



Working in Bushfire Recovery



Information Sheet

Employers and workers involved in bushfire recovery must comply with the obligations under the Work Health and Safety Act 2011 (WHS Act).

This resource is designed to assist in identifying and managing potential risks associated with the clean-up and repair effort.

Duties of PCBU's

The PCBU, must ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, the health and safety of workers and others, including contractors, while they are at work in the business or undertaking.

Contractor Management

Some bushfire recovery activities may require employers to call upon the expertise of specialist contractors to undertake specific work. If an employer needs to call upon expertise to ensure the health and safety of its workers and provide a safe workplace, then it should do so.

While an employer may rely on the expertise of others, it does not absolve the employer of its duties. They must consult, cooperate and coordinate with the specialist contractor to ensure the employer's work (and the contractor's work) does not put any workers at risk of harm.

Where employers rely on a specialist contractor with technical expertise, they are required to:

- ensure the specialist has the necessary expertise for the work
- ensure the specialist has their own systems in place for carrying out the work safely
- ensure the specialist is carrying out the work safely as per their own stated procedures (and not putting others at risk)
- continue to consult, coordinate and cooperate with the specialist, and
- provide appropriate instruction to the specialist.

Duties of Workers

Workers must comply with their obligations under the WHS Act 2011. They need to take reasonable care for their own safety, the safety of others and follow the employer's reasonable instructions and procedures of the PCBU.

Risk Management Principles

Before attempting any work activity in a bushfire-affected area, use the risk management principles to assess if workers or other persons may be exposed to risk as a result of the work activity.

- Identify the hazards: this information sheet lists some of the associated hazards.
- Assess the level of risk: the likelihood of exposure to the hazard, and the consequences (what harm could be done).
- Control the risk: identify and implement a control as per the hierarchy of controls.
- Review the control measures: determine the effectiveness of the implemented control and make sure you have not introduced a new risk.



Examples of Hazards

Heat Stress

Working in hot and/or humid environments can cause heat-related illness such as heat stress. Signs of heat stress can include headaches, dizziness, or fainting, as well as weakness and wet skin. Other signs may include irritability or confusion, thirst, nausea, or vomiting.

In most cases, heat stress can be treated by:

- Moving to and resting in a cool place with circulating air
- Ensuring cool clean drinking water is available
- Removing unnecessary clothing, including PPE
- Loosening tight and/or restrictive clothing

Dehydration

When working in heat, dehydration is a major risk. Dehydration occurs when you use or lose more fluid than you take in. Physical exertion such as cleaning up after a bushfire, especially in hot weather, can lead to faster dehydration.

- Drink adequate amounts of clean drinking water and avoid alcohol and caffeine

Sun Exposure

Repeated sun exposure which results in sunburn may increase your risk of skin damage, as well as certain diseases such as skin cancer.

- Ensure adequate coverage from the sun.
- Workers may need to wear long sleeves (light coloured clothing is preferred to dark), wearing a hat and sunglasses and applying sunscreen to exposed skin

Smoke

Smoke inhalation can be harmful, and long-term exposure may lead to an increased risk of heart and lung disease and/or other respiratory disorders.

- Precautions should be taken against inhaling fine particles such as smoke and ash by using an appropriate face mask.
- Do not use ordinary paper dust masks, handkerchiefs or bandanas. At a minimum, a 'P2' mask should be worn and when properly fitted, can filter out fine particles including asbestos fibres.
- Before deciding to use a mask, be aware they can be hot and uncomfortable to wear and can make it harder to breathe normally. If you have a pre-existing heart or lung condition, you should advise your employer, and talk to your doctor before using a mask.

Fatigue

Fatigue reduces a person's ability to perform work safely and effectively. Fatigue may be increased by the physical and emotional toll on a person during a bushfire recovery effort.

- Roster shifts so that each person has the opportunity to sleep continuously for seven to eight hours in each 24-hour period.
- Limit the number of consecutive night shifts to four and allow a minimum of 12 hours between consecutive shifts. Roster at least two full night's sleep after the last night shift.
- Provide frequent rest breaks during shifts.
- Encourage access to assistance services as required.



