

# BUSH FIREbulletin

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SPECIAL EDITION



# October 2013

## A TRIBUTE



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### I WAS THERE

Throughout this Special Edition *Bush Fire Bulletin* we have included large format photos where photographers captured the heat, atmosphere and intensity of the bush fire emergency. We asked each photographer to tell us what was happening in the moment.

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# Foreword



This issue of the *Bush Fire Bulletin* is dedicated entirely to the fires in October 2013.

It was one of the most significant fire emergencies our State has experienced for many years. The response from our members, our emergency management partners and the community at that time was nothing short of remarkable.

In the four weeks of October firefighters attended 1,167 bush and grass fires across NSW. This included significant fires in the Southern Highlands, Hawkesbury, Hunter, Port Stephens, Central Coast, Greater Lithgow and the Blue Mountains. In the Blue Mountains region, a number of large and destructive fires impacted on communities including Springwood and Winmalee, Mount Victoria, and communities along the Bells Line of Road, destroying homes and affecting infrastructure.

The most intensive fire activity was in the period between 13 and 26 October 2013 when there were 627 incidents and 164,054 hectares burnt. In that period there were 11 days with Total Fire Ban Declarations, 19 Section 44 Emergency declarations and a State of Emergency was declared by the Premier between 20-30 October.

At the peak of the emergency, and with conditions deteriorating, there were thousands of firefighters either deployed or strategically located, ready to respond. Nearly 100 aircraft were in action in the skies, assisting the crews on the ground.

Behind the scenes, a massive logistics effort was in swing, such as a base camp set up in Penrith for 850 firefighters and the Major Incidents Logistics

Support team which managed the participation of around 1,400 interstate firefighters.

I am proud of the senior fire managers whose well-considered risk-based decision making made a significant difference to the forward advancement of the main fire fronts.

The public information effort was extensive with huge community meetings held, and a massive interest in the NSW RFS website and other information channels. The media played a very significant role in key messaging and keeping the public well informed. I am very grateful for the investment made by the media over many years in the training and accreditation of media personnel. Throughout October the media were active partners in the public information effort. A feature article about the media's role appears in this edition.

The afternoon of 17 October proved to be one the most destructive few hours of the past decade. More than 200 houses were destroyed across the Blue Mountains region. Thankfully, no lives were lost.

Incidents reports on the major fires in Port Stephens, Lithgow, Blue Mountains and Southern Highlands are included in this edition.

In the days following 17 October nearly 150 fires were burning across NSW including several serious and threatening fires on the outskirts of Sydney. Adding to this scenario, on Sunday 20 October we received very worrying fire behaviour and weather predictions including hot temperatures and gusting winds for the next few days. This, combined with the already existing 1,600kms of active fire

edge, meant that the likelihood of greater damage caused by bush fires was very high.

The NSW Government declared a State of Emergency. A decision was made to start broadcasting information on contingency plans to large areas of the most at-risk communities. Some of the preparation and planning that went on in those days is featured in this edition, including a map of 'The Plug' – a high-risk containment strategy executed by expert RAFT (Remote Area Firefighting Teams) and the community meetings that were attended by thousands of residents.

The October 2013 fires took a massive toll in terms of property, infrastructure and indeed on the firefighters themselves. It is an accolade to the firefighters, however, that so few deaths occurred.

Sadly, the fire emergency did bring tragedy with the death of David Black, a pilot who was killed while engaged in firefighting activities on the south coast. A Vale to David Black is included in this edition of the *Bulletin*. Our thoughts are also with the family and friends of a man who suffered a heart attack while defending his home at Lake Munmorah.

As I said quite publicly at the time of this emergency, I believe we have the best firefighters in the world. Our coordinated firefighting arrangements in NSW, where the NSW RFS, Fire & Rescue NSW, National Parks and Forestry Corporation work as a team, is something we should all be proud of. We should also be proud of the relentless professionalism and commitment demonstrated by all during this time.

My thanks also goes to the 1,400 interstate firefighters who came to our aid and to the Police and Emergency Management agencies in NSW who provided support to the firefighting effort and to those affected by the fires. My thanks go especially to the Minister for Police and Emergency Services and the NSW Premier for their unwavering support during the fire season.

A calendar indicating the total numbers of fires active on any given day appears throughout this *Bulletin*. This is a reminder that even as the focus falls to some of the larger fires, a huge amount of work is being done by volunteers at all times to manage fires throughout NSW.

In order to pay tribute to the firefighting effort in October, we drew on the expertise of many outside the NSW RFS including professional photographers such as Gary P Hayes from the Blue Mountains, as well as those from Fairfax Media and *The Daily Telegraph* who donated their evocative photos. We would also like to thank *The Weekend Australian* for allowing us to re-publish their well-written feature by Greg Bearup on some of the containment strategies put in place in the Blue Mountains.

I would like to thank everyone who has played a role during the October 2013 fires and indeed across the whole bush fire season. This edition of the *Bulletin* is a tribute to you all.

Regards  
Commissioner  
Shane Fitzsimmons, AFSM



# Red October

Special Edition  
Bush Fire Bulletin

October 2013 will be remembered as one of the most challenging and significant periods of fire activity experienced in NSW in recent years. This issue of the *Bulletin* is dedicated entirely to those busy weeks when more than a thousand fires were reported and responded to and when thousands of firefighters took to firegrounds to protect their local communities.

This issue of the *Bulletin* tells not only the stories of the major fires and how they were fought but the stories behind the scenes. How were local community engaged in the fire effort? How was the public kept informed? What technology was used to track and strategise against the spread of the fires? How did such massive operation come together so quickly?

#### **Bush Fire Bulletin iPad version available**

For the first time this issue of the *Bulletin* will also be available on iPad with exclusive videos, interviews and slideshows to enhance the storytelling.

At the height of the bush fire emergency, Commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons spoke to the media and public:

*"We have the best firefighters in the world."*

In this issue of the *Bulletin* we see these firefighters at work and have the opportunity to appreciate the complexity and drama of the October 2013 campaign.

PHOTO: 17 October 2013: The Heatherbrae fire seen from the north. Photo by Wes Whitworth

# October 2013



Launch of the official Bush Fire Danger Period

1/10/2013



FRNSW battle blaze at Sydney Olympic Park that destroys 47 parked cars

10/10/2013



Port Stephens and Hunter Valley Fires start

13/10/2013



Fires races through Winmalee and Yellow Rock destroying homes

16/10/2013



Mt York Road and Hall Road fires start and the Heatherbrae Fire takes a run

17/10/2013



Interstate crews deployed



Confirmation that more than 200 houses destroyed in Blue Mountains on 17 October, but not lives lost.

19/10/2013



Commissioner begins regular live media conferences

20/10/2013



State of Emergency declared; Overarching IMT set up

21/10/2013



Thousands attend community meetings

22/10/2013



Firefighting pilot David Black, dies on South Coast

23/10/2013



Interstate crews begin departing

24/10/2013

27/10/2013

TOTAL OF BUSH AND GRASS FIRES PER DAY IN OCTOBER



TOBANS and pre-emptive S44 declarations



State Mine Fire starts



RAFT crews work on The Plug



State on Alert





# Preparations and predictions

In the months leading up to the October 2013, predictions were for a difficult fire season. Preparations were being made throughout the State including widespread hazard reductions, galvanising resources and extensive training and planning.

## Predictions

Weather forecasters were expecting the 2013/14 fire season to be one of the hottest on record. For some parts of the country, July 2013 was their warmest in more than 100 years and September 2013 was the warmest on record according to the Bureau of Meteorology.

The Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre (Bushfire CRC) also predicted that NSW could experience above average fire conditions, with the exception of the north coast and far west of NSW.

The above normal forecast was generally due to abundant grass growth across inland Australia. For NSW above average rainfall for much of the preceding three years had produced heavy grass fuel loads throughout the grassland areas of NSW west of the Great Dividing Range, the Tablelands and the Upper Hunter. Added to this, since January 2013 the country had generally experienced above average temperatures.

While the higher temperatures were encouraging grass growth in some areas, in the forested

areas in central and southern NSW coast and ranges, it was causing the forest fuel to dry out. Again this produced predictions for above normal fire activity.

## Getting ready

Brigades were preparing their own areas in the months before the fire season was officially launched on 1 October 2013.

Substantial hazard reduction work was completed around the State in 2013. The NSW RFS is the lead agency for bush fire hazard mitigation for NSW and every year the Service seeks to increase the number of properties protected by hazard reduction works. The Service works with a range of other land management agencies to do this work.

In the 12 months to 30 June 2013, the Service conducted 1,938 such hazard reduction works. In August and September brigades were working with partner agencies on over 100 scheduled hazard reductions each week. Several of these hazard reduction works proved to be vital in saving life

and property when the fire season got underway.

The aviation arsenal was also boosted in preparation for a challenging fire season. In early October the *Gypsy Lady* firefighting Air-Crane arrived from Greece. It was immediately deployed to fight the Blue Mountains fires and a second Air-Crane *Ichabod* began service within a few days.

The Air-Cranes are brought to Australia each year because their huge water carrying capacity of 7,000 litres and their ability, in the right conditions, to re-fill in less than six seconds. In addition to the two Air-Cranes, the NSW RFS has access to some 100 aircraft to help fight both bush and fast moving grass fires.

Meanwhile the public awareness campaigns were well underway and the annual NSW RFS Open Day was held on 30 September.

At the official launch of the Bush Fire Danger period on 1 October 2013 the Commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons was stern.



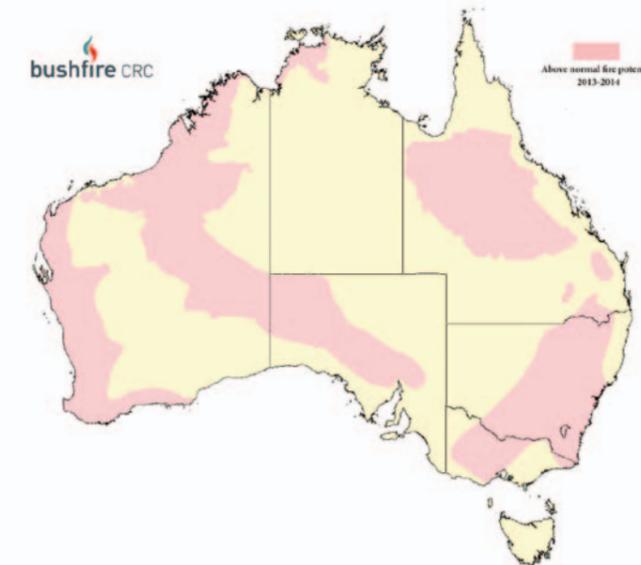
Fire Activity in August and September 2013



ABOVE: 13 September 2013: Another briefing, another fire, another day in the life of an RFS firefighter. After spending several days assisting with fires in Sydney's west, firefighters from Hornsby/Ku-ring-gai took advantage of the cooler weather by conducting a Hazard Reduction burn in St Ives. Photos: Kane Lambkin



ABOVE: Commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons joined then Premier Barry O'Farrell in welcoming the Air-Crane and their crews to NSW for the fire season. Photo by Ben Shepherd



ABOVE: Forecasts for the 2013/14 Season were for above average fire conditions across much of NSW. Pink indicates above average fire conditions predicted.

"We have just experienced the warmest winter on record and the latest forecasts are pointing to continuing dry and warm conditions," he said, "In the last few weeks we have seen fires which have started and spread quickly. If you've been waiting for a wakeup call about preparing for bush fires, this is it."

## 2013 Fire Activity before October

Even before the official fire season had been launched the NSW RFS was actively fighting many fires especially in the north of the State. Both August and September were very active months with a total of 2,322 active fires reported across NSW in that period.

The New England and Northern Tablelands areas commenced their official bush fire danger period from 1 August, 2013. Region North experienced 446 bush fires including a fire in the Crescent Head area near Kempsey which ran from 19 August to 26 August, threatening properties and burning 445 hectares.

Throughout September 2013 the north coast saw numerous fires, especially in the Lower North Coast and Clarence Valley Districts. In late September, fires across the mid coast area threatened communities around Taree and the Great Lakes areas. While there were some losses such as sheds and outbuildings, there were no homes destroyed.

Tuesday 10 September saw Section 44 declarations in the Blue Mountains, Hawkesbury and Cumberland areas, for fast moving fires which were threatening homes. Under conditions which were worse than originally forecast, a fire impacted on homes around the township of Yellow Rock in the Blue Mountains. On the same day in Western Sydney, fires at Londonderry and Marsden Park also affected local communities, with one home being destroyed. In just one day, nearly 30,000 Emergency Alert mobile telephone warning messages were delivered, while another 12,000 voice messages were sent to fixed phone lines in the fire affected areas.

In the final days of September, another Total Fire Ban was declared for a number of areas from Sydney to the Queensland border. A fire took off in Clarence Valley which was declared a S44 in late September and continued to burn in remote and State Forests.

All this set the scene for what would be a challenging month in October 2013.

OPPOSITE: 7 September 2013: McCallums Hazard reduction in Hornsby District. Photo by Tim Heslop



## I WAS THERE

Date: 10 September 2013

Time: 3:15pm

Location: Londonderry, west Sydney

Photographer: Nick Moir © Fairfax Media

*"When I reached the Londonderry Road fire NSW RFS crews were finding its speed and the copious amount of spotting ahead of the main firefront, a real challenge.*

*A finger of the front had roared across the containment line and continued its drive eastwards. The winds eased and firefighters attacked the finger's flanks. A rapid wind change, from north-west to westerly, turned a flickering edge about 50 metres west of the road, into a crown fire.*

*Firefighting crews prepared to stand their ground but the speed of the explosive push gave them no time to get into their truck and start its self-protection sprinkler system. In this photo you can see they ran towards me as the inferno blasted overhead."*

# Centre stage

The State Operations Centre at NSW RFS Headquarters in Lidcombe is a world-class facility which allows the Service and its partners to effectively oversee and coordinate incidents. The staff within the Centre monitor developments, analyse their potential and provide a variety of specialised resources to the Incident Management Teams and firefighters on the ground.

On 'bad' fire days it is unusual for there to be just the one fire. It's not uncommon for

there to be dozens, and there can sometimes be hundreds. Someone needs to keep track of all that is going on. This includes directing stretched resources to where they can do the most good across the State, providing specialised support, making sure the right people get the right information to take action, keeping the whole community informed, checking things are running well and advise, support or even intervene if needed when

things are going 'pear-shaped' in places.

Holding this 'big picture' overview is the job of the State Operations Centre.

During major periods of heightened fire danger State Operations has four main functions:

- Readiness
- Command, Control and Coordination
- Specialised Support
- Intelligence Support

The design and layout of the State Operations Centre was the subject of detailed analysis and planning prior to 2004, when the NSW RFS Headquarters was built. The room consists mainly of three concentric circles:

### The Centre Circle (also referred to as the "Centre of the Room")

State level officers are stationed here including the State Operations Controller (SOC), the Strategic Overview Officer (SOO) and the State

Public Liaison Officer (SPLO) and their assistants. The circular design of the desks reflects the flow of information. Information flows inwards and decisions flow outwards from the Centre Circle to the concentric circles around it.

### Middle Circle

The four regional Major Incident Coordination teams (MIC teams) are set up around the middle circle and act on behalf of the SOC to interact with various parts of the State –

North, South, East and West. The MIC teams, which are led by a Coordinator, are the point of contact (or 'one stop shop') for Incident Controllers across NSW, and provide scrutiny and support for incident management activities.

### Outer Circle

The outer circle consists of representatives from Key Functional Areas including various agencies and authorities who may have a supporting role to play

during major fire activity. These can include transport, communications, water supply, electricity, welfare and other specialists. They help coordinate actions such as maintaining key services, shutting down key infrastructure threatened by fires (and re-opening them as soon as feasible), and feeding back information from their operators in the field.

There are also areas for technical specialists, including the Bureau of Meteorology

(BOM), fire behaviour analysts and geographic information services (GIS) to operate. They produce weather forecasts, track critical weather changes, provide predictions of likely fire behaviour using computer models and generate maps of fires from reconnaissance data.

## 1 The Knowledge Wall

Quite literally 'the big picture' – this state of the art facility displays levels of readiness, weather information, State-wide fire activity, current levels of warning/alert for each incident and key intelligence products for the whole of NSW. The latest feeds of information from ICON, BOM, helicopters cameras, Twitter and other social media, are displayed directly on the Knowledge Wall. The Wall allows everyone in the room to see the same information at the same time. At any given time, anyone in the room can check the latest information being received and being broadcast by glancing up at The Knowledge Wall.

## 2 State Air Desk

The NSW RFS has more than 100 aircraft available each bush fire season and their movements along with their support units such as refuelling points, are coordinated by the State Air Desk.

## 3 Police and Other Fire Agencies

Agencies such as Fire and Rescue NSW, National Parks, Forestry Corporation and NSW Police work within the State Operations Centre helping to ensure consistency of information and a coordinated effort.

## 4 Key Emergency Management Functional Areas

Functional areas include utilities like power telecommunications and water as well as agencies including transport, health, Ambulance Service of NSW, Department of Defence, Public Works and welfare.



