



Bushfires and Your Child's School or Preschool

A GUIDE FOR FAMILIES

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This brochure provides you with important information about our approach to managing bushfire risk in government schools and preschools. We want to ensure parents and carers are well prepared for a bushfire emergency.

Please help us prepare for the fire danger season by:

- » familiarising yourself with the information contained in this brochure
- » reading all bushfire information provided to you by your child's school, preschool, vacation, rural or out of school hours care, including their site emergency management plan
- » talking to your children about what will happen if a bushfire occurs when they are at school or preschool
- » making sure your emergency contact details are updated and made available to your school or preschool before the start of the fire danger season
- » making a personal bushfire survival plan for your family and letting your child's school or preschool know if this will affect your child's attendance.

By taking the above steps it will help us to keep your children as safe as possible.



Government of South Australia
Department for Education and
Child Development

Bushfire risk ratings

A bushfire 'risk rating' is applied to all schools and preschools in designated bushfire-prone areas, based on their 'bushfire attack level' (BAL). A BAL measures a site's potential for exposure to ember attack, radiant heat and direct flame in the event of a bushfire emergency. The BAL is calculated by specialist consultants, who analyse information such as the location, surroundings or construction of the site, previous bushfire history and other relevant factors.

The 4 categories are:

- » **R1** Extreme/Very high-risk
- » **R2** High-risk
- » **R3** Medium/Low-risk
- » **NR** Non-rated.

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Bushfire preparation

All government schools and preschools have a site emergency management plan. Schools and preschools with a risk rating of R1 and R2 are also required to have a bushfire response plan. Sites in bushfire-prone areas that are rated R3 or NR are strongly encouraged to have a bushfire response plan, but it is not currently mandatory.

During the months of August and September each year, R1 and R2 sites are required to prepare for the annual fire danger season. Generally the fire danger season starts on 1 November and ends on 30 April. The Country Fire Service (CFS) advises us of the actual dates of each fire danger season every October.

Preparations

Pre-season bushfire preparations at schools and preschools include:

- » doing a bushfire preparation audit to ensure the site is bushfire ready
- » managing vegetation to reduce bushfire fuel loads on and around the site
- » updating their site emergency management plan and bushfire response plan.

In addition, there are processes in place to ensure that school bus and taxi services have appropriate plans in place in the event of a bushfire affecting their usual routes.

Schools and preschools practice their emergency procedures throughout the year and, before the fire danger season, R1 and R2 sites work hard to ensure that all staff and students understand what to do in the event of a bushfire emergency.

TIP

Find your school's risk rating by searching Bushfire Information at **www.decd.gov.au**.

Total fire ban days

During fire danger season, the CFS advises the public of total fire ban days. The rating is forecast by the Bureau of Meteorology each day and is an early indicator of the potential danger, should a bushfire start. A fire danger rating is not a predictor of how likely a bushfire is to occur, but how dangerous it could be if it did occur.

There are 3 classifications of total fire ban – 'severe', 'extreme' and 'catastrophic' – and schools may be required to take special measures on these days to make sure that they are ready to respond to a bushfire threat.

The bushfire threat flowchart can be found on the DECD website and is a handy guide to what schools and preschools may need to do on the respective fire ban days, depending on their own risk rating.

'Catastrophic' fire danger days

If the CFS gives advance notice of a forecast 'catastrophic' fire danger day, schools and preschools in the relevant fire ban district(s) that have a bushfire risk rating of R1 or R2 will be directed to **close automatically**. In addition, **all** school transport services in the affected fire ban district(s) will be cancelled.

Schools and preschools that have a risk rating of R3 or NR will remain open as usual, but are required to be vigilant because of the increased danger posed if a bushfire began burning under those conditions.

If your child's school or preschool is open, but their bus or taxi service has been cancelled, you will need to make your own travel arrangements. If your child is unable to attend because of the transport cancellation, you will need to advise the school.

The closure of schools and preschools on days of forecast 'catastrophic' fire danger enables families in the district to enact their personal bushfire survival plan more easily. It is important that you have arrangements in place if your child's school or preschool is closed, even if your own plan does not involve leaving the area. It is not advisable for children to be left at home on days of 'catastrophic' fire danger.

If the CFS elevates an existing fire danger rating to 'catastrophic' on the day in question, all schools, preschools and transport services will remain **open** and **operate as normal** unless otherwise advised.



