

Sportsground Closure Policy

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1.0 BACKGROUND

Sports and Recreation Facilities (SRF) manages and maintains 284 hectares of irrigated sportsgrounds across the ACT, supporting a broad range of sporting codes and recreational activities.

Unlike other jurisdictions across Australia, SRF manage the majority of the city's sportsground assets on behalf of the community. The ACT presents unique challenges in the management of sportsgrounds, notably an extreme climate with a high variability of rainfall and temperature, multi-use sportsgrounds that support more than one sporting code, high participation rates across a broad demographic, rapidly changing demand sporting seasons that do not align with the traditional summer/winter season and an ageing asset base, all of which contribute to a number of complex factors that impact the management of sportsgrounds.

Canberra's sportsgrounds are subject to regular maintenance, operational and renovation activities. Sportsground are irrigated and mown to maintain a healthy grass cover, while twice a year (between the winter and summer seasons) sportsgrounds are shut down to allow intensive maintenance such as fertilising, aeration, renovations, including turf repair, and preparations for the coming season such as installation of goal posts and line marking.

Canberra is unique in the fact that sportsgrounds require a mix of grasses to provide match fit conditions year-round. Turf surfaces are a custom mixture of cool season grasses which are slow growing and remain green in the winter months and drought tolerant grasses which thrive in the warmer months but brown off in winter. This presents challenges to maintaining grounds in adverse conditions including excessive rainfall and drought.

Grass growth is slow between April - September when soil temperatures are below 10 degrees. In addition, when ovals are saturated and soft under foot, machinery cannot be placed onto the ovals to undertake the surface repairs. As a result, sportsgrounds cannot be quickly repaired after they have been damaged following periods of wet and soggy conditions during the winter season.

Most ovals do not have subsurface drainage and with prolonged or severe damage surfaces will gradually see the grass smothered in mud which then rots, and the surface may become uneven across the field with prolonged usage. Such damage, if severe, can have lasting impacts on the availability of the affected sportsground following the season as well as financial implications.

As a result, SRF strives to avoid excessive damage to sportsgrounds while balancing the desire of the community to access grounds for training and match play.

2.0 POLICY OBJECTIVES

This Policy provides guidelines and procedures to inform decision-making about closure of ACT Government turf sportsgrounds due to wet weather. It applies primarily to SRF but also includes guidance for sporting groups in making their own decisions about the appropriate use of sportsgrounds for their participants.

SRF's priority is to provide equitable and sustainable provision and allocation of grounds that are fit for purpose. SRF applies a risk management approach to the management of grounds and in particular to the decision to close sportsground when ground conditions dictate.

This policy provides a clear framework for decision-making about sportsground closures in order to:

- pro-actively manage sportsgrounds in order to prevent damage and over-use, ensuring the long-term sustainability of multi-purpose sportsgrounds;
- ensure the safety and well-being for all users of the grounds;
- to provide certainty and accurate and timely information to the community concerning sportsgrounds closures across the Territory and the Capital Region.

3.0 CLOSURE CONSIDERATIONS

The Senior Director of SRF or delegated staff member will have the authority to close sportsgrounds should they be adversely affected by wet weather (or for operational or other needs).

Peak bodies, clubs or individual hirers do not have the authority to use grounds when they are closed. Synthetic fields along with the synthetic running track at Woden Enclosed are the only facilities approved for use when turf grounds are closed.

The decision to close sportsgrounds is not one that is taken lightly. It is accepted that a range of considerations may trigger sportsground closures, as outlined below.

3.1 Current condition of sportsgrounds

SRF turf management officers will sample multiple locations to determine the general condition of sportsgrounds across the city. The grounds staff will make visual and physical observations to determine subsoil moisture, grass coverage, existing damage or wear and the risk of unacceptable impacts.

3.2 Weather forecast

Detailed weather observations and predictions will be sought from the Bureau of Meteorology (BoM) to inform decision-making. As a general principle, in winter SRF will close grounds to all activities where the current condition of grounds are assessed as vulnerable (for example, saturated due to rainfall in preceding days) and/or there is a forecast of 20mm with a above 75% certainty or more issued by the BoM and the maximum temperature is less than 15 degrees.

During the summer season, SRF will close grounds to all activities where grounds are saturated due to intermittent rainfall in preceding days and/or there is a forecast of 30 mm with a above 75% certainty or more issued by the BOM and the maximum temperature is less than 25 degrees.

3.3 Consultation

SRF officers will engage with peak sporting bodies, other ACT sportsground managers such as the Australian National University and the University of Canberra and neighbouring NSW Councils to share information and seek alignment and coordination where appropriate. This recognises the fact that sporting groups and competitions in the Capital Region use a range of facilities managed by various public and private jurisdictions and organisations.

In order to minimise impacts and disruption to match play fixtures, SRF will seek to prioritise weekend match play over training and will only close sportsgrounds on weekends where conditions dictate that this is required and there is no possibility of an alternative solution.

