

Managing Asbestos Hazards

The ACT Rural Fire Service Chief Officer has issued this SOP under Section 38(1) of the *Emergency Act 2004* – A Chief Officer may determine standards and protocols.

Purpose

This procedure describes the practices to be followed to safely manage and mitigate the risk associated with the exposure to asbestos at incidents or during other RFS activities.

Scope

This Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) is applicable to personnel from the ACT Rural Fire Service brigades, as defined in the Emergencies Act 2004, their subcontractors and crew deployed from other jurisdictions.

Background

Asbestos is the generic term for a group of naturally occurring mineral fibres that are mined and then broken down from material clumps into groups of loose fibres. These fibres were often mixed with cement or woven into fabric or mats and made into construction products such as cement sheeting, insulation, pipes, paint, floor coverings, ceiling tiles and roofing materials.

Asbestos fibres are very small and may not be visible to the naked eye. Significant health risks may arise from the inhalation of airborne asbestos fibres and their passage into the lungs.

Generally, the smaller the fibres the greater the risk of a carcinogenic illness with the risk of cancer increasing as the diameter of the fibre decreases. The risk of cancer is also greater with prolonged exposure to asbestos.

Most commonly asbestos is found in two forms:

1. Sprayed on material containing asbestos is the form that is of most concern. This method was used until the early 1970s as fireproofing, sound proofing, thermal insulation, acoustic plaster, and insulation applications. It may also be found in lagging (material providing heat insulation) surrounding old heating flues and pipes entering through old hot water systems. It takes a laboratory analysis to conclusively identify the presence and type of this asbestos.
2. Asbestos was also incorporated into a stable matrix and is found in many working environments. Products in which asbestos may have been incorporated include vinyl asbestos tiles, laboratory table tops, asbestos rope and coil (utilised in heaters and woodstoves), roofing felts, suspended ceiling tiles, and asbestos cement products. These materials do not present a significant health risk unless they are tooled, cut, sanded or otherwise machined and release asbestos dust.

Asbestos sheet material can degrade over time if exposed to UV light. As a result, corrugated roofing sheets may present a relatively high risk.

Responsibilities

Members	<p>Must complete the Asbestos Awareness workshop before commencing an operational role</p> <p>Any member who suspects asbestos material to be present must immediately inform the IC/OIC/Crew Leader and remove themselves from proximity to the material.</p> <p>Any member who has been exposed to or worked in proximity to asbestos material must complete a WHS incident report.</p>
Incident Controllers/Officers in Charge (IC/OIC) /Crew leaders (CL)	<p>Must ensure assessment is undertaken for all hazards including asbestos and report any suspected presence to the RFS Duty Officer (DO).</p> <p>Special consideration should be given to incidents that involve a structure built prior to 1988, an area which appears to contain dumped/rubbish construction material and areas known to have previously contained asbestos.</p> <p>Must make the scene and themselves safe.</p> <p>Must report suspected asbestos presence to RFS DO.</p> <p>Must complete a WH&S Incident report.</p> <p>Must report any contaminated equipment to RFS DO.</p>
RFS Duty Officer RFS DO)	<p>Must notify incident to WorkSafe ACT and request their advice and instruction.</p> <p>Request ACT Fire & Rescue HAZMAT or equivalent interstate agency attendance, as required.</p> <p>Liaise with affected crews.</p> <p>Report any contaminated equipment to Manager, Operations.</p>
ACT Fire & Rescue	<p>Inspect and conduct decontamination of vehicles on-site.</p> <p>Clear or treat equipment, clothing and PPE.</p> <p>Tag the area as appropriate with barrier tape.</p>
ACT WorkSafe	<p>Contact the land owner or land manager and advise further action as required.</p>

Personnel will comply with this SOP when deployed at any incident, training or community engagement activity.

Personal protective equipment & clothing

All agencies have minimum standards for PPE/C on a fire ground. Firefighters must comply with their agency's standards in relation to this and ensure carriage and use of such PPE/C in line with their agency requirements for the task that they are undertaking.

Asbestos operational procedures

During a fire suppression operation

If the existence of an asbestos hazard is suspected or confirmed:

1. All personnel at the location must immediately:
 - a. be made aware of the hazard
 - b. if at all practical, move away from the location of the suspected material
 - c. if it is necessary to remain close to the suspected material, fit a P2 (or higher level) dust mask (AS/NZS 1716:2003: Respiratory Protective Devices)
 - d. ensure that vehicle doors and windows remain closed at all times
 - e. if the incident involves fire, remain out of the smoke plume emanating from the vicinity.
2. The CL/OIC must notify the RFS DO.
3. The area must be treated as hazardous and all non-essential personnel should be kept at a safe distance away from it. If, due to the nature of the incident, it becomes necessary for personnel to remain near the suspected material, then they should:
 - a. apply a water fog to the material to wet the disturbed material and minimise the amount of airborne contamination.

IMPORTANT – Avoid the use of high-pressure sprays directly onto the suspect materials.

