



Department of  
Sustainability and  
Environment

For information regarding bushfires in your area call  
**Victorian Bushfire  
Information Line  
1800 240 667**

# Advice to community before and during wildfire



**A guide for CFA personnel**



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**CFA WORKING WITH COMMUNITIES**

This guide is based on the CFA policy “Advice to community before and during wildfire”. It is designed to be a resource for CFA personnel to ensure that CFA provides accurate and consistent advice to the community in relation to wildfire.

CFA volunteers in particular, play a vital role in helping the community prepare and respond effectively to wildfire. The community places high value on the expertise and local knowledge provided by volunteers both before and during wildfire.

The guide outlines the basis for CFA’s advice to the community before and during wildfire, documents some important messages and identifies other available resources for both brigades and the community.



## The decision to “Stay or Go”

Although many people promote the simple “Stay or Go” slogan, the reality is that this is a very difficult decision that can only be made by the residents themselves.

**Research tells us that the two safest options for residents living in high wildfire risk areas are to:**

- **Stay and actively defend a well prepared home, or**
- **Leave the area well before threatened and road travel becomes dangerous**

It is important for the community to understand that it is a relatively safe and worthwhile option for residents to stay and defend their home during a wildfire if:

- They are physically able and mentally prepared to defend their home, and
- They have a well prepared home with adequate defensible space

However, not all people have the desire or capacity to stay with their home. It is a sensible option for residents to leave the area well before fire threatens, if:

- They do not have the physical capacity and psychological readiness to actively defend their house and will not be supported by others in the household.
- The house is likely to be subject to excessive amounts of radiant heat and direct flame contact due to heavy fuel loads very close to the house.

The decision to leave the area or stay with their property during a wildfire is the responsibility of the individuals concerned. CFA personnel should encourage residents to develop their own wildfire survival plan and review this plan at the beginning of every fire season. This plan should include what the entire household will do should a fire threaten the local area.

On days of high risk residents are encouraged to go over their plan and prepare themselves for the event of fire. On these days residents should be encouraged to make the decision to stay with the house or leave early, well before a fire could threaten their house.

CFA produces the *Living in the Bush Workbook* to help residents to make this important decision and to undertake the planning needed to develop a safe bushfire plan for the whole household.



## Evacuation

The Emergency Management Act (1986) and the Country Fire Authority Act (1958) gives residents the right to stay with their homes during a wildfire.

**This means that CFA and other emergency services do not have the authority to order a person to leave a property if that person has a financial interest in the land, building or goods within it.**

CFA personnel should be careful not to provide residents with specific directions, remembering that the decision to stay with the house or leave, must always be made by the residents themselves.



## House Survival

A range of factors will influence the likelihood a house can be successfully defended. These include:

- House design, construction and maintenance
- Vegetation management
- Fire intensity

These factors are very complex and may vary significantly throughout the fire season or even on any given day.

The likelihood a house will survive will also depend on the ability of residents to undertake appropriate response activities during the fire.

Because of the difficulties in judging these factors it is very difficult to say absolutely whether a house would or would not survive a wildfire.

**It is therefore very important that personnel do not make statements about whether a house could or should be defended by residents during a wildfire.**

CFA personnel may come across houses that would have a limited chance of surviving a high intensity fire in their current state. In these cases CFA personnel are able to provide residents with advice on how to increase the preparedness of the house in case of wildfire.

CFA promotes a range of resources to help residents prepare their homes for the event of wildfire.

These include:

- The Living in the Bush Workbook
- Building in Wildfire Management Overlay, Applicants Kit
- Australian Standard (AS 3959) "Construction of Buildings in Bushfire Prone Areas"

Each CFA Area has a Fire Safety Officer who will be able to provide more specific advice about the Wildfire Management Overlay and the construction of buildings in Bushfire Prone Areas.



## Seeking shelter during a Wildfire

CFA personnel should advise residents not to get caught in the open by seeking temporary shelter in the nearest building or structure able to provide a shield from radiant heat during the passage of the fire front.

**CFA personnel should advise residents that temporary shelter may be found inside the home or structures such as neighbouring houses, Fire Refuges or in municipal assembly areas.**

A Fire Refuge is a place or building designated for public use where people may seek short-term shelter during a wildfire. Fire Refuges may be one treatment that municipalities and other responsible authorities could decide to implement in response to an identified wildfire risk. Not all municipalities have designated Fire Refuges

It is important to be aware that CFA is not responsible for the management or maintenance of Fire Refuges and should advise people to seek shelter from wildfire in the nearest most appropriate building, which may or may not be a Fire Refuge.

