

Bushfire and roof-harvested rainwater

Fact sheet

Many people in Queensland do not have access to town water supplies and may rely on roof-harvested rainwater as their sole supply of potable water. Some of these people may also live in areas that experience bushfires.

Bushfires produce large amounts of smoke, ash and debris which can settle on roofs used to collect rainwater. Fire retardants and foaming agents used in fire-fighting activities may also be deposited on roofs. To ensure supplies of roof-harvested rainwater are not adversely affected by bushfires it is important that this material is prevented from entering the tank(s).

The following guidance can assist residents in maintaining the quality of water stored in rainwater tanks.

Before a bushfire

Residents who live in bushfire-prone areas should consider installing a system whereby the pipes which direct the water from the roof to the rainwater tank can be disconnected quickly and easily. This will prevent any material deposited onto the roof surface, as a result of a bushfire, from entering the rainwater tank and impairing the quality of the stored water. The disconnection should be made as soon as the threat of a bushfire is apparent to prevent windblown debris entering the tank and so that evacuation (if required) is not delayed. It may also be worthwhile sealing the openings to the tank to prevent ingress of contaminants.

After a bushfire

If the rainwater tank has not already been disconnected from the collection pipes, disconnect or redirect the pipes as soon as it is safe to do so. A plumber may be required to undertake this task. Once this step has been completed the roof will need to be cleaned. Appropriate measures should be taken to prevent slips and falls when cleaning the roof. If the roof is made of asbestos cement, DO NOT use high pressure water equipment to clean the roof.

Residents should wear a P1 or P2 mask if the chosen method of cleaning will mobilise ash into the air, creating a breathing hazard. These masks are commonly available at hardware stores. If the method of cleaning is likely to generate considerable levels of waste water, care should be taken to ensure this water is not drained to an area likely to result in ponding (to avoid mosquito breeding).

Remove any dead animals if present on the roof or in the guttering (wearing gloves) and clean the roof or guttering where the animal was found. Once the roof has been cleaned the pipes which direct water to the tank can be reconnected.

If it has rained since the bushfire, and before the collection pipes have been disconnected or redirected, it is possible that significant amounts of ash and fire retardants may have flowed into the tank. In most cases this will mean that the tank will need to be drained and cleaned. Alternatively, the water could be used for non-potable uses (for example watering the garden). Once the tank has been drained and cleaned, it should be refilled with water from a source known to be safe for drinking.

If the bushfire has damaged the integrity of the tank it is likely that the tank will require draining and repair or replacement. Take care not to stand on bushfire impacted tanks until it can be determined that there is no risk of falling inside.

Further information

- Guidance on the use of rainwater tanks: www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/ohp-enhealth-aintank-cnt.htm
- 13 QGOV (13 74 68) for your nearest public health unit.