

Bushfires and Water Tanks

Introduction

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

Public health significance

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

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

Action to take

- 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.
- 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 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.

Acknowledgement:

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Related links:

- Emergency Management Queensland (EMQ) at website: www.emergency.qld.gov.au/emq/css/beprepared.asp
- Emergency Management Australia Community Awareness Publications at website: www.ema.gov.au/www/emaweb/emaweb.nsf/Page/Publications
- Environmental Protection Agency at website: www.epa.qld.gov.au/