**NEWS ARTICLE**

Vodacom Century City fire highlights fire safety for PV systems

**14 July 2023:** The fire at the Vodacom building at Century City in Cape Town on Sunday 9 July is suspected of having been caused by an issue with the rooftop solar photovoltaic (PV) installation. Such systems for homes and businesses are increasingly popular to mitigate the impact of ongoing loadshedding.

However, for insurance purposes these need to be installed by an accredited installer or electrician, highlights [ASP Fire](http://www.aspfire.co.za) CEO **Michael van Niekerk**. The onus is on home and business owners to ensure that the installation is correct, especially in terms of accompanying gensets.

“There are several fire safety measures that should be taken into account to prevent the risk of fires when installing a solar power system,” says van Niekerk. Firstly, solar panels must be installed by experienced professionals to prevent fires caused by faulty wiring or overheating.

It is important to use high-quality solar panels, inverters, wiring, batteries and other components from reputable manufacturers. Inferior quality components, especially when it comes to lithium-Ion batteries, are more likely to malfunction, increasing the risk of a fire. Lithium-Ion batteries that are not equipped with a thermal management system have a high chance of overheating, resulting in thermal runaway and a subsequent fire.

Battery storage rooms must be fire rated to control a battery fire as these are exceptionally difficult to control and extinguish. The flammable gas produced during a Lithium-Ion battery fire can build up inside a garage or room, and if ignited can result in an explosion with disastrous consequences.

Another critical consideration is using properly sized and rated wiring in the installation to prevent overheating, short circuits or other electrical problems that can lead to fires. Wiring should be insulated, and conduit used where necessary to protect the wiring from the elements.

Faulty, poor quality or incorrectly installed solar panel junction boxes located outside on the roof can cause water to ingress the housing, which can lead to a short circuit and a subsequent fire that will result in a loss of the roof top solar installation.

Install an isolation switch to shut the roof-mounted solar panels down safely in case of an emergency, says van Niekerk. Such an isolation switch must be clearly labelled and easily accessible to the fire department. The impact that solar panels have on smoke ventilation and emergency firefighting smoke ventilation in a soft roof building are also important factors to keep in mind when designing solar panel installations.

In addition, a solar power system must be grounded to prevent electrical shocks and fires. All metal components, including the solar panels and storage batteries, must be grounded to a common ground point. Regular maintenance and inspection are critical to ensure all components function properly and to identify any potential fire hazards.

***Ends***

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**Notes to the Editor**  
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**About ASP Fire**  
ASP Fire operates across the entire African continent from its Gauteng base, providing professional, accredited fire risk management and support to its clients. ASP Fire designs, installs, and maintains a full range of fire detection and suppression equipment suited to clients’ needs. ASP Fire provides a holistic, proactive, and preventative fire solution based on integrated fire risk assessment, training, and consulting, with the installation and maintenance of fire detection and suppression systems that meet SABS, NFPA, FPASA, and SAQCC standards.

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