School closures

On rare occasions, it may be necessary for the department to direct any school or preschool to close because of bushfire activity and/or an increased bushfire threat level. The decision to close schools and preschools is not taken lightly because of the known impact on parents, caregivers and local communities. As a consequence, a formal direction to close is only issued under predefined circumstances or when there is a genuine belief that schools will be endangered by a bushfire event if they remain open.

When a site has been directed to close, no person is permitted to be on site. This means that all services, including vacation care, out of school hours care, rural care and any scheduled activities by private user groups will also be cancelled.

TIP

Keep your contact details up to date with your child's school or preschool.

Notifying parents and caregivers

The department informs schools and preschools of 'catastrophic' fire danger days or potential bushfire threats as soon as the information is provided by the CFS. Schools and preschools have the responsibility to notify parents and caregivers of an impending closure.

Since the type of notification method(s) used will vary from one site to another, it is important that you understand how your school or preschool will communicate this information to you. It will not always be possible for the site to provide information to you during operating hours and it may be necessary for them to contact you via telephone, text message or through social media and mobile applications.

It is imperative that you know and understand how your school or preschool will communicate emergencies to you and that they have up-to-date contact information.

Parents and caregivers should only take action in relation to official notifications from their school, preschool or through the department's official information sources.

All school closures are coordinated by DECD's Security and Emergency Management unit.

For more information on days of 'catastrophic' fire danger ratings, including school closures and changes to bus and taxi services, contact the Department for Education and Child Development **Emergency Information Hotline** on **1800 000 279**.

School excursions and camps

All schools and preschools take into consideration risks associated with the fire danger season when planning any excursions or camps. This includes monitoring daily weather conditions to determine if any planned activities will be cancelled due to fire danger ratings.

If a bushfire is burning on the day of an intended camp or excursion and is likely to threaten the destination or return to the school, the **excursion or camp will be cancelled.**

In the event of a bushfire or grass fire impacting on a camp or excursion that is already underway, the school and preschool will liaise with the Security and Emergency Management unit to determine the most appropriate action to take. Parents will be contacted by their child's school or preschool to inform them of any action or changes that will be taken as a result.

What you can do to prepare for the fire danger season

Have a personal bushfire survival plan and discuss it with your children. Keep it up to date and make sure that all family members know what to do.

If your bushfire survival plan affects your child's attendance at school, preschool, vacation care, rural care or out of school hours care, you need to let the school or service know.

Visit the CFS website **www.cfs.sa.gov.au** for more information on how to develop your own plan.

Know your child's school or preschool bushfire response plan and:

- » give your child's school, preschool, vacation care, rural care or out of school hours care your up-to-date contact details (mobile phone number, email address and alternative contact number)
- » review the list of key contacts and people authorised to collect your child on your behalf
- » download the AlertSA app to your smart phone and like the CFS, SES, SAPOL and DECD pages on Facebook
- » bookmark the AlertSA, CFS, SES, SAPOL and DECD websites so you can easily access them in an emergency
- » practice your bushfire survival plan with your family
- » talk to your child about what will happen if a bushfire emergency occurs.



In the event of a bushfire emergency

If a bushfire is approaching, the safety of children and other occupants is the highest priority. In these situations schools and preschools will:

- » move students to a designated bushfire refuge or other suitable location
- » fill available containers with water
- » close windows, doors and turn off the air conditioning
- » remain inside with students until the main fire front has passed
- » listen to local radio and monitor the CFS website
- » work with the DECD Security and Emergency Management unit to manage the situation and keep informed about changing conditions.

You may also receive advice from your school or preschool advising you that they have taken emergency precautions because of a potential bushfire threat.

TIP

Download the AlertSA app to your smart phone and 'like' the CFS, SES, SAPOL and DECD pages on Facebook.

Accessing emergency information

DECD's Security and Emergency Management unit is responsible for coordinating and managing bushfires, major incidents and disasters affecting government schools and services.

Working in partnership with emergency services such as the CFS, Metropolitan Fire Service (MFS), State Emergency Services (SES) and South Australian Police (SAPOL), the Security and Emergency Management unit acts as a conduit between sites and the emergency management community.

In any bushfire situation the unit also maintains the Department for Education and Child Development Emergency Information Hotline to provide advice to the community on:

- » what is happening at your child's school or preschool
- » any school closures in place (planned and actual)
- » any changes to transport services such as the re-routing of school buses and taxis
- » any new collection points for your child's school bus or taxis due to road closures
- » when it is safe to collect your child
- » when it is advisable to leave your child at the school or preschool due to a high level of risk to enter into the bushfire emergency zone or surrounding areas.