## 5 Fire Behaviour Analysis

Weather is a critical factor in the firefighting effort. Forecasters from the Bureau of Meteorology provide the latest information while NSW RFS Fire Behaviour Analysts provide fire predictions.

## 6 Public Liaison Unit

This team coordinates information and assists with the delivery of warnings to the community such as through the NSW RFS website media, social media and the Bush Fire Information Line.

## 7 Touchscreen table

A large touchscreen that allows a group of people to examine COP (Common Operating Picture), maps, incident overlays and other detailed graphical information related to fire intelligence and planning.

## 8 Emergency Alert Operator

Here operators develop and send out Emergency Alerts telephone/SMS warning and/or advice to the fire-affected communities in consultation with local Incident Controllers and the SOC, SOO and SPLO.

## 9 Regional Major Incident Coordination

NSW is divided into four regions – North, South, East and West. These teams help coordinate the firefighting effort in their region making sure local teams have got the resources they need.

## 10 State Public Liaison Officer (SPLO)

This officer maintains contact with the Public Liaison Officers on local Incident Management Teams. The local PLO provides information and warnings to the local community.

## 11 State Operations Controller (SOC)

A key player at the "centre of the room", The State Operations Controller, maintains overall awareness of the firefighting effort across the State ensuring information and warnings are being distributed and resources are being allocated where needed.

## 12 Strategic Overview Officer (SOO)

Supporting the SOC, this position gathers information and intelligence to ensure that the SOC and other position holders are able to make the most informed decisions possible. The SOO is constantly analysing what is occurring at incidents and what is likely to occur based on current and forecast conditions.



# Backyard blitzed

In addition to the 152 fires burning across NSW and six large fires threatening homes on Sunday 13 October, a surprising grass and scrub fire took off a block away from the NSW RFS Headquarters in Lidcombe – virtually in the backyard.

The State Operations Centre was fully operational on Sunday 13 October with the main focus being on Port Stephens area where the Salt Ash fire was threatening homes and residents were being evacuated.

The hot winds and high temperatures being experienced on the firegrounds were also prevalent in Sydney.

At around 1500hrs FRNSW began receiving numerous Triple Zero (000) calls to a fire in the carpark of the Aquatic Centre at Sydney Olympic Park, near the NSW RFS Headquarters. Around that time the NSW RFS fixed wing spotter identified the smoke over the area and reported cars well alight in the carpark.

A large black column of smoke quickly rose over the Olympic Park precinct as numerous cars caught fire from flames

swept along the carpark's garden beds and also from car to car by the strong winds. As the emergency unfolded, the centre's evacuation plan swung into action and around 500 people were safely moved away from danger by staff from the complex.

The first arriving crews requested additional backup as the fire rapidly spread and multiple vehicles caught fire. FRNSW crews worked in extreme conditions to extinguish the fires, prevent further cars from catching alight, and stop the fire impacting the rail corridor and surrounding Olympic sports centres.

A NSW RFS water bombing helicopter was sent to the scene and assisted firefighting operations from the air by dropping water on spot fires in the bushland surrounding

the car park. The railway line was temporarily closed during the emergency. RailCorp firefighting personnel worked alongside FRNSW firefighters to ensure rail services were quickly restored.

For over two hours, firefighters battled the wind-fanned fire before declaring the scene safe enough for Police to commence their investigation into the cause of the fire. The fire destroyed 47 parked cars and a motorbike, and severely damaged 33 other cars.

**ABOVE:** FRNSW battled to extinguish vehicles alight in a carpark at the Sydney Olympic Park. Photo courtesy of Fire & Rescue NSW



13/10/2013  
TOTAL OF FIRES  
ACROSS THE STATE  
**152**

# Port Stephens Fires

Hot winds and high temperatures on Sunday 13 October 2013 resulted in three fires in the Port Stephens area being reported within two hours of each other. Heavy rain that night allowed firefighters to get the upper hand on the Brownes Road Salt Ash and Mooreland (Fingal Bay) fires. The Hank St, Heatherbrae Fire however kicked on continuing to threaten homes and local infrastructure for five days.

In all, nine residential properties were damaged and another four houses were destroyed in the three blazes.

**TOP:** 17 October 2013: Residents prepare to leave on Medowie Road, Heatherbrae. Photo by John Grainger, The Daily Telegraph

## Mooreland Fire (Fingal Bay)

NSW RFS crews were called to a fire in Fingal Bay around 1300hrs on Sunday 13 October and reported that a 10ha fire was moving quickly toward the township of Fingal Bay. Under the windy conditions the fire was uncontrollable and unpredictable.

It became apparent early that this fire was not going to be contained by any form of direct attack and firefighters focused on protecting property and identifying suitable containment lines from which they could back burn. A warning was issued using the Emergency Alert system to residents in the path of the fire.

Crews reported flame heights of 5m. Within a short time a helicopter was supporting ground crews from above and six tankers and crews were

active on the ground. The fire was spotting to the north under the influence of strong winds and a control line was put in place to contain the northward spread of the fire. Despite best efforts, by late afternoon the fire was reported to be 117ha.

The containment strategies implemented across the fireground were, however, ultimately successful. A network of fire trails was used around the township of Fingal Bay, in conjunction with the already existing Asset Protection Zone network and natural features to contain the fire by late that evening.

Significant rain fell in the Fingal Bay area overnight which inhibited the fire's spread beyond 184ha (final size). The fire was classed as contained at 1230hrs the next day and declared out on 23 October, 2013.

## Hank Street Fire, Heatherbrae

Area: 5642 ha  
Perimeter: 110 km

## Brownes Road Fire, Salt Ash

Area: 355 ha  
Perimeter: 16 km

## Mooreland Fire, Fingal Bay

Area: 184 ha  
Perimeter: 13 km



### Brownes Road Fire (Salt Ash)

At around 1400hrs on 13 October 2013 a fire started at Brownes and Lemon Tree Passage Roads, Salt Ash just west of the Fingal Bay fire.

Eight NSW RFS tankers were sent to the scene and it was quickly determined that the fire would threaten homes within 15 minutes. An Emergency Alert was issued for residents in the vicinity of Brownes Road and Lemon Tree Passage Road. Reports came in of buildings on fire in Brownes Road. Firefighters focussed on property protection and police began evacuating houses along Lemon Tree Passage Road.

The fire took multiple runs in all directions throughout the afternoon and evening, crossing and closing several roads in the area. It was in this period that four houses were destroyed along with a number of sheds, outbuildings, vehicles, boats and plant. Crews on scene concentrated on property protection while aviation resources worked on spot fires.

At 1700hrs the fire was downgraded to Watch and Act as houses were no longer under threat. By 1800hrs an Evacuation Centre had been established at the Salt Ash Church Hall to house those



residents who had been stranded by the fire.

Strong north westerly winds ahead of a southerly change of 50kph gusting to 90kph came through late in the evening. Under this influence the fire took a run along Rookes Road and an Emergency Alert was issued warning residents to be aware of ember attacks.

By 2230hrs ember attack had abated, and although fires were burning among the

houses they were no longer under threat and crews had begun mopping up.

Relief came in the early hours of the morning when a light rain fell on the fireground and crews were able to contain the blaze. In the following days crews worked hard to consolidate containment lines and continued to patrol the fireground for the next nine days until it was declared out on 23 October 2013.

### Hank Street Fire (Heatherbrae)

A matter of hours after the Salt Ash fire started, a further report came in of a fire burning near Heatherbrae about 20kms west of Salt Ash.

The fire's progress was relatively slow for the first four hours. In the mid evening, under the influence of the strong north westerly winds, the fire broke containment lines about 1.5km from the point

of origin. Firefighters fell back to property protection along Tomago Road.

The predicted southerly change came through with a light rain and the change of wind direction which spared some houses. The fire headed north east towards Masonite Road and overnight some 190ha was burnt.

### Monday 14 October

The fire was still out of control on Monday morning. By midday, however the fire had entered wetlands south of Masonite Road and was self-extinguishing. Firefighters spent the rest of day and Tuesday involved in back burning operations around a nearby water treatment plant and substation.

### Wednesday 16 October

Conditions worsened on Wednesday and the fire flared up several times with one report of flame heights of 30m!

### Thursday 17 October

Weather conditions on Thursday were very dangerous. Wind speed increased dramatically to 45kph gusting to 70kph and temperatures soared to 34 degrees Celsius. The fire activity became very volatile in these conditions.

An Emergency Warning was issued for properties along Tomago Road and Cabbage Tree Road and around midday the Newcastle Airport was closed due to the proximity of the fire. An Evacuation Centre was established at Kings Park in Raymond Terrace for residents who could not return to their homes.

Reports of property losses began to arrive. In the early afternoon several key roads were closed including Nelson Bay Road. The Newcastle Airport was impacted, roads were closed and some areas were evacuated by Police.

During the afternoon the predicted strong southerly change arrived. This turned the northern flank of the fire into an uncontained head fire and the pushed north with intense fire activity closing Richardson and Medowie Roads.

In the early evening the fire crossed Richardson Road and crews worked on protecting homes in the Campvale and Medowie areas. The fire also

moved north west and put pressure on homes in the Lakeside suburb of Raymond Terrace, while also spotting across and closing the Pacific Highway at Heatherbrae. An Emergency Alert was issued to residents of Raymond Terrace and Medowie. By this time, the fire was about 3,500ha in size and burning on three fronts.

Fortunately control lines held and crews resumed back burning around properties in Medowie, Heatherbrae and Lakeside.

### Friday 18 October

Between midnight and about 0400hrs various minor flare-ups occurred and the fire reached to within 200m of the Tomago Aluminium gas facility, next to the smelter. While the fire was still out of control residents of Fullerton Cove, Salt Ash and Nelson Bay Road could return to their properties.

Back burning continued around Tomago. Roads were progressively opened during the day and evacuation centres were closed.

### Saturday 19 October

Further isolated flare-ups continued, but the fire was 90 percent contained. The fire was around 5,000ha and still active within containment lines. Crews were blacking out. By the end of the day all roads in the area had been re-opened.

Isolated flare-ups were reported over the next few days but the fire was declared out on 23 October 2013.

At the end of the Section 44 declaration, the fires had claimed four homes, damaged nine, destroyed nine industrial/commercial/primary production buildings and damaged a further 10; the fires also claimed 24 outbuildings and eight vehicles. When all Lower Hunter fires were declared out, 6641ha of bushland was burnt. Following this declaration a further 4,500ha of remote bushland was burnt in the south west of the Lower Hunter Zone but this fire was part of the Howe's Swamp Section 44 in the Hawkesbury District.

**OPPOSITE PAGE:** The northern part of Salt Ash consists of houses on semi-forested "hideaway" blocks. Photo by Ben Shepherd



(L-R) Chris Balzer, his mother Maureen and big brother Darren. Photo by Kristine Glen

## Loving families

In October 2013 the Balzer family joined other members of the Anna Bay Brigade in fighting the Heatherbrae Fire.

For many years the Balzer family have been integral to the Anna Bay Brigade in Port Stephens. Rainer Balzer was the much loved Brigade Captain until his death in 2008. His wife, Maureen Balzer and their sons Chris and Darren, continue to be active members of the brigade.

"Our brigade is a family orientated one," Kristine Glen from Anna Bay Brigade said, "On the day (Thursday 17 October, 2013) Maureen, Chris and Darren were on one truck and my family, Jason, Peta and granddaughter Tyela, were on the other. Meanwhile I, myself, was doing community liaison at Medowie!"

The day after the Heatherbrae Fire threatened homes, Chris Balzer posted a heart-felt thank you note on the brigade's Facebook page.

"To stand side by side strangers from other brigades from across the State is a privilege.

*To share smoke, sweat and tears with amazing crews of Anna Bay Brigade is an honour.*

*To have your mother, brother and family have your back, is something special that not many people will ever experience.*

*To all the crews that were involved in yesterday's events at Heatherbrae, Medowie and Williamstown, Stand Proud. You are the ones that gave your all and it showed. No houses were lost and only four sheds. On a day like that you can only put it down to a miracle.*

*To all the welfare men and woman who provided a meal and a place to rest - a big thank you to you.*

*To the Kind Random Stranger on Medowie Road who ran out at midnight with a bucket of ice and a cold can of coke - that really hit the spot!*

*To all my friends: thanks for the support last night.*

*But most of all, to my brother Darren Balzer and my Mum (and of course Old Rainer) for watching my back and getting me home safe.*

*Fighting fires has never fazed me, not since my first major fire at age 14 in 1994. I won't lie to you, yesterday was as bad as it gets and it even scared me.*

*Lastly, if you have a friend, loved one or anyone you know who has been affected by the fires, ring them. Make sure they are ok because once the smoke clears, that's when it will hit you. Peace out!"*

Chris Balzer  
Anna Bay Brigade



# Fire whirls

The Heatherbrae fire, near Port Stephens, picked up speed and ferocity on Thursday 17 October 2013.

Local photographer, Wes Whitworth, caught some of the extreme fire behaviour that day in the Grahamstown and Williamtown areas.

The Heatherbrae fire had started on Sunday 13 October and by Thursday was 3,500ha and burning on three fronts. The fire forced the closure

of Newcastle Airport and the Pacific Highway as it travelled east through Medowie, Williamtown and Campvale. It destroyed sheds and other structures and threatened numerous homes while temperatures reached 35 degrees and wind gusts topped 100km/h.

Along with Wes Whitworth's images is one photo from Daily Telegraph photographer John Grainger, who caught an extraordinary image of local firefighters watching as two tree candles burn and a fire whirl speeds past.

Photo by John Grainger © the Daily Telegraph

# State Mine Fire



The State Mine fire burned around 55,000ha of rugged scrubland over four weeks – most of it in just one day. Billowing out smoke over that period, it was largely responsible for the pall of smoke over the Blue Mountains and Sydney Basin throughout October. It was a large and threatening fire to fight destroying five houses and damaging one other.

## Wednesday 16 October

The State Mine fire ignited shortly after midday on Wednesday 16 October 2013 on the grounds of the Marangaroo Army base, where an army explosives exercise was underway.

Firefighters were unable to attack the fire due to the danger of unexploded ordnance in the area. Even aerial attack was ruled out due to a 'no fly zone' in the air spaces above the Army base. The fire quickly spread beyond the army base into rugged, largely inaccessible, country containing heavy fuel loads.

Throughout the afternoon ground crews worked on the flanks and heel of the blaze but aircraft were not able to attack the head of the fire due to reduced visibility caused by smoke drift. Properties were threatened that afternoon but backburning work was largely successful in containing the flanks of the blaze.

Weather conditions, however, were set to worsen significantly the following day. The Bureau of Meteorology had forecast Thursday 17 October as Severe fire weather day, with high temperatures and wind gusts up to 95kph.

That evening two community meetings were held for more than 200 people in Clarence in Oaky Park Lithgow. Residents who were not properly prepared to defend their property were told they should leave Clarence immediately or at first light the following day.

## Thursday 17 October

At first light it was evident that daylight would bring with it horrendous fire conditions. At 0500hrs, winds were gusting up to 40kph and soon the temperature had risen to 26 degrees Celsius while humidity fell to 18 percent.

Preparations were put in place. The Zig Zag Public School was

closed for the day, and several local roads, including the Bells Line of Road, were closed.

Western Line train services between Lithgow and Mt Victoria were suspended.

By midday the fire, propelled by winds gusting up to 95kph, was impacting properties around Oaky Park in Lithgow and Clarence where several hundred home and the towns water supply were saved by firefighters as the front impacted the towns. A number of Emergency Warnings were issued, however despite the efforts from firefighters many trains from the historic Zig Zag Railway were destroyed along with a number of sheds including one belonging to a local firefighter who was protecting properties at the time. Aircraft were grounded for some hours due to the speed of the winds and this made it difficult for incident controllers to track the fire front.

Areas of Lithgow began to experience power outages and about 1,000 homes in Mt Victoria, Dargan, Clarence, Bell and Mt Irvine were blacked out.

Throughout the afternoon, crews responded to multiple calls for assistance as further Emergency Warnings were issued for the townships of Mt Wilson and Mt Irvine which were in the direct path of the fire. At this point over 12,000 hectares of bush land had been burnt.

The fire had travelled more than 30km in 24 hours.

Overnight the fire threatened homes in Mt Wilson, destroying two.

## Friday 18 October

Southerly winds propelled the fire northward overnight. The day began with crews continuing to be engaged in property protection around Mt Wilson and Mt Irvine as the fire

spread towards Mt Tottie and Mountain Lagoon.

Throughout the day, State Emergency Service crews conducted door knocks and letterbox drops to inform residents about a community meeting in Mount Lagoon to be held the following day.

Crews undertook defensive works throughout the night around Bilpin and Mt Tootie.

## Saturday 19 October

Despite low wind speeds, the fire intensified throughout the morning. As a result, Emergency Warnings were issued shortly after midday for the areas of Dargan, Bell, Berambing and Bilpin. Fire intensity was so great in some areas that crews had to be withdrawn for their own safety. Properties were under threat and residents in Bell were told to expect the fire to impact.

Interstate crews from Tasmania and Victoria arrived in Lithgow to assist.

More than 500 residents attended community meetings at Bilpin, Mountain Lagoon and Clarence, where they were informed about the current situation and the planned backburning operations. By 1600hrs, the fire had drawn level with Mt Tottie and was threatening properties in Bilpin Springs Road.

