

Southern Barossa Winery Tourist Accommodation Project (SBWTAP)

Unacceptable Bushfire Risk to Life, Community and the Barossa

A briefing from Preserve & Protect Barossa

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Purpose

This briefing sets out why the Southern Barossa Winery Tourist Accommodation Project (SBWTAP) should be refused on bushfire grounds alone, due to unacceptable and foreseeable risks to life, community safety, emergency responders and the Barossa's wine industry reputation.

While the public submission period has closed, the ministerial decision remains pending. We urge the Premier, the Minister for Planning, the CEO of the Department for Housing and Urban Development, and all relevant local members including Ashton Hurn MP to carefully consider the bushfire evidence and refuse this application.

Key Points Summary

- The site is classified at the **highest bushfire risk level** (High Risk) under state planning policy and carries a Very High qualitative rating in the proponent's own assessment. The resort would concentrate more than 1,000 guests and staff—equivalent to a small settlement—in a location recognised as one of the most fire-prone in the region.
- All evacuees would depend on a **single compromised escape route** via Menzel and Hoffnungsthal Roads, with a known geometric choke point at the Hoffnungsthal–Lindner Road intersection that cannot be substantially widened without removing significant and regulated trees unlikely to be approved.
- **Recent fires within metres of the site** (including one approximately 275 metres away in December 2025) demonstrate this is a live, recurring bushfire environment, not a theoretical risk. Multiple fires in the immediate 2 km radius over recent years required CFS appliances and water bombers.
- The proponent's own Bushfire Emergency Management Plan anticipates **evacuations and daily risk briefings on high-risk days**, yet provides no workable plan to relocate or manage more than 1,000 people, often over a series of High and Extreme fire danger days each season.
- Increased human activity on **steep slopes averaging 14–15 degrees** significantly increases ignition likelihood and drives faster uphill fire behaviour, risking rapid runs into the Barossa Range and threatening neighbouring properties and vineyards.
- There is **no clear analysis** of whether local Country Fire Service (CFS) appliances, water supplies and access arrangements can effectively respond to a six-storey building fire in this rural setting, exposing guests and emergency responders to avoidable risk.
- Bushfire smoke from a major fire at this site would likely spread into the Barossa Range, where rugged, hard-to-defend terrain could allow smoke to affect vineyards across the entire valley, causing **widespread smoke taint**, crop loss, unsellable wine and long-term damage to the Barossa brand and its global reputation.
- **Safer, already-zoned township locations** (including Tanunda's Tourism Development Zone) are available for major tourist accommodation and offer multiple evacuation routes, established safer-place infrastructure and lower bushfire exposure.

Bushfire and Climate Context

South-eastern Australia is among the most bushfire-prone areas in the world, and South Australia's own climate emergency declaration (May 2022) recognises that climate change is increasing the frequency of extreme fire weather events, as well as the size, scale, ferocity and impact of bushfires^[1]. The declaration explicitly states that these events pose a continuous

challenge to the CFS's fire suppression capacity and capability, as well as an increased threat to life, property and environmental assets[1].

Climate modelling forecasts an increase of between 5% and 65% in the incidence of extreme fire danger days across South Australia[1]. For the Barossa, this translates into many High fire danger days and multiple Extreme days each season, with a clear upward trend already evident in recent CFS data for the proposed site's district over the last five years:

Risk Level	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
High	97	98	73	77	116
Extreme	2	0	8	6	10

Table 1: CFS fire danger days, proposed SBTAP district, 2020–2025

This means that evacuations, operational disruptions and daily risk management would not be rare events, but regular and growing features of resort operations. The notion that more than 1,000 guests and staff can be repeatedly briefed, safely evacuated, relocated and returned over a series of High and Extreme fire danger days is operationally unrealistic and underscores the fundamental unsuitability of this site for large-scale tourist accommodation.

Site-Specific Bushfire Hazards

Very High Risk Rating and Steep Slopes

The SBTAP site is located on land designated High Bushfire Risk under state planning policy, following scientific research commissioned after devastating Mount Lofty Ranges fires to classify land units according to objective risk criteria. The proponent's own Bushfire Risk Assessment assigns the site a Very High qualitative bushfire risk rating[2].

The Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) confirms that the hotel site is located on steep terrain with an average slope of approximately 14.5 degrees, while the winery site averages 9 degrees with some areas reaching up to 15 degrees[3]. The Bushfire Risk Assessment explicitly states that "fire will burn faster uphill, especially when pushed by prevailing winds"[4]. These steep slopes directly increase the rate and severity of bushfire spread.

