

Hot Days, Bushfires and Bushwalking

[NB Edited from information received from the Bushwalking NSW Tracks and Access Officer in his report for November 2013 – please refer to the disclaimer at end].

In the past few decades we have seen more devastating and fast moving bushfires than we imagined possible. It now seems that this is a pattern set to continue and get worse. In 2012 the IPCC predicted that “in south-eastern Australia, the frequency of days when extreme fire danger threatens will increase by up to 25 per cent by 2020, and up to 70 per cent by 2050.”

As activity leaders our first priority is to the welfare of the whole group. Welfare trumps the potential fun of a trip every time.

When to cancel an activity

Park closed	An activity will also be cancelled if the park manager declares the park or any of the tracks or trails (to be used) as closed.
Total Fire Ban, Severe Fire Danger	All day activities in bushfire prone areas are to be cancelled if either a Total Fire Ban is declared or if a Severe, Extreme or Catastrophic (code red) fire danger rating is declared for the area.
(Multi Day)	<p>For a multi-day activity every reasonable effort should be made to monitor fire activity, fire danger ratings, total fire bans and park closures during the activity. Please carry and use a mobile phone and/or a portable AM/FM radio to check news bulletins. If a Total Fire Ban is declared or if a Severe, Extreme or Catastrophic (code red) fire danger rating is declared (or suspected) then every reasonable effort should be made to leave the activity early. If leaving is not possible then the group should move to the safest area possible.</p> <p>Check the forecast before your activity – if the forecast suggests any day of temperatures over 30°C and high winds then assume there will be a Total Fire Ban.</p>

Exceptions

An activity can still go ahead during a total fire ban if an employee of the park manager says (in writing) that the activity is still safe to proceed in the area planned, or

If a park agency declares (in writing – such as on their website) an area to be used is specifically open during a total fire ban (such as picnic areas).

There are no exceptions for days declared as Extreme or Catastrophic (code red) fire danger rating for any activity in a bushfire prone area.

Other times

Bushfires will still occur on other days and can still be deadly. Leaders still need to consider bushfire survival plans for each activity and may still need to cancel activities due to specific conditions that make it impractical to minimising the risk from fire.

During the year land managers will be starting strategic fires in bushland across the country. These are carefully planned burns that need to be avoided. These fires will be listed as planned closures on the NSW NPWS website and as planned burns on the NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS) website (including all public land). Stay well clear of these burns. Seek advice from the land manager if you have an activity planned near the burn during or within two weeks after the planned burn.

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Finding the information you need

- The RFS publishes fire danger rating and Total Fire Bans at about 5pm the evening before. So Saturday's information will be available after 5pm on Friday. www.rfs.nsw.gov.au
- NPWS park closures www.environment.nsw.gov.au/NationalParks/FireClosure.aspx
- Forest NSW do not currently provide regular closure information online – you can phone their visitor information number 1300 655 687.
- Councils rarely post regular closure information online – please phone the relevant park lands manager for the council you are visiting if you have questions.
- Planned prescribed hazard reduction burn conducted on public land in NSW are listed on the RFS website www.rfs.nsw.gov.au/dsp_content.cfm?cat_id=689
- Bureau of Meteorology www.bom.gov.au
- Other states. The ACT is covered by the NSW RFS fire area 8. For other states or reserves please check the equivalent authority.

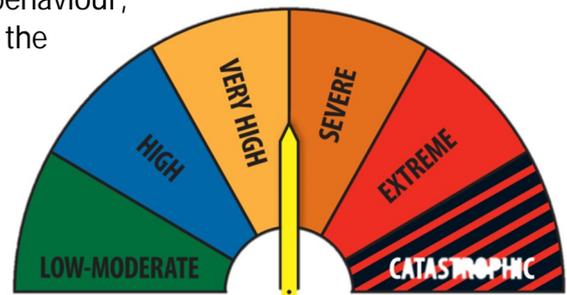
Definitions

Bushfire prone area: Is an area that can support a bushfire or is likely to be subject to bushfire attack.

www.rfs.nsw.gov.au/file_system/attachments/State08/Attachment_20070228_06EF9BB7.pdf

In practical terms for bushwalkers this is any area within a 200m from the edge of a National Park, State Forests or any other forested or grass land.

Bushfire danger rating: Is an assessment of the potential fire behaviour, the difficulty of suppressing a fire, and the potential impact on the community should a bush fire occur on a given day.



www.rfs.nsw.gov.au/file_system/attachments/Attachment_FireDangerRating.pdf

(NB Above PDF file is LARGE – 22,577 KB).

The rating ranges from low-moderate for days where fires are likely to be slow moving and easy to control - to Catastrophic for those days where a fire will be unbelievably hot, fast moving and uncontrollable (think Canberra 2003 and Victoria 2009).

Total Fire Ban day: A day where open fires are banned. This is to limit the number of fires that escape and threaten life, property and the environment, especially on days when it is very hot, dry and windy.

This means that it is illegal to use any camping stove on a bushwalk.

www.rfs.nsw.gov.au/dsp_content.cfm?cat_id=1110

Track & trail or park closure: Is when a land manager declares the walking track, management trails closed or the whole park closed. Often on days of total fire ban the NPWS will close the track and trails in a park but still allow use of picnic areas and lookouts.

