

FIRE HAZARD RATINGS FOR POWERLINES

Background

Under Section 80 of the Electricity Safety Act 1998, CFA and the Metropolitan Fire and Emergency Services Board (MFB) assign low and high fire hazard ratings to the Country Area of Victoria and to portions of the Metropolitan Fire District. *Fire Protected Areas (more generally public land areas) for which the Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) is the responsible authority are not currently assigned fire hazard ratings as part of this process.*

The assignment of low and high fire hazard ratings aims to safeguard life and property by preventing overhead electric line-related ignitions, on land-uses where such ignitions have the potential to cause damage to life, property and/or the environment. The potential for significant bushfire spread (encompassing grassfire through to forest fire) and resultant damage is assessed on different land-uses through the application of worst-case scenario weather conditions.

In contrast, Bushfire Prone Areas (BPAs) and Wildfire Management Overlays (WMOs) define areas with significant potential for the ignition of houses due to sustained and significant ember attack as well as radiant heat and/or direct flame contact from going bushfires. These areas generally include trees and shrubs and vegetation that can support crown fires. Whereas BPAs and WMOs generally consider areas of standing vegetation, fire hazard ratings are assigned on the premise of continuous surface vegetation and/or fuel such as open grasslands.

Implications

The low and high fire hazard ratings are utilised to prescribe *low and hazardous bushfire risk areas* for:

- the Electricity Safety (Electric Line Clearance) Regulations 2005. In the Electric Line Clearance Regulations, the extent of vegetation clearance adjacent to overhead electric lines varies according to the bushfire risk area defined. The authorities responsible for the maintenance of these clearance spaces include electricity distribution businesses, municipal councils and private land owners;
- the Electricity Safety (Installations) Regulations 1999. In the Installations Regulations, a private electric line to be constructed or substantially reconstructed must be placed underground except that overhead private electric lines may be constructed or substantially reconstructed in *low bushfire risk areas*;
- the Electricity Safety (Bushfire Mitigation) Regulations 2003. The objective of these Regulations is to make provision for the preparation of bushfire mitigation plans and the inspection of private overhead electric lines by electricity suppliers.

Ongoing Review Program

No ad-hoc re-assessments of fire hazard ratings are undertaken outside the provisions of an ongoing review program. Ratings are nominally reviewed every 4 years, although more regular re-assessments are undertaken in areas experiencing sustained urban growth. A review of ratings for outer metro-Melbourne has been recently completed, and is currently being extended into parts of country Victoria.