

2023 – 2024 BUSHFIRE PREPAREDNESS (VEGETATION) PROGRAM FACTSHEET

Factsheet

INTRODUCTION

The Victorian Government has committed to the continuation of the Bushfire Preparedness Vegetation Program (BPVP).

\$9.15 million has been allocated towards the 2023-24 BPVP. This allocation is intended to deliver essential bushfire vegetation clearance works at government schools **prior to the 2023-24 bushfire season** (as will be indicated by your municipality's 2023-24 Fire Danger Period leading into the summer).

Schools identified as being at risk of bushfires are recorded in the Bushfire at Risk Register (BARR). The BARR is based on Victoria's Bushfire Prone Area designations and other information sources including the Bushfire Management Overlay; Victorian Fire Risk Register; terrain and fuel type exposure.

The BARR may include sites that have been de-staffed, closed or deemed surplus to education needs by the Department. These sites must also meet BPVP guidelines, with this responsibility, typically of the Principal in active schools, assumed by the relevant Region for closed or de-staffed schools, or in the case of surplus sites the Land Regeneration Team within the Property Agreements and Land Regeneration Unit, Property Branch.

As a recipient of bushfire vegetation clearance funding as part of the 2023-24 Bushfire Preparedness (Vegetation) Program allocation, your school will receive a letter from the Department of Education stating the funding amount and actions required.

This document provides relevant information on how schools can use Bushfire Preparedness (vegetation) Program (BPVP), before the typical bushfire season, and acquit it **by 1 November 2023**. Please note that not undertaking these important works may be considered when assessing applications for future grant programs.

BUSHFIRE PREPAREDNESS (VEGETATION) PROGRAM – GUIDELINES

As a BARR school, you are required to undertake vegetation clearance activities on a regular basis to mitigate the risk of harm to your school community and your school buildings in the event of a bushfire.

BARR schools are required to **demonstrate appropriate planning for bushfire mitigation** by ensuring you have a basic Vegetation Management Plan VMP (or equivalent) and including it with your acquittal.

- A free, basic, three-year VMP is provided to all BARR schools, through our School Support Program (SSP) visits, by a Bushfire Planning and Design (BPAD) Level 2 practitioner.

- All BARR schools will receive an SSP visit during the August to October period in either 2023, 2024 or 2025, and within three years of the last SSP visit to your school. Flowing from the visit you will be provided with a three-year VMP.
- A school may be exempted from the SSP visit if they prefer but only if they can provide evidence of their own VMP equivalent that has been authored by a BPAD2 qualified practitioner and that reasonably addresses the guidelines within this BPVP Factsheet.

Schools are encouraged to:

- act quickly in July / August to secure/book contractors prior to the bushfire season and, in particular, for the September school holidays;
- utilise, if needed, expertise of one or more suitable partners who, depending on the locality, who may be able to assist, including;
 - Country Fire Authority (local) Support Officer;
 - Municipal Fire Prevention Officer;
 - Regional DET Emergency Management staff;
 - Qualified arborist; and
 - A Bushfire Planning and Design (BPAD) level 2 practitioner.
- consider the need to schedule and budget for both **ongoing** (regular/annual) works such as grass management and gutters management and **one-off** works such as large tree removal works; and
- if you are planning to undertake major one-off works (costing between \$10,000 and \$30,000), bringing your overall costs over your nominal allocation, you may be entitled to one-off (contingency) funds for those over amounts. If you have such plans, you are asked to contact the VSBA at bushfire@education.vic.gov.au, prior to commencing those works to discuss to put a formal, email request to access the one-off (contingency) funds.

Work tasks should be undertaken that will prioritise and maximise preparedness for

- your designated Shelter in Place (SIP);
- other school buildings;
- evacuation (egress) routes; and
- a secondary assembly point.

Guidelines / tasks: the types of specific tasks you should be undertaking are:

- The school site must be slashed or cleared of all flammable undergrowth such as dry grass and vegetation to the site boundary unless it is greater than 50m from buildings, evacuation routes and evacuation locations.
- A fuel reduced zone must be established around buildings (20 metres as a guide) consistent with the following requirements:

Grass, leaves and debris.

