

**ST MATTHEW'S SCHOOL  
NARROGIN**



**Bushfires**

**Reviewed 2016**

## **Introduction**

*St Matthew's School, Narrogin, has developed a comprehensive Bushfire Plan which has been designed to assist staff to prepare for a total fire ban, catastrophic fire danger rating, or a bushfire.*

The preparation of this plan was developed in accordance with the *Emergency and Critical Incident Management Policy* and the *Principal's Guide to Bushfire* with input from local emergency management agencies.

## **Bushfire Zone Register**

CEWA is concerned to maximise the safety of its students and staff. St Matthew's School has been added to the Bushfire Zone Register. Inclusion on this register means that the school may be required to invoke pre-emptive closure on a day for which a Catastrophic Fire Danger Rating (FDR) has been declared for Narrogin. A Catastrophic FDR means that if a fire starts, it is likely to be uncontrollable, unpredictable and fast moving.

## **What does this mean for our school?**

When given advance warning by DFES that a Catastrophic FDR has been forecast for a given day, the Executive Director may direct the pre-emptive closure of St Matthew's School. If the school receives such a direction, you will be informed of the possible planned closure by a letter sent home with your child. Parents of students absent on the day this letter is sent home will be contacted by telephone, so please ensure the school has up to date contact details for you. In the intervening period between the declaration of the pre-emptive closure and the day of planned closure, DFES will monitor weather patterns to keep CEWA informed of any change to the forecast for the declared day.

The final decision to pre-emptively close the school will be confirmed by CEWA with the principal on the day before the declared day. If the forecast changes after that deadline, the closure will stand, regardless of improvements to the weather conditions later in the afternoon of the day before the declared day or overnight. The intention is to limit confusion or uncertainty for parents and to allow you ample time to make alternative child care arrangements. Parents will be advised of the confirmation of closure, or its reversal, by a note sent home with your child on the day before the planned closure. Again, parents of students absent on this day will be contacted by telephone.

## **How will I know when the school is reopening?**

It is anticipated that the school will only be required to close for a single day at a time, but this will depend on the weather. You will receive an SMS to advise you whether the school will reopen the day after the planned closure, or whether it will remain closed. The school website will contain a notice to advise you of the current status of the school closure and when it is expected to reopen.

Parents should monitor local media for current information about fire danger ratings and notification of schools reopening. Staying tuned to ABC Local Radio in your locality is advisable. You can also check with DFES on 1300 657 209 or [www.dfes.wa.gov.au](http://www.dfes.wa.gov.au).

## **Questions?**

Please contact the school on 9853 9500 if you have any questions about planned closures during the bushfire season.

Jonnda Simpson  
Principal

## **INFORMATION ABOUT BUSHFIRES**

### ***Bushfire Hazard***

Many schools in Western Australia are located in areas that may be impacted by a bushfire. The level of risk to which schools in these areas are exposed can vary considerably and is dependant on the bushfire hazard surrounding a school, and also on how well a school is prepared and able to act in a bushfire emergency.

Generally, only flammable vegetation covering an area greater than about 10 000 m<sup>2</sup> should be assessed. Isolated single trees and small groups of trees and shrubs would not normally be included in an assessment. However, if these add to the fire hazard in the general area, or if they are close to buildings, some work would be required to reduce the hazard. This can often be achieved through gardening or landscaping activities.

The DFES has grouped bushfire hazards into four levels. These are: Low, Medium, High and Extreme. These levels can also be used to determine the severity of bushfire hazards adjacent to schools, and within school grounds.

### **Low bushfire hazard areas**

This typically includes urban and suburban areas with maintained gardens, parklands and street verges. These areas are generally devoid of native vegetation. Farm pasture and cropping areas would normally be included in this category. It should be noted that severe bushfires may still impact on schools which are located within low bushfire hazard areas.

### **Medium bushfire hazard areas**

This level includes areas where standing native vegetation occupies no more than about 30% of the total vegetation spread across the area. Suburban areas with some native vegetation cover would also fall into this category. Shrub land and open heath on moderate slopes with a gradient of less than 10° are included in this category.

### **High bushfire hazard**

Forested and well treed areas where the leaf litter and understorey has been reduced, as well as plantations, which are located on moderate slopes less than 10°, fall into this category. Shrub land and open heath on steeper slopes may also be included in this hazard category.

### **Extreme bushfire hazard**

This category includes forests with a dense understorey, heavy leaf litter, as well as timber plantations where the fuel hazard has not been reduced. Hazard-reduced forests and plantations on slopes with a gradient greater than 10°, as well as dense heath and shrub land, are placed into this category.

### ***How Bushfires Behave***

All fires need fuel, air and heat to start and grow. Bushfires in particular behave in a number of ways depending on the amount of these elements, and most severe bushfire threats generally occur in summer when high temperatures, strong easterlies and lightning from thunderstorm activity combine.

### **Fuel**

Vegetation around your school, such as dry grass, leaves, twigs and bark, provide fuel for a fire. This fuel plays a part in how hot a fire can be and how fast it can spread. If fuel is removed, the fire will starve.

### **Heat and radiant heat**

Bushfires generate enormous heat. Much of this heat goes up into the air but significant heat also radiates at ground level. This radiant heat spreads the fire by drying out vegetation so it will burn. Radiant heat is the main cause of people dying in a bushfire. Radiant heat may not set fire to your school but it can crack and break windows that will allow embers in that can start fires inside school buildings.

### **Embers**

Even if the fire front does not reach your school, it can still be damaged by burning embers carried by strong winds. Embers can get into your school through gaps in roofs, walls, evaporative air conditioners, windows and doors. They can land on materials that easily burn and this can start a fire. Research has shown that ember attack is the main reason that buildings catch fire during a bushfire. Embers can continue to threaten your school even after the fire front has passed.

### **Direct flame contact**

When materials close to your school catch fire, flames can touch the outside of your school buildings. How long flames are in direct contact with school buildings depends on the amount of fuel to be burnt.

### **Oxygen**

Bushfires need oxygen in the air to keep going and the more there is, the faster the fire burns. Strong winds not only force the fire along but also increase air circulation and provide more air. Any change in wind direction or speed can rapidly increase the rate of spread and the direction of the fire.

### **Wind**

Strong winds usually come with bushfires and as the wind increases so does the fire's temperature. The wind pushes flames closer to fuel making the fire travel faster. Embers and other burning materials are also carried by the wind which can damage buildings kilometres from the fire front.

### **Fire spread**

Fires usually spread faster in grassland than in forests, because winds are stronger and the fuels are less dense. Bushfires will move faster when travelling uphill. The speed of a fire front advancing will double with every 10% increase in slope. On a 20% slope, bushfire speed is four times faster than flat ground. Buildings located on tops of hills or ridges are particularly vulnerable to fires burning in a valley belt.