

About...

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.

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.

Permit requirements

A building permit must be obtained for a private bushfire shelter (bushfire bunker) prior

Private bushfire shelters (bushfire bunkers)

to construction. Bushfire shelters have to comply with performance requirements set out in the Building Code of Australia including safe accessing 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, or
- Apply to the Building Appeals Board 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 models that have a certificate of accreditation will be listed on the VBA website - www.vba.vic.gov.au

- The Australian Building codes Board have published a design document – Performing Standard for private bushfire shelters Part 1 – 2010 which is available at www.abcb.gov.au

It is important that you seek the advice of a relevant registered 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 VBA website at:

www.vba.vic.gov.au

The VBA recommends people consider their options carefully, and view a private bushfire shelter as a part of your overall bushfire survival plan, 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.

For further information and assistance contact the VBA on 1300 815 127 or visit

www.vba.vic.gov.au