Policy

This policy outlines actions schools and early childhood services must take in relation to bushfire and grassfire risk.

Summary

* All registered schools, as a component of their registration, must comply with the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority (VRQA) [Guidelines on Bushfire Preparedness](https://www.vrqa.vic.gov.au/schools/Pages/bushfire-preparedness.aspx).
* Schools and early childhood services must ensure they understand their bushfire and grassfire hazard exposure, their risk and the actions that they need to take for their emergency management planning, preparedness, ongoing situational awareness and response.
* All schools and early childhood services on the department’s [Bushfire At-Risk Register (BARR)](https://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/programs/health/Pages/bushfirerisk.aspx), and [schools and early childhood services considered at risk of bushfire or grassfire (Category 4)](https://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/programs/health/Pages/category4.aspx), must close on all days forecasted by the Bureau of Meteorology to be Catastrophic fire danger rating (FDR) in their fire weather district.
* Schools must cancel all bus routes which travel through fire weather districts that are forecasted to be Catastrophic FDR.
* All BARR schools need to understand their risk categorisation and how this determines whether they are also required to relocate or close on an Extreme FDR in their local government area.
* In the event of exposure to an immediate bushfire or grassfire threat, all school principals and approved providers/facility managers (or their delegates) have the authority to enact their Emergency Management Plan.
* The department and the Country Fire Authority have collaborated to provide guidance to schools and early childhood services on the BARR and Category 4 list on preparing for the risk of bushfire and grassfire, refer to the [Guidance tab](https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/bushfire-and-grassfire-preparedness/guidance).

Details

Bushfire and grassfire risk management

The department’s Bushfire and Grassfire Preparedness Policy is informed by expert advice from the emergency sector, including the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO).

Schools and early childhood services around Victoria are at varying risk from bushfire and grassfire:

* Every school and facility should consider if they are located near bushland or grassland, placing it at increased risk of bushfires or grassfires. Information and resources are available from the [Country Fire Authority](https://www.cfa.vic.gov.au/plan-prepare/am-i-at-risk).
* All registered schools, as a component of their registration, must comply with the VRQA’s [Guidelines on Bushfire Preparedness](https://www.vrqa.vic.gov.au/schools/Pages/bushfire-preparedness.aspx) (VRQA Guidelines).
* In addition, the department maintains a register of the schools and early childhood services most at risk of bushfire – the BARR. The department also maintains a list of schools and early childhood services at a lower level of risk of bushfire and grassfire (Category 4 list).
* Schools on the BARR have additional preparedness requirements under the VRQA Guidelines.

Schools and early childhood services at any risk of bushfire and grassfire can be required to take pre-emptive action to protect against the risk of fire. For more information, refer to the [Pre-emptive actions](https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/bushfire-and-grassfire-preparedness/guidance/pre-emptive-actions) chapter of the Guidance tab in conjunction with this policy.

In the event of exposure to an immediate bushfire or grassfire threat, all school principals or facility managers (or their delegates) have the authority to enact the school or facility’s EMP.

Schools and early childhood services at risk of grassfire

The department maintains a list of schools and early childhood services at some lower level of risk for bushfire or grassfire, refer to [Schools and early childhood services at risk of grassfire (Category 4) (XLSX)](https://www.education.vic.gov.au/PAL/category-4-schools-and-early-childhod-services.xlsx).

This list is reviewed annually. Refer to the [Schools and early childhood services at risk of grassfire (Category 4)](https://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/programs/health/Pages/category4.aspx) page for further information.

Schools and early childhood services on this list must close on days that are forecasted by the Bureau of Meteorology as at a Catastrophic fire danger rating (FDR) in their fire weather district and cancel their bus routes.

All schools and early childhood services located near grassland must record their grassfire response procedures in their EMP, and government schools are to utilise the [online EMP portal](https://emergencymanagement.eduweb.vic.gov.au/) to do this. Refer to [Emergency and Critical Incident Management Planning](https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/emergency-critical-incident-management-planning/policy).

Schools and early childhood services on the Bushfire At-Risk Register

The department maintains a register of the schools and early childhood services most at risk of bushfire – the [Bushfire At-Risk Register (BARR)](https://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/programs/health/Pages/bushfirerisk.aspx).

When listed on the BARR, the school and early childhood service:

* is categorised based on its bushfire risk
* must meet requirements for bushfire preparedness in the VRQA Guidelines
* may be required, based on its BARR category, to relocate or close on High or Extreme FDR days in their local government area (LGA)
* must close on days forecasted by the Bureau of Meteorology as Catastrophic FDR in their fire weather district and cancel their bus routes
* receives bushfire-specific compliance advice for their Shelter-in-Place building.

