

Public Health Information -

Advice for people with water tanks living in bushfire-affected areas

Introduction

Bushfires generate large amounts of smoke, debris and ash. If you live in bushfire-affected areas you need to be aware of the possibility of contamination of your tank water from dead animals, debris or ash being washed off the roof and into your rainwater tank when it rains.

As well as being a nuisance, the ash and debris can contain chemical components that might be harmful if they get into your drinking water supply. Obviously, any dead animals will contaminate the water and make it unsafe to drink.

Debris, smoke and ash present on your roof indicate that the first flush of water will not be suitable for drinking. If you have been hosing down your roof as part of your fire plans, or if it has already rained, these contaminants may have already washed into your tank.

The same issues apply to catchment areas. Following rain, debris will wash into creeks and streams, therefore water diverted from creeks or streams will also not be suitable for drinking. Untreated water from these sources should not be used for drinking in any event. Water from deep bores or wells should continue to be fit for human consumption.

What can I do to my rainwater tank to reduce contamination from a bushfire?

Install a first flush diverter between the roof and the tank to prevent ash and other debris contaminating the water. These are available from most hardware stores and suppliers of rainwater tanks.

How do I know if my tank water is contaminated after a bushfire?

The best guide is your knowledge of what your tank water usually looks and tastes like.

- If the water tastes or smells unusual or is cloudy, discoloured or contains particles, then assume it is contaminated. Do not use it for drinking, preparing food or making ice until the tank has been cleaned and refilled with new rainwater or clean water brought in by a water tanker/carter.
- If in doubt, assume the tank water is contaminated, or, you may choose to have the tank water tested (for contaminants such as chemical, microbiological and algal levels) before making a decision to not use it for drinking purposes.
- Water that is not suitable to drink may be used for other purposes such as fire fighting or watering the garden, but do not give it to animals to drink.

When can I start using my rainwater tank again for drinking water purposes?

- Regardless of whether your tank needs cleaning or not, you still need to clean the roof to prevent contamination by debris entering the tank. Use the first flush diverter on your rainwater tank to divert any residual debris away from your drinking water storage. If you don't have a first flush diverter, disconnect the inlet from the roof to the tank until the roof has been cleaned of debris.
- When safe to do so, arrange to clean debris from the roof and gutters before it rains. Be cautious when doing this to prevent injuring yourself.

- Dead birds or other small animals found in gutters should be removed using gloves and put in a plastic bag for disposal.
- When cleaning out the tank, remove any sludge and rinse/scrub the interior with a diluted household bleach solution (according to the directions on the label). Do not climb inside the tank unless you can ensure you have good ventilation, as an enclosed space can quickly become a potential hazard.

Further information

- The brochure "*Your Private Drinking Water Supply*" provides information that is designed to help keep your supply of drinking water safe and healthy, including advice about how to disinfect with chlorine. It can be downloaded from:
<http://www.health.vic.gov.au/environment/water/tanks.htm>
- General advice for water carters can be found at: <http://www.health.vic.gov.au/foodsafety/>
- Hard copies of these documents are available from Department of Human Services regional offices, Councils, community centres and bushfire recovery centres.
- For a laboratory that can test a tank water sample, look under 'Analysts' in the business telephone directory.
- For advice on disposal of dead birds and other small animals, contact your local Council's Environmental Health Section.
- For further health information about the quality of your rain water tank after a fire, contact the Environmental Health Unit, Department of Human Services on 1300 761 874
- Other sheets relating to bushfires and public health include:
 - "Hazards on Your Property after a Bushfire" and
 - "Advice for people with water tanks living in bushfire affected areas"

Both can be downloaded from www.health.vic.gov.au or by calling the Environmental Health Unit of Department of Human Services on 1300 761 874.