Located on steep, sloping terrain in the foothills of the Barossa Range, any fire starting at the site would rapidly run uphill into the range, where rugged topography, limited access and challenging escape routes make active firefighting and asset protection extremely difficult and dangerous. Once established in the range, such a fire would be very hard to contain and could cause widespread devastation across the Barossa, posing an unacceptable threat to life, property and regional values.

The Bushfire Risk Assessment also confirms that "increased human activity often has the most potential to increase ignition likelihood" and that "increasing volume of human activity and vehicles accessing the area... and construction incidents" further heighten bushfire risk[5]. Currently, the site has no buildings and is used only by vineyard workers. If SBTAP proceeds, there could be more than 1,000 visitors and staff on site[6], representing a very significant increase in ignition sources including vehicles, machinery, cigarettes and construction activity.

Single, Unsafe Evacuation Route

More than 1,000 guests and staff would depend on a single escape route—Menzel Road to Hoffnungsthal Road—to evacuate in an emergency, along with existing residents further up Menzel Road[6]. The traffic assessment explicitly acknowledges that the Hoffnungsthal and Lindner Road intersection on this escape route is so narrow that a CFS appliance and a car cannot pass simultaneously:

"A review of vehicle turn paths within the curved section of Hoffnungsthal Road indicates that simultaneous movements of a commercial vehicle such as a Heavy Rigid Vehicle and a car (B99 design vehicle) could not be accommodated within the existing carriageway width in the vicinity of the Lindner Road intersection... The increase in volumes associated with the proposal (including increased commercial vehicle movements) would, however, increase the probability of conflict. Desirably, widening would be undertaken... The ability to undertake significant improvement is limited by large significant and/or regulated trees for which removal would unlikely be approved."^[7]

This is not a minor design flaw—it is an inherent, unmanageable constraint. No amount of signage, traffic management or operational fine-tuning can change the geometry of the Hoffnungsthal–Lindner intersection or the regulatory obstacles to widening it. In a worst-case bushfire scenario, emergency vehicles would be forced to share this constrained corridor with panicked evacuees, significantly increasing the likelihood of blockage, collision or operational delay at precisely the time when seconds matter most.

On catastrophic, extreme or fast-escalating fire days, large numbers of people attempting to leave via Menzel Road and Hoffnungsthal Road would be highly likely to block CFS and other emergency vehicles from getting to and past the hotel complex, effectively trapping existing residents further up Menzel Road while also compromising the safe egress of resort guests and staff. This is an unacceptable planning outcome that exposes both visitors and residents to avoidable danger.

Pattern of Recent Local Fires

This is not a hypothetical concern. In recent years, there have been multiple fires in the immediate vicinity of the proposed development:

- **10 December 2025:** Fire approximately 275 metres from the proposed resort site.
- **2023:** Multiple fires on Menzel Road and two separate fires on Sugarloaf Road.
- **2018:** Fires at Barossa Helicopters and St Jakobi.

All of these incidents, within a two-kilometre radius of the proposed site, required multiple CFS appliances and water bombers. These events illustrate a clear pattern: this is a live, recurring bushfire environment, and any decision that significantly intensifies human presence here must proceed on the assumption that it is not a question of *if* there will be a fire impacting the site, but *when*.

Operational Impracticality and Ignored Expert Advice

Daily Risk Management and Evacuation

The proponent's Bushfire Emergency Management Plan (July 2025) anticipates evacuating the resort on declared Extreme or Catastrophic fire danger days, and on high-risk days, all staff and visitors will receive briefings about fire risk and potential evacuation, with all staff and visitors participating in risk assessment to determine daily activities[8].

This raises a fundamental practical question: where are more than 1,000 guests and staff supposed to go, and how are they to be safely managed, on days when the wider region is also under stress and high alert? As the CFS data shows, over recent fire seasons there have been many dozens of High fire danger days and multiple Extreme days each year, with a clear upward trend. This means evacuations and briefings would not be rare events, but a regular and highly disruptive feature of operations.

The risk management requirement shows no operational cognisance of the practicality of managing a resort: how or where does one relocate up to 1,000 people for a day, or more, or worse—in and out over a series of days? There may be a series of risk days, not just a single day, and risk days might be interrupted by lesser days, requiring occupiers to evacuate, reoccupy and then evacuate again. This example is a stark indicator of the absurdity of the development's siting.