- Grass must be short cropped and maintained during the declared fire danger period;
- All leaves and vegetation debris (including stockpiled leaves, pruning, dead limbs and trees) must be removed at regular intervals during the declared fire danger period;
- Rooves and roof gutters are clear of leaves, twigs and branches;
- Remove other flammable elements and prune lower limbs of established trees (check with local council before removing trees)
- Within 10 metres of a building, flammable objects must not be located close to the vulnerable parts of the building;
- Plants greater than 10 centimetres in height must not be placed within 3 metres of a window or glass feature of the building;

Shrubs and Trees

- Shrubs must not be located under the canopy of trees;
- Thick, continuous shrubs or other vegetation contacting building walls or directly under windows be removed;
- Individual and clumps of shrubs must not exceed 5 square metres in area and must be separated by at least 5 metres;

- Large trees that are taller than 10 m be situated at greater distance than their height from the Shelter in Place building;
- Trees or branches over-hanging or touching buildings and sheds be removed or trimmed to a height of 2 metres from building rooflines and 2 metres clear of buildings;
- The canopy of trees must be separated by at least 5 metres; and
- There must be a clearance of at least 2 metres between the lowest tree branches and ground level.
- The fuel reduced zone does not have plantings that are dense and typical of bushland settings. The Country Fire Authority's (CFA) [Landscaping for Bushfire](#) document provides information and ways to appropriately manage vegetation around buildings; additional advice may be available from CFA Community Safety in regional offices and CFA Headquarters;
- Should the school meet the fuel reduced zone requirements listed above, the school may also use the BPVP grant to remove or replace other combustible elements, for example woodchip surfacing, brushwood screening, timber fencing, timber retaining walls;
- Please note that if a school wishes to engage the professional services of a bushfire attack expert to assist with the development of a (multi-year) vegetation management plan (for an amount that does not exceed 30% of its 2023-24 nominal allocation), this would be an appropriate use of the BPVP funding and would be viewed favourably.

PROGRAM TIMELINES

Task	Date
Schools receive first BPVP 2023-24 payment (80%) and notification	June 2023
Planning / scheduling of works	July onward
Schools undertake BPVP 2023-24 works	From Aug 2023
<i>* Schools considering larger one-off arborist works contact VSBA</i>	Aug - Nov 2023
<i>Schools complete most works prior to bushfire danger period</i>	By 1 Nov 2023
Schools complete acquittal process	By 1 Nov 2023
Schools receive second payment (up to remaining 20%)	On evidence of acquittal
Schools undertake any necessary small additional seasonal works	Jan - Apr 2024

PROCUREMENT OF CONTRACTORS TO UNDERTAKE THESE WORKS

- Schools are required to be compliant with Government procurement procedures as stipulated in the Procurement of Low-value Construction Works or Services Policy. This includes providing **at least one quote for works under \$50,000**, although the VSBA recommends seeking multiple quotes (where possible) to ensure value for money.
- When providing quotes as part of the acquittal process, you will attest that **there are no conflicts of interest held in relation to the contractor who has completed the works**. For example, if the supplier is a member of the family of someone working at your school.

PAYMENT AND ACQUITTAL OF FUNDING

Please note that **not undertaking these important works may be taken into account when assessing applications for future grant programs**.

The VSBA will be paying grants for the delivery of vegetation clearance over two stages:

Stage 1: Receive 80 per cent of funding. Implement works.

You will receive 80% of your notional allocation upfront in order to implement the required works.

Stage 2: Acquittal and receipt of up to 20 per cent of funding.

Schools will shortly be provided a link to logon to the SmartyGrants system and complete an acquittal form.

Acquittal Requirements

The following documentation needs to be attached to the acquittal form to demonstrate each item of expenditure is eligible under the program:

- **An itemised cost estimate (quote)**
- **A receipt of payment**
- **Photo(s)**

This acquittal form must be completed by Wednesday 1 November 2023 to confirm the works have been undertaken.

Acquittal should be for works that both:

- occur from 1 May 2023, (after the conclusion of the previous (2022-23) fire season); and
- are specifically in preparation for the 2023-24 or future fire seasons.