The Department for Education and Child Development Emergency Information Hotline operates during business hours, with an out-of-hours messaging service at other times. The hotline is the best source of current and up-to-date information on bushfire emergencies.

**Department for Education and
Child Development Emergency
Information Hotline 1800 000 279**

During a bushfire emergency

Consider these important points before you make a decision:

- If your child has been moved to the school's bushfire refuge, they are accounted for and supervised.
- If you were to remove them from this location, would you have a safer place to go, is the route safe?
- Is your child safest at the bushfire refuge?
- What information has the school provided to you?
- What instructions did they give?
- Did they actually recommend that you collect your child?
- Have you contacted the Department for Education and Child Development Emergency Information Hotline for up-to-date information on the incident and the welfare of the site occupants?



Frequently asked questions

My child attends a R1 or R2 risk rated site, and a 'catastrophic' fire danger warning has been declared for the following day. Will their school be open?

Total fire bans are issued by the CFS for individual fire ban districts. If your child's school or preschool is in one of the fire ban districts that has a 'catastrophic' fire danger day and it has a risk rating of R1 or R2, it will be closed. This closure will also extend to any vacation care, rural care, out of school hours care services that operate from the site.

If the fire ban district that your child's school is located in does not have a 'catastrophic' fire danger day declared, it will still be open as usual.

My son's school is closed because of the 'catastrophic' fire danger day. Why is my daughter's school still open, even though they are in the same district? Surely it's still dangerous?

Schools and preschools that have been given a bushfire risk rating of R1 or R2 are considered to be most at risk if a bushfire threatens to impact upon them. 'Catastrophic' fire danger conditions make it highly likely that a bushfire could be started and will make it extremely difficult for emergency services to get it under control. R1 and R2 rated schools and preschools do not open on these days to assist in reducing a clear risk.

Sites that have a bushfire risk rating of R3 or NR are less likely to be impacted by a bushfire and are likely to be safer locations if a bushfire begins to threaten the area. They are generally located within or extremely close to CFS 'bushfire safer places'. Although there is a moderate risk of embers hitting the school or preschool building during a serious bushfire event, the location and construction of the site will offer a higher level of protection and 'spot fires' are unlikely to take hold within the grounds.

The department considers R3 and NR rated schools and preschools to be relatively safe locations, which is why they remain open.

My child catches the school bus every day but his school is not a high-bushfire-risk location. How does a 'catastrophic' fire danger day affect me?

If your child takes school transport or uses a school taxi service and a 'catastrophic' fire danger day is declared for that fire ban district, **all** school transport services will be cancelled and you will need to make alternative arrangements.

Does the transport cancellation policy apply to all districts? Surely the bushfire risk is not the same everywhere?

If your fire ban district **does not** have any schools or preschools that have a R1 or R2 risk rating, the transport cancellation policy will not apply. Currently, only the North East Pastoral and North West Pastoral districts do not have any risk-rated sites.

What happens if the weather changes and during the day the CFS upgrades the fire danger warning from 'extreme' to 'catastrophic'?

All schools, regardless of their risk rating, will remain open and all transport services including school buses and taxis will operate as normal. You may wish to enact your own personal bushfire survival plan, and may choose to collect your child early if necessary.

Is my school's bushfire refuge also the local community bushfire refuge?

No. If your town has a community refuge, it will most likely be a town hall or other locally identified building. A school's bushfire refuge is purely designed to house the children and staff in the event of an imminent bushfire threat. Check with your local CFS for the location of your community bushfire refuge.

A neighbour told me that a grass fire is burning near my child's school/preschool. Should I collect my child?

If a fire is burning near your child's school, the school will enact their bushfire response plan (or site emergency management plan). This will include moving to a bushfire refuge or other suitable location to ensure all children and staff are safe.

If a fire is burning in the area, you need to seriously consider whether you should travel through the affected area to get to school. Your child is being cared for by the school and collecting your child from the relative safety of a bushfire refuge may put you and your child at unnecessary risk from actual bushfire or reduced visibility from smoke. In addition, there may be road closures in place that you are not aware of. Roads and access points need to be kept clear for emergency service responses.

How will I be notified if a bushfire is affecting my child's school?

Each school determines its own method of notifying parents of an active emergency, so it is important that you are aware of the system used by your child's school. Your school may have a dedicated SMS system, use social media or smartphone applications and will likely use these mediums to communicate during an emergency.

