



NEIGHBOURHOOD SAFER PLACE –
BUSHFIRE PLACE OF LAST RESORT

ASSESSMENT GUIDELINE

November 2025

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1. Introduction

Reducing the impact of bushfires is a shared responsibility between government, emergency service organisations and the community. The community plays a vital role in taking the necessary steps to prepare their property for bushfire, to understand their risk, to develop and be ready to implement their bushfire plan.

It is also critical for those living in bushfire risk areas to have a backup plan if their primary plan fails, or their planned options (such as leaving the area early) are unable to be implemented. A backup plan should identify shelter and last resort options available to them, including those that individuals have personally assessed as being a safer option relative to their situation if caught in a fire event.

A Neighbourhood Safer Place also known as a Bushfire Place of Last Resort (**NSP-BPLR**) in the near vicinity (neighbourhood) may, as a last resort, provide a specified level of protection (a safer place) from the immediate life-threatening effects of a bushfire. NSP-BPLRs are not part of leave early, shelter in place or evacuation strategies. They are places of last resort where a person's prospects of survival may be better than other places, but they do not guarantee safety.

A NSP-BPLR is an area or premises that provides separation distance from the bushfire hazard (i.e. predominant vegetation) and protection from direct flame contact and excessive (life threatening) levels of radiant heat. It is an existing location and not a purpose-built, fire-proof structure. A NSP-BPLR may be an open space such as a local sports field, foreshore or park, or it may be located within a community facility such as a hall or sports pavilion.

Municipal councils (and Alpine Resorts Victoria¹), the municipal district (and relevant alpine resort) of which is wholly or partly in the country area of Victoria, identify potential suitable locations, designate, establish and maintain NSP-BPLRs within their municipal district, pursuant to provisions within Part IIIA, Division 3 of the *Country Fire Authority Act 1958* (**CFA Act**). The Country Fire Authority (**CFA**) supports municipal councils in the establishment of NSP-BPLRs as a last resort option for communities living in bushfire risk areas (and people visiting, working in or traveling through bushfire risk areas).

This CFA NSP-BPLR Assessment Guideline (**Guideline**) has been prepared and approved by CFA, published in the Government Gazette and on the CFA website, pursuant to s.50E of the CFA Act. The Guideline sets out the criteria and other considerations by which an appropriately trained CFA officer, assesses the suitability of a NSP-BPLR in terms of protection from the immediate life-threatening effects of radiant heat from bushfire. This is one critical step within a broader municipal council process and is not intended for use by the public.

The Guideline has been subject to regular reviews since its adoption in 2010. There has been no change to critical criteria, but this 2025 update includes some minor text

¹ All reference to council within this guidance document also refers to Alpine Resorts Victoria for the alpine resorts within the country area of Victoria. Section 5 of *Alpine Resorts (Management) Act 1997* mandates that Alpine Resorts Victoria is taken to be a municipal council for the alpine resorts; and the alpine resorts are taken to be a municipal district for the purposes of the *Emergency Management Act 2013*.

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amendments such as change to fire danger rating terminology and additional or revised content for technical and procedural clarification.

2. Background

The 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission (VBRC) Final Report stated that *“The people who left their homes sheltered in a variety of locations - other houses or buildings, bunkers, reserves and ovals, pubs, in-ground swimming pools, cars, dams, and so on. Some people reported that these were pre-planned alternatives and that they helped people survive.”* The VBRC also heard examples of fatalities in very similar locations, which serves to highlight that these locations do not guarantee safety.²

The VBRC stated that *“[...] many people did not have a well-thought-out plan and were left to make their own decisions without the benefit of assistance from the authorities [...] For these people, the lack of alternatives - the provision of shelters, refuges or evacuation - can become critical because they have no fall back option.”*³ *“The Commission considers that a revised bushfire safety policy should provide information about places in which to shelter and support for individuals in identifying such places.”*⁴

In response to the VBRC recommendations, regarding the need for a range of community shelter and relocation options in the event of a bushfire threat, State policy was developed and relevant legislation was amended to provide for the establishment of shelter and last resort options including ‘Neighbourhood Safer Places’.