Crews continued to work hard late into the night, when easing conditions allowed the fire to be downgraded. A major back burn was undertaken from Bell to Mt Wilson Road to prevent the fire spotting into the Grose Valley and spreading towards the lower Blue Mountains.

## Sunday 20 October

Crews took advantage of calm overnight conditions and undertook backburning operations. Moderate winds returned shortly after daybreak, however, intensifying fire behaviour to the point that Emergency Warnings were issued for Dargan and Bell. Backburning continued in many areas throughout the day in a bid to achieve containment of the fire.

Due to forecast weather conditions for the coming days, the State Mine Fire was included in an overarching IMT (Incident Management Team) for all three fires in the vicinity - Lithgow, Blue Mountains and Hawkesbury. This would allow faster and greater access to resources to contain the blaze.

## Monday 21 October

Crews again worked throughout the day to complete backburning and protect properties. Emergency Warnings were issued for Mt Irvine and Berambing.

Yarramundi residents were briefed about the current situation and strategies at a community meeting.

## Wednesday 23 October

A small amount of rain fell on parts of the fireground after midnight, however there was far too little to have any meaningful impact on the fire. Wind speeds intensified, causing flare ups in multiple areas. Throughout the afternoon crews worked to contain the flare ups as well as protect a communications exchange and mobile phone towers at Clarence.

## Thursday 24 October

Easing conditions provided some relief to firefighters. Throughout the day, crews performed backburning work while other staff conducted community briefings at local shopping centres. Strong and gusty south westerly winds intensified, leading to an Emergency Warning being issued for the area west of Bilpin. Residents in Mt Irvine were told to shelter in place as fire was in close proximity to roads leading away from the area. The fire had crossed the Bells Line of Road into unburnt bushland west of Bilpin. The Aircrews were working in the area in an effort to slow the fire's progress.

## Friday 25 October

Crews were again able to undertake backburning throughout the night, thanks to subdued conditions. However, flare ups during the morning again led to an Emergency Warning being issued at Hartley Vale and near Lawson's Long Alley.

Crews door knocked residents in Yarramundi, Bilpin, the Grose Valley and Bowen Mountain to inform them of community meetings which would be held the following day.

Crews continued backburning and suppression operations for a further 25 days. After sustained rainfall which lasted several days, the State Mine fire was officially declared out on 19 November 2013.

OPPOSITE PAGE: 19 October 2013: Fire behind Sandford Avenue and Macauley Street in Lithgow. Photo by David Rawsthorne

16/10/2013

TOTAL OF FIRES ACROSS THE STATE

89

## Mt York Road Fire State Mine Fire

Area: 9,383 ha  
Perimeter: 99 km

Area: 54,862 ha  
Perimeter: 461 km



# Mt Wilson responds...

The isolated communities of Mt Wilson and Mt Irvine were threatened by both the State Mine Fire and the Mt York Road Fires. In a huge community effort, two-thirds of residents on site contributed directly to the fire effort. As Kathleen Oakes, Community Engagement Officer writes, in a high-risk isolated community, everyone is a firefighter.

Our philosophy is that everyone in the two villages of Mt Wilson and Mt Irvine has a role to play in an emergency.

A terrifying windstorm that swept through the area in 2011 highlighted the need for greater community engagement and crew support in our villages, so the brigade decided to create three teams that would kick into action during an emergency. The three teams were:

1. Station Officer Team – their role was to answer phones at the station and put together crews
2. Catering Team – sets up a kitchen at the Village Hall for feeding local and visiting crews and residents.
3. Community Engagement Team – including Street Coordinators.

The Catering and Community Engagement Teams would include residents who were not active firefighters. During the State Mine Fire this meant that 67 percent of our population was directly engaged in protecting our villages.

The Community Engagement team divided Mt Wilson and Mt Irvine into six areas with two Street Coordinators in each area. The Street Coordinator's role was to be the contact points for residents, both providing and receiving critical information. This face-to-face communication was to be backed up by regular email and website updates. Mt Wilson has a Community Website and a regular email newsletter subscription list (80 percent of residents have internet connection). It was this website and email list that was used by Community Engagement to keep everyone informed. It was supplemented by phone calls and personal visits to those without internet.

History tells us that most of our fires come from the Lithgow area, so when the State Mine Fire started at Lithgow on Wednesday 16 October 2013, the Mt Wilson/Mt Irvine Brigade swung into action.

Two messages were emailed to all residents that day advising them to implement their Bush Fire Survival Plans.

On the morning of Thursday 17 October the first Station Officer arrived to start organising crews, the Street Coordinators were activated and the first of our more vulnerable residents was evacuated.

With hindsight, Thursday 17 October and the morning of Friday 18 October, was our worst time.

I had left the Station to defend my own home. Conditions were very hot and gusty and the NSW RFS website was reporting that the firefront was only one kilometre west of Mt Wilson. Many of the roads in and out of our villages were closed. I received phone calls from my assistant, Kim, who had stayed at the Station to mind things as well as our Street Coordinator, Judy. They were lovely to receive but best of all was the sight of Valley Heights Cat 1 trundling up our drive at 2am in the morning while the flames were 10 metres from our house.

Ultimately, our community lost two houses, many sheds, much equipment and kilometres of

fencing. The fire continued to cause anxiety around our villages for another 10 days but was finally controlled thanks to help from crews from NSW RFS, interstate and NPWS RAFT teams.

Friday morning I was back at the Station. Our Catering Team, led by Deb Griffin, was in full swing. For the next 10 days the Catering Team fed hundreds of firefighters. The Village Hall was renamed 'Deb's Café'. When visiting crews heard they would be fed at Mt Wilson, they cheered. Shopping for the kitchen was a challenge as the volatile fire conditions meant that roads were occasionally blocked. Just about anyone coming up from Sydney was given a shopping list.

The Community Engagement Team updated the local website at least twice a day. Each time there was an update all the residents received an email about it. The Street Coordinators checked properties, opened gates to give fire appliance access and visited residents who lived on their own.

I attended the briefing by Captain Beth Raines every morning and evening and that provided the basis of the messages sent out. These included NSW RFS warnings and alert levels, the weather, explaining where the fire was at, what our crews and visiting crews were doing and, very importantly, if the roads were open to bona fide residents.

We lost power and telephone lines three or four times but in our heavily forested and remote location we are used to that. Our Station and Village Hall, therefore, have generators, as do most houses, and after the windstorm Wi-Fi was installed at the Station and Village Hall. With generators, mobiles and laptops we managed to keep in contact with everyone. Thanks to our Street Coordinators I had a daily, reasonably accurate, list of who was in the villages at any one time.

On the following Monday we were advised that a number of residents wanted to leave the village or had to get back to work. I liaised with the Police

and, with the help of Street Coordinators, we organised a convoy to leave.

On the following Wednesday which was predicted to be a horror day we decided to hold community meetings at Mt Wilson and Mt Irvine. Once again, with the help of our Street Coordinators, the message got out and almost all the two villages, apart from those on crews, attended the meetings. Our Street Coordinators did a fantastic job passing on messages and visiting residents without internet, checking neighbours, properties, opening gates to properties to allow quick access for fire appliances and assisting residents who needed to leave.

The community effort was really held together by the strong leadership and skills of our Captain Beth Raines and our Senior Deputy, Captain Peter Raines. There was also inspiring leadership displayed by many of our residents.

One of the houses lost was the historic 'Carisbrook' owned by

Eleanor Herriot and John Lee. Despite their personal loss, they chose to stay on with friends at Mt Wilson and assist in catering and the crews. At the After Action Review, Eleanor thanked everyone for their support, little realising how their own community spirit and resilience was an inspiration to us all.

The community were very generous with their appreciation of the brigade. Not only did they thank us personally but we received a staggering \$53,000 in donations!

Approximately 140 residents were in the village during the fire and two-thirds of them contributed in crews or teams. In partnership with our community our brigade sought to keep our community safe from bush fire. Although we had our losses, our planning paid off and overall it was a grand community effort for all the community to celebrate. In a high bush fire risk, isolated community we are all firefighters.



TOP LEFT: Captain Beth Raines briefing the teams and crews. Photo by Kathleen Oakes. RIGHT: Mt Wilson crew takes a break from building containment lines. Photo by Duncan Peppercorn. BOTTOM LEFT: Deb Griffin (right), of Deb's Cafe fame, Team Leader of the Catering Team, and Judy Tribe (left), Chair of the Village Hall Committee and a Street Coordinator. Photo by Rosemary Walsh

LEFT: Beverley Thompson and Judy Teulon, members of the Catering Team. Photo by Rosemary Walsh. CENTRE: Senior Deputy Captain Peter Raines is reunited with his son Bill. Bill and his mum, Linda, raced out for a quick shop but the outbreak of the Mt York Road fire and subsequent road closures resulted in a surprise holiday for them both in Sydney for a few days. Photographer Linda Raines. TOP RIGHT: After the fire, Danes Way, Mt Irvine. Photo by Peter Raines. BOTTOM RIGHT: The first night- fire at Mt Wilson. Photo by Peter Raines

# I WAS THERE

Date: 17 October 2013

Time: 2:00pm

Location: Blast Furnace Park, Lithgow

Photographer: David Rawsthorne, Lithgow resident

*"The ruins of the Blast Furnace, was one of the best vantage points. As we turned into the parking area of the Blast Furnace Park, I had to stop. It was only then that the actual scale of the smoke clouds really hit home. Looking up a hill, with the huge Blast Furnace at the top being totally dwarfed by the smoke behind it, I knew this fire was going to be one to remember for many years to come.*

*Watching the smoke move across the skyline was almost hypnotic. Dark and light patches were moving constantly through the smoke clouds. We could hear sirens of the Police, NSW RFS and town brigades echoing around the hills, and knowing they were fighting the fires was a comforting thought. At the car park adjacent to the Blast Furnace we saw over 100 people watching the fires approach. The winds kept the majority of the smoke away from the immediate area, but you could still smell smoke, and this smell persisted in town for weeks after the fires had been put out.*

*Over the next few days I continued taking images of the fires but the one thing that struck me the most was not the destroyed houses, cars or bushland, it was the many thank you signs put up by people along the Bells Line of Road whose houses and businesses had been protected. The sign at Monkey Creek summed it up: Thank You isn't enough..."*

17/10/2013

TOTAL OF FIRES  
ACROSS THE STATE

144





# Mt York Road Fire

It was a gusty day and the atmosphere was filled with smoke from the State Mine Fire when a report came into the Blue Mountains Fire Control Centre around midday that there was a fire in the area of Mt York Road, Mt Victoria.

The Mt York Road fire commenced at approximately 1225hrs on 17 October 2013 and despite the immediate response it rapidly spread to the Mt Victoria area resulting in the loss of 10 houses and a number of sheds, garages and cars.

Being a Total Fire Ban day, crews were stood up at brigade stations across the Blue Mountains. An IMT (Incident Management Team) was in place due to the weather conditions and they immediately set about

providing management of the fire. This IMT was initially staffed by NSW RFS however extensive assistance was provided by National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) and Fire & Rescue NSW (FRNSW).

Aircraft and ground crews were quickly dispatched to the area and promptly contained the blaze. A little over an hour later, however, the fire broke containment lines and crossed Mt York Road, threatening houses in St George's Parade and Closeburn Drive, Mt Victoria.

Blackheath/Mt Victoria Brigade Deputy Captain Jonathan Mallin was one of the first responded crews in St George Parade, Mt Victoria and was tasked with property protection of one of the houses under threat.

"Initially when we first got there I considered that it was going to be difficult to defend (the house) if the fire came up the back," Captain Mallin said. "We couldn't see anything because of the trees and we were basically fighting it blind when it came upon us.

"We went to the back of the property to lay out a hose line...that was when we saw the fire coming up through the grasslands at quite high intensity. We started retreating and that is when we advised the residents that it was then too late for them to leave."

Many of residents attempted to leave the area in their cars, but crews gathered them into the fire truck while the fire front went through. Others were advised to return to their homes and seek shelter Deputy Captain Mallin reported.

"They were pretty freaked out they didn't get a lot time to prepare," he, "Some of the guys on the truck were really gutted that we didn't save the house. As much as I felt deep down that we would not be able to save it, they got in and had a good go at saving it.... We were up against it."

Within three hours, four houses had been lost in St Georges Parade and there were concerns for the Mt Victoria Treatment Works. Winds were gusting up to 66kph and the fire spotted across the railway line north of Mount Victoria and over the Darling Causeway. The Darling Causeway to Bell was closed and the railway line between Mt Victoria and Lithgow was halted.

Firefighters were putting a huge effort to protect property in the dangerous conditions and one firefighter was injured and subsequently hospitalised with burns.

"It was really, really windy and dry and obviously that is a pretty ominous thing when you know

there is fire coming up," Deputy Captain Mallin said, "The wind played on the mind a bit that this could go far and fast."

By the early evening it was clear that 10 houses had been lost.

Fears that bushwalkers might have been stranded in the Grose Valley were allayed when a NPWS helicopter reported having flown over the area checking for campers and hikers, but none were found.

## Friday 18 October

Firefighters continued to focus on defensive strategies with the main focus on the protection of life. The fire was expanding rapidly over the Darling Causeway and into the Upper Grose Valley. The biggest concern was that the fire could spread into the Grose Valley and impact on the lower Blue Mountains. Throughout the day the fire was unpredictable, closing roads and the railway line at various times.

Dry and heavy fuel loads combined with trying weather

conditions, so that by the end of Friday the fire had spread to 800ha.

Significant assistance was provided by FRNSW and a RAFT crew provided by the NPWS helped control the fire.

That night, a community meeting was held at Mt Victoria which was attended by 350 people.

## Saturday 19 October

Over the coming days the emphasis shifted to offensive firefighting techniques to contain the blaze. Firefighters worked to create boundaries around the fire, which then allowed aerial incendiary work to be completed to allow containment of the fire.

At times access was difficult due to the rugged terrain in the Grose Valley. The difficulty with broader strategy implementation in the more rugged areas necessitated the use of RAFT and aerial operations to combat the fire.

Offensive fire strategies were developed early on and a

number of "trigger points" were developed by FRNSW personnel to assist with the implementation of the strategy and also to assist with planning. The Northern Strategic Line (a containment line that had its origins in the 1990s) had already been identified and significant work had been done to enhance and strengthen the line during 2011/12 was utilised in a number of areas to provide a line to back burn from and into to provide protection for homes. Hazard reduction completed in earlier seasons also assisted the containment strategy.

In the late afternoon the fire took a run up Mt York Road but was controlled and no damage was reported.

## Sunday 20 October

Early Sunday morning, Commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons called a meeting of the Incident Controllers for State Mine Fire (Superintendent Greg Wardle) and the Mt York Road and Linksvie



TOP: 19 October: A huge back burning operation around Darling Causeway and Bells Line of Road prevented the spread of the State Mine and Mt York Road fires. ABOVE: 24 October: Bells Line of Road. Photos by Jonathan Mallin. OPPOSITE PAGE: 22 October 2013: Last ditch back burning around Bells Line of Road before the predicted bad weather the following day. Photo by Jonathan Mallin



A storm cell, with high instability and north west winds, approaching from the west causes concern for the safety of RAFT teams. In the early afternoon burning operations are suspended due to rain brought by the storm.

Fires (Superintendent David Jones, Hawkesbury District, (Superintendent Karen Hodges,) along with SEOCN (State Emergency Operations Controller), Commissioner FRNSW Greg Mullins, representatives of the Bureau of Meteorology, Deputy Commissioner Rob Rogers, Assistant Commissioner Steve Yorke and members of the State Operations, to discuss the current situation and also to consider predicted weather.

Weather conditions were not favourable and all parties expressed concern at the potential for communities in the path of the fires to be threatened in the coming days.

Following further discussions with the Incident Controllers, it was determined that a overarching IMT would be established to coordinate resources and response for all fires. Individual Incident Controllers were to remain responsible for their own fires.

Led by Deputy Commissioner Rob Rogers it was the first time the NSW RFS had set up one overarching IMT for running fires over three Districts.

Throughout the day a number of communities were on alert including Mount Victoria, Kanimbla Valley, Megalong Valley, Mount Boyce and Blackheath as well as Mt Wilson/Mt Irvine and Mt Tomah.

Buses were replacing trains from Mt Victoria to Lithgow.

### Monday 21 October

Overnight the fire crossed over Victoria Falls Track raising concerns that it may work its way around to impact the Great Western Highway and the rail corridor. Resources were committed to trying to contain the breakout. The fire was also making a run north along the east side of Mt York Road.

Back burning and fire suppression operations continued throughout the day on a number of fronts. In the evening, community meetings were held in Blackheath, (2,500 attendees) and Medlow Bath (200 attendees).

At a meeting of the overarching IMT that day, the high-risk strategy known as 'The Plug' was outlined. 'The Plug' became central to the fight to

protect the Blue Mountains. This strategy involved back burning off a steep and difficult section of bushland that was inaccessible to firefighters.

The 5km containment line was to be constructed by hand by specialised and experienced Remote Areas Firefighting Teams (RAFT) in a narrow ravine at the 'gateway' to the larger Grose Valley and hence the lower Blue Mountains. This strategy had been tried on a number of previous occasions and had failed but this time crews were to make use of more hard containment and natural features. It was a high-risk approach due to the potential for fire to breach containment lines, with a fire perimeter of more than 150kms.

