



Modern car a plastic coffin in bushfires

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MODERN car design makes for safer, more comfortable motoring but for someone caught in a bushfire the latest models can be death traps.

Research for the NSW Rural Fire Service by Bushfire Co-operative Research Centre has found new sedans are far more dangerous in fires than their heavy metal predecessors.

The Australasian Fire Authorities Council, the peak body for the fire and emergency services, has used the research to inform drivers what to do if caught in a bushfire.

While, obviously, it's best to steer clear of fire-affected areas, if trapped, the council advises drivers to remain in their car.

"Research shows you should park in an open area, turn off the engine and air-conditioning and get as low to the ground as possible," AFAC chief executive officer Naomi Brown said.

"They (cars) can be a fire trap but there are some things that can be done in this worst-case scenario."

Ms Brown advised all motorists to carry a woollen blanket that can be used to cover passengers.

"Today's cars are more dangerous because there is much more plastic and glass. The plastic goes (burns) very

quickly and the glass, too. Before, car door handles, bumper bars and other parts were metal — the change in design has made it more dangerous."

The study, conducted in January 2007 at the NSW service's hot fire training facility in Mogo, on the NSW south coast, used seven two-wheel-drive sedans, ranging in size, age and make.

Lead researcher Justin Leonard, from the CSIRO's Sustainable Ecosystems, described the testing as "unique", saying the last similar tests were in the 1960s.

In the simulated test, temperatures inside the cars surged to about 300C.

"Sheltering below the window line is the best strategy, as the heat passes through the windows," Mr Leonard said.

"Being underneath a woollen blanket down low keeps temperatures around 40C to 50C and the blanket is also difficult to ignite," he said.

Mr Leonard said smoke and toxic gases from melting components inside cars were often more significant than the heat.

"People trapped in a car during an intense forest fire could expect the ordeal to last 15 minutes," he said.

"But people need to become knowledgeable about bushfires, come to understand the situation and make the right decisions beforehand so they don't end up trapped."

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