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No refuge here: school's fire defences crippled

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THE bushfire-ravaged town of Coldstream in the Yarra Ranges has been left without a firefighting system at its primary school for more than a year, despite Black Saturday fires coming within about 500 metres of the school in February.

The school's fire service, which connects hydrants underground, broke last December, but the school council says it only received State Government funding for a new system this month.

There are no contractors in the area that can install the system before Christmas.

School council president Darren Dew said residents last year arrived at the locked school on Black Saturday before sheltering from fires at the nearby community centre.

"The knee-jerk reaction is to go to the public hall or the school, because they're nice big areas surrounded by open spaces that they feel safe in and that have hydrants," Mr Dew said. "If that happens again this year, we need to let the public know: don't come to the school because it's not safe."

Mr Dew said that after tendering for quotes earlier this year to have the service fixed, the school found the extent of repair costs meant it would have to submit quotes and apply to the Department of Education. He said approval was granted on December 11.

A spokeswoman for the department responded in an email that it had given Coldstream Primary School "almost \$47,000 for a new fire hydrant inside the school" and that "as soon as Coldstream PS notified the department, funding for a new fire hydrant was approved".

But Mr Dew insisted bureaucratic delays meant approval had not been instantaneous, and there was confusion about whether the school needed to apply for funding or use money in an emergency account.

Coldstream Primary School is among more than 700 government schools rated as having a high fire risk and which will close on days of "code red" fire danger weather. Coldstream school principal Peter Donaldson declined to comment on the fire service breakdown.

A spokeswoman for the Yarra Ranges Shire Council said residents should not consider any schools as refuges but should instead consult their fire plan. She said the council had this week endorsed its first two "neighbourhood safer places" in the municipality - they are Monbulk Recreation Reserve and Morrison Reserve in Mount Evelyn. But she stressed these were to be considered "places of last resort".

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/national/no-refuge-here-schools-fire-defences-crippled-20091219-l6s2.html>