

# Keeping rainwater tanks safe in areas affected by bushfires

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Bushfires generate large amounts of ash and debris which can contaminate rainwater supplies. Although the presence of ash and debris from burnt forests in rainwater does not represent a health risk, it can affect the colour, clarity and taste of rainwater. However, there may be other contaminants that are potentially more harmful, including dead animals and trace chemical residues from burnt treated timber.

If the rainwater smells, tastes or looks unusual, assume it is contaminated and don't drink it.

## Reducing the risk of contamination

- Check the roof and guttering for dead animals. If it is safe, remove them as soon as possible to avoid contaminants getting flushed into the tank by the next rainfall event.
- If safe and possible, remove ash and debris from the roof and gutters, e.g. by thoroughly hosing off the roof catchment area if water supplies are available. Use a first flush device or diverter (recommended as a routine installation) between the roof and the tank to prevent ash and other debris from entering the tank and contaminating the water. Do not collect this flush water or the first flush of rainwater after the bushfire. You may need to manually divert quite a lot of wash-down water if hosing off the roof, by fully opening the end of the device or propping the diverter to one side.
- If you do not have a first flush diverter, disconnect the inlet from the roof to the tank so the wash-down water runs to waste until the ash and debris has been removed.

## Removing contamination

- If a dead animal is found inside the tank, empty and disinfect it before re-filling. If this process has to be delayed, remove the remains and disinfect with chlorine.
- If you need to remove other significant contamination, drain and clean and disinfect the tank and allow it to refill with clean rainwater or fill with water provided by a registered water carter (look under 'Water Cartage' in the Yellow Pages®). All commercial water carters must be registered with their local Council.
- If draining and cleaning the tank is not possible in the short-term, the water can be used for purposes other than drinking, e.g. toilet flushing and watering (not fruit/vegetables).

## Fire retardants and foams

- Fire retardants and foams may be present on your roof if they were used to fight the fire at your house. The recommended concentrations of the commonly used retardants and foams should not present a risk to health, but may affect the taste of the water. Fire retardants also contain detergents that may cause the water in the tank to froth.