2.1 Bushfire safety options

Leaving bushfire risk areas on days of heightened risk is always the safest option. Leaving early means leaving a bushfire risk area before a fire has started. People leaving an area prior to a fire starting will have a range of options available to them that are outside the fire threatened area. These may include privately arranged places (e.g. friends and family), or public locations such as suburban areas, regional urban areas or larger towns that are safe from bushfire and provide access to amenities.

Leaving once a fire has started may be an option in some circumstances. However, this is an inherently risky option, and safety will be affected by many factors, including the proximity of the fire and time to impact, access to safe evacuation routes and timely access to emergency warnings and incident information. Some people are likely to remain or find themselves in an area threatened by fire.

All plans have the potential to fail, or evacuation may not be possible, and it is impossible to predict all potential scenarios. It is vital that people are aware of and understand the full range of options available to them, where people can seek shelter when there is imminent threat from a bushfire and it is too late to leave. These options may include:

- Local large urban area or large town centre that is separated from hazards
- A well-prepared home or nearby building

² VBRC Final Report; Volume 2; Chapter 1; Victoria’s Bushfire Safety Policy; pg. 19.

³ VBRC Final Report; Volume 2; Chapter 1; Victoria’s Bushfire Safety Policy; pg. 32.

⁴ VBRC Final Report; Volume 2; Chapter 1; Victoria’s Bushfire Safety Policy; pg. 21.

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- Community Fire Refuge
- Private bushfire shelter (or bunker)
- NSP-BPLR or
- other last resort options, such as a nearby structure, an area of low vegetation, a body of water or a vehicle parked in a large clear open space.

Not all options will be available in all circumstances.

Not all options will afford the same degree of protection from a bushfire.

Personal circumstances and local conditions in a fire event will affect the extent to which any of these options provide relative safety or are still a viable option to access.

It is critical that people understand the need to do everything possible to avoid having to use last resort options.

3. Concept

A NSP-BPLR location:

- is a place of last resort in the near vicinity for individuals to access during a fire event affecting their neighbourhood if still safe to do so, without the need to take a high-risk journey beyond their neighbourhood.
- eliminates direct exposure to flames from a fire front and manages radiant heat to survivable levels; and
- should only be accessed when personal bushfire plans cannot be implemented or have failed.

A NSP-BPLR does not guarantee the survival of those who assemble there. A NSP-BPLR may offer improved protection if threatened by fire but cannot be considered as 'safe'.

Those who gather at a NSP-BPLR must remain alert and monitor the fire. Active defence against the effects of bushfire (heat and embers) and possible consequential spot fires may be necessary.

Not all communities will have a NSP-BPLR in the local area, as potential sites may not meet specific criteria identified in the Guideline and/or further risk assessment criteria held within a council's Municipal Neighbourhood Safer Places Plan (**MNSPP**) or identified during municipal emergency management planning processes. Some communities may not have the fire risk profile to indicate a need for a NSP-BPLR.

Accessing a NSP-BPLR or any other last resort option should not be part of a primary bushfire survival plan. All last resort options are inherently dangerous.

A NSP-BPLR should not be confused with Community Fire Refuges,⁵ Emergency Relief Centres,⁶ or informal places of shelter.

⁵ Community Fire Refuges are purpose built or modified buildings that are prescribed in the *Country Fire Authority Regulations 2025*, that can provide short-term shelter from the immediate life-threatening effects of a bushfire, but do not guarantee safety.

⁶ An Emergency Relief Centre is at a place (such as a town hall or community centre) that a council establishes to provide immediate and basic services to people affected by an emergency; *Victorian State Emergency Management Plan; October 2024; pg. 60*.