In other regions and climates—for example, mountain snow resorts—seasonal close-down is a standard management approach for extreme weather or climate conditions. Seasonal closure as a management approach has clear parallels to the climate risk conditions that apply here, and in reality it is the planning approach that would need to be applied to ensure community safety. The need for such a response, however, points to the gross error in the land's selection. The development's site selection highlights the purpose of land use planning, which must prevail over exploitation of the land's natural assets—its setting and views—when public safety is at stake.

Expert Closure Recommendations vs Proponent's Position

The Bushfire Emergency Management Plan (July 2025), prepared by SA Bushfire Solutions, recommends site closure on Catastrophic fire danger days and on Extreme days where the Fire Behaviour Index exceeds 74[9]. Yet the proponent's EIS states only that "the site will be closed on declared Catastrophic Fire Danger Days"[10].

The proponent's failure to adopt SA Bushfire Solutions' recommendation for closure on both Catastrophic and Extreme (FBI >74) days creates an unjustified inconsistency between independent expert advice and the proposed operating regime. In circumstances where any relaxation of this precautionary standard would expose guests, staff and the surrounding community to higher residual risk, the absence of robust, independent evidence supporting a lower closure threshold is unacceptable and suggests that commercial considerations are being prioritised over life safety.

Smoke Taint and Economic Risk to Barossa Wine Industry

Bushfire smoke does not only threaten life and property—it poses a direct economic threat to the Barossa's wine industry through smoke taint. When grapevines are exposed to smoke from bushfires, volatile phenolic compounds are absorbed into the berries, resulting in wine with unpleasant smoky, ashy or burnt flavours that are detectable even at very low concentrations.

Smoke taint can render entire vintages unsellable or force wineries to sell affected wine at heavily discounted prices. In severe cases, smoke-affected fruit cannot be processed at all, resulting in total crop loss for that season. The financial impact on individual producers can be devastating, and at a regional scale, smoke taint events damage the Barossa's reputation for quality and consistency in international markets.

A fire starting at this site, on steep slopes backing into the Barossa Range, would likely spread rapidly uphill into rugged, hard-to-defend terrain where containment is extremely difficult. Once established in the range, smoke from such a fire could drift across the entire Barossa valley, exposing vineyards region-wide to smoke taint—not just properties immediately adjacent to the resort. Locating a 1,000-person resort—with its associated vehicles, machinery, construction activity and ongoing human presence—in this high-risk ignition location materially increases the probability of a fire that could affect the whole valley's wine production[5]. The Barossa's global reputation relies on consumer trust in quality and provenance, and a preventable, resort-associated fire causing valley-wide smoke taint would have reputational and economic consequences well beyond a single vintage.

This risk is entirely avoidable by directing large-scale accommodation development to safer township locations away from high-risk bushfire areas and sensitive agricultural assets.

Missing Analysis: Local Firefighting Capacity

There is no explicit analysis in the EIS of whether local or regional fire appliances, most of which are designed for rural fires and typical low-rise development, can access or effectively fight a fire in a six-storey building. This is critical for the safety of guests, staff and emergency responders, given the hotel's unusual height for a rural region.

The EIS fails to address the structural fire implications of placing a six-storey building in a rural CFS area where high-rise firefighting appliances are unlikely to be available, exposing future guests and the broader community to avoidable risk. In the absence of a detailed assessment—prepared in consultation with the CFS—demonstrating that suitable appliances, reliable water supplies, access arrangements and operational protocols will be in place to protect guests, staff and emergency responders during a significant structural fire, the proposal cannot be regarded as providing an acceptable level of fire safety.

Governance, Duty of Care and Safer Alternatives

Following devastating fire events in the Mount Lofty Ranges, the State Government commissioned scientific research to classify land units according to risk, and that work was recognised nationally as the forefront of regional planning for land use. The resulting high bushfire risk policies are objective, with little room for interpretation. They exist precisely to prevent decisions like this one: locating a high concentration of people—visitors equivalent to a small settlement—in a proven high-risk hazard location.

This reasoning is reinforced by the fact that every other zoned location or current approval for large-scale resorts in the Barossa (with capacity increases equivalent to over 1,000 people) is not designated High Risk for bushfire. The Bushfire Risk Assessment itself identifies Tanunda as one of the closest bushfire safer places for SBWTAP evacuees[11], and Tanunda already has a Tourism Development Zone specifically designed for large-scale tourist accommodation projects.