RAFT from NPWS and NSW RFS were deployed for the task, assisted by helicopters. At times, they had to trek many kilometres through rugged bushland to consolidate containment lines where crews would back burn. This work continued around the clock in the lead up to October 23.

"The strategy was not a dangerous one," said Commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons, "but it was high risk. It was also the most viable option for achieving containment of the Mt York Road fire."

### Tuesday 22 October

While a number of RAFT teams were working around the fireground putting in control

lines, other preparations were being made for the frightening weather conditions predicted for the next day. Schools across the Blue Mountains were to be closed and residents were being asked to consider leaving the Mountains for the day.

A storm cell, with high instability and north west winds, approaching from the west caused concern for the safety of RAFT teams. In the early afternoon burning operations are suspended due to rain brought by the storm.

A large community meeting attended by around 2,500 was held in Katoomba.

### Wednesday 23 October

This was the day forecast to be extremely bad fire weather. Despite a light rain overnight, all firefighters were on the alert and there were literally thousands of firefighters on standby should things turn bad. Containment lines around the Bells Line of Road near Mt Banks came under pressure but in general all the control lines hold.

By the late afternoon, it was clear that the worst fears were not realised.

### Thursday 24 October

Back burning and suppression operations continued in many locations throughout the day. High winds prevented aircraft from operating and ground crews and heavy plant were

also withdrawn from working control lines for their safety.

In the early afternoon control lines along the Bells Line of Road near Mt Banks Road were breached and the village of Mt Wilson came under threat. Three Strike Teams were immediately diverted to protect Mt Wilson. An Emergency Warning was issued for residents of Mt Wilson and Mt Irvine.

The wind eased during the afternoon and the breakout was contained and work progressively resumed on suppression and back burns. The Alert Level was lowered to Watch and Act.

The control line in the Grose Valley, referred to as 'The Plug', held and was being deepened. A number of roads including the Bells Line of Road and the Darling Causeway remained closed.

### 25 October-7 November

Over the coming days firefighters continued mopping up and consolidating control lines, despite a number of minor flare-ups.

The fire was declared out on Thursday 7 November at 1430hrs. The Mt York Road Fire burned for 22 days, destroyed 10 houses, damaged three others and burnt 9,383ha. All property losses occurred in St George's Parade, Mt Victoria on the first afternoon of the blaze.



ABOVE: 17 October 2013: Early responders, brigades arrived on Mt York Road to find the fire spreading quickly under windy conditions. Photo by Jonathan Mallin



19 October 2013: Hall Road Fire near Balmoral. Photo by Janne Sloane

# Hall Road Fire

In the hours between 1100hrs and 1400hrs on Thursday 17 October, 2013, three major fires took off. The Mt York Road Fire in the west of the Blue Mountains, the destructive fire in Winmalee, and at about 1125hrs a blaze was sparked in the Southern Highlands east of Balmoral Village.

The Hall Road fire burned for 26 days and in the first week had significant impact on infrastructure in the area including major roads into Sydney and Wollongong, water supplies, a colliery and a communications tower. Overall two dwellings were destroyed and two others damaged.

The bush fire was volatile and difficult to control with firefighters working on many fronts to contain the blaze. Over the first six days several villages from Balmoral to Wilton to Almyerton in the south were threatened. The fire burnt mostly in the Upper Nepean Catchment which services the four dams of Sydney's Water Catchment and also disrupted electrical supply to the water filtration plant and threatened a gas pipeline. In total the fire burnt out 15,657ha.

It began with an urgent evacuation of primary school children from the Yanderra village on Thursday afternoon. Jacqueline Murphy reports.

A fire was sparked just east of the village of Balmoral at about 1125hrs. The wind was blowing from the north west at around 43kph. Within about 20 minutes reports were received of property and livestock under threat in Hall Road, Wilson Drive and Railway Parade, Balmoral Village.

The fire moved quickly and an Emergency Warning was issued for Balmoral Village and within the hour, another Emergency Warning was issued for the village of Yanderra, 4kms to the east of Balmoral.

The residents of Yanderra were told that leaving was the safest option. David Stimson was the Public Liaison officer that afternoon.

"It was a very hectic afternoon," he said, "The fire was bearing down on Yanderra so we had less than an hour to evacuate the large school there. We called in the Police and they initiated the evacuation with the help of the staff and parents. Meanwhile I was on the local radio advising residents on the location of Evacuation Centres and giving as much information as I could to help the community make good decisions in such critical conditions."

Evacuation Centres were established at Mittagong for residents of Yanderra.

As the high winds were forecast to continue the NSW RFS dispatched additional aircraft, Strike Teams and heavy plant to assist. By 0100hrs the Bargo Sportsground was established as the Staging Area for the resources pouring into the area.

Throughout the afternoon the fire threatened Yanderra and destroyed a communications tower and a number of buildings. The water treatment plant in Yanderra came under threat but ground crews were able to protect it. An estimated 1,800 hectares were burnt out around Balmoral and Yanderra in the afternoon and early evening of 17 October.

The fire crossed the Hume Motorway several times over the afternoon and the road was closed in both directions. By 1900hrs the local media were reporting a 20km queue of traffic on the Hume north of the roadblock. Mount Ousley Road was also closed at the Picton Road junction as a precaution.

Although conditions eased in the evening the fire did cross the

Picton Road forcing its closure to traffic late that evening and into the next day, leaving both the Hume Motorway and Picton Road closed to traffic. By late that night firefighters were getting the upper hand on the bush fire and it was downgraded to a Watch and Act alert status. Residents were allowed to return to the homes in Yanderra, Balmoral, Bargo and Wilton.

### Friday 18 October

The following day the fire was still burning on many fronts. Underground mines and critical water infrastructure made the construction of containment lines challenging. The fire continued to threaten roads and other infrastructure throughout the afternoon when winds whipped up again. The fire crossed the major rail link between Sydney and Melbourne. The rail line remained closed until the next morning.

The fire conditions were erratic throughout the evening and as the fire broke containment lines near Picton Rd and threatened the Cordeaux Colliery. Overnight crews initiated a number of large back burns to contain the fire.

### Saturday 19 October

In the early morning the railway line was reopened but gusty northerly winds developed after dawn and this intensified fire behaviour. At 1245hrs power lines feeding the water filtration facility were impacted by fire and resources were directed to protect these facilities. Soon afterwards the fire started spreading south, putting pressure on southern control lines around the villages of Yerrinbool and Hilltop.

Under gusty north westerly winds the fire again threatened the Cordeaux Colliery in the mid-afternoon. Ground crews sought shelter at the colliery and conducted asset protection. Soon afterwards the wind swung to the north easterly, this time putting pressure on western control lines, especially around Balmoral Village and Hilltop. Further crews were rushed in to these areas to assist.

### Sunday 20 October

Back burning operations continued overnight but Sunday 20 October was also a challenging day for firefighters. Containment lines north of Hilltop came under pressure and towns to the south,



LEFT: 17 October 2013: Late in the evening the fire continued to be threatening. Photo by Glenn Miller. RIGHT: 17 October 2013: By 2pm firefighters were battling under very strong winds. Photo by Glenn Miller



Alpine and Aylmerton, were added to areas under threat. All residents on the western side of Yerrinbool were to be evacuated by midday and Sierra St, the main access to the west, was closed at the bridge over the Hume Motorway.

While the fire remained within containment lines these lines were constantly under pressure of being breached. Public meetings were organised for Yerrinbool and Hill Top communities as there were

concerns about forecasts of elevated fire danger for the following day.

### Monday 21 October

In the early hours of Monday morning the fire breached containment lines in the Bargo area and proceeded north along the Bargo River Gorge. Community meetings were planned for Bargo, Pheasants Nest and Wilton for later in the day. During the afternoon the community of

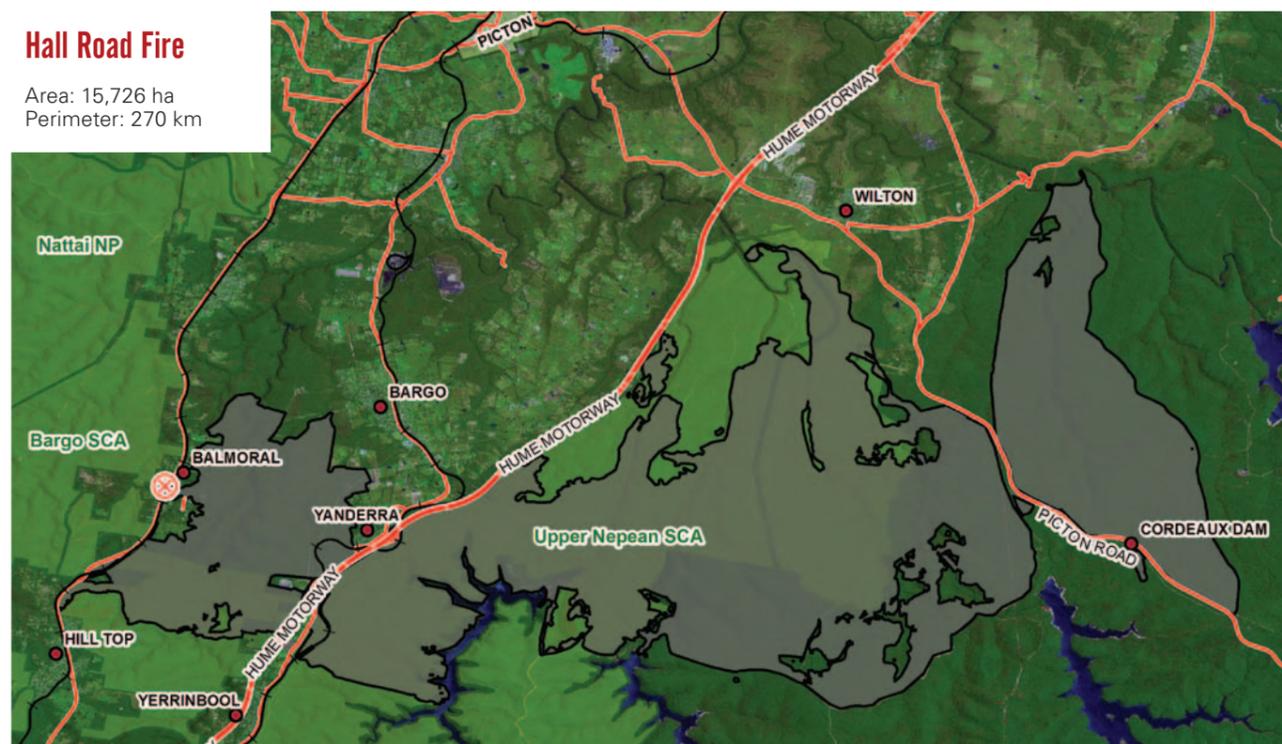
Wilton experienced ember attack. Residents were asked to shelter in place as the fire approached. The fire status was upgraded to Emergency Warning alert status. The Airplane was deployed to strengthen containment lines around the village. Winds increased and caused significant ember attack into Wilton and as a consequence additional firefighting resources including aircraft were deployed. Resources were also dispatched to protect the main gas pipeline.

By late afternoon the conditions had eased and the warning level was again downgraded to Watch and Act. Back burning continued and flare-ups were attended to over the following days.

On Thursday 24 October the Alert Level for the Hall Road fire was downgraded to Advice, however back burning and mopping up continued until Wednesday 30 October. The fire was declared out on 11 November, 2013.

## Hall Road Fire

Area: 15,726 ha  
Perimeter: 270 km



## So much more than snakes and accidents



ABOVE: 15 November 2013: The kids of Yanderra Public School welcomed back the NSW RFS firefighters the day they returned to school. Photo by Dean Symons

In the aftermath of the Hall Road fire, the Southern Highlands Community Safety Teams visited several schools. Southern Highlands Community Safety Officer, David Stimson, said it was the good news story of the fire.

"It was really rewarding to return to the Yanderra School," he said, "It had been closed for several weeks during the fire and we returned on the day that the kids went back to school."

"Many of them were hesitant to go back because of their experience. We took Trauma Teddies for all of the kids as well as the fire truck. We were a smash hit! Having the trucks there and talking about the recent fires. The kids really loved it."

Later, in a joint effort, FRNSW and NSW RFS firefighters got together to visit Picton Public School. It was the first time the two services had been involved in a Community Engagement event together.

Year Two student Cheyanne Brandt from Picton Public School described it best:

*We had a special visit today at school from the NSW Rural Fire Service and Fire & Rescue NSW.*

*They came to talk to us about what they do and the uniforms that they have to wear to protect themselves from the dangers. They have to deal with so much more than snakes and accidents.*

*We talked about fire safety, and the recent bush fires in the area.*

*We also got to talk about and have a look at what the fire trucks did and the different roles that each truck has.*

*We got to see how all the equipment that is stored on the trucks and how to use it.*

*It was the best day of school ever.*



I WAS  
THERE

Date: 17 October 2013

Time: 3:00pm

Location: Bells Line of Road, Dargan

Photographer: Wolter Peeters © Fairfax Media

*"A strong gusty south-westerly wind blew up in the afternoon on the 17 October on the Bells Line of Road. The State Mine Fire began spotting well ahead of the fire front and crews were drawn to save houses near Newnes Junction and Dargan along the Bells Line of Road.*

*Several NSW RFS crews were protecting property in the area but as the fire front approached, the sky became dark and the smoke thickened. Strong winds showered the firefighters in embers.*

*I took this photograph just as conditions were deteriorating and crews started to become concerned for their own safety. Soon after this photo was taken crews withdrew from the immediate area."*

# Three destructive hours

By Matt Sun, NSW RFS Media



On 17 October 2014 at around 1330hrs a fire was reported at Linksvie Rd, Springwood in the Blue Mountains, west of Sydney. Within 30 minutes it had crossed Hawkesbury Road and was spreading rapidly east toward the suburbs of Winmalee and Yellow Rock. In just a few frantic hours, nearly 200 homes would be destroyed.

It was a nightmare scenario for the NSW RFS with hot temperatures, strong winds, significantly dry fuel following a very dry period of warm weather, and at least three other major fires burning near to Sydney and the Blue Mountains. Within minutes of the fire starting, fire trucks were responded to the area and an Emergency Warning was issued.

In total 195 homes were destroyed and 145 buildings were damaged by the Linksvie Rd fire. Much of this destruction occurred in these first few hours around Emma Parade, Buena Vista Road, Heather Glen Road, Moray St, Singles Ridge Road and Purvines Road. Several houses were lost in Paulwood Avenue, close to St Thomas Aquinas Primary School.

That afternoon of 17 October 2013 the wind direction was erratic, fire behaviour was very intense and erratic and the fire was uncontrollable. The focus was on protecting immediate threats to life and property. Waterbombing helicopters

were unable to be deployed for much of the afternoon due to the high winds.

Local Group Officer Greg Corrigan was organising troops on Singles Ridge Road that afternoon.

"It was the toughest two hours I have had in the game," he said, "It was horrendous. I could not even see the bonnet of the Hilux, there was so much smoke and embers flying. The radiant heat was extreme."

"Flames were crossing across the road, we could see houses burning to the ground in front of us!

"It was the worst fire I have ever seen in my 37 years."

Local schools were drawn in to the drama. All roads around St Columba's Catholic College in Springwood were closed due to fire activity in the area. This resulted in hundreds of students sheltering in the school hall. Meanwhile students from St Thomas Aquinas Primary were evacuated and kept safe at the Winmalee Shopping Centre. Stories of close encounters and lucky escapes abound on that afternoon including a local kindergarten where the children were rescued after their playground had been destroyed by fire. (See page 40.)

Hundreds of anxious residents gathered behind police cordons in the streets around Winmalee and Springwood as the afternoon wore on. An

Evacuation Centre was quickly set up at Springwood Sports Club for those unable to return to their homes.

It was a tense and frightening few hours for residents and firefighters alike, but thankfully there was no loss of life and there were no serious injuries.

As fire conditions eased in the evening, and interstate and out-of-area crews streamed into the area to support the locals, the arduous task of building containment lines began. Backburning operations, the construction of containment lines using hand tools and heavy plant, were undertaken overnight and throughout the following days.

In all 3,631ha were burned over 27 days. Several flare ups in subsequent days resulted in Emergency Alerts issued but by Wednesday 23 October air operations were reporting calm conditions across the fireground. The Linksvie Fire was declared out on 13 November 2013.

On the following pages we track the events of the afternoon of Thursday 17 October 2013 from different perspectives. We hear from a Winmalee resident who was at home that afternoon, as well as NSW RFS members who were called in to assist, a captain of a local brigade as well as the Incident Controllers at the local Fire Control Centre and the State Operations Centre at Headquarters.

LEFT: Aerial photo of Long Angle Rd and part of Singles Ridge Rd, Yellow Rock. Photo courtesy of Peter Belshaw BMCC.



LEFT: 17 October 2013: Long Angle Road at about 1730hrs. ABOVE: 17 October 2013: Power poles down on Singles Ridge Road, 1816hrs. Photos by Erwin Willems.