- b. keep the affected area thoroughly wet with the continued application of water.
- c. avoid cutting, disturbing or unnecessary movement of any suspected material.

NOTE – Material containing asbestos that is in good condition and not broken should still be treated with caution.

During any other RFS activity

If the existence of an asbestos hazard is suspected or confirmed:

1. All personnel at the location must immediately:
 - a. be made aware of the hazard
 - b. move away from the hazard
 - c. ensure that vehicle doors and windows remain closed at all times.
2. The CL/OIC must notify the RFS DO.
3. The area must be treated as hazardous, an exclusion zone marked and all personnel must remove themselves from the location.

Decontamination

If any personnel, equipment or vehicles are suspected of having been contaminated by asbestos material:

The IC/OIC/Crew Leader must:

1. identify an area to be set aside upwind of the suspected asbestos site, and locate personnel, equipment and vehicles there. Consider the site location to avoid the need to move the site once established.

2. ensure contaminated personnel remain outside of vehicles as they make their way to the decontamination site, unless it is unsafe to do so
3. inform the RFS DO of the potential contamination of personnel, equipment or vehicles.

The RFS DO must:

4. request ACT Fire & Rescue HAZMAT or equivalent interstate agency attendance if practicable. (unless already requested by IC/OIC)
5. arrange delivery of clothing for any contaminated personnel to change into after decontamination
6. dispatch an additional vehicle if required for transport of uncontaminated members

The IC/OIC/Crew Leader must:

7. ensure that no personnel, piece of equipment or vehicle is removed from the decontamination site until cleared by ACT Fire & Rescue HAZMAT or equivalent interstate agency, or the RFS DO (on the advice of ACT Fire & Rescue HAZMAT, or equivalent interstate agency)
8. ensure that all contaminated personnel, equipment and vehicles are inspected and decontaminated by ACT Fire & Rescue HAZMAT or equivalent interstate agency
9. if some equipment and vehicles cannot be decontaminated onsite:
 - a. ensure equipment is bagged and removed by ACT Fire & Rescue HAZMAT or equivalent interstate agency for offsite decontamination or disposal (PPE jackets and pants will be sent to a specialised laundry to be decontaminated)
 - b. notify the RFS DO who will organise the professional cleaning of any vehicle that ACT Fire & Rescue HAZMAT or equivalent interstate agency are unable to decontaminate onsite.
 - c. Record all equipment removed for decontamination and forward this list to the RFS DO, who will send it on to the Manager, Operations. If any equipment is deemed contaminated – not for reissue, new equipment will be issued.

IMPORTANT – Under no circumstances may personnel who are wearing suspected contaminated clothing/equipment enter vehicle cabins (unless there is a safety requirement for them to do so), return to station or a private residence prior to undergoing the decontamination procedures.

- d. Once decontaminated, make arrangements for the affected personnel to be returned to station.

IMPORTANT – Should a member return to station or their residence and discover a piece of contaminated equipment/clothing, they should place it immediately into a sealed bag and notify the RFS DO. The RFS DO will then inform ACT Fire & Rescue and request appropriate action.

Post exposure

Onsite

The IC/OIC must:

1. make a list of all personnel and vehicles on site during the incident/activity
2. send the list to the RFS DO, who will forward it to the Manager, Membership (personnel) and the Manager, Operations (equipment/vehicles)
3. ensure the suspected area is taped off by ACT Fire & Rescue HAZMAT or equivalent interstate agency with barrier tape, or by RFS personnel if ACT Fire & Rescue HAZMAT or equivalent interstate agency is not present.

Offsite

1. The RFS DO will contact Worksafe ACT, or appropriate authority if deployed interstate, and inform them of the incident and the location of the suspected asbestos. WorkSafe are responsible for informing the land owner or land manager.
2. All personnel who were in close proximity to the site must complete accident/incident forms through RiskMan whether they were exposed or not.
3. All personnel who may have been exposed, or who are suspected to have been exposed, to airborne asbestos will undergo medical assessments organised by the RFS.

Additional agency involvement


Operations outside the ACT will follow the interstate organisation's existing operating procedures

Document information

Version history

Author	Version	Version Approval Date	Summary of Changes
Andrew Stark	1.0	17/12/2012	Version 1.0
Rohan Scott	2.0	10/03/2020	Reviewed and updated
Stephen Huntley	3.0	21/06/2021	Administrative Review

Approved by

Name	Title/Role	Signature	Date
Rohan Scott	CO ACT RFS		23.07.21

Document Owner

Position	Section
Director	Operations

Next review due: 10/03/2022

Related documents

Document name
SOP 1.2.1 Using Personal Protective Clothing and Equipment
SOP 1.2.2 Issuing Personal Protective Clothing and Equipment
Notifiable Instrument NI2018-244 Work Health and Safety (Asbestos Awareness Training Course and Occupations) Declaration 2018
Asbestos Awareness Workshop
ESA Policy: Asbestos Awareness Action Plan and Activity Matrix

Document name
Work Health and Safety Act 2011
Riskman Incident Reporting form

Signed documents will be scanned and filed in TRIM.