

Pre-bushfire season hazard and private pole inspections

FAQ



April 2020

Annual Ausgrid Pre-bushfire Season Hazard Inspections and Private Pole Inspections will start in April 2020 and are expected to be completed by August 2020. Ausgrid crews (including contractors) will inspect both the (1) Private pole and overhead powerlines and (2) Ausgrid network for defects and potential bushfire hazards.

1. Private Pole and overhead powerline inspections

As part of our bushfire safety management plan, Ausgrid communicates annually with customers who have private mains (which includes privately-owned poles, pole-top fittings and overhead powerlines) and service mains on their property to inform them we will be conducting on the ground inspections to check for bushfire hazards on their property.

There are approximately 42,500 private poles in bushfire prone Rural Fire Service areas in the Hunter, Central Coast, Newcastle and Sydney. Ausgrid conducts 'rapid' inspections of these private poles routinely every year and 'in-depth inspections' of them every 5 years. As part of this year's pre-summer bushfire inspections Ausgrid will inspect >19,000 customers' private mains (which includes privately-owned poles) as well as nearly 8,000 customers' service mains (which are the overhead powerlines that connect Ausgrid's network to the customer's property).

Q Why do you need to do these inspections?

A: Recent months in Australia have shown us how dangerous bushfires can be. Ausgrid is committed to ensuring we help prevent bushfires.

We regularly inspect and patrol our network to ensure it is in good shape and manage potential bushfire hazards. Property owners will also reduce bushfire risk by maintaining their privately-owned poles, pole-top fittings, overhead powerlines and vegetation on their properties.

Q What are private poles and overhead powerlines?

A: Power poles and powerlines are those that are located beyond the connection point on your property, including between different buildings and structures on your land.

These assets allow customers to have electricity available where they want it on their property. Generally, they were originally installed at the landholder's request. Many private power poles have been in place for decades, including through multiple changes in land ownership.

Q What are my responsibilities if I live in a bushfire prone area and have private poles and overhead lines on my property?

A: If you are a property owner in a bushfire prone area you must:

- maintain all privately-owned poles (including pole-top fittings) and overhead powerlines on your property,

- keep your trees, branches and other vegetation a safe distance away from all poles (including pole-top fittings) and overhead powerlines on your property, and
- keep your trees, branches and vegetation a safe distance from Ausgrid's electricity network, including our poles and overhead powerlines, which may be located near your property.

Q What happens if you identify a defect during these inspections?

A: If Ausgrid identifies any bushfire hazards on your property, we will provide you with a *Bushfire and Vegetation Risk Mitigation Defect Notice* that tells you what work is required to manage the hazards and the timeframe in which you must complete the work.

It is then your responsibility to arrange, and pay for, an appropriately qualified and licensed contractor to complete the work.

Q What happens if I don't undertake this work?

A: Given the seriousness of the situation, if you as the property owner do not comply with this notice, then Ausgrid may (under the *Electricity Supply Act 1995* [NSW]) enter your property and complete the required work. We will then recover the reasonable cost of doing the work from you.

Alternatively, if we consider that there are health and safety reasons warranting disconnection of the premises, we may need to disconnect your premises.

Q Who pays for the defect repairs?

A: The owner of the property is responsible for fixing the bushfire hazards. This may include engaging an appropriately qualified contractor and paying for any rectification work.

Q How long do I have to fix the defect?

A: You have 60 days to fix the hazards from when you receive your defect notice. Ausgrid will send you a reminder notice after 30 days if they haven't heard from you.

Q But it's not my property. What do I do?

A: Please forward the letter to the property owner or real estate agent immediately as when Ausgrid identifies a bushfire hazard it must be fixed within 60 days.

Q Are there any circumstances in which Ausgrid will grant an extension?

A: Bushfire poses as a serious risk to life, property and the environment. There are set time frames that defects must be rectified. Ausgrid is here to support customers trying to get their work completed. Ausgrid knows that sometimes this may be difficult for whatever reason. Customers should contact Ausgrid to discuss their individual circumstances on 13 13 65.

Q What if I can't afford to fix the hazards outlined in the defect notice?

