

Community Information Sheet Private Bushfire Shelters (Bushfire bunkers)

On 11 November 2009 the Victorian Government introduced the Building Amendment (*Private Bushfire Shelter Construction*) Interim Regulations 2009.

These regulations mean that a building permit must be obtained for private bushfire shelters (bushfire bunkers) prior to construction. Bushfire shelters have to comply with the performance requirements in the regulations including accessing and exiting the shelter.

These Regulations were subsequently replaced by the Building Amendment (Private Bushfire Shelter Construction) Interim Regulations 2010. These Regulations adopted the national *Performance Standard for Private Bushfire Shelters 2010 Part 1* which provides guidance on the design of a private bushfire shelter.

The purpose of this Community Information Sheet is to explain the regulations and give further information to anyone considering installing a private bushfire shelter.

In summary:

- New regulations are now in place and they require all private bushfire shelters to have a building permit
- It is not compulsory to build a private bushfire shelter but if you do build one, it is compulsory to obtain a building permit for it
- Private bushfire shelters may not be a safe option in all cases and are a last resort as part of a bushfire survival plan. The best way for people to ensure their safety during a bushfire is to leave their properties early when it is recommended under the new bushfire warning system and heed the CFA Prepare Act Survive messages.

What is a private bushfire shelter (bunker)?

A private bushfire shelter (commonly referred to as a bushfire bunker) is an option of last resort where individuals can take refuge during a bushfire while the fire front passes. This may be a pre-fabricated commercial product or a structure built on site.

You should continue to heed the new warning systems and leave early. You should also continue the preparation of your property before each fire season utilising the information in the CFA's Prepare-Act-Survive publication available at www.cfa.vic.gov.au

Is it compulsory to build a private bushfire shelter?

No. New houses in Victoria are required to undergo a Bushfire Attack Level assessment, which may give rise to construction requirements under Australian Standard AS 3959-2009 "Construction of buildings in Bushfire Prone Areas".

However, there is no legal requirement to build a private bushfire shelter and they are not regulated under AS 3959-2009. It is a matter of personal choice as to whether people want to construct a private bushfire shelter as part of their bushfire survival plan.



Do private bushfire shelters save lives?

At this stage, there has been no conclusive research on this point and the evidence presented to the Bushfires Royal Commission has been conflicting. Seven people died in private bushfire shelters during Black Saturday, but others told the Royal Commission that they believe private bushfire shelters saved them.

What changes have been made to the regulation of personal bushfire shelters?

From 11 November 2009 the Regulations require that a building permit must be obtained for a private bushfire shelter (bushfire bunker) prior to construction. Bushfire shelters have to comply with performance requirements set out in the regulations including safe accessing and exiting the shelter and maintaining tenable conditions within the shelter for the period of occupancy.

To obtain a building permit under the new system you either need to:

- Purchase a shelter which has been accredited as meeting the performance requirements in the regulations by the Victorian Government's Building Regulations Advisory Committee (BRAC), or
- Apply to the Building Appeals Board (BAB) for a determination that your non-accredited bushfire shelter complies with the regulations, or
- Obtain certification from a fire safety engineer who did not design the shelter to satisfy a building surveyor that your non-accredited bushfire shelter meets the requirements of the regulations.

Are there any recommended private bushfire shelter products?

There are no recommended products but the Building Regulations Advisory Committee is in the process of considering some designs for accreditation. When this process is complete, the private bushfire shelters that have a certificate of accreditation will be listed on the Building Commission's website at www.buildingcommission.com.au

Where can I get more information about the new regulations?

Consumer FAQs and other information are on the Building Commission's website at www.buildingcommission.com.au

A copy of the Building Amendment (Private Bushfire Shelter Construction) Interim Regulations 2010 can be downloaded from the Victorian Parliament website at [http://www.legislation.vic.gov.au/Domino/Web_Notes/LDMS/PubStatbook.nsf/93eb987ebadd283dca256e92000e4069/EA3E2236DA1A2669CA25772E001FF04D/\\$FILE/10-032sr.doc](http://www.legislation.vic.gov.au/Domino/Web_Notes/LDMS/PubStatbook.nsf/93eb987ebadd283dca256e92000e4069/EA3E2236DA1A2669CA25772E001FF04D/$FILE/10-032sr.doc)

A copy of the national *Performance Standard for Private Bushfire Shelters 2010 Part 1* can be downloaded from the Australian Building Code Board's website at <http://www.abcb.gov.au/index.cfm?objectID=C617CEFF-53FB-11DF-AA90001143D4D594>



What should I do if I am considering a personal bushfire shelter?

If you are considering building or installing a private bushfire shelter, there are a number of issues you will need to consider:

Location

- The siting and location requirements for a private bushfire shelter will be prescribed as a condition of the BRAC Accreditation, BAB determination and as a condition of the building permit.
- Generally, a private bushfire shelter should be located so that it will not be impacted by other structures or fuel loads that may catch fire during the occupancy of the shelter (including buildings and fuel loads on an adjoining property) or falling trees or tree limbs.
- It should also be located and signed to prevent emergency vehicles from inadvertently driving over it, (i.e. in a search of the property following a bushfire event).

Construction

- The private bushfire shelter including the door must be able to withstand high wind.
- If the private bushfire shelter is underground, it needs to be waterproof, and be able to withstand or prevent vehicles driving on top of it.
- The private bushfire shelter must be resistant to flames, high temperatures and ember attack.
- The private bushfire shelter must have fire resistant windows or some other way of allowing the occupants to know when it is safe to leave the private bushfire shelter.
- Doors should be fire resistant and should be made of material that has a low conductivity.
- You should consider the direction in which the door swings, the locking and latching mechanisms, as well as the level of fire resistance and heat conductivity of the door material.
- The construction design will be approved by the BRAC Accreditation process, a BAB determination, or a building surveyor issuing a permit after being satisfied by a certification from a fire safety engineer who did not design the shelter.

Amenity

- The private bushfire shelter must be big enough to hold the expected number of occupants.
- The private bushfire shelter must have an air supply, or be sufficiently large to hold enough air to allow the occupants to remain inside until it is safe to leave the refuge.
- The private bushfire shelter must be able to exclude smoke, and must be well insulated to prevent the temperature inside the private bushfire shelter from increasing beyond a safe level.

Note that in bushfire conditions, services and equipment such as electricity, phone, radio, water, pumps and sewerage usually become inoperable.

A private bushfire shelter should not be used for any purpose which could prevent its use in a bushfire, for example, storage of flammable liquid. The space should be kept clean and dry and free of spiders, snakes and other animals.

It is important that you seek the advice of a relevant building practitioner, such as a fire safety engineer or a structural engineer, prior to purchasing or constructing a private bushfire shelter, or modifying an existing building to be used as a private bushfire shelter. To find a registered building practitioner go to the Building Commission website at www.buildingcommission.com.au

We urge you to consider your options carefully, and to view a private bushfire shelter as a part of your overall bushfire survival plan only as a last resort, rather than a simple solution. You also need to consider whether you and your family are psychologically ready to stay in the private bushfire shelter during a fire.

Remember, the safest option is to leave early.

Further information

Visit our website from time to time for information about new developments in this area. www.buildingcommission.com.au or telephone 1300 815 127.