aluminium to all external doors and windows
		Replacing glass with toughened or laminated safety glass
		Replace overhead glazing with 'grade a' safety glass
EXTERNAL STRUCTURES		External structures to be located >10 metres from the main dwelling.
DECKING		Replace decking with non-combustible material

OTHER REQUIREMENTS

ASSET PROTECTION ZONES

Development on bushfire prone land requires suitable separation from the bushfire hazard. This separation is referred to as an Asset Protection Zone (APZ) and should be located wholly within the development property.

The APZ separates the building from the hazard. It is designed to minimize the presence of fuels, which could burn in a fire. Therefore, the impact of direct flame contact, radiant heat and ember attack on the development is reduced.

In order to ensure appropriate levels of safety, it is recommended that an APZ is always provided. Where a building has been newly developed or alterations and additions have been undertaken, recommended levels of construction are reliant upon the ongoing maintenance of the APZ. In this regard, the suitability of the design and construction of the building will be significantly compromised should the APZ not be maintained or implemented as intended.

APZ should be managed in accordance with section 4.1.3 and Appendix 5 of '*Planning for Bushfire Protection 2006*' and the NSW Rural Fire Service's document Standards for asset protection zones.

SERVICES

During major bushfire events, the preparedness of the dwelling and its occupants may be seriously jeopardised with the loss of basic services, particularly water and electricity.

Adequate water supply is critical for any firefighting operation, particularly where property protection is envisaged. A reticulated water supply should be provided which is easily accessible and located at regular intervals. Where no reticulated water supply is available, a water supply of 5,000L reserve (i.e. water tank or dam) dedicated to firefighting purposes should be installed and maintained.

Electricity services should be located so that the possibility of ignition of the surrounding bushland or fabric of the buildings is limited. Regular inspection of the electricity lines should be undertaken to ensure they are not impacted by branches.

The location of gas services should vent facing away and not lead to the ignition of surrounding bushland or the fabric of the buildings.

LANDSCAPING

Vegetation can burn during a bushfire. With this in mind, careful attention must be paid to species selection, their location relative to their flammability, avoidance of continuity of vegetation (horizontally and vertically), and ongoing maintenance to readily remove flammable fuels (leaf litter, twigs and debris).

Homeowners are advised to contact Council before undertaking any work that involves modifying or removing existing trees.

The following additional information relating to landscaping is available at www.rfs.nsw.gov.au

1. Standards for Asset Protection Zones
2. Appendix 5 of Planning for Bushfire Protection 2006

CONTACT US

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