

News Release

12 February 2009

Safety needed for survivors and workers in bushfire areas.

WorkSafe and the Department of Human Services have called on bushfire survivors and workers in disaster zones to take extreme care as the recovery begins in some areas.

WorkSafe's Executive Director, John Merritt, said that in the rush to return lives to normal it was essential that hazards in fire-affected areas were managed and appropriate protective clothing and equipment was used.

"Hazards include asbestos-containing material, damaged gas cylinders and their valves, pesticides and other chemicals, nails and sharp objects.

"There are also dangers from burnt trees which could fall, or branches that may drop unexpectedly."

To reduce the risk to residents inspecting their properties, the Department of Human Services has provided nearly 2000 asbestos kits to people affected by fires at Relief Centres in Yea, Alexandra, Whittlesea, Nillumbik Shire and Horsham.

"The kit include disposable overalls, gloves, masks, plastic sheeting and bags," Victoria's Chief Health Officer, Dr John Carnie said.

Mr Merritt said it was important that people inspecting their properties took safety precautions, but left large-scale clearing work and demolition to appropriately qualified and equipped professionals.

WorkSafe Inspectors are in attendance at the Alexandra, Yea, Traralgon and Whittlesea Emergency Operations Centres to provide advice and support to emergency services personnel.

WorkSafe Inspectors are also providing advice and support in other areas.

Employers and workers are expected to follow all appropriate procedures in line with the Occupational Health and Safety Act and appropriate regulations.

Information sheets and a DHS booklet '**Cleaning up your property after a bushfire**' are available in printed form at relief centres and online.

Background:

Asbestos cement sheeting, also known as fibro, was a commonly used building material from the late 1940s to the 1980s. When it is intact it provides little risk to humans, however when damaged it could create a risk to a range of respiratory conditions.

1. If attending the fire affected areas, for example to inspect your property, wear a particulate respirator (P1 or P2) as protection against airborne particles. These are readily available from hardware stores. People with respiratory or heart conditions should seek medical advice. Men with facial hair, particularly beards, may have difficulty getting a good fit.
2. Wear sturdy footwear and heavy-duty gloves, protective overalls with long sleeves and trousers. If possible wear disposable coveralls which should be thrown away after use.
3. Non-disposable clothing should be cleaned or washed before re-use.
4. Where possible for buildings or structures that are still intact or partially intact, as far as practicable, asbestos-containing material should be removed before demolition work begins.
5. Residents intending to clean up any asbestos-contaminated debris or remove asbestos-containing material yourself, ensure you carry out the asbestos removal safely. Refer to the DHS booklet '**Cleaning up after a bushfire**' for guidance.
6. Residents engaging a contractor to carry out the asbestos-removal work, make sure they are a WorkSafe Victoria licensed asbestos removalist. The licence holder is required to carry the removal in accordance with the Occupational Health and Safety Regulations 2007.
7. Employers and workers are expected to follow all appropriate procedures in line with the Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004 and appropriate regulations. Information is available from WorkSafe's advisory service on 1800 136 089 or go to www.worksafe.vic.gov.au

Public information: WorkSafe Advisory Service 1800 136 089 and DHS on 1300 761 874.

Information for employers and workers: WorkSafe Advisory Service 1800 136 089

WorkSafe media inquiries only: Michael Birt 9641 1216.