Risk assessment and categorisation of schools and early childhood services on the BARR

The department has applied an evidence-based methodology for identifying which schools and early childhood services will be on the BARR and how BARR schools’ risk will be categorised.

All schools and early childhood services in Victoria are reviewed utilising a fire risk methodology developed by the CSIRO for Victorian educational facilities.

When determining which schools and early childhood services should be on the BARR, the department, based on advice from the CSIRO, considers:

* the site's [Bushfire Prone Area designation](https://mapshare.vic.gov.au/vicplan/)
* the [Bushfire Management Overlay](http://delwp-internet-m5.clients.squiz.net/planning-2018/policies-and-initiatives/bushfire/building-in-the-bmo)
* the [Victorian Fire Risk Register](https://www.vfrr.vic.gov.au/index.php)
* the site's terrain, fuel and vegetation type.

Schools and early childhood services listed on the BARR are rated according to their level of bushfire risk, as either Category 1, 2 or 3, with Category 1 having the highest bushfire risk profile.

The BARR is reviewed annually with advice from CSIRO.

Schools and early childhood services with queries about this register should email emergency.management@education.vic.gov.au

Bushfire preparedness for schools at bushfire risk

Schools and early childhood services located near bushland must record their bushfire response procedures in their EMP, and government schools must use an [online EMP portal](https://emergencymanagement.eduweb.vic.gov.au/) to do this. Refer to [Emergency and Critical Incident Management Planning](https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/emergency-critical-incident-management-planning/policy).

The [VRQA Guidelines](https://www.vrqa.vic.gov.au/schools/Pages/bushfire-preparedness.aspx) include specific requirements in relation to infrastructure and site maintenance, emergency management planning, information sharing and training that BARR schools must comply with as a condition of their registration.

Note: Early childhood services are separately regulated by the department’s Quality Assessment and Regulation Division (QARD). Emergency management requirements for early childhood services are available at [Emergency management requirements – early childhood professionals](https://www.education.vic.gov.au/childhood/providers/regulation/Pages/emergencymanagementrequirements.aspx).

Arrangements for schools at highest bushfire risk

Schools in Categories 0, 1 and 2 must have a pre-emptive action plan approved by their regional director. Your school’s pre-emptive action plan should be developed in consultation with regional emergency management staff and reviewed by your senior education improvement leader (SEIL) prior to approval by your regional director.

After approval by your regional director, your plan should be monitored each year to ensure it is still up to date. Any changes to your plan will need to be reviewed and approved by your regional director by 1 September each year.

Pre-emptive actions will be triggered for Category 0 schools on a forecasted High FDR day in their LGA, and for Category 1 and 2 schools on a forecasted Extreme FDR day in their LGA.

These arrangements are not applicable to Catastrophic FDR days as the department implements a pre-emptive closure plan for all schools on the BARR and Category 4 list.

There are 3 possible actions which can be taken:

1. relocation of the school to operate on a safer school site
2. remote and flexible learning
3. school closure.

Relocation is always the preferred option to ensure safety for staff and students and the continuity of education, however this is not always possible for every school. Where relocation is not feasible then a remote and flexible learning plan should be considered to continue education where it safe to do so.

Ahead of the fire danger period, these schools must:

* engage/involve their school community in bushfire preparedness planning
* identify a host location
* develop a bushfire preparedness pre-emptive relocation, remote and flexible learning or closure plan for approval from their regional director – refer to the resources section of the [Bushfire preparedness relocation and closure procedures (DOCX)](https://www.education.vic.gov.au/PAL/bushfire-preparedness-relocation-and-closure-procedures.docx) for a template plan.

If relocation is not a feasible option, identified highest risk BARR schools will be approved by their regional director to develop a remote and flexible learning or closure plan.

Arrangements for highest risk schools will be as follows:

* Category 0 schools – will relocate, undertake remote and flexible learning or close in accordance with their pre-approved plan on a day of forecast High and Extreme FDR for their LGA
* Category 1 schools – will relocate, undertake remote and flexible learning or close in accordance with their pre-approved plan on a day of forecast Extreme FDR for their LGA
* Category 2 schools – will relocate, undertake remote and flexible learning or close in accordance with their pre-approved plan on a day of forecast Extreme FDR for their LGA.

Before every relocation, the relocating schools must:

* email their regional director confirming the elevated FDR forecast for schools in their region (refer to template letters on the [Resources tab](https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/bushfire-and-grassfire-preparedness/resources))
* notify staff, parents and carers, outside school hours care and other site users, for example, contractors
* complete the School Relocation Principal Checklist and forward to the regional director – refer to the resources section of the [Bushfire preparedness relocation and closure procedures (DOCX)](https://www.education.vic.gov.au/PAL/bushfire-preparedness-relocation-and-closure-procedures.docx) for the checklist
* make alternate arrangements for camps and excursions that are due to depart or arrive at the school on the day of the relocation.