Remember, even structures that are not well prepared may provide enough shelter to shield people from radiant heat during the actual passage of the fire front.

It is very important to remind the community not to get caught out in the open during a wildfire.

## Road Travel during wildfire

Research very clearly shows that late evacuation by residents is a dangerous option. CFA does not encourage people to travel on the roads when there is a wildfire in the area.

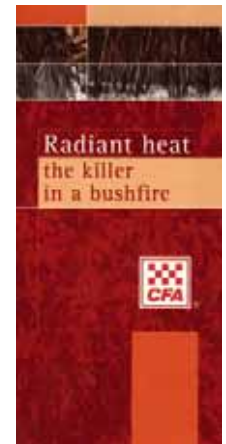
Victoria Police manages road access in and out of the fire area. If a resident is away from home at the time of the fire they may be prevented from entering the fire area and may be prevented from returning to their residence.

While safety is the overriding concern every effort should be made to allow residents and landholders to reach their properties before the fire impacts and as soon as possible after the fire has passed.

Where people are caught driving in a wildfire situation and no fixed structures are available, CFA recommends that people stay sheltering inside their car.

**CFA should advise residents to avoid being caught out in the open or on the road during a wildfire.**

CFA produces the Radiant Heat brochure and the Road Travel Card to help residents to react appropriately if they are caught out on the road. It may be handy to have some of these brochures available at the station so they can be given out to the community.



## Fire Suppression

CFA's first priority is the safety of firefighters followed by community and asset protection. During a major wildfire the Incident Management Team will direct available resources in accordance with CFA priorities, with consideration of firefighter safety and other factors during the incident. CFA will not be able to provide assistance to every house during major wildfires.

The community needs to have realistic expectations about what is likely to happen during a wildfire. Residents could get into significant trouble if they are relying on having a fire truck at their door when there is a fire in the area.

**CFA brigades cannot guarantee to provide assistance to individual houses during a wildfire.**



Some people may decide to undertake fire-fighting activities on their own properties or on the properties of their neighbours. CFA have guidelines that apply to the operation of private equipment at fires on private land, including burn-off activities managed by CFA.

CFA expects that those members of the community who decide to undertake fire-fighting activities using private equipment will comply with the requirements of the "CFA Guidelines for Operating Private Equipment at Fires".



## Information before and during wildfires

In recent years CFA and DSE have set up the Victorian Bushfire Information Line (VBIL). This call centre is used to provide information to the community before and during bushfires. The VBIL frequently responds to questions from the community about:

- Regulations for Total Fire Ban days and the Fire Danger Period (Can I Cant' I)
- Wildfire Incident updates
- Information about planning and preparing for wildfires
- Information for people who need to respond to a wildfire.

During significant wildfires CFA will activate the Information Unit as part of the Incident Management Structure. The Information Unit is responsible for the delivery of accurate and timely messages from the Incident Management Team to the community.

The threat messages are significantly more detailed than a simple alerting system as they aim to provide information to enable people to make appropriate decisions and respond to the threat more safely.

These messages are sent out to the community through the media, with particular emphasis on regional and local radio. ABC radio is the official broadcaster for Victoria during an emergency. Information is also available through the CFA website and the Victorian Bushfire Information Line (VBIL).

**CFA personnel should advise residents to seek information about wildfires through:**

- ABC state-wide and regional radio or an appropriate local radio,
- CFA public website [www.cfa.vic.gov.au](http://www.cfa.vic.gov.au)
- VBIL (1800 240 667)

It is well known that sudden onset fires can affect parts of the community before there is time to send out an official warning.

**CFA cannot guarantee to provide, maintain or activate community alerting systems or to guarantee that the community will receive any official warning in the event of a wildfire.**



## Resources for brigades and the community

CFA encourages residents of high-risk areas to prepare for the fire season by attending CFA pre-season wildfire education meetings.

These meetings are always more useful when attended by representatives from the local brigade. It is beneficial for the community to see a coordinated approach from CFA and the local knowledge provided by brigade representatives adds to the value of the meeting.

**It is also very important for CFA personnel to be aware of CFA messages to the community so that they can provide consistent advice when they themselves are working with the community.**

CFA personnel who regularly interact with the community in relation to wildfires should be familiar with CFA publications for the community such as:

- Living in the Bush Workbook
- Can I, Can't I
- Guidelines for Operating Private Equipment
- Radiant Heat Brochure
- Grassland Brochure
- VBIL fridge magnet & Road Travel Card
- Building in Wildfire Management Overlay Applicants Kit

These resources are distributed through CFA Regional offices and are readily available to brigades and residents.

For more information about wildfire safety messages and wildfire education contact the Community Education Coordinator in your Area.