**Joanne Cusack, resident, Sunny Ridge Road, Winmalee**

**Joanne Cusack noticed a little whiff of smoke in the air. Forty-five minutes later, her house was on fire.**

"I was at Penrith and I just decided to come home. When I got home, it was really, really windy. The bins had blown over so I brought mine and the neighbours in. Then I went inside and never thought any more of it.

A little while later my phone rang and it was a friend checking to see if I was okay. I said 'I'm fine, why?' She said 'there's a fire close by'. I looked outside and there was a little bit of smoke, but not that much, so I didn't think too much of it. I thought I'd take a photo so I went and got my camera and by the time I did that, the smoke had gotten really thick and was this brown, orangey colour. I thought: This doesn't look good.

I rang my neighbours at their work to let them know what was going on and decided I'd better go next door and get their little dog. She was cowering in her little shelter, so

I got her and brought her back to my place. When I looked out the back there was just... there was this fire at the back of my property, a 10-foot high fire. I went down there with a garden hose and tried to put it out - that didn't work. I came back and started hosing down the deck, just in case things got worse.

Then it did get worse.

I started getting a few things together in case I had to leave. Then I went out the back and the trees next door were on fire. I thought: It's time for me to go. I got my car out of the garage, started packing my stuff in, got the little dog and then shut the garage door, thinking it would save my husband's car. That didn't happen.

It was very surreal and you do silly things. I grabbed my cameras... I grabbed two hard drives. I thought: do I grab the TV? but realised my life was not worth risking for any of that.

As I drove to the top of the driveway I realised I'd forgotten my iPad so I went back inside. I knew that would keep me up-to-date with what was

happening, the Fires Near Me App and the RFS on Facebook, so I needed that. Every alarm was going off and the back of my house was on fire. I ran out the front and both houses next door to me were on fire.

I got into the car at about 2pm. I thought I'd do a full loop of my cul-de-sac so my dashcam could record it, but it was too scary. So I drove to the top of the hill and waited with some neighbours. The fire was coming up the street by then and we didn't know what to do. It all happened so quickly didn't have time for the fire brigade to be there or the police to be there. It happened too quick. I drove to my daughter's place and waited.

I was scared and I was shaking and I couldn't stop pacing for about three days. I just walked and walked. I couldn't lie down.

We lost our house.

My husband and I have been in the Blue Mountains for 30 years and have been through three or four fires. The wind that day was ferocious. The fire was ferocious. Nothing could have saved my house that day."

**Christine Lowe, firefighter, Hazelbrook Rural Fire Brigade**

**A plume of smoke marred the picturesque view. Minutes later, Christine Lowe would put be putting her training to the ultimate test.**

"I was at the Hazelbrook shed on standby because it was a TOBAN (Total Fire Ban) day. We'd jumped into the truck to do a little bit of local recon (reconnaissance) around the area and we'd driven up to Queens St in Hazelbrook, which gives you a view down to the Lower Mountains. As we were coming back we noticed a plume of smoke much further down the mountain, so we called that in and were soon responded.

Getting from Hazelbrook to Winmalee doesn't take that long, but from the time we saw the smoke to the time we got there, there were houses already gone. It really puts you in awe of Mother Nature, the heat, the wind, the rest of it. She was in control and she let you know it.

My timing is out but I think it was well before 3pm. This

was my first time doing first response. And it was confronting. Climbing out of the truck and seeing houses already impacted. That was quite frightening. There were so many streets impacted and so many houses impacted.

The pressure and the speed of everything. I'd never experienced anything like it before. I'm your 'do-as-you-are-told' type of girl and all of the sudden I was having to think for myself while also working in a team.

But I did it. And I'm proud of myself for doing it.

We were in one street and a house was ablaze, but the house next door wasn't alight yet. There was a pile of sticks and stuff right up against that house. Suddenly we hear this whistling sound and we realised it was the sound of a gas cylinder about to go, so we had to pull back. We couldn't put that pile of sticks out and that house went. And it was so frustrating. A feeling of inadequacy. You want to save everybody's home, because we all want to be superheroes, but you can't. Seeing someone's home completely

gone brings you back down to earth. You can't do everything. You want to.

But it was also really rewarding when there were houses that we could save. There were fires that we could put out and we knew doing that would protect houses. There were fences that were burning, gardens that were burning, things underneath homes that were burning and we were able to put those fires out. That felt great, that felt useful.

You kind of felt like you were looking after your patch and I guess, as a firefighter, everywhere in the Mountains is your patch. Wherever you are sent is your patch and you want to protect your people."

**Mat Hunter, Captain, Hazelbrook Rural Fire Brigade**

**The drive from South Granville to the Hazelbrook shed was the longest of Mat Hunter's life.**

"I was working in the morning and I remember saying to a colleague who is also an RFS firefighter: 'I hope nothing happens today'.

After midday, the pagers started going off. I'm listening to the radio on my smartphone and I'm hearing the Group Officers calling red message after red message. That was it for me at work. I jumped in my car and started heading west. I'm driving up along the M4 seeing this cloud of smoke, this black and boiling smoke, and I'm thinking: there's houses in

there. I got stuck behind every slow car in the world. It was the most frustrating drive I have ever, ever experienced. Once I got into the Mountains, up Blaxland way, it was just horrendous. Seeing what I could see.

I couldn't get to the shed quick enough.

But I did get there eventually. We came on air and within minutes we were told to respond to Mount Riverview. There were four of us in the Cat 7, a good crew. We were travelling down the highway and had this view of the Linksview fire. I turned to them and said 'are we ready for this?' And they said 'yep, let's go'.

At about 4.30pm we were tasked to Grosvenor Place, there was our Cat 7 and Glenbrook 9 and we had the street to ourselves. We were just watching the smoke and it was coming towards us, coming towards us rapidly. I remember it was the first time I've ever had police report to me, which was very surreal. They asked me 'what do you want us to do?'

We did property inspections and we had to make decisions about what we could do. How were we going to attack this beast that was coming towards us? We were looking in backyards and front yards to see what water we had available. There were a few homeowners there that were well set up with hoses and sprinklers. A lot of houses were empty.

We waited. And you know what? It got to early evening, probably 5.30pm or 6, and the wind died down. We dodged a bullet. We would have been in a world of pain if that had kept coming towards us.

We had made a plan and decisions about a number of houses which would have been undefendable. And I am more than happy that we didn't have to put that plan into place. More than happy."

**Luke Reid, radio operator, Blue Mountains Group Support**

**Luke Reid didn't have to ask how serious the situation was. He could tell by the sound of firefighters' voices.**

"I was on the radios at the Helibase at the Medlow Bath airfield. It was quite a tense atmosphere. As I'm sure everyone remembers, the weather was extreme and we were sort of expecting the worst. We knew that if we had an outbreak of fire that we would have to act quickly. So everyone was really keyed up and prepared to act at a moment's notice.

When the first reports came in, things fell into place very seamlessly, the machinery tipped in and the response was very fluid and organised. Then the calls certainly started sounding serious and immediate.

There was a heightened tension and a real need for resources to be responded quickly. I think everyone

“...The rate and spread I was seeing, well it just defies logic... all of us were a bit shocked at how fast it was running.”

David Jones, Incident Controller



ABOVE: 17 October 2013: View of Springwood fire looking toward Winmalee from Warrimoo Oval. This photo appeared on Twitter at 3.20pm. Photo by Dann Weatherhead

realised what sort of serious situation we were facing pretty early because the tone of the voices changed and the requests for help were coming in thick and fast.

Everything happened so quickly. That was the really frightening thing. Within a few minutes of those initial reports, the fire had already spread a long way. And it became very obvious that containment was not going to be an immediate option.”

### Jennifer Ballard, scribe, Winmalee Rural Fire Brigade

**When Jennifer Ballard needed inspiration, she was able to depend on the kindness of strangers.**

“I was at work in Penrith when my neighbour called me. She said: ‘you need to come home, I mean now, it’s really bad. The Great Western Highway is going to be closed, so hurry up’. And she never exaggerates anything.

I went home and was getting things together. I remember my throat went dry as I ran through the house. I drove to my grandfather’s house and got him sorted. My daughter’s property had been deemed safe. So I went to Winmalee and waited to be told what to do.

I started working as a scribe, which basically means you log every single call that comes through the radio. The time, the date, who was calling, what the message was, what the reply was. Messages could be someone reporting a fire or asking for a bulldozer.

When a call came through that you couldn’t answer immediately, you had to follow it up. And the thing is, while you’re asking the commander or waiting to speak to the commander, four more calls would come through. You had to be on the ball.

I got home thinking I was so exhausted I would just go straight to sleep but at 1am I was still wired and I could hear the voices I had been writing down.

I’ve worked at the Phillip Island motorcycle racing championships 25 times, where everything is always hectic and coming and going. I thought I had seen it all but nothing was as stressful as that day. The number of calls coming in and the importance of what they were saying. That afternoon will stay with me forever.

But on the other side of things, on the positive side, you were thrown together with complete strangers. You didn’t know what they did or even what their names were. But everyone just met and got on with the work they were allotted to do. Everyone worked so well together. Things got done.

I saw such human spirit out there. A man just drove up with a truckload of oranges. Someone who lived near Sydney Airport brought up a whole heap of toothbrushes. Someone mentioned we were out of eggs and 500 eggs just arrived within the hour. Telstra came and put in six new landlines within 20 minutes when they were asked to.

The council sent up a huge truck full of bottles of water. There were policemen, volunteers and people doing things. Without anyone saying anything, everyone stood up and just started unloading the truck. They formed a human chain and started passing and stacking the boxes. When they finished, they went back to what they had been doing.

Seeing that was really good. It gave me goosebumps.”

### Superintendent David Jones, Incident Controller, Blue Mountains

**It was horrific day for Incident Controller Superintendent David Jones who was already managing the response to the Mt York Road Fire in the west of the Blue Mountains as well as closely watching the State Mine fire near Lithgow, when the call came through about the Linksview Road fire in the east.**

“I was parking the car out the back when the radio call came through for the Mt York Road Fire. The LEOCON (Local Emergency Operations Controller) was with me. We had just been out to Lithgow to discuss the potential impact that the State Mine fire may have on the Blue Mountains. I remember making the comment: ‘It’s just started’. Little did I know that once it started, it was really going to start.

That’s when Jason Heffernan (Region East Major Incident Coordinator) called and said to

me: “Have a look on Airview (live footage from helicopters), you’ve got a fire cracking off in the Linksview Road area.”

We whacked it (the Airview feed) up on the big screen. My first impression was that it was a grass fire, not a bush fire – it was moving that fast. I come from out west and I’m used to seeing hard running grass fires. The rate and spread I was seeing, well it just defies logic when you think about it as a bush fire. All of us were a bit shocked at how fast it was running.

Everything froze for a few seconds and time seemed to slow. We started calling for every available unit to respond and we were throwing everything we had straight down the highway.

By this time the Triple Zero (000) calls were rolling in hand over fist. One call that remains crystal clear in my head was a report that two elderly people were trapped in a house that was alight. I wrote it down, turned to a radio operator and said ‘cut over the top of everything, you’ve got to get a truck to this address’. As it turns out there no one at home, but you don’t know that at the time.

Thinking back on that afternoon, there were a number of things that I was pleased about. Our pre-incident work paid off, we had a full Incident Management Team stood up so we didn’t have to scramble to get an IMT to happen as well as all our brigades being on standby. We were ready to go.

I think the other thing that was really good was all of the people who were involved in getting together the information for Emergency Warnings. We had our heads switched into that mindset, we knew exactly what we needed to do, so again, I’m pretty pleased that the work we’d done leading up to the fire season was quite fruitful.

The most important thing was that we got people on the ground and we did what we could.”

### Superintendent Jason Heffernan, Region East Major Incident Coordinator, State Operations Centre

**When Jason Heffernan saw the Linksview Road fire appear suddenly in the video feed from a helicopter flying over Winmalee, his gut told him things could go bad very quickly.**

“I knew the day was going to be a challenging day for us.

We already had a number of Section 44s in effect across Region East. As the day progressed, the fire activity started to increase. My gut started to tell me that things were going to go bad in a very quick way if we got another fire.

I was watching Airview. There was a column of smoke coming up in the vicinity of Springwood. Airview zoomed in and we began seeing the fire take hold and it started to crown very quickly, which told me we were going to be in for a world of hurt.

The MIC (Major Incident Control) desk started forming Strike Teams and sending them up the Mountains. I called (Incident Controller) David Jones and told him what I’d been watching on Airview, that I saw the fire jump the ridgeline and really develop and that he was in for a bit of trouble.

I knew our response would have to be something special

that day. We knew we were in for the long haul at that stage. I remember looking up at the Knowledge Wall, seeing Airview showing the fire had well and truly reached down into Winmalee.

Another moment that I remember very clearly was when the room went dark. All of State Ops went dark because of the smoke which had come across Sydney. It was eerie.

Throughout that afternoon, our management had to be such that every fire had the same amount of attention. The only way to do that was to divide the Region East Section 44s up between the north, south and west regions. I liken it to what a Group Captain would do in the field, establishing sectors, and we did the same thing in State Ops.

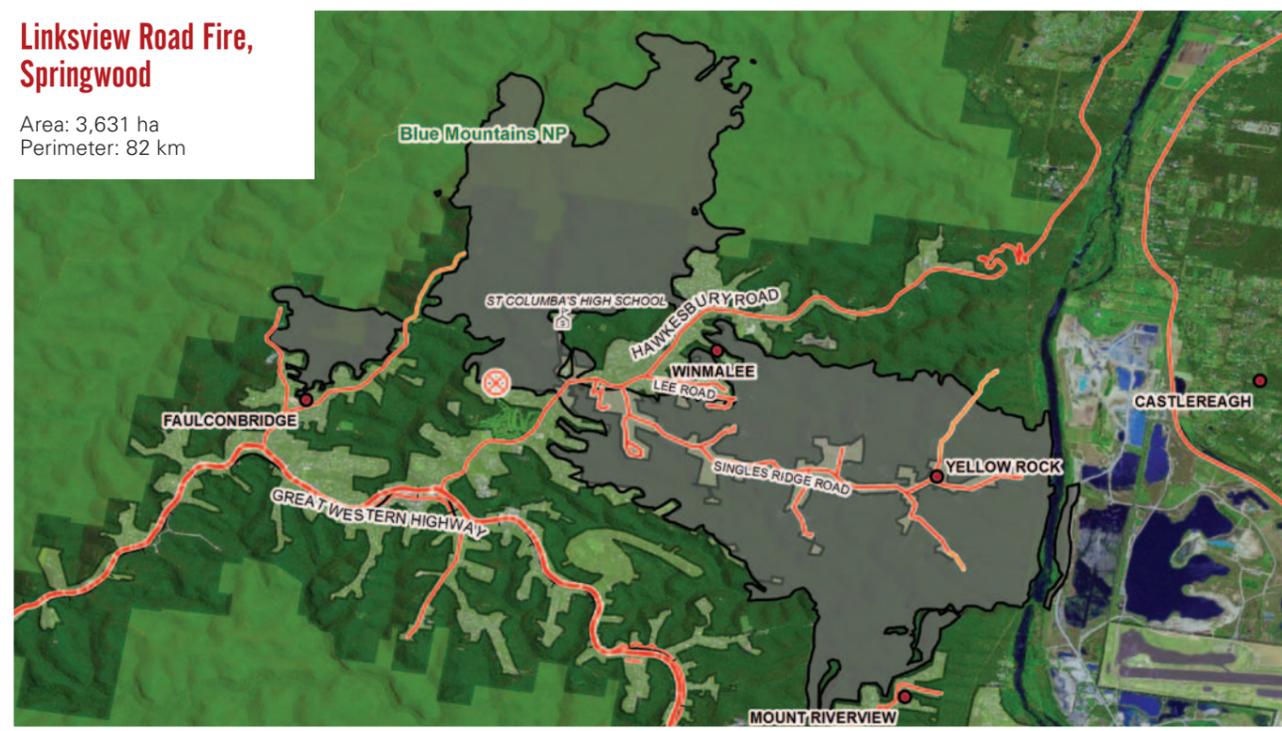
What was very comforting to see was the level of dedication of the volunteers. We moved a phenomenal amount of resources into management

teams and support personnel and there was a real desire of the volunteers to get involved and get things done. It was really encouraging to see people go out of their way to help. People really dug in deep and got on board, which ultimately made my job much easier and I’m forever indebted and grateful.

Certainly, we know from studies of human nature that in times of adversity and crisis, people revert back to their base knowledge and that’s why we train, what’s why we do Exercises, that’s why we have Incident Management qualifications. It was evident when the chips were down that people’s training and experience really did shine through.”

## Linksview Road Fire, Springwood

Area: 3,631 ha  
Perimeter: 82 km



**Map Key**  
 0 1 2  
 Kilometres  
 ⊗ Approx. Origin   ■ Burnt Area   □ Built Up Area   ● Township   🏫 High School   🛣 Road   🚊 Rail   🌳 National Parks



# I WAS THERE

Date: 18 October 2013

Time: 12:15pm

Location: Cragan Bay Road, Nords Wharf, near Catherine Hill Bay

Photographer: Phil Hearne © Fairfax Media

*"This image went viral online and received more than four million views from around the world.*

*Driving through the fire affected area was very eerie. There were fallen, burnt-out trees along the side of the road and not a person in sight.*

*I had been shooting all morning when I saw NSW RFS firefighters lying on the road. They were all exhausted. Within seconds, a truck came around the corner and they jumped back into action."*

POST-SCRIPT: The crews had been working through the night in horrific and dangerous conditions in Catherine Hill Bay. Brothers Matthew Jones-Power, 24, and Joshua Jones-Power, 17, from the Wallarah Brigade, commented after they saw the photo.

