

Making sport safe in a changing climate

A four-step guide



Climate change and extreme weather are already affecting the sports we love and putting the health of athletes young and old at risk. But there are some simple steps that grassroots clubs can take to ensure that everyone stays safe on and off the field. Making sure your club is climate-ready will give our future athletes the best chance of success.

EDO works with communities to protect the environment by providing specialist legal advice, advocating for law reform, developing legal education tools and launching ground-breaking litigation.

How does climate change impact sport?

Climate change is making it harder for people to play sport and changing how and when they can participate. Rising temperatures and sea levels, longer periods of drought and flooding events can all damage playing surfaces. Extreme weather events cause cancellations, delays and changes to match schedules. Climate change also increases the risk of serious injury to participants and spectators because of hotter conditions and exposure to harder playing surfaces.

“Ever since 2019 there's been so much rain, and it has really affected games. So many games are being called off due to rain. I've played seasons where it should have been an 18-game season and it's only been 10 or 11 games. I never remember experiencing that when I was a kid and now it seems to happen every year or every second year.”

Bill Shipway

Grassroots AFL player, primary school teacher and junior football coach.

“It was my first season playing soccer. It was 35 degrees, my head was pounding, and my lungs were burning. I sucked in the dry air and my lips were paper thin, seared by the sun. My sweat-soaked arms prickled with goose bumps; I could not wait for half-time. I was severely dehydrated and suffering heat stroke.”

Heather McGiddy

Grassroots soccer player and women's soccer coach.



Case studies

In recent years, we've seen climate impacting sport in significant ways at both elite and grassroots levels.

Australian Open heatwave

There were more than four days over 40° during the 2014 Australian Open, prompting more than nine players to withdraw and more than 1,000 spectators and several ball-kids to be treated for heat exhaustion.

Cricketer sent to hospital with heat stroke

English Test Cricket Captain Joe Root was hospitalised with heat exhaustion after an Ashes Test match in Sydney in 2018. The air temperature at the time was 42° and a heat-tracker in the middle of the ground showed a reading of 57.6°.

Soccer cancelled as temperatures soar

Temperatures of over 44° on 11 February 2017 led to the cancellation of the A-League's Newcastle v Melbourne Victory match, and all under-18s NSW football trial games.

World-class cycling event shortened

Extreme heat in South Australia in 2018 and 2019 led to the shortening of the route of the Tour Down Under cycle race.

Bushfire smoke suspends Big Bash

A Big Bash League (BBL) cricket match at Manuka Oval in Canberra was suspended on 21 December 2019 after smoke from the 2019-20 bushfires blew over the field.

Floods flatten baseball buildings and contaminate AFL ground

Devastating floods in Lismore NSW in 2022 damaged the local AFL oval making it unsuitable for play, and the local baseball facility was also hit by the flood as it was being upgraded.

Flood ruins football field

In northwest Brisbane, a soccer club's synthetic playing field was washed away by floods that hit Qld and NSW in 2022. A shipping container full of the club's equipment also floated away on the floodwaters.

AFL seasons cut short by drought

In 2007, three-quarters of metro and rural AFL leagues in Victoria had their playing seasons delayed or shortened due to ground closures caused by drought.



What can we do to keep sport lovers safe?

Local sports clubs are where our athletes are made, and where community is built. The clubs that are forward-thinking when it comes to climate change risks will give their athletes the best opportunities. Here are four steps you can take to help your sports club get on the front foot.

Step One: Start the conversation.

Find out if your club is climate ready. Here are some questions you can ask the club to find out how prepared they are for the challenges climate change will throw at players and spectators. You can ask club administrators to provide the following information.

1. Does the club have an extreme heat or extreme weather policy?

An extreme heat policy might set a temperature limit where play must stop, or a temperature forecast that requires a game to be postponed. There might be additional rules around the number of breaks required during practice or a match if a temperature is reached. Are impacts to spectators and umpires also considered in these policies?

3. Is this policy publicly available and does the club community know about it?

When we're informed, we feel safe and assured that if the worst happens, we know how to respond. Where can people find the club's climate-related policies? Are people made aware when these policies are updated?

2. What are the rules of these policies and who is responsible for enforcing them?

Policies are most effective when it's clear whose job it is to make sure the rules are followed. If extreme heat is forecast for a weekend match, will it be the club president who decides to postpone a game? If an unexpected deluge occurs during practice, is it up to the coach to determine if play is called off?

4. Are club facilities vulnerable to extreme weather events like floods or bushfires?

Does your club have adequate evacuation plans in the event of a flood or a bushfire? Are there measures your club is taking to mitigate any future risks to facilities from extreme weather events?

Step Two: Developing policies to keep players and spectators safe.

If your club's policies were developed and are operated by a broader association, and are not managing these climate risks, you might want to suggest some improvements with your State or National associations.

If your club doesn't already have policies that address climate change risks, you can help kickstart the process by checking your state, district, regional or national sporting body for templates and examples of these policies. Some of the more common climate risk policies sporting organisations and clubs will develop are:

Heat policies are critical in mitigating against the risk of personal injury of players arising from heat. The best heat-related policies use the internationally accepted Wet-Bulb Globe Temperature (WBGT) as the basis for assessment. The best heat policies set out the required actions at each level of heat.

Extreme weather policies are also important and can provide guidance as to when a venue, field or pitch is considered too dangerous to play on account of flooding or extreme heat and rain, cyclone, frost, snow, high winds, lightning or electrical storm or hail.

Step Three: Get informed and spread the word.

Knowledge is power, and there are many resources available for clubs who are looking to create policies that will keep their community safe from climate impacts.

- [Vicsport has several hot weather resources](#)
- [Sports Medicine Australia's extreme heat policy](#)
- [Australian Institute of Sport's exercise in bushfire smoke resource](#)
- [Australian Institute of Sport's sun-safe sport resource](#)
- [Vicsport's guide to first aid for heat illness](#)
- [Sports Environment Alliance resources](#)



Step Four: Understand the legal risks.

Legal risks for sporting clubs

Sporting clubs could be liable if they fail to ensure a “safe system of work” for people they employ, such as coaches or club officials.

Having an insufficient heat policy during training and any games organised by the club and/or failing to ensure appropriate medical assistance is available at practice or at any games organised by the club could place the club at legal risk.

It’s important to check your club constitution for any obligations to members, volunteers, officials, players and employees.

Legal risks for event organisers

Event organisers could be liable for:

- Proceeding with an outdoor event despite adverse weather conditions. For example, carrying out a marathon race during exceedingly hot or wet conditions or failing to take adaptive measures to address these concerns;
- Failing to provide adequate medical assistance to injured players;
- Failing to undertake risk assessments considering the impact of extreme weather on players or warn players about risks that are not obvious.

Legal risks for referees/umpires

Referees and umpires could risk liability for:

- Failing to enforce the rules of the game/heat policy to avoid the risk of heat-related illness to players;
- Failing to undertake adequate inspections of playing surfaces impacted by adverse weather;
- Proceeding with an outdoor event in dangerous weather conditions, such as when play is allowed to continue in extreme heat, or when the playing surfaces of a pitch or field have become dangerous due to extreme rain or wind, leading to player injury.



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To learn more about the legal risks sport clubs and organisations face in a changing climate you can read the [Sports, Climate Change and Legal Liability](#) report. This research was developed in collaboration with sports and climate advocacy organisation FrontRunners.