Displaced fauna

Following a bushfire, surviving animals will be displaced and looking for food and shelter. These animals have the potential to cause serious harm, through bites, scratches, or disease.

- Check in and under objects before attempting to move them as snakes, spiders and other animals may be taking refuge in the location. Startling these animals may cause them to become aggressive and attack.
- Do not attempt to kill snakes as most snake bite incidents occur when someone has attempted to strike and kill the snake.
- Engage a wildlife removal specialist to remove snakes from buildings and pits.

Copper chrome arsenate (CCA) treated wood

CCA-treated wood is commonly used in structures such as pergolas, decking, fencing and landscaping. After a fire, the ash from this wood contains up to 10 per cent (by weight) arsenic, copper and chromium.

- Children, pets and other animals must be kept away from ash areas containing CCA-treated wood until clean-up is completed. Swallowing only a few grams of this can be harmful.
- Ash should be double-bagged, sealed and taken directly to your local landfill. Damaged timber can also be taken to landfill.

Demolition

Potential risks that can occur from demolition work which must be controlled include, unplanned structure collapse, and damage to services such as gas, water, sewerage, telecommunications, electricity, chemical, fuel and refrigerant in pipes or lines.

- Stay away from damaged buildings and structures until they have been checked and declared safe by the relevant authority. Be aware of overhead power lines (that may be live) when using cranes.
- If demolition work is to be undertaken, check that it doesn't require a licensed demolition expert to perform the work. If it does, ensure a person with the correct licence is engaged. If the work doesn't require a licensed demolition expert, make sure the work is undertaken by people who understand the structure, or the part of the structure, they are demolishing.
- Check the location of any underground, overhead or concealed services (for example gas, water, electricity) prior to commencing any demolition work.

Chemical hazards

Bushfires may have burned or damaged hazardous chemical containers including corrosives, oils, pesticides such as agricultural and industrial chemicals. Careful safety considerations should be taken when handling and disposing of hazardous chemicals.

- Try to identify chemicals and their hazards using labels and markings. If it is not identifiable, seek expert advice from a waste management consultant.
- If a container may cause potential risk, (for example bulging under pressure, leaking, or in a precarious position), isolate the immediate area and call '000'. Firefighting authorities are equipped and trained to deal with these situations.
- Isolate chemicals from general waste.
- Contact the local authority for advice on disposal of the waste.



Slips, trips and falls

It is important to be aware that the terrain in a fire affected area is likely to have changed.

- Watch out for risks such as downed power lines, trees or burned debris.
- Be aware of damaged infrastructure including damaged walls, bridges, roads and footpaths.

Look out for exposed pits or underground tanks which may have been damaged.

Musculoskeletal injuries

Manual handling tasks including lifting, pushing and pulling can cause musculoskeletal injuries or disorders if the associated risks are not properly managed.

- Take appropriate action to assess the weight of a load and lift/move it in the most appropriate manner.
- Get help from a second person or use a mechanical aid (such as a bobcat) to move heavier items.

Quad bike use

Quad bikes are a major cause of death and serious injury in rural workplaces with many incidents associated with rollovers. After a bushfire, the terrain may have changed, and this can contribute to an increased risk of rollover.

- Decide if the use of a quad bike is completely necessary.
- Wear an appropriate helmet.
- Identify and assess potential hazards prior to attempting to drive through bushfire affected areas.
- Operate quad bike at a safe speed suitable to the conditions.
- Do not allow children or untrained, inexperienced people to operate quad bikes.

Asbestos

Buildings constructed before 1988 may contain asbestos cement (or 'AC') sheeting in walls, roofs, floor underlays, eaves, chimney flues or asbestos in vinyl floor tiles and backing to sheet linoleum. These AC materials are generally not a health risk unless they are cut, broken, drilled or crushed, where asbestos fibres may be released. The Work Health and Safety Regulations 2011 include more specific requirements for PCBUs to manage the risks associated with asbestos in the workplace. Further information is available in the [Code of Practice: How to Manage and Control Asbestos in the Workplace](#).



More Information

- [Comcare Bushfire page](#)
- [Code of Practice - How to Manage Work Health and Safety Risks](#)
- [Code of Practice – Demolition Work](#)
- [Hazardous manual tasks](#)