In addition, there is already substantial capacity for large-scale tourist accommodation in safer locations that are either zoned for tourism development or already approved. Existing or potential sites include Château Tanunda, Novotel at Rowland Flat (where there are approximately 120 hectares of unused zoned land that could be further developed), Seppeltsfield (including the Oscar Seppeltsfield hotel project), The Nexus project on Yaldara Drive at Lyndoch, and the Sandy Creek Resort proposed at the golf club. These locations are either in or adjacent to township or established tourism nodes, with better access, multiple routes and lower bushfire exposure than the SBWTAP hillside site.

Building major accommodation at established township sites, where multiple evacuation routes and proven bushfire safety infrastructure are in place, would offer much greater protection for visitors and locals. Prioritising township locations rather than expanding risky development into vulnerable rural zones aligns with current policy and the intentions of the Tourism Development Code Amendment, which encourages safer clustering of large-scale tourism projects.

Approving SBWTAP would:

- Undermine the meaning and integrity of high-risk bushfire zoning and regional planning policies developed specifically to protect life and property.
- Breach the government's duty of care to existing residents, the wider Barossa community, visiting tourists and emergency responders.
- Set a dangerous precedent that commercial interests can override objective, science-based land use planning in high-hazard areas.

No one in the community, the planning system or government wants to see headlines about a preventable tragedy that local residents, emergency services and planners had already warned was a disaster waiting to happen—characterised by multiple fatalities, loss of homes and critical infrastructure, and irreparable damage to the Barossa's landscape and reputation.

Across Australia, we are already seeing the consequences of ignoring risk: in other states, whole towns are now being relocated or radically reshaped in response to repeated fire and flood disasters. Those are tragedies that are hard to reverse. Building a large-scale resort in this location would be an entirely preventable disaster.

Our State is at the forefront nationally in classifying land and creating no-go zones for high-risk areas and land uses. For this site, the planning framework makes it clear this use isn't supported. The community shares that view and we are asking decision-makers, bound by a duty of care to the public, to honour the intent of the system we all rely on to keep us safe.

Decision Request

We ask the Premier, the Minister for Planning and the CEO of the Department for Housing and Urban Development to refuse the Southern Barossa Winery Tourist Accommodation Project on bushfire grounds alone, due to unacceptable and foreseeable risks to:

- Resort guests and staff
- Local residents and neighbouring properties
- Emergency responders and CFS operations
- The Barossa wine industry and its global reputation

We urge the South Australian Government instead to support major tourism investment in safer, township-based locations that align with planning policy, climate science and contemporary bushfire-aware development practice.

The State Planning Commission and the Minister for Planning have a clear duty of care to existing residents, the wider Barossa community and visiting tourists. Decisions made under the planning system must not expose people to foreseeable and preventable risks. In this case, the dangers associated with placing a large-scale resort in an area of known and recurring bushfire threat are well documented, widely acknowledged and repeatedly demonstrated by actual fire events.

Approving this development in full knowledge of those hazards would not only breach the community's trust in the integrity of the planning process but also conflict with the government's broader obligations to safeguard life, property and the region's long-term reputation as a safe and sustainable destination.



References

- [1] South Australian Government. (2022, May). Declaration of Climate Emergency. Government of South Australia.
- [2] SA Bushfire Solutions. (2025). Southern Barossa Winery Tourist Accommodation Project, Bushfire Risk Assessment. Appendix 17, p. 44, section 10.4.
- [3] Southern Barossa Winery. (2025). Environmental Impact Statement, p. 121, section 10.7.2.1.
- [4] SA Bushfire Solutions. (2025). Bushfire Risk Assessment. Appendix 17, p. 31, section 9.4.
- [5] SA Bushfire Solutions. (2025). Bushfire Risk Assessment. Appendix 17, p. 28, section 9.1.
- [6] Southern Barossa Winery. (2025). Environmental Impact Statement Assessment Requirements, p. 3, section 2.
- [7] Traffic consultant report. (2025). Appendix 10, p. 27, section 6.2.2.
- [8] SA Bushfire Solutions. (2025). Bushfire Emergency Management Plan, July 2025, p. 12, section 7.
- [9] SA Bushfire Solutions. (2025). Bushfire Emergency Management Plan. Appendix 17, p. 67, section 7, Table 5.
- [10] Southern Barossa Winery. (2025). Environmental Impact Statement, p. 103, section 10.5.2.5.
- [11] SA Bushfire Solutions. (2025). Bushfire Risk Assessment. Appendix 17, p. 50, section 12.2.