However, you should consider the possibility that these systems may not operate effectively if there is a power outage or a loss of telecommunications infrastructure in the area. If you suspect there may be an incident threatening your child's school or preschool, contact the **Department for Education and Child Development Emergency Information Hotline – 1800 000 279**. Schools and preschools need to keep their communication lines open so that emergency services and the department can contact them to provide advice and assistance.

I've just received a SMS from my child's school advising me a fire is impacting on the school, what should I do?

The school will enact its bushfire response plan (or site emergency management plan) and move all children and staff to a bushfire refuge or other safe location. This is most likely the safest place for your child to be at that moment. It is not a good idea to access the school until the fire danger has passed. If you do attend the school and attempt to remove your child, staff may ask you to stay with your child at the refuge. Do not expose you or your child to unnecessary risk by attempting to drive through active bushfire conditions.

I live in a bushfire prone area and as part of my personal bushfire survival plan I keep my child at home with a parent during extreme weather conditions. Do I need to tell anyone?

You need to advise your child's school, preschool, vacation care, rural care or out of school hours care services if your child is not going to be in attendance that day. This helps the school to manage their resources and keep account of all students in attendance on the day.

My child is scheduled to go to school camp/excursion today and I am worried about the risk of a bushfire as there are forecast 'extreme' weather conditions, what should I do?

Schools will reconsider any planned camps or excursions if weather conditions have the potential to put children and staff at risk, and will monitor daily weather conditions to determine if any activities will be cancelled.

Your child's school will advise you if any planned camps or excursions are to be cancelled. If a planned camp or excursion hasn't been cancelled and you believe there is a risk, you can choose to remove your child from the activity and keep them at home. If you choose this option, please ensure you inform the school. Alternatively, you can request your child attends school as normal on the day/s of the planned activity.

My child is currently on school camp/excursion and a bushfire has started close to the area. What will the school do to keep my child safe? What should I do?

If a bushfire or grass fire starts and is impacting on a camp or excursion that is already underway, the school and preschool will take advice from DECD's Security, Bushfire and Emergency Management unit. You will receive information from your child's school/preschool to inform you of any action or changes that will be taken as a result. It is not advisable to collect your child from the camp or excursion as it may put you and your child at risk. The Security, Bushfire and Emergency Management unit will work with emergency services to keep children and staff safe. In these situations, contact the Department for Education and Child Development Emergency Information Hotline – 1800 000 279 for further information.

Who should I call for more information if a bushfire emergency is near my child's school?

The Department for Education and Child Development Emergency Information Hotline – 1800 000 279.

Parent checklist

- ☐ Have you given your emergency contact details to your child's school or preschool, including the names and contact details for people authorised to collect your child from school/preschool?
- ☐ Have you received and read the information provided to you by your child's school/preschool, including their site emergency management plan (bushfire response plan)?
- ☐ Do you have your own personal bushfire survival plan in place? Does it consider how you will manage different scenarios and consider school, preschool, school transport, out of school hours care, vacation and rural care? You need to practice enacting your plan in advance.
- ☐ Have you talked to your children about what will happen if a bushfire occurs when they are at school or preschool?
- ☐ If your personal bushfire survival plan affects your children's attendance at school/preschool or other related service, have you let your school/preschool know?
- ☐ Do you know who to contact for information? Have you downloaded the AlertSA app to your mobile device to keep up-to-date of real-time events and warning information?
- ☐ Are your family and caregivers ready for a bushfire emergency?



Contact Information

Department for Education and Child Development Emergency Information Hotline	1800 000 279
DECD website	www.decd.sa.gov.au
AlertSA website and mobile app	www.alert.sa.gov.au
SA CFS	www.cfs.sa.gov.au
CFS Bushfire Information Hotline	1300 362 361
Emergency Services	000
South Australian Police	131 444

Bushfire information for the deaf, hard of hearing or speech impaired

If you are deaf, hard of hearing or have a speech impairment, you can contact the CFS through the National Relay Service:

TTY users	Phone 133 677 then ask for 1300 362 361
Speak and listen users	Phone 1300 555 727 then ask for 1300 362 361
Internet relay users	Connect to the NRS then ask for 1300 362 361
To report a fire or emergency	Access TTY 106 (TTY users only)

If you want to make a call using **Auslan** to someone who speaks English and uses an ordinary phone, **video relay is the call option for you.**

If you want to make a call on a mobile phone without an internet connection **SMS relay** is the best call option. Send an SMS on your mobile phone to **0423 677 767 asking for 1300 362 361.**

TTY 106 is a dedicated text-based emergency relay service with direct access to fire, police and ambulance services. It can only be contacted through a TTY machine, not from a mobile phone or ordinary phone.