

Rainwater quality and bushfires

Bushfires generate large amounts of ash and debris which have the potential to contaminate rainwater supplies. Although the presence of ash and debris in rainwater does not represent a health risk, it could affect colour, turbidity and taste.

There are some simple steps that can be taken to ensure that your rainwater supply is suitable for drinking after a bushfire.

Reducing the possibility of contamination

- Where possible, remove any ash and debris deposited on the roof or gutters.
- Check the roof and guttering for dead animals and remove if present.
- Do not collect the first flush of rainwater after the bushfire. Use a first flush diverter between the roof and the tank to prevent ash and other debris from entering the tank and contaminating the water. First flush diverters are commercially available from most hardware stores and rainwater tank suppliers.
- In the absence of a first flush diverter, disconnect the inlet from the roof to the tank until ash and debris has been removed.

Detecting contamination

- If ash and debris has been washed into the tank in sufficient quantities by rain occurring before an opportunity to divert the first flush or roof-hosing as part of a fire plan, the quality of the water may be affected.
- If the rainwater smells, tastes or looks unusual, assume it has been contaminated.

Fire retardants

Fire retardants and foams may also be deposited on roofs. This material can be washed into tanks when water is hosed on to the roof as part of fire protecting activities, or when it rains after a bushfire.

The recommended concentrations of the commonly used retardants and foams should not present a risk to health, but they may affect the taste of the water if washed into the tank. Fire retardants also contain detergents that may cause the water in the tank to froth.

Removing contamination

- Drain and clean the tank and allow it to refill with clean rainwater or fill with water provided by a water carter (look under 'Water Cartage' in the Yellow Pages®).
- Alternatively the water can be used for purposes other than drinking such as garden watering.
- If a dead animal is found, empty and clean the tank. If this process has to be delayed, remove the remains and disinfect with chlorine.

Water Quality Fact Sheet

Further information

- SA Health Drought webpage to access a range of rain water related resources:
www.health.sa.gov.au/pehs/topics/drought-package.htm
- Refer to 'Guidance on the use of rainwater tanks' by enHealth Council for more information on first flush diverters, tank cleaning and chlorination at:
http://enhealth.nphp.gov.au/council/pubs/pdf/rainwater_tanks.pdf
- Your local Council Environmental Health Officer
- Contact Environmental Health, SA Health (contact details below).

Contact

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