3.1 Limitations and risks

NSP-BPLRs have limitations and do not guarantee safety:

- Sheltering at a NSP-BPLR may result in physical and/or psychological trauma
- There are risks to people travelling through a fire affected environment on foot or in a vehicle to a NSP-BPLR
- There are risks to people accessing, sheltering and leaving a NSP-BPLR during the passage of the fire front
- Limited capacity
- Limited parking
- May not cater for animals
- Emergency services will not necessarily be present
- Do not provide amenities or services (e.g. food, drink, toilets, medical services)
- May not cater for special needs (e.g. infants, elderly, ill or disabled)
- They are not an appropriate destination when leaving the area early
- They are not assessed to be a place of shelter from other types of emergencies (e.g. to escape rising floodwaters or as a shelter from severe weather events)
- May be in the open and therefore provide no protection from the elements, such as high temperatures from the sun, high wind, or smoke, ash and embers from the fire.

4. CFA site assessment

After identifying a potential NSP-BPLR a municipal council must ask CFA to assess the place in accordance with the Guideline criteria. On receiving a request, CFA must assess the place and if the place meets the criteria set out in the Guideline, certify in writing that the place meets those criteria. A council must not designate a place as a NSP-BPLR unless the place has been certified by the CFA as compliant with the Guideline criteria (pursuant to s.50G of the CFA Act).

CFA's NSP-BPLR bushfire hazard assessment (**site assessment**) is the first critical step in ascertaining the suitability of a NSP-BPLR. The site assessment determines if potential locations identified by municipal councils meet criteria within the Guideline. The critical criteria, established through fire industry and agency partner collaboration, mandate maximum allowable potential radiant heat from a fire event directly impacting the site for open spaces and buildings. There may be other factors affecting acceptance of a site as a NSP-BPLR but satisfying the criteria is the precondition to consideration of acceptance.

The site assessment provides information on the bushfire hazard - the predominant classified vegetation type according to the *Australian Standard AS3959-2018 (AS3959)*, the vegetation height and distance from the boundary of the NSP-BPLR, the indicative fuel loads and site (effective) slope. Vegetation exclusions apply where the site presents non-vegetated areas (e.g. waterways, exposed beaches, roads, rocky outcrops) or low threat vegetation (e.g. cultivated gardens).

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The potential radiant heat load is determined based on data captured at the time of assessment, considering the requirement for council to maintain all designated NSP-BPLRs in its municipal district and review each designated NSP-BPLR by 31 August each year (pursuant to s.50I and s.50J of the CFA Act).

The site assessment is evidence and risk based on site specific attributes. Compliance may be readily determined where there is a clear delineation between the edge of unmodified vegetation and the managed area that enables the proposed or existing NSP-BPLR site to meet the acceptable separation distance from the hazard (based upon worst-case scenario assumptions). Where the acceptable separation distance is not met, the potential radiant heat load (expressed in kilowatts per square metre) is calculated using bushfire attack assessment methodology and computerisation based on a generalised view factor⁷ model. Isolated flammable elements (such as shrubs, grass, isolated trees, etc.) may be present within the separation space so long as such elements do not add to a fire's rate of spread, or significantly contribute to the potential radiant heat impacting on the NSP-BPLR.

Where the vegetation adjoining a proposed or existing NSP-BPLR site is significantly modified and/or fragmented (e.g. urban development), a fire may pass through the landscape via multiple ignitions of isolated flammable elements rather than as a defined fire front. In this scenario the fragmented vegetation may be considered excludable under the AS3959; or where there is uncertainty, the CFA officer may procure further fire behaviour analysis through appropriately qualified practitioners. This further analysis is to determine combined impact of localised flaming sources of heat and inform assessment according to maximum radiant heat criteria. Further analysis may also be applied (but not limited to) where initial site assessment outputs indicate non-compliance within negligible variation to radiant heat criteria parameters. The CFA delegated officer may develop a position of compliance based on review of evidence and informed professional judgement.

