

VICTORIAN TRADES HALL COUNCIL
APPROVED SAFETY STANDARD

VTHC2020.01

Bushfire Smoke

All outdoor work must cease when the EPA Air Quality Index level is Hazardous.

Bushfire smoke contains a mixture of gasses and very fine particles that are hazardous to health. Those most at risk are firefighters, other emergency service workers and those working outdoors.

There is currently no evidence of a threshold below which exposure to particulate matter does not cause any health effects. Health effects can occur after both short and long-term exposure to particulate matter, therefore outdoor work must cease when the EPA Air Quality Index reaches Hazardous.

PLEASE TURN OVER FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

HEALTH HAZARDS OF BUSHFIRE SMOKE

- Short-term: making lung and heart conditions (e.g. asthma, chronic bronchitis, emphysema) worse. Asthmatics may need to use their medications more often.
- Those who suffer from chronic bronchitis/emphysema or heart conditions are at an increased risk and need to take additional precautions, including staying indoors.
- Long-term: unknown but depend on extent and duration. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare has estimated that ordinarily approximately 3000 deaths annually are attributable to air pollution.

People most at risk from particle pollution exposure include those with heart or lung disease (including asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease-COPD), older adults, and children. Research indicates that pregnant women, newborns, and people with certain health conditions, such as obesity or diabetes, also may be more susceptible to Particulate Matter (PM)-related effects. Cardiac arrests increased in Melbourne during 2006-07 when smoke from bushfires affected Melbourne Residents.

Air quality is measured using the World Health Organisation Air Quality Index (AQI). It measures the particles that are in the air and then the EPA provides a level of Good, Moderate, Poor, Very Poor and Hazardous based on the number of harmful particles (PM10 and PM2.5) and gasses (ozone, nitrogen dioxide, carbon monoxide, sulfur dioxide) in the air. If you are concerned about the levels of smoke, take the following steps:



Scan with the camera app on your phone to access the EPA website.

1. Go to the EPA website and check the current Air Quality Index Level at: www.epa.vic.gov.au/EPAAirWatch.
2. Find the Air Quality Index Level below and implement the actions outlined in the table for that air quality level.

Air Quality Index Levels of Health Concern	Actions
Good	<p>HSRs: Under s35, request that the employer develop, in consultation with all HSRs, a smoke plan which will be implemented when agreed.</p> <p>Be prepared to issue a PIN if the employer refuses to discuss a smoke plan.</p>
Moderate	<p>Employers: Consider limiting/rescheduling outdoor work for any workers with asthma or other lung problems do not work outdoors. Check Fire Danger rating for area.</p> <p>HSRs: Meet with employer to ready implementation of smoke plan.</p>
Poor	<p>Employers: No strenuous outdoor work for at risk workers. Ensure any workers who must continue to work outdoors have appropriate PPE. Check Fire Danger rating for area.</p> <p>HSRs: Ensure smoke plan is implemented; consult with delegate; contact union, Talk to your DWG about the smoke plan and any concerns they may have.</p>
Very Poor	<p>Employers: Ensure that no strenuous outdoor work is done. Monitor air quality inside the workplace. No outdoor work for at risk workers. Check Fire Danger rating for area and take appropriate measures.</p> <p>HSRs: Ensure there is no strenuous outdoor work scheduled; request workplace air monitoring results; if the employer is scheduling strenuous outdoor work, contact your union.</p>
Hazardous	<p>Employers: Cease all outdoor work.* Check Fire Danger rating for area and take appropriate measures.</p> <p>HSRs: Ensure NO outdoor work is undertaken by anyone. Issue an OHS Act s74 direction to cease outdoor work.</p>

*Emergency work with the provision of suitable RPE can continue if necessary.



Q&A WITH ADVICE FROM WORKSAFE, FAIR WORK OMBUDSMAN, EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AND DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES

If the air is hazardous, do I have to work? Will I get paid?

- If your HSR issues a cease work direction, then you do not have to work and you will be paid.
- If your employer shuts down a workplace, speak to your union and consult your EBA to see whether the agreement allows it and provisions where applicable.
- If your employer stands down an employee, consult your EBA and speak to your union. During a stand down, employees don't need to be paid but accrue leave in the usual way. You may be able to take paid leave during this period.

What if I can't travel to work because the air is hazardous (even if I work indoors) and dangerous to my health? Will I be paid?

- If you're able to work from home, ask your employer if you are able to make arrangements to do so in the event of hazardous air quality;
- If you are unable to work from home and travelling to work would make you unfit for work, you may take paid sick leave. Check your EBA for your entitlements and requirements regarding taking sick leave.
- If your EBA doesn't otherwise prevent it, if you feel that you are at risk of illness or injury you may complete a Statutory Declaration if supporting evidence is required.

What if I need to take care of a child/family member due to environmental reasons (ie: school shut-down, person is sensitive to exposure to hazardous air)? Will I be paid?

- Employees can take paid carer's leave to care for or support a member of their immediate family or household who is sick, injured or due to an unexpected emergency.
- Check your EBA for your entitlements and requirements regarding taking carer's leave.

- Full-time and part-time employees who have used all of their paid sick and carer's leave, and casual employees, are entitled to two days unpaid carer's leave per occasion to provide care and support to an immediate family or household member due to illness, injury or in the event of an unexpected emergency.
- Casual employees, whilst not being able to take paid carer's leave, are entitled to take leave without your boss threatening to or actually taking adverse action against you (eg. Loss of future shifts).

What if I don't feel safe going to work when there's a Code Red or an emergency warning issued in my area? Will I be paid?