Many schools plan for small follow up (seasonal) works (such as further grass cutting or further gutter clearance in the January holidays) that need to be done during the summer months (after the acquittal). Since you will be unable to provide invoicing prior to such works, the VSBA will accept quotes as evidence for these, thereby enabling acquittal to be completed in one step.

Receipt of (second payment) funding

- In instances where the total cost of the vegetation clearance works exceeds your 80 per cent upfront allocation, the VSBA will provide you with the remaining allocated amount required upon receipt (and assessment/approval) of the acquittal documentation.
- If works do not exceed 80 per cent of the notional fund, the acquittal process is still required for whatever amount is expended. The VSBA does not intend to recover any funds that are underspent below the 80 per cent that has been paid upfront.
- If you are considering undertaking major one-off works such as arborist works (costing between \$10,000 and \$30,000) that will result in an 'overspend', you may be entitled to one-off (contingency) funds above your nominal 2023-24 allocation. If you have such plans, you are invited to (and will need to) contact the VSBA as soon as possible to discuss and request access to one-off (contingency) funds at bushfire@education.vic.gov.au.

SmartyGrants system

SmartyGrants is a simple online grants program acquittals system. *Here is the [log-on link](#) to the SmartyGrants system for you to complete an acquittal form. It is the same link as previous years, to where previous acquittal forms were located.* Please use your school's (@education) email address as the username and the same password that your school has used previously or go through the simple 'forgot password' process on smartygrants (or contact the VSBA if you are yet to be registered). Once you are logged in, please:

1. Access the 2023-24 Bushfire Preparedness Program online acquittal form (under 'My Submission') and provide the requested information relating to the works undertaken.
2. Complete the form, attaching the requested supporting documentation listed above.
3. Attest / acknowledge terms of use for bushfire vegetation clearance funding.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (FAQ)

How should I go about this? I do not understand. Who can I contact to help?

- Typically, the responsible person (Principal, Business Manager and or Maintenance Manager) will refer to the guidelines in this factsheet, July, then plan and implement/source vegetation clearance works in preparation for the summer.
- If you are in any doubt about the program, process or works that you should be undertaking, then please don't hesitate to contact the Bushfire Preparedness (vegetation) Program team at: bushfire@education.vic.gov.au before undertaking any works.

Is there a requirement to demonstrate we have a Vegetation Management Plan?

- Yes, but it is easy. All schools should now have a 3-year VMP in place, provide to you through the BPVP's School Support Program. All schools will be visited again, through a three-year rolling program, in the next three years. Attach the VMP, or an equivalent if you have sourced one, to your acquittal.
- The specific vegetation clearance tasks that schools are required to undertake are outlined above in the section entitled "Bushfire Preparedness (vegetation) Program - Guidelines."

What exactly can I spend it on and not spend it on?

- The funding is to be spent on vegetation clearance activities that relate to de-risking your school ahead of the bushfire season.
- The specific vegetation clearance tasks that schools are required to undertake are outlined above in the section entitled "Bushfire Preparedness (vegetation) Program - Guidelines."
- Examples of vegetation clearance works that schools may undertake include trimming of trees, removal of trees, cleaning of gutters, fixing external fittings, clearing paths and other activities commonly outlined in this factsheet.
- The funding should not be spent on internal improvements or teaching resources. Another example of something not to be spend on would be a shade cloth because that will not reduce the risk posed to a school by bushfires.
- Works that relate to trees that are bushfire safe but are unsafe for reasons (such as falling limbs, protruding roots, etc) should not be included in the BPVP acquittal. In such instances, schools may wish to inquire about support through the VSBA's Safe Tree Program.
- Replanting and fencing may be appropriate if they are performed for the purpose of reducing the risk posed to a school in the event of a bushfire. For example, replanting vegetation away from flammable structure may be a suitable use of allocated funding. Replanting should prioritise indigenous flora with low flammability.

What about small follow up 'seasonal' works can only be completed after the November acquittal, for example further grass cutting, further gutter clearance, in the January holidays?