Any variations in procedures, alternative assessment approaches, analysis and/or alternative solutions to meet radiant heat criteria must be accompanied by sufficient evidence.

4.1 Radiant heat criteria

A NSP-BPLR should provide protection to people from lethal levels of radiant heat through an appropriate separation distance between the bushfire hazard (vegetation) and the outer edge of the NSP-BPLR. The determination of acceptable distances from the hazardous vegetation producing the radiant heat is based on a specific fire design.

Considering that the primary purpose of a NSP-BPLR is to provide for the protection of human life from a bushfire event, the assessment methodology applied is based on a worst-case scenario. Compliance with the radiant heat criteria is established on a design fire

⁷ View factor or configuration factor is a geometrical factor required by calculating the radiant heat flux to which a site might be exposed, which is a function of flame geometry, location of radiant heat flux receiving element, that is, radiation receiver and relative orientation between the flame and the receiver; *AS3959-2018, pg. 101.*

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occurring under Catastrophic (Fire Danger Rating) conditions, without active fire fighter protection.

Fire weather and flame characteristics*:

Forest Fire Danger Index	120 (Catastrophic)
Flame width	100m
Flame temperature	1200K

*Design fire modelling also includes other inputs such as wind speed, ambient temperature, relative humidity, flame emissivity, slope and fuel characteristics.

A NSP-BPLR must meet the following maximum radiant heat criteria.

NSP-BPLR type	Maximum radiant heat	Separation distance
Building	10kW/m²	> 140m
Open space	2kW/m²	> 310m

The separation distance in metres (m), in the above table, is from the outer edge of the NSP-BPLR to a **forest fuel hazard** and represents an acceptable evidence-based measure to comply with the maximum allowable radiant heat criteria.

Where NSP-BPLRs are abutting less than extreme fuel hazards the separation distance may be reduced so long as the criteria for maximum radiant heat are met.

A NSP-BPLR may be impacted by other bushfire attack mechanisms such as low-level radiant heat, embers and hot convective winds. This reinforces the premise that although these places may provide a specified level of protection, they are not devoid of risk.

4.2 Grassland management

Grasslands have a distinct place in the CFA site assessment process, due to:

- the potential for rapid growth in conditions of adequate warmth and moisture.
- the potential for this type of vegetation to be managed through appropriate treatments to meet the radiant heat criteria.
- the requirement under s.50I of the CFA Act for councils to maintain all designated NSP-BPLRs, and
- s.50J of the CFA Act for councils to review designated NSP-BPLR within the municipal district by 31 August each year.

Councils may identify a suitable NSP-BPLR site in a grassland area that can only meet the radiant heat criteria with active management of the site and/or the land abutting the site, over the Fire Danger Period (**FDP**), with treatments including slashing, mowing or grazing.

For lands abutting the site, the prescriptions for management are determined based on the distance from the edge of the assessed NSP-BPLR to the edge of grassland identified as unmanaged (or potentially unmanaged) within the assessment area. The assessment area includes all land that is within 310m from the outer edge of a NSP-BPLR open space or

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140m from the outer edge of a NSP-BPLR building, in all directions. Grassland prescriptions are applied where the deemed to satisfy distance to meet the radiant heat criteria cannot be met without specified and agreed management during the FDP⁸.

In these circumstances CFA may certify the site as meeting the radiant heat criteria provided that appropriate, specified and prescribed treatments are in place throughout the FDP. This must include prescriptions for management of the grassland in a minimal fuel condition,⁹ secured by agreed terms entered by the landholder(s). The landholder may be the council, a public authority, an agency or a private person.

Evidence of grassland management agreement(s) noting the specific treatments and prescriptions described in the CFA assessment report must be provided by council to CFA with notification of designation, and when confirming ongoing designation as part of the annual review process.

