

NEIGHBOURHOOD SAFER PLACES - BUSHFIRE PLACES OF LAST RESORT ANNUAL REPORT

Report Author: Executive Officer Emergency Management

Responsible Officer: Director Communities

Ward(s) affected: (All Wards);

The author(s) of this report and the Responsible Officer consider that the report complies with the overarching governance principles and supporting principles set out in the Local Government Act 2020.

CONFIDENTIALITY

This item is to be considered at a Council meeting that is open to the public.

SUMMARY

This report is seeking Council to endorse the designation of Bushfire Shelter options within the municipality of Yarra Ranges. The annual audit has been completed for all identified Neighbourhood Safer Places – Bushfire Places of Last Resort (NSP-BPLR) in Yarra Ranges. Nineteen sites have been audited and are deemed compliant for designation as NSP-BPLR for the 2025/2026 fire danger period. Three existing Community Fire Refuges (CFRs) are still commissioned by Emergency Management Victoria and will be retained within the municipality. These buildings are state-owned and managed assets, listed on both Country Fire Authority (CFA) and Yarra Ranges Council Websites. There are 19 NSP-BPLR sites in total, and 3 CFR sites established for the 2025/2026 fire danger period.

RECOMMENDATION

That Council endorses the designation of 19 Neighbourhood Safer Places - Bushfire Places of Last Resort for the 2025/2026 fire danger period as deemed under the Country Fire Authority Act 1958.

RELATED COUNCIL DECISIONS

There are no related Council decisions relevant to this item.

DISCUSSION

Purpose and Background

Yarra Ranges municipality is known as one of the highest risk bushfire areas in Victoria. As part of a holistic bushfire community safety approach there are 19 locations across the municipality that are flagged as NSP-BPLR. This is in accordance with the Country Fire Authority Act, that Victorian Councils are to identify, designate, establish, and maintain suitable sites as NSP-BPLR in their municipal districts. NSP-BPLR are locations where the community can gather that may provide some protection from direct flame and heat in a bushfire, when all other personal bushfire plans have failed.

The CFA conducts an annual assessment of each NSP-BPLR in collaboration with Victoria Police and a Council representative, to ensure compliance with the assessment guidelines. NSP-BPLR are not intended to replace a personal bushfire survival plan. The CFA advises that there is no guarantee that people will not be injured or killed by fire or radiant heat when traveling to or sheltering at the NSP-BPLR. Following the introduction of NSP-BPLR legislation, Yarra Ranges Council currently has 19 NSP-BPLR locations within the municipality, which they maintain.

In comparison, Community Fire Refuges are specially built or modified buildings which can withstand bushfires. CFRs are operated and maintained by the Victorian State Government. A Community Fire Refuge will only be opened if there is a significant fire threatening the local area. The Yarra Ranges municipality has three of the five existing CFRs in state.

Options considered

This is a legislative requirement under Country Fire Authority Act 1958 and as such no other options have been considered.

Recommended option and justification

Council acknowledges the annual review of NSP-BPLR and endorses the designation of 19 NSP-BPLR sites within Yarra Ranges municipality for 2025/2026 fire danger period.

FINANCIAL ANALYSIS

There are minimal costs for annual inspections, installation, and maintenance of signage and NSP-BPLR sites. Annual inspections of NSP-BPLR ensure that sites comply with the assessment criteria. All sites are subject to ongoing maintenance and are part of operational budget.

APPLICABLE PLANS AND POLICIES

This report contributes to the following strategic objective(s) in the Council Plan:

Connected and Healthy Communities

- Yarra Ranges Municipal Emergency Management Plan (MEMP)
 - As legislated under the Victorian *Emergency Management Act 2013* this municipal-wide multi-agency plan, the MEMP, sets out local emergency management arrangements, of which an Annual Fire Readiness program is required. This report links to the MEMP through the Annual Fire Readiness program and its actions provide broadscale community safety options for at-risk bushfire locations.

RELEVANT LAW

Country Fire Authority Act 1958 – S50J

SUSTAINABILITY IMPLICATIONS

Economic Implications

In meeting the criteria for ongoing designation as an NSP-BPLR, no economic impacts are expected. The operational budget meets any requirements for maintenance and upkeep of all sites.

Social Implications

The social impacts of designated NSP-BPLR are minimal, until its use during an emergency. Should communities or visitors not have an appropriate bushfire survival plan on high-risk days, these sites offer a place of last resort location that provides a safer option to self-evacuate in the event of a bushfire.

Environmental Implications

In meeting the criteria for ongoing designation as an NSP-BPLR, vegetation maintenance may be required around these sites.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The Country Fire Authority, Victoria Police, relevant landowners/managers, community, and Yarra Ranges Council staff are consulted during the NSP-BPLR assessment process. Council publishes a list of NSP-BPLR sites on the Victorian Government Gazette. The CFA and the Yarra Ranges Council websites list all designated bushfire shelter locations in Yarra Ranges and this list is updated annually. As part of community awareness and broader personal bushfire safety messaging, the CFA recommends that each household has a personal bushfire survival plan that seeks to only use NSP-BPLR as a last life-threatening option.

COLLABORATION, INNOVATION AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

In meeting the criteria for ongoing designation of NSP-BPLR, a risk assessment is carried out each year by Yarra Ranges Council, Country Fire Authority and Victoria Police representatives. This assessment ensures that designated NSP-BPLR still meet relevant assessment criteria. Installation of updated signage continues in consultation with CFA to improve accessibility. This continuous improvement has been commended by CFA as an innovative approach.

RISK ASSESSMENT

All NSP-BPLR within Yarra Ranges have been reassessed in 2025 and have been found to comply with the assessment guidelines. All NSP-BPLR will be available for use by the community for 2025/2026 fire danger period. Ongoing Community education and information from relevant fire agencies provide consistent key messages to highlight the role of NSP-BPLR. NSP-BPLR are places of last resort and do not replace the need for residents to have a bushfire survival plan.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

No officers and/or delegates acting on behalf of the Council through the Instrument of Delegation and involved in the preparation and/or authorisation of this report have any general or material conflict of interest as defined within the *Local Government Act 2020*.

ATTACHMENTS TO THE REPORT

1. Neighbourhood Safer Place - Bushfire Places of Last Resort (NSP-BPLR) within Yarra Ranges municipality