Fire Areas: NSW is divided into 20 'Fire Areas'. When a total fire ban is declared and a Fire Danger Rating announced they will apply to a specific fire area. Each of the fire areas are made up of a series of local government areas. The fire areas cover large areas, for example the 'Greater Sydney Region' fire area is made up of all the Sydney Metro Councils as well as the Blue Mountains, Gosford, Hawkesbury and Wyong LGA's. The RFS provide a map on their website at www.rfs.nsw.gov.au.

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Myths & FAQs

Myth & FAQ	Response
"But if a fire comes I can just head downhill into the gully. I have been told fires burn uphill?"	On days of Severe or higher fire danger rating, fires will behave very aggressively. The fire is fanned by strong winds and hot embers will start new fires many kilometres ahead of the main fire front. There will be no reliable safe place to hide from fire in this context.
"The walk follows a wide creek - surely we can just dive in there if is a fire?"	The radiant heat from a bushfire is intense and can kill people over 100m away. Protecting yourself from a fire requires solid structures that can also provide cool fresh air. Even a wide river provides little safety from the radiant heat, nor will it provide the fresh air required for survival.
"But the forest we are visiting is very lush and green – surely it won't burn"	Even moist rainforest will burn aggressively given warm enough conditions. Please get advice of the land manager and see if they consider it safe considering the forecasted Fire danger Rating.
"There are no trees where we are walking, mostly alpine grass land – we can just jump over any fire"	On windy hot days grass fires are particularly deadly and very fast moving. The fire front will be too wide and deep to allow you to avoid the flames and radiant heat. Grass fires can be just as deadly as forest fire and can move incredibly fast.
"If I trigger my PLB the helicopter will pull us out before the fire comes?"	Rescues take time to organise. On days of severe or higher fire danger rating there will also be strong winds which make helicopter rescues slow, if at all possible. Even if they are able to land or winch the rescue will still be slow and there may not be the time needed to rescue all the party. This is assuming there is a helicopter available to respond at the time.
"But this walk is in a small suburban forest – we should be fine there?"	Even small suburban forests burn, a fire may start in someone's backyard and spread through the forest very quickly. Even though the forest is small a fire fanned by 30km/h winds will quickly overtake you.
"What if a Total Fire Ban is declared whilst I am on a multi-day walk?"	Check the forecast before you leave – if the forecast suggests days of temperatures over 30°C and high winds then assume there will be a Total Fire Ban and change your plans. If a fire ban is unexpectedly declared (or suspected) do your best to leave the park early, if you are not able to, find the safest place possible to spend the day. It is illegal (and very dangerous) to use a stove on a total fire ban day (even if you don't know the ban has been declared). Between November and April always be prepared with no-cook meals and water purification solutions that will work without a stove.

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Rationale and Supplementary Information

Rationale for cancelling on days of Total Fire Ban and days of Severe (or higher) Fire Danger rating

The lead agency on bushfire safety (RFS) suggests that people leaving bushfire prone areas early as the best chance of survival on days of Severe and higher fire danger ratings.

Days of total fire ban are declared when a fire is likely to escape and threaten lives. On a Severe Fire Danger day the RFS explain that fires will likely be uncontrollable and fast moving with flames that may be higher than roof tops. Expect embers to be blown around and into homes causing other fires to start and spread up to 4km ahead of the main fire. Fire can threaten suddenly, without warning and be very hot and windy which will make it increasingly difficult to see, hear and breathe as the fire approaches. In the event of a fire, firefighting resources are unlikely to be available to help all properties. Ensure that your survival is the primary consideration in any decision. Leaving early (hours before) is the safest option for you. There is a chance lives may be lost and people injured and expect that some homes and businesses will be destroyed or damaged.

Under such weather conditions bushfires are very likely to start and spread quickly. Even well prepared bushwalkers are unlikely to survive a bushfire if confronted under these conditions. The risk is high, the potential consequence is unacceptable and there are no reasonable strategies to decrease the potential consequences. Therefore we should heed the advice of the RFS and avoid all bushfire prone land under these significant Fire Danger ratings.

For park safety related information please visit the NSW NPWS fires/closures safety page link at www.environment.nsw.gov.au/NationalParks/FireClosure.aspx.

For hazard reduction burning information, major wildfire updates and a list of all current incidents in NSW, please visit the NSW Rural Fire Service website at www.rfs.nsw.gov.au and follow the relevant links.

Note for Internet Explorer 10 users

Some functionality on the NPWS website may not currently be compatible with Internet Explorer 10. If you find that functionality on this website is unresponsive, you can try running your browser in compatibility mode:

Press F12 on your keyboard to display the developer tools

On the developer tools menu, select Browser Mode then select Internet Explorer Versions 9 or 8.

Better still, Internet Explorer users could update to the latest version (Version 11 at November 2013).

Disclaimer

The preceding includes information, advice and opinion from various sources about bushwalking during hot days and bushfire danger. These sources include the Bushwalking NSW Tracks and Access Officer who also compiled the original message. Please note that text does not necessarily represent official Bushwalking NSW or CMW policy. CMW does not accept responsibility for any incorrect or outdated information, broken web links or disputed advice contained within – please make your own considered opinion. If you have an inquiry about anything in the document (which may then be forwarded to Bushwalking NSW), or you experience any broken web links, please contact the CMW Editor at editor@cmw.asn.au.

21 November 2013.