Advice for People with Water Tanks Living in a Bushfire Affected Area

Introduction
Bushfires generate large amounts of smoke and ash. If you live in a bushfire-affected area you should be aware of the possibility of contamination of your tank water from dead animals or debris and ash being washed off the roof and into your rainwater tank when it rains. As well as being a nuisance, the ash and debris can contain chemicals that might be harmful if they get into your drinking water supply. Obviously, any dead animals will contaminate the water and make it unsafe to drink. The presence of debris and ash on your roof indicate that the first flush of water will not be suitable for drinking. If you have been hosing down your roof as part of your fire plans, or if it has already rained, these contaminants may have already washed into your tank.

Catchment areas
Similar issues apply to catchment areas following rain. Debris will wash into creeks and streams. Therefore water from creeks or streams will not be suitable for drinking. Untreated water from these sources should not be used for drinking in any event. Water from deep bores or wells should continue to be fit for human consumption.

What can I do to my rainwater tank to reduce contamination from a bushfire?
Install a first flush diverter between the roof and the tank to prevent ash and other debris contaminating the water. These are available from most hardware stores and suppliers of rainwater tanks.

How do I know if my tank water is contaminated after a bushfire?
The best guide is your knowledge of what your tank water usually looks and tastes like.
- If the water tastes or smells unusual, or is cloudy, has an unusual colour or contains particles, assume it is contaminated. Do not use it for drinking, preparing food or making ice, until the tank has been cleaned and refilled with new rainwater or clean water brought in by a water tanker/carter.
- If in doubt, assume the tank water is contaminated, or you may choose to have the tank water tested (for chemical, microbiological and algae levels) before deciding whether to use it for drinking.
Water that is not suitable to drink may still be used for other purposes such as fire fighting or watering the garden, but do not give it to pets or livestock to drink.

**When can I start using my rainwater tank again for drinking water purposes?**
Regardless of whether your tank needs cleaning or not, you still need to clean the roof to prevent contamination by debris entering the tank. Use the first flush diverter on your rainwater tank to divert any debris away from your drinking water storage. If you don’t have a first flush diverter, disconnect the inlet from the roof to the tank until the roof has been cleaned of debris.
- When it is safe, arrange to clean debris from the roof and gutters before it rains. Be careful to prevent injuring yourself.
- Dead birds or other small animals found in gutters should be removed using gloves and put in a plastic bag for disposal.
- When cleaning out the tank, remove any sludge and rinse/scrub the interior with a diluted household bleach solution (according to the directions on the label). Do not climb inside the tank unless you can ensure you have good ventilation, as an enclosed space can quickly become a potential hazard.

**Further information**