

New Bushfire Building Standards

In response to Victoria's devastating bushfires, the Victorian Government has introduced a new residential standard for building which they believe will allow people to build their homes without compromising safety.

In essence what has transpired is that the Australian Standard 3959 "Construction in Bushfire Prone Areas" -1999 has been revised and adopted in Victoria as an interim standard which will be for a maximum of 12 months as the legislative changes were introduced via a Premier's Certificate which by-passes the normal Parliamentary processes.

The 1999 standard has been under review since that date and at this point in time, the stakeholders which include material manufacturers, builders, architects, engineers, building surveyors and the Australian Fire Authorities have not signed off, apparently on the finer details.

Interestingly the CSIRO have been very vocal as they believe that the new code weakens the existing legislation.

The fires this year have rewritten the rules registering temperatures in excess of 1200^o Celsius and wind speeds of more than 120 km per hour.

The major changes are as follows:-

- The whole State of Victoria is now a declared bushfire area. Previously each council had the ability to declare their municipality as a bushfire prone area.
- New standards apply to all residential buildings (same as before) except that associated outbuilding within 6m of the dwelling or buildings are considered.
- The number of Bushfire attack levels has increased from 4 to 6.
- The 1999 Standard focussed on ember attack where the new code considers radiant heat, flame contact and burning embers or a combination of these three attack forms.
- In the higher levels of the Bushfire Attack Level (BAL) measures required for new residential buildings may include concrete slabs, non combustible materials for external walls, shutters or toughened glass for windows.
- Once a building application is lodged for a residential building, the Building Surveyor would be required to carry out a site inspection to check that the BAL nominated by either the building designer, the owner or the builder was applicable to that site.
- In the past only the openable sections of windows had to be protected with metal flywire screens where as now, the whole window in higher BAL requires protection due to flying objects followed by embers.

As our area was declared as a bush fire prone area previously, the impact financially will not be great as the only real changes would focus around window protection and possibly the external cladding.

The conditions on Planning Permits in relation to the retention of vegetation are one issue that the government are struggling with. If vegetation management controls are not implemented this will be a major problem and the bushfire construction controls introduced on March 11, 2009 may be futile.

In some instances, authorities having jurisdiction in certain bushfire locations may recommend or not permit the construction of a residential building due to the unrealistic risk exposure.

It should be understood that compliance with the Interim Standard will not guarantee that a building will survive a bushfire event on every occasion due to the unpredictable nature and behaviour of fire and the difficulties associated with extreme weather conditions.



D. Bruce Howie
Municipal Building Surveyor BS1117
Falls Creek Resort Management Board

