

Smoke Alarm Factsheet

From 1 May 2006 it is a term of every residential tenancy agreement that the landlord will install and maintain smoke alarms according to the standards in the Environmental Planning and Assessment Amendment (Smoke Alarms) Regulation 2006. The provisions about smoke alarms apply to residential tenancy agreements started before 1 May 2006 as well as new tenancies.

All smoke alarms installed from 1 May 2006 must comply with Australian Standard AS 3786. The power supply and location of smoke alarms depends on the type of building.

For private dwellings such as detached houses, terrace houses, units, relocatable homes, etc., alarms must be hard-wired to mains electricity supply or battery powered (landlord's choice).

They must be installed on every storey. On storeys with bedrooms, an alarm must be located on or near the ceiling in every corridor associated with a bedroom. The landlord may have to install one or more alarms.

On storeys without bedrooms, a smoke alarm must be installed in the path of travel that people would likely take to evacuate the building.

From 1 May 2006 it is a term of every residential tenancy agreement that neither the landlord nor the tenant shall interfere with the operation of a smoke alarm. If a smoke alarm gives false alarms (e.g. triggered by cooking), the tenant should not remove the battery or disable it. The landlord or agent should move the alarm to a more suitable location or replace it with a different style of alarm.

It is a term of every residential tenancy agreement that the landlord will place new batteries in smoke alarms at the start of the tenancy.

Regarding the replacement of batteries, if a tenant is physically able to replace the battery, it is their responsibility. If not, the landlord must replace it.

Landlords after 2 days notice can enter the premises to:

- install smoke alarms
- maintain and repair smoke alarms
- change a battery in a smoke alarm.

What are the types of smoke alarms available?

There are hard wired (connected to mains power with a battery back-up) or battery powered smoke alarms available. There are models available for use in kitchens and caravans and for those with special needs such as the hearing impaired. Models incorporating an emergency light are also available.

A combination of photoelectric and ionisation alarms (hard wired and interconnected) should be installed. Ionisation smoke alarms work by ionising air's nitrogen and oxygen atoms to detect harmful smoke in indoor environments. Whereas photoelectric smoke alarms use light-sensing technology to identify the presence of smoke.

If you are only installing one alarm, the New South Wales Fire Brigade (NSWFB) strongly recommends that it should be a photoelectric alarm. Photoelectric alarms appear to be superior to ionisation alarms in most circumstances, and there is little appreciable difference in performance during flaming fires. Therefore, photoelectric alarms may provide a faster warning in many circumstances.

The NSWFB recommends:

- Every house or home unit has a suitable number of working smoke alarms installed.
- There should be smoke alarms on every level of your home.
- Only Australian Standards # 3786 approved alarms should be used.
- Hard wired alarms must be fitted by a qualified electrician.
- Smoke alarms must be installed according to the manufacturer's instructions.
- All smoke alarms should be tested regularly.
- You should replace the battery in each smoke alarm at least once a year.
- Alarms should be replaced as recommended because they have a limited lifespan.
- To be effective smoke alarms must be cleaned regularly.

Fact: Smoke from a home fire is toxic. Only early warning can assist in giving your tenant vital time to escape a smoke-filled room. Also, when asleep tenants will not smell the smoke from a fire and the smoke will actually put them into a deeper sleep. A smoke alarm can provide the early warning your tenants need and is the critical first step in any property fire safety plan.

Sources: 1) Tenants Rights Factsheet 20. See www.tenants.org.au
2) The NSWFB website: www.fire.nsw.gov.au

Ten Things to Know about Bushfires

Here is the latest advice from the Rural Fire Service regarding bushfires.

- 1) **Telephone Warnings:** Funded by the Federal Government to the tune of \$15 million, a new telephone-based National Emergency Warning System will be given a full public trial. Warnings can be delivered via landline and mobile phones, recorded messages and text messages, alerting people in designated areas of fire danger.
- 2) **Levels of Alert:** There are three levels of bushfire alert: "Advice", meaning that a fire has started but there is no imminent danger; "Watch and Act", which means that there is possible danger to the individual and household; and "Emergency", which means danger is imminent.
- 3) **Catastrophic Danger Rating:** There is a new category to the bushfire danger ratings system—"catastrophic"—which means that householders in the path of such a fire should relocate immediately.
- 4) **Stay or Go:** Householders are still able to make a decision as to whether they "stay" and defend or whether they "go". If they opt to stay, they should have adequate clothing and equipment to defend their houses. In conditions of extreme fire danger which are below "catastrophic", it is suggested people relocate.
- 5) **Bunkers:** People should not rely on bushfire "bunkers" for protection. No standards have been devised for their construction. Self-made bunkers are known to have failed during the Victorian bushfires, killing seven people. Residents are advised by fire authorities to identify a place in their area that is safer than where they are and where they can relocate quickly. This could be a sports complex, community centre or shopping centre.
- 6) **Survival Plans:** It is strongly recommended that people prepare kits, including spare clothes, medical supplies, radios with spare batteries and other items which they can take with them in the event of having to relocate. Householders should have plans on how to get out of the house and on where to meet and attention should be paid to the safety of pets.
- 7) **Property Protection:** Householders need to prepare their property to withstand fire. This includes clearing fuel from around the property, clearing gutters, enclosing underfloor areas and sealing any gaps in building. It is also necessary to check the property's insurance cover, in case of damage.
- 8) **Bushfire Household Assessment Tool:** This is accessed on the Rural Fire Service website, where householders can feed in data about their address and receive an instant assessment of the fire risk.
- 9) **Arson:** Known arsonists are on notice that they are being monitored. Special surveillance has been mounted in areas known to represent serious arson risks.
- 10) **Commissioner's Powers:** As commissioner, Shane Fitzsimmons can order a landholder, including the National Parks and Wildlife Service, to remove hazards and if that is not done he can have it done and bill the landholder. He is backed by a budget of \$216 million this year and is in command of all fires.

Source: "Ten Things to Know about Bushfires", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 November 2009.