- Notify your employer in writing and include your HSR in correspondence (or delegate if no HSR) explaining that you feel unsafe to go to work.
- Call your union.
- Consult your EBA to see what provisions exist.
- You may be able to take sick leave. If your EBA doesn't otherwise prevent it, if you feel that you are at risk of illness or injury you may complete a Statutory Declaration if supporting evidence is required.
- You may be able to take another form of leave.

What if a member of my family has sustained a life-threatening illness or injury, or died in the bushfires? Will I be able to take paid leave?

- Consult your EBA to see what arrangements exist.
- All employees are entitled to two days of compassionate leave per occasion to spend time with a member of their immediate family or household who has sustained a life-threatening illness or injury. Compassionate leave may also be taken after the death of a member of the employee's immediate family or household. Employees (other than casual employees) are entitled to be paid for periods of compassionate leave. Your EBA may allow for greater entitlements.

What if I want to take leave to volunteer to assist affected communities? Will I be paid?

- Check your EBA to see what entitlements exist.
- Under the NES employees who are members of a recognised emergency management body to take unpaid community service leave for certain emergency management activities such as dealing with a natural disaster. An employee must also be:
 1. engaging in an activity that involves dealing with an emergency or natural disaster
 2. engaging in the activity on a voluntary basis (whether or not the employee directly or indirectly takes or agrees to take an honorarium, gratuity or similar payment wholly or partly for engaging in the activity)

3. a member of, or has a member-like association with, a recognised emergency management body

4. requested to engage in an activity by or on behalf of the body, or it would be reasonable to expect that such a request would have been made if circumstances had permitted.

A recognised emergency management body is:

- a body that has a role or function under a plan that is for coping with emergencies / natural disasters (prepared by the Commonwealth or a state or territory)
- a fire-fighting, civil defence or rescue body
- any other body which is mainly involved in responding to an emergency or natural disaster.

This includes bodies such as:

- the State Emergency Service (SES)
- Country Fire Authority (CFA)
- the RSPCA (in respect of animal rescue during emergencies or natural disasters).
- Awards and agreements may also contain specific provisions in relation to community service leave in addition to the NES. Under the NES, the amount of time that can be taken is not specified, however the employee is entitled to the following time off work as long as the absence is reasonable in all the circumstances:
 - the time that the employee is engaged in the activity
 - reasonable travel time associated with the activity
 - reasonable rest time immediately following the activity.

An employee who wants to take a period of community service leave must tell their employer as soon as practicable, including the expected period of the absence and, if required by their employer, provide reasonable evidence of the reason for the leave.

General Tips to Remember

- Communicate with your employer in writing and keep a record of all communications (emails, texts, messages, etc). If you can't, send yourself a text message or write an email to yourself with a record of any verbal communications
- Your union and your elected health and safety representatives are there to help keep you safe and healthy at work. They can help you if you are having problems with your employer
- You have the right to say no to unsafe work and your employer has an obligation to consult with you about matters of occupational health and safety. Check out ohsreps.org.au for more info, or call your union.

Resources for mental health, financial and other support for bushfire affected communities, volunteers and emergency services workers:

Federal Government financial support:

Disaster Recovery Allowance

Workers who have lost income as a direct result of the bushfires may be eligible to claim a Disaster Recovery Allowance (DRA) from the Department of Human Services (DHS).

What does the Disaster Recovery Allowance include?

Workers can receive up to 13 weeks' pay at Newstart or Youth Allowance Rates. DHS states that it will provide payments from the "date that the income is lost".

DHS will take into account the workers' income prior to and following the disaster.

What are the basic eligibility requirements?

- Must work or live in a declared Local Government Area that has been impacted by bushfires.
- Must be an Australian Citizen or "hold an eligible visa".
- Applicants are required to prove that they will earn less than the "relevant threshold amounts". The threshold amount is the fortnightly payment that the worker may be eligible for. For example, a single person with no children would need to prove that they will not earn over \$1060.67 from alternative sources of income, such as interest earned from assets or shares.

Federal Government mental health support:

Extra mental health support (in addition to existing provision of 10 psychological therapy sessions under Better Access Program) from 17th January for:

- People impacted;
- Emergency management workers and volunteers.

This support is for 10 Medicare benefits for 10 mental health treatment services.

People will not need referrals or mental health plans to access these services. To arrange treatment people can talk to:

- GP;
- Psychologist;
- Occupational Therapist;
- Social Worker.

Social workers can assist in organising counselling sessions at:

- Mobile Service Centres and in Mobile Servicing Teams;
- Recovery centres and evacuation centres;
- Mental health services commissioned by Primary Health Networks.

Victorian Government support:

\$14.4 million Victorian Bushfires Case Support Program announced 12/01/2020 and immediately available for people in fire affected areas in Gippsland and North East Victoria.

There is no charge for the services provided by the program.

Support coordinators will be a single point of contact and work with local residents to link them to support they need including mental health support and financial counselling.

They can also assist with practical things such as filling out paperwork, accessing grants and financial claims and navigating services available through local, state and commonwealth governments.

Support is also available for people who may have been impacted by the bushfires in Gippsland and North East Victoria but live in other parts of the state.

Culturally appropriate services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Victorians will be offered by local Aboriginal community Controlled Agencies.

Access to support coordinators is via local council, visiting a recovery centre or calling 1800 560 760. Recovery centre locations and opening hours at emergency.vic.gov.au

Services will be delivered by Windermere and Gippsland Lakes Community Health in Gippsland, Gateway Health in Northern Victoria, and cohealth in other parts of the state. Windermere is also providing a statewide contact, advice and information service.

Other services state and federal governments are referring people to:

Lifeline: 13 11 14 lifeline.org.au

Beyondblue: 1300 224 636 beyondblue.org.au

Kids Helpline: 1800 55 1800 kidshelpline.com.au