A: Ausgrid knows there are people in the community who are experiencing financial stress and hardship. The financial hardship policy has been developed to assist customers who need to pay Ausgrid directly for bushfire safety rectification work.

Ausgrid seeks to address financial hardship early and encourages customers to discuss their individual circumstances and eligibility for assistance. More information about the hardship policy is available by visiting the website at <https://www.ausgrid.com.au/About-Us/Who-we-are/Policies-and-reports/Hardship>

Q: Why is Ausgrid continuing with this program during a pandemic?

A: Ausgrid knows that COVID-19 has changed our society in a lot of ways, however we also must prepare for the next bushfire season and we cannot put off this critical work. Ausgrid will ensure that we work with our community throughout the pandemic to deliver the bushfire program and protect us all next summer.

Q: COVID-19 is causing financial hardship for a lot of people – how will I pay for these works Ausgrid is making me do?

A: Ausgrid is a party to the Energy Networks Australia COVID-19 Relief Package and is also compliant with the Australian Energy Regulator's Statement of Expectations on COVID-19 response. As such, Ausgrid has strengthened and expanded their Hardship Program to support customers and are able to offer payment plans and other special considerations to customers impacted by COVID-19.

Customers should contact Ausgrid directly on 13 13 65 to discuss their individual circumstances and to learn more about the Hardship Support Program.

2. Pre- Bushfire season hazard inspection program – Aerial patrols

Q: Bushfire season hazard inspection program – aerial patrols

A: Inspections of the Ausgrid network will be predominately done by helicopter, however, where we are unable to effectively inspect the asset by helicopter, we may use a specially equipped SUV mounted LiDAR unit or, in rare occasions, a drone.

Around 10,000 assets across the Ausgrid network will be inspected between end April to July 2020.

Q Where will these inspections be done?

A: We will be inspecting bushfire prone land areas in all Local Government Areas within our service network in the Upper Hunter, Newcastle, Lower Hunter, Central Coast, South, East and Northern Sydney.

The helicopters fly between 25 and 40 kilometres per hour and have been modified to allow for the quietest operation. We know from prior experience, that the helicopters may fly low at times, which can startle animals in rural areas and property owners may want to consider securing livestock during these periods.

Q: When will the crews be in the air?

A: Crews will be the air between 7.30am and 5.30pm (weather permitting) from end-April 2020 through to July 2020. A schedule of where we will be flying will be available on our website in the coming weeks. We will be using two helicopters to complete our inspections.

The Ausgrid website is regularly updated with details on these inspection programs and why we need to do this important work prior to the start of the bushfire season on 1 September 2020.

Visit ausgrid.com.au for more information.

Q: Will the helicopters be noisy?

A: The helicopters fly between 25 and 40 kilometres per hour and have been modified to allow for the quietest operation. We know from prior experience, that the helicopters may fly low at times, which can startle animals in rural areas and property owners may want to consider securing livestock during these periods.

Q: What sort of information will you be collecting during the aerial inspections?

A: The aerial inspections collect information about the network and the immediate area around it. There are two types of information collected namely pole top photography and Lidar measurements. Pole photography enables us to identify defects on poles to fix them before they become dangerous failures.

Lidar is a surveying method which enables us to make three-dimensional models of the poles and wires to determine distance to vegetation, for bushfire risks identification and distance to the ground to identify public risks.

Q: What do you do with the images and information you collect in the aerial patrols?

A: The specialist crews will be using laser scanning equipment and taking high-resolution photographs to identify any potential bushfire hazards relating to our high-voltage powerlines.

This includes identifying problems with our powerlines or spotting trees, branches or vegetation growing too close to them. Once these hazards are identified we will send specialist crews to fix them so they're safe for the next bushfire season starting in September 2020.

Q: What about my privacy?

A: The helicopter crews are inspecting Ausgrid's electrical assets, including our high-voltage powerlines. They are not inspecting private property, so they will not capture any personal images.

Helicopter operators must also comply with the relevant State privacy laws and are commonly used by other providers and emergency service organisations to monitor conditions to prevent bushfires.