- It is expected that most works be completed by November 2023.
- For small follow up (seasonal) works such as grass cutting or further gutter clearance that are needed during the summer months (after the acquittal), schools are asked to include relevant quotes for those follow-up works, in your November acquittal and these will be accepted as evidence. This should enable acquittal to be completed in one step and the second payment released as early as possible in the new year.

Do I need to provide quotes and if so, how many?

- Yes, you are required to submit at least one quote for required vegetation clearance works.
- If you are in any doubt about the program, process or works that you should be undertaking, then please don't hesitate to contact the Bushfire Preparedness (vegetation) Program team at: bushfire@education.vic.gov.au before undertaking any works.
- Schools are reminded to be compliant with Government procurement procedures as stipulated in the Procurement of Low-value Construction Works Policy. This includes at least one quote for works under \$50,000, although the VSBA always recommends seeking multiple quotes (where possible) to ensure value for money.
- When providing quotes as part of the acquittal process, schools will attest that any conflicts of interest held in relation to the providers have been recorded on Edupay as per the Departments policy.

If I cut down certain vegetation, does it then leave the school open to safety issues?

- When considering removal of trees from a school site, please always consider things like adequate shade and whether a tree is of significance to the local community or ecosystem.
- Additionally, please consult the CFA guide for relevant information on ways to appropriately manage vegetation around buildings.

Who do I contact to get my school site assessed and costed for the specified works?

- As the BPVP is 'school-led' you are responsible for sourcing contractors to cost and deliver works. This may require procuring services from a list of different trades including arborists, gutter cleaners and landscapers.
- The BPVP SSP, described above, provides your school, once every three years, with a VMP with advice on works to ensure you meet the BPVP program requirements.
- If your school runs out of all options, in your endeavours to source a suitable contractor(s), please contact the BPVP team at bushfire@education.vic.gov.au.

Will I need to provide evidence of completion of vegetation clearance works?

- Yes, regarding works you undertake, you will be required to submit supporting evidence, (tax invoice, receipt and photographs). These will need to be submitted in SmartyGrants.
- By 'signing' the acquittal form (submitting your acquittal), you will be attesting that your school meets the requirements of this program, as described in the guidelines section above.

Can I resubmit the response if I enter incorrect information during my initial attempt?

- Yes, you may resubmit your response if incorrect information during your initial attempt. It is important that you contact the VSBA to inform them that you will be resubmitting your form, for the VSBA to reopen the form for you to do so.

How long does my school have to spend the money allocated for bushfire vegetation clearance?

- BPVP 2023-24 funding is to be spent before the 2023-24 bushfire season commences (notwithstanding the point above about additional seasonal works during the season).

What COVID-19 restrictions or considerations may impact on the works and or acquittals?

- Bushfire preparedness is considered *critical maintenance and safety work to public infrastructure*.
- Schools should regularly refer to the relevant Victorian Government requirements regarding COVID-19 including expectations of contractors.

What can I do with any surplus funds that remain after I have completed the specified vegetation clearance works?

- After completing all the activities required for your school (see "Bushfire Preparedness – Guidelines" section), you may use any residual BPVP 2023-24 funds to undertake related bushfire preparedness works and or purchases. Such 'related' works and or purchases, do not have to be specifically vegetation clearance related, but they should be justified as being in the spirit of the program (i.e., are fully or significantly for the purposes of bushfire emergency mitigation) and not already flagged for support under any other VSBA program.
- Please note that you will be required to provide proof of payment for any additional bushfire preparedness activities that you may undertake. Proof of payment documentation should be submitted as part of the acquittal process.

Further information

For further information and inquiries, contact the Bushfire Preparedness (Vegetation) Program team: bushfire@education.vic.gov.au or call 7022 2368 or your regional Operations and Emergency Management representative:

Region	Contact name	Telephone
South-Western Victoria	Andrea Cox	03 4434 0509 / 0407 861 841
South-Eastern Victoria	Haruka Ito	03 8904 2698 / 0428 805 945
North-Western Victoria	Allison Hughes	03 4433 7547 / 0477 763 238
North-Eastern Victoria	Therese Carroll	03 7505 3641 / 0428 284 749