Schools on the BARR, regardless of categorisation, may still apply to their regional director to have alternate arrangements for their school due to elevated fire danger forecast which will be assessed on a case-by-case basis. These schools, in the first instance, should discuss their plans with their regional manager, operations and emergency management.

Catastrophic FDR days

Schools and early childhood services on the BARR and Category 4 list regardless of risk category, must close and cancel their buses on days forecasted by the Bureau of Meteorology as Catastrophic FDR in their fire weather district. All other buses which travel through the Catastrophic FDR fire weather district will also be cancelled.

Catastrophic FDR is the highest level of fire danger. These are the most dangerous conditions for a fire and if a fire starts and takes hold, lives are likely to be lost. Catastrophic FDR days will be forecast for the whole of a fire weather district.

In some circumstances the department may be advised of the potential for Catastrophic FDR conditions to be present.

The region, will:

* wherever possible, provide schools and early childhood services with 4 to 7 days’ notice of a possible Catastrophic FDR day closure to enable schools to forewarn their school and parent/carer community
* confirm the final decision to close a school by 1 pm the day before the Catastrophic FDR day closure.

Ahead of the fire danger period, schools and early childhood services on the BARR and Category 4 list must:

* advise their school and parent/carer community and all site users of the arrangements for the summer that the school or early childhood facility will be closed on any Catastrophic FDR day in their fire weather district and nobody is to be on site that day
* include pre-emptive closure procedures in their emergency management plan
* complete the activities outlined in the [bushfire/grassfire readiness checklist schools (DOCX)](https://www.education.vic.gov.au/PAL/school-bushfire-site-readiness-review-checklist.docx) or [bushfire/grassfire readiness checklist early childhood (DOCX)](https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/childhood/providers/support/BushfireandGrassfireReadinessReviewChecklist.docx)
* notify bus travellers and parents/carers that no school bus services will operate to or from a school closed on a Catastrophic FDR day in their fire weather district.

Note: Schools and early childhood services not on the BARR or Category 4 list will remain open, unless they are directly threatened by fire or another emergency.

Schools and early childhood services on the BARR and Category 4 list must do the following before closing on a Catastrophic FDR day:

* notify staff, parents/carers and all other site users (including contractors, outside school hours care, extracurricular activities and programs) that the school or early childhood facility will close and nobody is to be on site that day (schools may consider using the template letters and newsletter content, for this purpose, refer to the [Resources tab](https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/bushfire-and-grassfire-preparedness/resources))
* check proposed camp and excursion venues located in forecast Catastrophic FDR fire weather districts and update the [Student Activity Locator](https://partner.eduweb.vic.gov.au/sites/sal) with cancellations or changes
* notify bus travellers, parents, bus operators and client schools of potential and confirmed cancellation of bus routes.

Schools are strongly encouraged to download the [VicEmergency app](https://vicemergency.zendesk.com/hc/en-gb/categories/203637608-VicEmergency-app%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) to maintain situational awareness, including notification of any forecasts of Catastrophic FDR days in their fire weather district.

All school and early childhood facility closures as well as bus service cancellations are published on the department website – refer to [Closures and bus service cancellations](https://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/programs/health/pages/closures.aspx).

Shelter-In-Place building

All schools (regardless of their BARR status) must nominate a building or buildings on the school site that can provide temporary accommodation until emergency services arrive and/or as a building of last resort if there is insufficient time to evacuate. The school must identify the Shelter-In-Place in their EMP.

For further details refer to [Shelter-in-Place Buildings](https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/shelter-place-buildings/policy).

Planned burning

Planned burning is conducted throughout the state to reduce the risk to communities from future bushfires. For more information about the location and timing of planned burns for the next ten days, you may contact the Victorian Bushfire Information Line on 1800 240 667 or visit the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning – [Planned Burns Victoria](https://plannedburns.ffm.vic.gov.au/).

Related policies

* [Buildings and Grounds Maintenance and Compliance](https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/buildings-grounds-maintenance/policy)
* [Emergency and Critical Incident Management Planning](https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/emergency-critical-incident-management-planning/policy)
* [Excursions](https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/excursions/policy)
* [Leave — Bushfire, Flood or Other Severe Weather Event](https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/leave-bushfire-flood-or-other-severe-weather-event/overview)
* [Shelter-in-Place Buildings](https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/shelter-place-buildings/policy)

Contacts

For information about vegetation clearance grants available to schools in bushfire prone areas:

School Grants Unit
bushfire@education.vic.gov.au

For all other enquiries regarding bushfire and grassfire preparedness:

Policy and Intelligence Unit
Security and Emergency Management Division
03 7022 0269
emergency.management@education.vic.gov.au