Council has the role of facilitation and, if required, enforcement of the treatments during the FDP. Fire prevention notices may be utilised but are not ordinarily an appropriate method for achievement of prescriptions for management at a NSP-BPLR. The objection and appeal provisions associated with fire prevention notices could result in significant delays in achieving compliance. This method should only be used as a last resort by councils where a private landholder has reneged on the grassland management agreement and the grassland condition constitutes, or may constitute, a danger to life or property from the threat of fire (pursuant to s.41(1) of the CFA Act).

Where compliance according to agreed terms during the FDP cannot be met within an immediate time frame, council must follow due process to decommission the NSP-BPLR.

5. CFA assessment exclusions

The Guideline criteria do not consider other potential bushfire attack mechanisms (e.g. ember attack), non-vegetation hazards or structural aspects of a building. These matters may, where applicable, be considered within council's further risk assessment which may be initiated through the Municipal Emergency Management Planning Committee (**MEMPC**) or relevant sub-committee of the MEMPC.

This broader risk assessment considers criteria outlined in the MNSPP or municipal emergency management planning processes which may include: the environment surrounding the potential NSP-BPLR site, access and egress, other uses of the site and whether those uses could be inconsistent with its designation as a NSP-BPLR, building accessibility (if applicable), traffic management, etc. Council may seek advice from appropriately qualified CFA personnel and other relevant parties.

⁸ Unmanaged or potentially unmanaged grassland may be identified as the classified vegetation within the assessment area (for any or all aspects) but if the distance meets the radiant heat criteria, then prescriptions for management are not applied.

⁹ Minimal fuel condition means there is insufficient fuel available to significantly increase the severity of the bushfire attack (recognisable as short-cropped grass for example, to a nominal height of 100 mm); AS3959-2018 section 2.2.3.2, pg. 15.

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CFA's delegated officer may independently identify other non-vegetation hazards or risk concerns in the immediate or broader landscape and provide recommendations to council through the MEMPC or relevant sub-committee due process.

6. Consents and agreements

Council must also obtain consents for use and rights of access from the landholder where the proposed NSP-BPLR is located on land that is not council owned or managed; and grassland management agreement from the relevant landholder of the site and/or land abutting the site (if applicable) [4.2].

If a landholder does not consent to the place being designated and used as an NSP-BPLR (or withdraws consent in any subsequent year of designation); or a grassland management agreement cannot be secured, if applicable (or cannot be renewed in any subsequent year of designation, if applicable), the site must not be designated or if currently designated the site must be decommissioned.

7. Annual review

Pursuant to s.50J of the CFA Act a municipal council must, by 31 August in each year, conduct a review of each designated NSP-BPLR in its municipal district to determine if it is still suitable to be designated as a NSP-BPLR. This council annual review, or review on a designated site at any time of year, must include a request on CFA for reassessment.

On receiving a request, CFA must assess the NSP-BPLR in accordance with the Guideline criteria. As part of a review reassessment, CFA may determine from evidence gathered that a site status is unchanged from previous assessment and therefore continues to satisfy the assessment criteria. In these circumstances, CFA may certify that the NSP-BPLR continues to meet the Guideline criteria and provide any advice pertaining to grassland management (where applicable).

If CFA's assessment determines that a designated NSP-BPLR no longer complies with the Guideline criteria, council must decommission the NSP-BPLR.

The council may also decommission a designated NSP-BPLR that CFA has certified as compliant with the Guideline criteria, but the council is satisfied on reasonable grounds that it is not appropriate for the place to continue to be a designated NSP-BPLR. This may be due to other hazards identified in the broader council review assessment process, or a landholder withdraws consent to use the land or grassland management agreement cannot be secured (if applicable), or other circumstances such as planned works on the site during the FDP.

On completion of council's review (MNSPP) including confirming consents and sourcing current agreements, and receipt of a compliant CFA NSP-BPLR assessment report, council must notify CFA confirming ongoing designation of the NSP-BPLR (or notify a decommission decision) by 30 September (thereby providing a list of all designated NSP-BPLRs pursuant to s.50K of the CFA Act).

8. NSP-BPLR establishment process summary