*"That was pretty crazy," they said. "We just stopped for about two seconds to catch our breath. We were waiting for the fire to come up to the road; we needed to take a break when we could ..."*

Joshua was in the middle of his HSC exams and had taken time out to fight the fires.

*"The support from the photo is really encouraging," he said, "and makes us love our community even more."*

# It's not the end of the Rainbow

Rainbow Pre-School on Singles Ridge Road, Winmalee was evacuated at the height of the fire's spread through the suburb. Rainbow Pre-School Director, Joan Murray tells her story

Thursday began as a normal day at Rainbow, with the children playing happily in the backyard.

We came indoors just before 10am but decided not to go outside for morning tea as the weather was hot and windy with the smell of smoke in the air.

Our day continued as normal. We closed the curtains, put on some CDs and everything was good. Lunch was eaten indoors. Staff members were monitoring the weather and it was deteriorating.

One of our pre-school parents, Dale Wade-Ferrell, works as a firefighter (with FRNSW). Every year throughout Term 3 Dale comes in to teach the children about fire safety. We call him Fireman Dale and our children think that they are pretty lucky to have their very own fireman.

Dale arrived around lunchtime to keep an eye on our backyard. We moved the children to

the TV area, kept the curtains closed and all was calm. Another former Rainbow dad and off-duty firefighter, Mathew Fraser, arrived to help in the backyard.

At around 2.45pm the electricity went off and we had to open the curtains. This was the first time that the children saw the smoke. We moved them to the front of the building and began to play "I spy".

We were 13 kids between 2-5 years old and five adults.

Just then, Captain Steve (Price from NSW RFS) arrived to evacuate all of us – right NOW!

Our children were remarkably calm. We held hands and walked to the RFS truck waiting outside.

We loaded the children in the back of the trucks. They were very calm. Captain Steve from Valley Heights Brigade drove us up Singles Ridge Rd and

towards Springwood. I could see fire on either side. We sang: "If you are happy and you know it clap your hands."

We arrived at Springwood Public School totally unannounced - a slightly bedraggled little group. We were accommodated in the library where we read many, many stories and did several rounds of Farmers in the Dell!

Over the coming hours the police moved us to the Springwood Bowling Club where several of the children were able to be picked up by their parents. A small group of about five of us had to sleep the night on mattresses on the floor.

We went back at Rainbow the next day and saw that our backyard was rather singed but the building was in tact.

Fireman Dale and Fireman Steve, we thank you for saving our lives.

## Quick work in horrendous conditions

Captain Steve Price from the Valley Heights Brigade was returning from work around 3pm on Thursday 17 October 2014, when his Group Officer Greg Corrigan tasked him with reconnaissance on Singles Ridge Road, Winmalee.

Captain Price took the brigade's personnel carrier (PC) to Singles Ridge Road to check on the Rainbow Pre-School as well as the safety of other residents.

Conditions were horrendous with embers showering heavily, strong winds and massive radiant heat from the fire racing through the area. Captain Price went to the Rainbow Pre-School and made an assessment to evacuate the 13 children and five adults immediately in the PC.

"We just had to squeeze them all in," Captain Price said later, "There was not enough time to come back a second time."

The fire impacted the Rainbow Pre-School soon after. Within minutes two fire trucks arrived in the area and were able to protect the Centre from destruction, although the backyard of the Centre was badly damaged.

Captain Price quickly returned to the area to evacuate more residents from Singles Ridge Road.

"It was the worst fire I have ever been in," Group Captain Corrigan said, "If it wasn't for Pricey, I am absolutely sure there would have been serious injuries or even death."



## Tip your lid

School children throughout the Winmalee and Springwood area were affected by the fires. As part of the healing process Winmalee Public School held a 'Hats off to Emergency Services' breakfast and assembly in early March 2013. Children wore hats donated by the community and stood up to cheer for the Police, NSW RFS and ambulance workers gathered on stage.

Photo by Matt Sullivan, News Local.

Throughout October and November 2013, the NSW RFS was inundated with messages of appreciation from across the country. From school children to Royalty, warm words of thanks arrived via email, social media and in the mail. The following is an excerpt of the many email messages received...

YOU ARE SELFLESS

Everyone pulled together in a time of need

champions

The tireless work, the gestures of care along the way, the risks to yourselves while you fight to preserve life and save all that is dear to people.....you are a rare breed and amazing people, each and every one of you....from the bottom of our hearts, thank you

gratitude

Words can't express how much we appreciate what u have done to save The Blue Mountains

Buena Vista at Winmalee may never be quite the same but the people who remain there will be a huge source of courage and help to those who must rebuild.

COURAGE

Couldn't have got through this without the RFS - thank you!

TIRELESS EFFORT

Thanks for keeping my family and so many others safe!

THANK YOU TO ALL THE FIERYS  
we salute you and thank you all

WE HAVE THE Bless you all

BEST FIREFIGHTERS

You are special individuals and at this time, I wanted to say a deep and heartfelt thank you for the tireless effort you have been putting in to assist with the fire situation.

IN THE WORLD

Commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons, AFSM

TRUE HEROES

Everyone pulled together in a time of need

Merci, taa, muchas gracias, dunker, thank you

Thankyou doesn't seem enough

Aussie heroes

confidence

A big Thank you from another Kurrajong resident, living directly east of Mountain Lagoon. Thank you for all the work you did before, especially during and what you all continuing to do.

AMAZING AT WHAT YOU DO

THANK YOU TO ALL RFS FIREFIGHTERS & A SPECIAL THANK YOU TO THOSE THAT BACK BURNED AT MOUNTAIN LAGOON BOTH BEFORE & DURING THE FIRE.

special individuals

YOU ARE OUR CHAMPIONS AND OUR HEROES

heartfelt

Thanks for saving my sister's house.

In this very selfish world we live in, you are selfless, you risk your life on a daily basis for no monetary gain, you are true heroes and all of you have my utmost respect.



# Predicting fire behaviour in October 2013

By Laurence McCoy, Senior Fire Behaviour Analyst

October 2013 saw significant fire activity in NSW, particularly in the Blue Mountains region. An interagency and interstate Fire Behaviour Analysis team was assembled in NSW RFS Headquarters for the event.

## A Case Study - October 2013 Fires

The Service maintains a full-time fire behaviour analysis capability within State Operations. The team comprises a Meteorologist, Fire Behaviour Analyst (FBA) and Fire Behaviour Simulator Operator. During periods of high operational activity, this capability is escalated to support Incident Management Teams while they build capacity. The Fire Behaviour Analyst also assists with State-wide strategic overview, major incident coordination and crew resource management objectives. In NSW, over 80 agency staff and volunteers have attended the Fire Behaviour Analysis Intermediate level Training.

During the October 2013 event, 1,162 fires were recorded, 19 of these being declared major incidents. An interagency and interstate Fire Behaviour Analysis team was assembled in NSW RFS Headquarters to provide support to the fire managers.

At its peak, the team comprised 30 personnel from fire agencies in NSW, Victoria and Queensland. It integrated cutting-edge science with the inclusion of some of the nation's leading fire scientists from the CSIRO, The University of Melbourne, The University of Wollongong and mapping support from the NSW Land and Property Information.

A number of lessons were learnt from the escalation.

1. Understanding customer needs and providing context for the products can help to integrate the products into incident management. Good communication is also required to ascertain situational awareness and refine model inputs.

Where the unit was able to deploy FBA trained personnel into larger IMTs, communication

improved. In addition to preparing predictions, these personnel were able to perform a number of liaison type functions including deriving fireground information, tapping into the experience of locals and providing context for predictions which were prepared at State Operations for the Incident Management Team.

Not every IMT had the ability to accommodate an FBA. Space and resources (computer hardware) limitations often meant that Incident Controllers made the decision to use the FBA support offered by Headquarters. In these cases, two way communications could mean the difference between incorporating the prediction into operational planning and the prediction not being utilised.

2. While State-wide data sets continue to improve, their accuracy can be coarse. A field reconnaissance trial

helped to refine data input to the models. It provided greater confidence to the FBA when considering model inputs. The use of field reconnaissance was credited with increasing the accuracy of predictions and explaining deficiencies in others.

The Unit also deployed Portable Automatic Weather Stations to a number of fires. This provided invaluable information for both FBAs and weather forecasters. A number of additional units have since been purchased to bolster this capability.

3. The National training course is the first step. Whilst the course provides an excellent base to develop predictions, further training is required to integrate the theory into agency based operational systems.

For seamless integration of inter-agency and interstate personnel, pre-incident

planning is essential. The NSW RFS has developed stage up plans for unit escalation. These include where the FBAs are to be located and the resources they will use. Pre-planning for network logins for all FBA trained personnel in NSW prevented delays in subsequent events. More robust induction systems have also been developed to help FBAs get to the job of preparing predictions quicker.

Overall, the escalation of the unit was considered a success. The unit released approximately 200 manual and over 200 computer-simulator derived predictions. This included piloting of cutting edge products such as ensemble modelling using the Phoenix Fire Characterisation model. Some of these predictions helped to inform significant community messaging and incident management decisions.



ABOVE: Fire Behaviour Analysts examine linescans during the October 2013. (L-R) David Philp (NSW RFS), Dr Stuart Mathews (CSIRO), Greg McCarthy (DEPI) and Tom Denman (NSW NPWS)

# 18 October 2013 Thank you

18/10/2013  
TOTAL OF FIRES  
ACROSS THE STATE  
**128**

TO: All NSW RFS Staff  
FROM: Commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons  
DATE: 18 October  
TIME: 12.51am  
SUBJECT: Thank you

Evening All,

It has clearly been a difficult and dangerous day for many of our members, and for communities affected by fires in areas including the Blue Mountains, Port Stephens, Lake Macquarie and Wingecarribee, as well as the Hunter, South Coast and northern region of NSW.

Sadly, indications are there have been substantial losses from these fires. In some of these fire areas it is likely there have been dozens, if not hundreds of homes destroyed. These fires will have long lasting affects for all involved.

While many will focus on the losses, and rightly so, we should also reflect on the number of homes which have been saved. This is due to the hard work and professionalism of NSW RFS volunteers, as well as crews from Fire & Rescue NSW, National Parks and Forests NSW. There has also been exceptional assistance from the NSW Police Force, the SES and the broader emergency management community.

We also need to recognise the extraordinary commitment and dedication of the affected communities during what was a very frightening and emotional time.

There has also been incredible support from our partners in the media in delivering information and warnings to affected areas.

Days such as this are a team effort and I want to thank everyone who has played a part, whether on the frontline or behind the scenes.

There is a significant amount of work ahead in assessing and accounting for the damage and destruction, not to mention the hundreds of kilometres of fire edge yet to be contained.

To the crews still out on firegrounds, please look out for one another and stay safe.

Again, thanks.

Regards,

**Shane**

Commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons, AFSM



18 OCTOBER 2013 (CLOCKWISE):  
One of the 195 homes destroyed the day before in Winmalee and Yellow Rock. Photo by Ben Shepherd  
Building Impact Assessment teams from the NSW RFS started work the next day to assess the damage in Winmalee. Photo by Brad Hunter  
Prime Minister Tony Abbott along with Commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons faces the media scrum in Winmalee where 195 houses had been destroyed the day before. Photo by Ben Shepherd.  
The ACT RFS contingent arrives in Winmalee to assist the local firefighters. Photo by Ben Shepherd.  
At 2am in the morning crews around Mt Wilson were protecting homes from the State Mine fire. Photo by Peter Raines.



# I WAS THERE

Date: 19 October 2013

Time: 3:00pm

Location: St Columbus High School grounds, Winmalee

Photographer: Brad Hunter © The Daily Telegraph

*"I had never seen a fire crown before. One of the firefighters told me to get ready for it, so I ran back to get an overall scene shot. And it just went up!*

*I was 30 metres away and I still had to duck my head into my jacket while I was taking photos. My photo made the front page of The Sunday Telegraph.*

*The Duffys Forest Brigade members are standing in the foreground watching. The fire was a back burn they had put in that day to help protect property.*

*I've been a news photographer for a while but this is the first time I've worked on a fireground. All of the media training started to come back to me and I was doing all the things I'd been told about, like pointing the car towards my exit route. I kept thinking about not putting myself in a situation that I'd regret. I had been told about what sort of conditions to expect at a fire but until you actually experience it you don't realise how intense it can be. You understand that fire is hot but I didn't expect such intensity after such a short period."*

# What can a smoke plume tell us?

A large smoke plume formed above the State Mine Fire in the afternoon of 17 October 2013. The iconic Blue Mountains ridge in the middle ground of this photo and the Grose Valley below, show the scale of the fire and the relative height of the smoke plume. Fire Behaviour Analysts in State Operations used similar photos to help prepare their prediction of fire behaviour over the coming 12 hours.

Photo by Gary P Hayes



Atmosphere above (warmer air) is conditionally capping the column. The wispy clouds, an indication of strong upper winds.

The angle of the smoke plume reveals there is a strong wind blowing from the left to right NW to SE.

Scale: The sheer scale of this smoke plume gives insight to the size of the fire. In this case the fire is developing into a very large landscape scale event.

Shows clouds forming where the temperature of the smoke is reaching dew point. These clouds are called pyro cumulus.

Dark smoke indicates a high intensity fire; probably in a forested area with heavy fuel loads.



# Shoulder to shoulder

Throughout October 2013 significant assistance was offered to NSW RFS by fire agencies from across Australia. The generosity of assistance from fellow volunteer firefighters allowed NSW RFS crews to be stood down or given extra resources over the long hours of firefighting which often took place overnight or into the early hours of the morning.

Commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons acknowledged the vital extra resources provided by other states which started as early as the afternoon of the 17 October 2013 when the Linksvie Road Fire was reported. A total of 1,413 interstate and international firefighters assisted in the NSW RFS during October 2013. "It shows the immense resourcefulness of our nation and the importance of the valuable work done across state borders," said Commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons, "Almost every state and territory was involved in the effort and was able to unite in a time of need. It is a huge logistical effort to transport, feed and manage this number of volunteers, but it was all done very efficiently and with great spirit of camaraderie."

Agency	Number of Personnel	Areas deployed
ACT Rural Fire Service	133	Lithgow Shoalhaven Eurobodalla Blue Mountains NSW RFS HQ
Queensland Rural Fire Service	116	Blue Mountains with FRNSW Strike Teams NSW RFS HQ
South Australia's CFA	374	Hawkesbury Blue Mountains Lithgow Lower Hunter
Tasmania	62	Blue Mountains
Victoria CFA	726	Southern Highlands Blue Mountains The Lakes Lithgow Hawkesbury City of Sydney with FRNSW
WA FESA	1	NSW RFS HQ
New Zealand	1	NSW RFS HQ
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,413</b>	

## Major Incidents Logistics Support

October 2013 was the busiest period of the Major Incidents Logistics Support (MILS) team since the 2009 Black Saturday bush fire deployments.

It takes a team of dedicated staff to manage the logistics of more than 1,400 interstate firefighters, keeping them fuelled, fed, accommodated and deployed to the firegrounds.

The MILS team of four to six staff, including Travel, Accommodation and Management Support roles,

set up at State Operations on 17 October 2013 and continued until 28 October. The team members were drawn from the NSW RFS Headquarters staff who lent a hand due to the size of the bush fire emergency. The scale and scope of the logistical support in a Major Incident is tremendous including everything from arranging a police escort for a convoy of 40 fire trucks from South Australia to ensuring that supplies of water bottles for maintained throughout.



### A Day in the Life of the MILS team

- 6am** Check early morning airport pick ups and accommodation arrangements have gone to plan
- 7.30am** Receive operational update from State Operations
- 8am** Meet with liaison officers from interstate agencies - receive updates, requests and deal with issues from the field reported overnight
- 9am** Collate total numbers of interstate firefighters within the State and distribute to media and State Operations
- 11am** Attend Daily Briefing and provide updates on MILS activity
- 10am-2pm** Manage the requirements for:
  - Interstate Liaison Officers: Provide transport, office set up etc, fire briefings. Liaise re arrivals and departures, exceptional circumstances, special requests. Book flights – with Virgin, Qantas and charters in some cases
  - Liaise with Base Camps (Hawkesbury, Penrith, Singleton, Lithgow) to confirm arrivals and departures, provide supplies, arrange other accommodation near firegrounds or airports. Track relocations of Strike teams while on fireground
  - Manage travelling volunteers – both road and air. Provide fuel and food while on the road – eg: arrange with Roadhouses on their route to provide fuel and food. Manage fatigue for travelling volunteers – ensuring stops and breaks. Arrange transport to and from airports plus airport meet and greet for arrival and departures
- 2-5pm** Interstate volunteer arrivals – drivers scheduled
  - Respond and finalise resources requests for the following day
  - Confirm all arrangements for following day via agency liaison officers
- Evening** Confirm with drivers pick up times and locations for next day
  - Touch base with Liaison officers and State Operations



OPPOSITE: Victorian CFA Crews arriving in Sydney for deployment. TOP: Penrith Base Camp housed 850 interstate firefighters. Photos courtesy of Martin Greenwood. MIDDLE: ACT RFS crews back burning in the Blue Mountains. Photo by Rolf Poole. LOWER: ACT Parks and Conservation crews waiting on Bells Line of Road for deployment. Photos courtesy of Martin Greenwood



# Bravo Bravo!

By Allen Bates and Terry Falkingham

Of the large contingent of interstate firefighters who assisted the NSW RFS in October 2013, one crew tells their story here. Strike Team Bravo from the ACT RFS stepped in to assist at Winmalee late on 17 October 2013. Southern Districts Volunteer Bushfire Brigade, Dave Pennock, Steve Kuczerka, Bill Hoff, Terry Falkingham and Allen Bates, joined four other crews to make up Strike Team Bravo.

