

Flameproof houses - scheme that cost homeowners millions in ruins

Article by Liam Mannix published in The Age Victoria, 10th May, 2016

The author of the CSIRO report cited in this article, Justin Leonard, will be the keynote speaker at this year's Risk Frontiers seminar later this year.



Wye River resident Sheryl Smith lost her home in the Christmas fires. She now faces the prospect of rebuilding the home to strict new construction standards, which she estimates will cost around \$200,000 more than before Photo: Jason South

Victoria's so-called 'flameproof houses' were more likely to burn down than older designs in the Christmas Day bushfires, a damning CSIRO report has found. Homeowners in fire-prone areas have since 2009 been legally required to use flame-resistant materials at an added cost of up to \$200,000. But the report exposes a number of serious flaws in the policy that in many cases means homeowners have wasted their money, say experts.

On Christmas Day, in the coastal communities of Wye River and Separation Creek, 116 houses were lost to bushfire. Of the area's seven flame-proof houses, built with an added cost of between \$5,000 to \$200,000, four burned down, the CSIRO report found. Of older houses built after 2003 but not of a flameproof design, only three of 11 burned. About 80 per cent of the community's total housing stock burnt down.

"The research study highlights a range of specific weaknesses in the ... design specifications of current regulatory standards," the report says. The report identifies several key flaws. First, the policy allows flameproofs to be built using materials that are often not flame resistant.

More problematically, the policy only applies to new buildings. Old, non-flame resistant buildings are unaffected. But when they catch fire, they burn very hot – hot enough to burn down any flameproofs that are built next door.

One of the flameproof's stories highlights the system's flaws. The Koonya Avenue, Wye River house was clad with plasterboard, a material meant to protect from flames. But a second cladding of stained cedar was then built over the top. The house maintained its flameproof rating, but in reality was highly flammable, the report says.

The double-cladding solution is promoted by many builders that offer flameproof houses as an aesthetic solution. It is likely many other houses have been built in a similar fashion.

A worse example can be found on Iluka Avenue. There a well-designed flameproof appeared to be holding up well, until its next-door neighbour caught fire.

That house was built prior to the fire building regulations. When it went up, it burnt hot enough to reduce the neighbouring flameproof to ashes and twisted steel beams.

Kate Cotter, CEO of the Bushfire Building Council, said many people had spent huge sums believing their houses to be protected from bushfire.

"What's concerning is that if houses are built even to the highest bushfire rating they are still unlikely to be able to survive from the house next door burning. If people have gone to very high expense for houses that are next to old houses, they won't actually be safe in a fire."

Emergency Services Commissioner Craig Lapsley admitted the system was flawed but said there wasn't much that could be done.

"The problem we have is we cannot retrospectively apply it. We cannot ask you to pull your old house down and build a new one.