3.4 Consistency and equity

It is acknowledged that different sporting uses and levels of competition and training have varying impacts on playing surfaces. Likewise, some sportsgrounds are more resilient to damage than others. Despite this, to ensure consistency and equity, a closure decision will generally apply to all ACT Government natural turf sportsgrounds. However, in exceptional circumstances like finals or matches that must be played there may be some exceptions approved after consultation with peak bodies and following individual ground inspections.

4.0 CLOSURE NOTIFICATION

Where changes are made to the availability of ACT Government sportsgrounds for training and match play, this will be notified at 9am during weekdays and the status of sportsgrounds will be notified on the ACT Sportsgrounds webpage at <https://actsportsgrounds.act.gov.au/home> ..

For weekend bookings, a notification of the status of grounds will be made public no later than 2.00pm on the preceding Friday. Provisional information and consultation will be undertaken with peak bodies by no later than 12:00 pm on Fridays. SRF will provide the earliest notification possible to patrons regarding weekend bookings.

A decision about weekend closures will not be made after the preceding Friday. If ground conditions are impacted by unexpected and significant rainfall on the weekend, peak bodies or competition organisers will need to decide if fixtures will proceed as per the advice in Section 5 of this policy.

Information regarding the status of sportsgrounds is available on the ACT Sportsgrounds webpage or by contacting ACT Sportsgrounds on 62075141 during business hours. A 24 hour automated wet weather phone line is also available on 6207 5957.

Contact can also be made with Access Canberra (13 22 81) or checking relevant social media of ACT Sport and Recreation, peak sporting bodies or local club.

When the ovals have been closed by the ACT Government, all affected bookings will be cancelled out and fees and charges will not apply.

5.0 GUIDANCE FOR SPORTING GROUPS

As outlined in this Policy, SRF will close grounds where required on a blanket closure basis. In instances where SRF has deemed all grounds will remain open after a wet weather event or where unexpected rainfall eventuates and closures cannot be implemented at short notice, it is the responsibility of the peak sporting bodies, their clubs or umpires/referees to deem the facility safe for their intended purpose. Peak bodies may choose to suspend play to prevent injury to players or to protect the integrity of the playing surface.

In all circumstances, peak bodies and clubs will need to determine the fitness of a sportsground for play according to their own policies and risk considerations. This can apply to use of particular sportsgrounds and/or to categories/levels of competition.

The following information is provided as a guide to assist peak sporting bodies and clubs in making a decision to suspend play due to unsafe or unsuitable ground conditions resulting from rainfall.

5.1 Inspection of grounds

Grounds should be inspected by clubs, preferably the day before a booking, especially where there has been regular rain leading into the event. All grounds should be inspected on match days with three main issues taken into account for grounds which may warrant suspension of play due to wet weather.

1) Player Safety - while it is often considered that hard ground is the main concern in relation to player safety, slippery and heavy turf is also the cause of player injury. If grass dislodges easily players can find it hard to maintain footing and more unusual injuries can occur due to irregular movement and responses to the conditions. Safety issues relating to standing water should also be considered. Stagnant water sitting in muddy puddles can carry bacteria that can cause illness.

2) Substantial damage to a field - clubs and codes need to consider the benefits of 1 day of match play and possible resulting damage to a sportsground, which could see that location closed requiring maintenance for a number of weeks and the effect of that decision making on other sports and codes. If in doubt, peak bodies are encouraged to cancel fixtures wherever possible. Exercising caution will ensure grounds are still suitable for play for the duration of the season.

3) Amount of Rainfall - rainfall leading into competition and training should be considered. Due to varying composition of subsoils and other factors, some sportsgrounds can absorb heavy or persistent rainfall and remain fit for weekend competition; other grounds may be impacted by a rainfall event the night before a weekend fixture. Clubs should take into consideration the rainfall during the week, the night before and the forecast for the day of training/competition when making decisions.

Any inspection for condition should consider the following:

5.1.1 Grass cover

During the winter season grass cover will deteriorate, especially where repeated training is undertaken on specific parts of an oval. During wet weather, grounds are likely to wear more and if a decision is made to play or train on wet ground with low grass cover, then this may cause significant damage to the field with consequences for future availability.

5.1.2 Ground Softness

It is recommended that clubs consider cancelling competition play and training bookings if there is any sinking into the field when walking on it or if when standing still/walking water rises up to the surface.

The only exception to this would be if the area affected was small and the rest of the field was firm and poor grass cover is not an additional issue.

5.1.3 Surface Water

It is recommended that clubs consider suspending competition play and training bookings if there is any surface water visible on the field. The appearance of surface water means that the ground has reached a saturation point of 100% and the surface will be damaged very quickly if played on. The exception to this would be if the area affected was small and the rest of the ground was firm, and no other issues such as ground softness and poor grass cover are evident.

5.1.4 Amount and type of activity

A full day competition will have a significant impact during wet weather. Grounds can be damaged very quickly over 1 or 2 weekends with heavy use and wet weather. Juniors and seniors impact the ground differently, with junior levels generally causing less impact. Peak bodies may decide to prioritise junior games over senior games for the long term benefit of the sport when it comes to making decisions about cancelling games. Alternatively, peak bodies may decide to prioritise the higher level fixtures if this is their priority to manage impacts to planned fixtures.