"Crews were urgently needed for a five-day deployment to Sydney," read the pager on the afternoon of 17 October 2013.

The Southern Districts Brigade crew was quickly confirmed and headed to the staging area just north of Canberra. Our crew had all deployed interstate before and had been fighting fires together for years. In fact we worked out we had around 100 years of firefighting experience in our truck alone! (Yep some of our crew were 'older'!)

Strike Team Bravo the ACT RFS Volunteer Strike Team was assembled and briefed off the highway north of Canberra. Five Heavy Tankers (Category 1s) with Command Vehicles and support units including two ACT SES volunteers were to respond to Penrith for tasking in the Blue Mountains area. The gravity of what was occurring in Sydney was conveyed to us, we were under strict instructions to keep together and not to stop for anything. A second ACT RFS Strike Team staffed by ACT Parks had been assembled

and was also being deployed to Sydney.

Thanks to a burn our brigade had conducted the night before, one of our priorities was to dry crew member Terry's PPE which was rescued from the washing machine as he packed for the deployment. This was achieved with an improvised clothes line in the crew refuge area during our four hour drive to Sydney.

As we headed north, the Hume Highway south of Mittagong came to a complete stand still, a consequence of the Hall Road Fire, with both lanes taken up by heavy vehicles, cars and caravans. Our Strike Team responded with lights and sirens along the inside road verge for several kilometres. This was an experience in itself as by this time it was dark. Our driver, Steve, very cautiously had to keep one eye on the verge of the road and the other on the lookout for 'rubber-neckers' out of their vehicles and wandering the highway. After passing the NSW Police road block, our Group Captain

announced by radio that there was 'smoke over road ahead' then 'active flame to the left' quickly followed by 'and on the right'. We had no idea that this was the southern edge of the Hall Road Fire. NSW RFS crews were actively fighting the fire as we continued to head to Penrith. An eerie silence seemed to fall over us for a short time. We were left with no doubt about what we were heading toward. We had mixed feelings driving past NSW RFS crews who appeared light on the ground and yet were getting stuck right in.

Our first stop was the Penrith Panther's Leagues Club for a quick meal. We were then assigned to a NSW RFS Coordinator and proceeded to make our way up to one of the hardest hit areas of the Blue Mountains - Winmalee. We went straight into property protection back burning. This burn set the pattern for the next three shifts with crews leap frogging each other from house to house primarily working the back fence lines of the properties. This turned

out to be a very interesting exercise as the abrupt drop off the escarpment at the properties back fences made our tasks more challenging. This was not your usual, stock standard urban/bush interface.

It was also in Winmalee that we were first introduced to active Fire & Rescue NSW Community Fire Units (CFUs) deployed to assist with their own property protection. These men and women in blue overalls were a regular sight on our first three shifts. Typically a CFU will roll into action after the fire front has passed, using equipment stored in a CFU trailer located on their street. CFU members are generally residents in the area and are trained to assist their own neighbourhood with mopping up and property protection. There are around 120 CFUs in the Blue Mountains area.

We worked through the night and around 0700hrs the next day (18 October 2013), we were guided to the RAAF Base at Glenbrook. This was to be our home-away-from-home for

Despite all efforts, the fire eventually broke containment lines to our north. With a gusty north-east wind driving the front towards crews on the ground around Faulconbridge, the plan changed we were quickly re-tasked to Faulconbridge

the duration of the deployment. (A special mention goes to the Base Commander, staff and personnel who were welcoming and supportive and this was very much appreciated.)

Later in the day of Friday 18 October both ACT Strike Teams could be seen parked on the Great Western Highway waiting for tasking – we were all keen to get back onto the fireground. We were working a swing shift from 12 midday to midnight in order to revert back onto a day shift pattern the following day. Mt Riverview was our eventual tasking for more property protection back burning. We followed the pattern of the burn the previous night with the ever present escarpment at the rear fence line.

After a good night's rest back at Glenbrook, we continued the Mt Riverview burn the following morning (19 October 2013). This is where we gained a real sense of achievement. We could see the results of our work and had ownership of a task well done. After securing the last house in the area, four ACT crews continued burning along Cripple Creek. The aim was to meet NSW RFS crews who were back burning down from the north. This completed the sector and greatly reduced the fire threat to residents.

While the other crews continued down Cripple Creek, our crew was tasked to patrol on foot and secure back to the start of the Mt Riverview burn. It would be fair to say that despite carrying hand tools and chainsaws, we had the easier task, as the remaining crews on the burn reported heavy going.

After three shifts conducting back burns with quick turnaround times, on 20 October we were tasked to a sector with very little activity. We spent the morning patrolling a well blacked out fire edge along Paterson Road

in Springwood, the crews before us had done really good work. A visit by the ACT Emergency Services Agency Commissioner, Commissioner Dominic Lane, later in the day was a welcome distraction. We were eventually re-tasked late in the day to St Columba's Catholic College in Springwood. It was amazing to see well over 50 red fire vehicles mostly from the Victorian CFA. We did query as to what type of liquid was in the tanks of the vehicles from around the Rutherglen area, it was proven to be water – oh well! Unfortunately this tasking coincided with our end of shift.

We were back at St Columba's staging area the next morning (21 October) for our last shift. A line of seven white vehicles parked alongside a large CFA contingent was a great example of the range of commitment from other State and Territory fire services. The range and type of trucks deployed by CFA was impressive and clearly demonstrated their rural and urban firefighting roles. After comparing notes and talking to our Victorian counterparts, it was generally accepted that you could never get bored in a truck with an in-cabin controlled front mounted water canon designed for grassfires.

After the briefing, we were again tasked with NSW RFS crews to contain the fire-front approaching from the north-east of the St Columba's School. We walked off Chapman Parade, not far from St Columba's into the bush a few hundred metres but no sooner had we walked in, with hand tools and helicopter support above, we walked back out. The fire activity in the area was too erratic.

Our five ACT units were then tasked further down the fire trail to contain the approaching fire front. We were the third truck in line with the first two

crews getting the lion's share of heat and smoke. Overhead, our aviation partners were extremely busy dropping their payloads with pin point accuracy just about on top of our tankers, displaying impressive flying skills under the conditions.

Despite all efforts, the fire eventually broke containment lines to our north. With a gusty north-east wind driving the front towards crews on the ground around Faulconbridge, the plan changed and we were quickly re-tasked to Faulconbridge.

Once there our crews quickly prepared for property protection along with CFA and NSW RFS crews. Thankfully conditions eased, as did the threat and we were released from the fireground after a testing shift.

By this stage we were now starting to feel the effects of a well worked five days and looking forward to being relieved by our replacement ACT crews, who had already arrived at the RAAF Base in Glenbrook. After a handover of vehicles and a quick briefing to oncoming deployment crews, we wandered off for a meal at the Glenbrook Mess - a welcome sight after another long day in the lower Blue Mountains.

Finally, it was straight onto the coach for Canberra and back to our regular lives in the ACT. After all we had seen over the last few days, most of us saw the trip back home from the inside of our eyelids.

**OPPOSITE PAGE:** The entire Strike Team Bravo from the NSW RFS on Patterson Road in Springwood with their Commissioner Dominic Lane on October 20 2013. Photo courtesy of Martin Greenwood

## 2013/14 fire season facts and figures

- During October 2013, the ACT deployed over 130 personnel to fight the bush fires in NSW, including those in and around Sydney. All RFS Brigades from the ACT were made up within this group (Jerrabomberra, Rivers, Hall, Parks, Molonglo, Guises Creek, Gungahlin, Tidbinbilla and Southern Districts Brigades), along with support from our maps volunteers, State Emergency Service, mechanics and aviation members.
- Overall, during the 2013/14 fire season the ACT RFS sent 403 personnel on interstate deployments to assist in bush fire emergencies in NSW and Victoria.

## The ACT Rural Fire Service

- 562 volunteer firefighters across eight brigades
- 1 ACT Parks Brigade staffed by (145) employees of ACT Territory and Municipal Services (TAMS)
- 13 full-time RFS staff, as part of the broader Emergency Services Agency
- 72 Remote Area Fire Team members
- 19 Heavy Tankers (Cat 1s)
- Four Compressed Air Foam System Heavy Tankers (2 x Cat 1, 2 x Cat 2)
- 14 Medium Tankers (Cat 7)
- 13 Light Units (Cat 9)
- One Bulk Water Truck (Cat 13)
- Eight Brigade Command Vehicles, four Group Officer Vehicles, 11 Parks Officer Vehicles (Cat 16)
- Eight Quick Fill Trailers (Cat 14)
- Three Remote Area Fire Team Trailers (Cat 17)



**I WAS  
THERE**

**Date:** 20 October 2013  
**Time:** 6:45pm  
**Location:** Mount Lagoon Road, Bilpin  
**Photographer:** Brad Hunter © The Daily Telegraph

*"I took this photograph at night time when the Duffys Forest crew was conducting a back burn at a property on Mountain Lagoon Road at Bilpin.*

*I know this looks staged but it definitely isn't. The firefighters were just going about their business when I shot this frame. The light of the fire was such that it perfectly cast silhouettes of the firefighters.*

*When I think back about this photo I remember the heat and the sensation of the fire sucking the oxygen out of the air."*

# The thin brown line

In the Blue Mountains, west of Sydney, Armageddon is approaching. There's a radical plan but can a crack team of remote area firefighters pull it off?

By Greg Bearup, The Weekend Australian Magazine. Photos by Gary P Hayes

It isn't such a bad day. The winds are light, it's forecast to reach a pleasant 23 degrees and there's no fire ban; a relief after weeks of unseasonal highs and evil westerlies. It's the morning of Wednesday, October 16, and a posse of army engineers is deployed to the Marrangaroo Army Camp near Lithgow, NSW. They are training to search for improvised explosive devices - the home-made bombs that have killed and disfigured so many of their comrades in Iraq and Afghanistan. Sweeping the ground with metal detectors, the sappers locate their deadly foe lurking in the dirt. The bomb disposal expert lays a demolition charge, lights the 30-second fuse and shouts "Fire on!" as they retreat to safety. Boom! A piece of white-hot shrapnel fizzles through the air, landing in a patch of parched grass, sparking a fire that spreads quickly on the live firing range.

Army fire crews are dispatched and firefighters sent from Lithgow. The first half-hour is crucial to containment - if they can reach it before it grows to a hectare in size, they'll have a chance. They arrive well within

time but are unable to attack it, fearing the blaze will set off unexploded bombs. They wait for it to emerge onto safer terrain but the beast has been unleashed. The State Mine fire is on the rampage.

In his office at the Blue Mountains Fire Control Centre in Katoomba, David Jones, 57 (NSW RFS correction: 51), the local NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS) manager, sees the fire alert pop up on his computer screen at around noon. That afternoon, he and the area's police superintendent, Darryl Jobson, drive to Lithgow, 40km away. It's a neighbourly visit. They want to know how they can help and what containment strategy will be used to halt the fire's spread onto their patch in the mountains. They drive home late that night and Jones rises early the next morning; already he can hear an ominous wind howling outside. It is going to be a horrid day.

He gathers his wife and two daughters, aged 17 and 19. "Righto," he says, "what are your survival plans for today?" Same plan as always, Dad, they chorus - we'll all meet up at the Fire Control Centre. "Goodo."

He hugs and kisses his girls and his wife. An almost-reformed smoker, Jones pops into a shop on the way to work, buys a packet of ciggies and sucks the smoke deep into his lungs to settle the nerves.

He and Jobson drive back to Lithgow for another briefing. The situation is grim: the fire is advancing at a phenomenal rate, so they return to the mountains to prepare. At 12.20pm, as they are pulling into the car park of his office, they hear a radio report that another fire has started at Mt York and is heading towards Mt Victoria, a town of 800 people 16km south east of Lithgow. It was ignited by a power line, downed by the 80km/h gusts. This is Jones's patch. "Oops," he says to the policeman, "here comes our first fight."

Four fire trucks are dispatched and RFS strike teams are alerted. Jones and his team move to his operations room, with its giant map of the Blue Mountains on the wall. Dozens of emergency calls flood in; so many that his staff are unable to answer them all and the overflow is diverted to RFS headquarters. The crews on

the ground almost have things contained when a huge gust of wind thunders through, picking up a chunk of fire and hurling it over the firemen, who are forced to retreat. It is now heading directly towards Mt Victoria. Jones takes a call on his personal mobile - it's RFS headquarters. Two elderly people are trapped in their home in the path of the fire. He scribbles down the details and a crew is diverted to rescue them. Every available unit is dispatched to Mt Victoria.

Just as this is happening, at 1.27pm, another fire alert flashes across his screen. The high winds have downed a power line at Springwood and flames are galloping towards homes and 6000 residents at nearby Winmalee, 80km west of Sydney. Some of the trucks heading to Mt Victoria are diverted. They are now fighting a battle on two fronts, 50km apart. Jones looks around the operations room and watches the colour drain from the faces of his staff. He says to himself what everyone is thinking. "I hope we don't lose anyone. Please don't let people die."





Within minutes the fire has jumped Hawkesbury Road and houses in suburban streets with nice, comforting names like Sunny Ridge Road and Buena Vista Road are engulfed in a terrifying inferno.

An RFS Airview helicopter happens to be above Winmalee and streams live video footage of the fire's advance into the operations room. Jones, a 32-year veteran, has never seen a forest fire move this rapidly. At 1.50pm he strides into his office and dials the Red Phone at RFS headquarters in Homebush, in Sydney's west. Commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons and his senior staff gather to hear his call. It is now considered too late for people to flee. "Gentlemen," Jones says. "We need to issue an emergency warning for a 'stay and shelter'." Within minutes the fire has jumped Hawkesbury Road and houses in suburban streets with nice, comforting names like Sunny Ridge Road and Buena Vista Road are engulfed in a terrifying inferno.

Jane Boys, a nurse, is on a day off and is checking the web and listening to the radio, but the first she hears of imminent danger is an explosion in her

backyard in Emma Parade. Out the front, an off-duty policeman is running from house to house, banging on doors, screaming, "Just get out! Just get out!" Boys and her neighbours scramble up the road to safety with pets and photos and iPads. Within a few hours the fire has raced 10km down the mountain, jumped the Nepean River and destroyed almost everything in its path.

People tell Jones they can see when he's processing information because he starts to blink rapidly. Today his lids are pumping like the shutter of a paparazzo's Canon. He's almost overloaded. Information is coming in from Headquarters, from crews on the ground, from the public, from the Bureau of Meteorology, from helicopters and planes circling above, from the media. All the while he is trying to direct his resources to where they are needed most. One of the most

disturbing images is relayed from a helicopter hovering above the dense smoke at Winmalee. From its thermal imaging camera, Jones can see dozens of neatly spaced blocks of red. He knows these are images of burning houses. He can only hope there are no people inside. Late in the day the RFS padre arrives. He takes one look at Jones and says, "Mate, you look like you need a coffee." He returns with a warm brew. "You look absolutely shell-shocked."

Late that night Jones walks into his house, exhausted and emotional, to be greeted by his wife Judith. "It's an absolute bloody shambles," he says. "I think I've lost 50 or 60 houses." He still doesn't know if there are any bodies in those houses. "There was just nothing we could do. If we'd had 1000 tankers lined up it still would have overrun them." Still, he can't shake the guilt he feels that so much destruction

has occurred on his watch. That evening, Fitzsimmons is briefing his minister and the NSW Premier Barry O'Farrell. "I think we'll be counting bodies in the morning," he tells them bluntly. They'd had unconfirmed reports of bodies floating face down in swimming pools.

Volunteers from around the state pour in - the RFS is a giant, well-organised army of 70,000 volunteers and 4000 fire trucks - assisted by fighters from Fire and Rescue NSW and the National Parks & Wildlife Service. Come morning, 366 firefighters in 54 trucks are battling the two fires on the mountain, assisted by eight helicopters, each dropping 1000-litre water bombs. Hundreds more volunteers are battling to contain the State Mine fire to the north.

Later that day, Friday, October 18, one of Jones's staff walks into his office and says, "Boss, I've got some numbers." He

reads out his list: 195 houses destroyed at Winmalee; 10 at Mt York; 146 badly damaged. "You're joking," Jones says, stunned. Incredibly, nobody is dead.

Jones doesn't have time to dwell on it as fires are still burning uncontrolled throughout the mountains. One of his fire analysts unfurls a big map of the Blue Mountains on his desk with crayon markings all over it; the planner and his team have been predicting what might happen in the days ahead by studying wind and weather forecasts. Red lines run deep into the major population centres of Blackheath, Katoomba, Leura and Springwood. "How many houses are we talking about here?" Jones enquires. "Eight to ten thousand," the planner says. Jones pats his pocket. It might be the time for a quick durry.

Dr Simon Heemstra is watching all this (the fire bush

fire emergency in the Blue Mountains) unfold from RFS Headquarters at Homebush. He's a worried man. On the Thursday, when Winmalee was devastated, the State Mine Fire burned an incredible 35km in less than six hours through the eucalypt forests. Heemstra, the RFS's senior fire behaviour scientist, is leading a team of analysts trying to predict what may happen next. These three fires that have caused so much destruction - the State Mine Fire, the Mt York Road Fire and the Winmalee fire - were caused by three tiny sparks. They now have more than 150km of active fire front to deal with. What happens if they get another day like they've just had? Or worse?

public on social media, giving them vital information about the formation of the smoke clouds. They are collating all this information with the weather predictions for the days ahead.

The data is being crunched manually by analysts to allow them to make informed predictions. At the same time it is being fed into supercomputers using the latest fire simulation modelling. The conclusions reached by both humans and machines are very, very frightening.

What troubles Heemstra most is a terrifying phenomenon known as pyrocumulus, or pyroconvective, where a large fire marries up with unstable atmospheric conditions to form giant smoke clouds. These monstrous clouds can rise to a height of 15km and cause violent winds and lightning - a firestorm. They have the potential to drop burning embers and cause lightning strikes 20km in front of the advancing fire. If the fire progresses another 35km in one day, as it has just done, tens of thousands of homes in the western suburbs of Sydney and the Blue Mountains are at grave risk and burning embers could land as far east as Parramatta, the geographic heart of Australia's largest city. This is a worst-case scenario, but a real possibility - and while the weather conditions are nowhere near as severe as Victoria's 2009 Black Saturday bush fires, where 173 people perished and 2030 houses were destroyed, these fires are threatening much larger population centres. The lesser scenarios aren't pretty either, still involving the loss of many thousands of homes.

Some radical decisions need to be taken and Fitzsimmons is in the mood to approve them

Everything points to Wednesday, October 23, as being the horror day when unstable atmospheric conditions could lead to pyrocumulus. It is now late on Friday, October 18. Armageddon is approaching.

Heemstra seeks out his boss, Commissioner Fitzsimmons, to deliver his predictions. He explains the worst-case scenarios and works back from there - it's the RFS's creed to "plan for the worst, hope for the best". Fitzsimmons listens and then asks a series of searching questions about the likelihood of each scenario; he's overseeing this vast operation like a wartime general, making sure his troops are properly resourced and deployed to where they are most needed.

As a 15-year-old kid, Fitzsimmons joined up as a volunteer and has watched the Service evolve from a disjointed, poorly funded outfit run by local councils to a professional, centrally coordinated organisation with proper training and standardised equipment. He is acutely aware of the dangers his firefighters face, having lost his father, George, in 2000 when a backburning operation went horribly wrong. A number of his volunteers have just lost their homes at Winmalee, but are refusing to stand down. He's been up to visit and they've been touched by his empathy. He's a man who's not ashamed to cry.

For a long time Fitzsimmons lived in the shadow of his charismatic former boss, Phil Koperberg. But the public has grown to know and trust him. They like him. He fronts the media with blunt warnings of the dangers, his delivery like a nightclub bouncer explaining the dress code. The pressure on him is immense. He is thinking, "None of these fires is contained, they are all burning very aggressively, and within a week we are going to see a day similar, or worse, to the day that caused all these fires to run and spread as badly as they did." Some radical decisions need to be taken and Fitzsimmons is in the mood to approve them. He knows that "tens of thousands of houses are at risk - it is that serious. We either fight, or we retreat and let them burn."

One of the most audacious plans is known as The Plug, a strategy to stop the Mt York Road Fire advancing further into the Grose Valley with an offensive backburning operation. If it fails, those who

approve it will probably end up before a Coroner, having to explain their actions. But that will be nothing compared to the guilt they'll feel if more houses are lost, or worse. Fitzsimmons' overriding concern is for the safety of his firefighters. He tells his commanders that if things don't go to plan they'll all have his full backing should they later have to face the lawyers. Still, he's apprehensive.

Fitzsimmons informs (then Premier) Barry O'Farrell of the plans. "The option to do nothing is not an option," he tells the Premier. "If we don't do something these fires have the potential to cause incredible damage. It can't get much worse. I have extraordinary confidence in my team, but this is a high-risk strategy that has the potential to go wrong." The Premier nods and wishes him the best of luck.

The Grose Valley is only a two-hour drive from Sydney CBD yet it's one of the most rugged places in Australia.

It's not all that far from where the prehistoric Wollemi Pine grew undiscovered until 1994. When Charles Darwin visited the valley in 1836 he stood atop a sandstone cliff and looked across the impressive forested valley to the other side and remarked that it was "stupendous ... magnificent". Darwin was overlooking where they now plan to put The Plug.

The idea comes from senior Parks ranger Richard Kingswood, who walks into Jones's office and says, "Have you thought about this?" Kingswood's plan requires cutting a 5km containment line across the Grose Valley, by hand, to form part of the Northern Strategic Line, what they call the Blue Mountains "Armageddon Line". The hope is that they can backburn enough of the Grose Valley to starve the advancing fire of fuel, come Wednesday. The danger is that it could all so easily backfire and they'll have a fire on the doorstep of the urban areas of the Blue Mountains.



Just cutting the fire trail across the steep and thickly forested valley is a mammoth task. An elite team of 40 remote area firefighters, drawn from the RFS and NPWS, is assembled. Nigel Holland, 40, a Parks field officer with 20 years' firefighting experience, is part of the team. Over the weekend he and his team work day and night. They descend into the Grose Valley with the fire front 6km to the west of them; they carry chainsaws, leaf blowers, axes, rake-hoes and litres and litres of drinking water for the backbreaking task of clearing a one to two metre-wide path across the entire valley - the thin dirt line. They then wait for favourable weather to light the backburn.

That time comes late on the afternoon of Monday, October

21 - two days before the predicted Pyrocumulus Day. Holland is at home when he gets the call; it's his daughter's birthday party and he's in the garage, cooking a barbecue. He doesn't usually get nervous doing backburns but this call induces "a crook feeling in my guts". His initial reaction is, "I don't think we should be doing this." One of his mates at the barbie says, "Are you sure about this?" His wife, too, is unhappy but says she trusts his judgment. "It's up to you," she says. He reassures her and says he'll re-evaluate, "minute by minute". He gives her and their two kids a big squeeze and then drives to the nearby Parks depot, on the lip of the Grose Valley. It's just on dusk.

Holland finds that his fellow rangers and the RFS crews are

equally nervous. Because the operation is being conducted at night they'll have no air support - no choppers to water-bomb should the fire get away. However, they are told an ambulance helicopter with night-vision equipment will be on standby at Blackheath. It's been specifically assigned to support Holland and his team and ordered not to attend any other jobs.

The firefighters are briefed by a Parks field officer, Mick English, a guy whom Holland trusts with his life. His briefing is sombre and direct. English reinforces that this is a voluntary mission; that anyone who doesn't want to participate is free to leave. A couple of people opt out. Holland thinks to himself, "I don't disrespect their decision. I wouldn't go

down there either if I didn't know the terrain." There's no swagger; nobody is saying, "She'll be right, mate."

The remaining group discusses the mission and the consensus is that the plan is the only way to stop this fire. "There are only a few people who can pull this off," Holland says to his mates, "and so if we don't do it, who else is gonna do it?" They gear up and head off to the valley.

A couple of fire hoses, several kilometres long, run down the cliff face from the southern Blackheath side. A pump has been dropped down to the Grose River to supply water to the northern side. It pumps water up to a bladder where another pump forces the water further up the hill to another bladder, and so on. However,

One of the most audacious plans is known as The Plug, a strategy to stop the Mt York fire advancing further into the Grose Valley with an offensive backburning...

it only reaches so far up the northern slope. Holland has been assigned to this section at the end of the containment line, where the fire hoses don't reach. A place where, if things go tragically wrong, there will be no escape.

At around 8pm he sets off for the two-hour, 5km walk, descending a vertical 700m through the blue gum and turpentine forests to the river below. He then scales the other side. One section is so steep that he has to use a rope. He is armed with a drip torch, packets of matches, a back-up lighter and a rake-hoe. All he can hear is the crunch of his boots, his own breathing and the chirping of the night forest

as his helmet-torch lights up the track ahead. At around 10pm he scrambles up the last shaley section to be halted by a giant sandstone cliff.

Holland catches his breath for a moment before radioing his supervisor. "Boss," he says. "Are you sure you want me to do this?" Go ahead, comes the reply. He asks again, and then a third time. He then checks the wind direction one final time. If it jumps the break, he'll fight it with his rake-hoe, or flee. Holland has a drip torch, but doesn't want the fire to spread too quickly and so opts for a single match. He strikes it and flicks it into a patch of grass. The fire takes hold, spreading slowly westward, the right

direction, away from the containment line. For a minute or more he stands, enchanted by the incredible beauty of it all, as it flickers and flows across the forest floor like a dancer, illuminating the giant eucalypts and the sandstone cliff in a soft, warm glow. A few minutes after that he thinks, "This just might work."

He then begins his descent to the valley floor, flicking matches at intervals as he goes. The fire burns slowly through the undergrowth, behaving just as they had hoped. All night he and his team patrol up and down the containment line, making sure it doesn't jump. After dawn helicopters arrive to drop aerial

incendiaries - small fireballs - to deepen the backburn, to reinforce The Plug.

At 8am on Tuesday, Holland begins the long trudge out of the valley. Two hours later he and his team arrive back at the depot where someone has put several cases of beer and soft drinks on ice. Holland cracks one open and sits down on the ground, exhausted, allowing himself a moment to feel very proud of what he has just been involved in. He thinks to himself, "This strategy has never been used before - a 5km hand-line that's been lit by a small group of guys in the middle of the night. Normally a backburning operation has vehicles and helicopter support

and all those other things and we didn't have any of that." He thought it had about a 30 per cent chance of success, but it held. He takes a long swig and it barely touches the sides. Someone tosses him another can. They've organised drivers to ferry them all home.

As Wednesday, October 23 unfolds, Shane Fitzsimmons is allowing himself to think he may soon get to sleep in his own bed again. The Plug appears to be holding. Other aggressive backburns to halt the State Mine fire also appear to have worked. And the weather - so vengeful the week before - has, overnight, delivered some relief.

Fitzsimmons arrives at RFS Headquarters to the news that 5mm of rain has fallen across much of the fireground. If the fire is going to spread rapidly it will need to be up and running by mid-morning, but at 11am he is looking at live video feeds showing "fire dormancy across large areas of the fireground". By mid-afternoon, Fitzsimmons is feeling like he dodged a bullet. It worked!

Heemstra is in his office on this day, clicking his heels each time he pulls up a new piece of data on his computer. The unstable atmospheric conditions the Bureau predicted are not quite as bad. The wind is not quite as strong - a drop

of just 10km/h can mean the difference between a fire advancing 5km a day rather than 40km. The rain was a godsend and he smiles as he looks at the measurements from each and every gauge. He knows that the work of the firefighters has been heroic but it could so easily have gone the other way. It was a case of good management combining with an enormous dollop of good luck. He turns to one of his colleagues and says, "We just kept a tiger in a cage with paper walls."



#### About the photographer...

All of the photos in this story are taken in Blue Mountains between 17-26 October 2013 by Gary P Hayes. Gary P Hayes has been taking photographs for over 35 years and has always focused on emotive landscapes and travelogue imagery. He has lived in UK, USA and Australia, currently residing in Wentworth Falls in the Blue Mountains, west of Sydney. Gary tries to find beauty in our world and during the October 2013 fires was on the spot to observe the natural beauty juxtaposed against the threat of threatening State Mine and Mt York Road Fires. Gary P Hayes generously donated the use of his photos to the *Bush Fire Bulletin* for this Special Edition. ([www.garyphayes.com](http://www.garyphayes.com))

# What is The Plug?

The large amount of fire activity in the Blue Mountains, forecast weather conditions and the potential for further property losses and a campaign fire that could last months in the Grose Valley and threaten, potentially, all of the homes in the Blue Mountains, saw fire managers take high-risk and radical action to protect the communities of the Blue Mountains leading up to 23 October 2013.

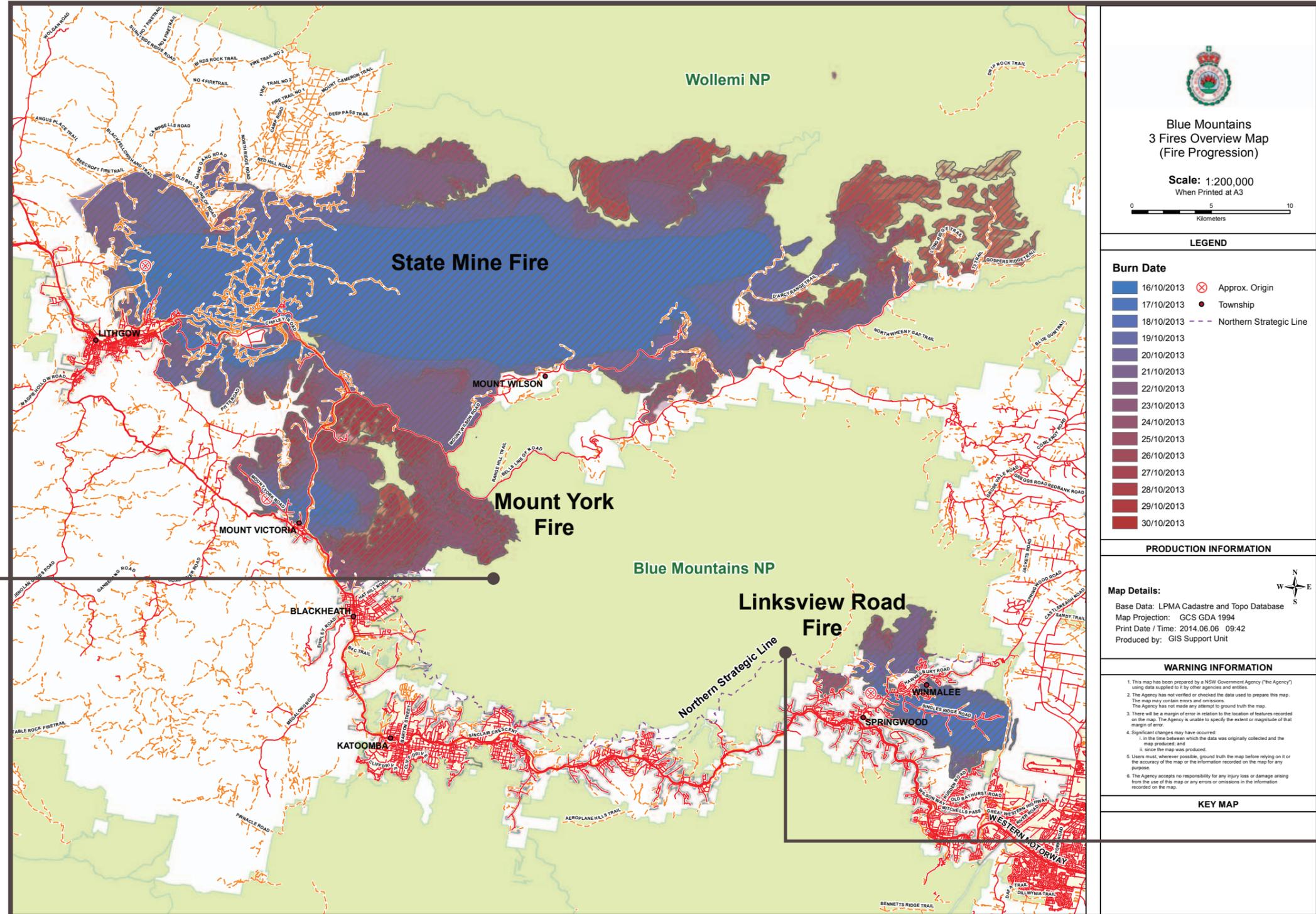
'The Plug', as it would become known, became central to the

fight. This strategy involved back burning off a steep and difficult section of bushland that firefighters could only access by foot or helicopter winch in. This was a high-risk approach due to the potential for fire to breach containment lines, with a fire perimeter of more than 150kms. Remote Area Firefighting Teams were deployed for the task, assisted by helicopters. At times, they had to trek many kilometres through rugged bushland to

consolidate containment lines where crews would back burn. This work continued around the clock in the lead up to October 23, when conditions were expected to deteriorate further. In light of the looming forecast, and due to the scale and extent of the fire activity, a decision was made by the NSW Premier to declare a State of Emergency. This step is very rare for bush fire emergencies and was in recognition of the potential threat. The complexity

of this situation led to the formation of an overarching Incident Management Team (IMT) for the complex of fires burning across the Blue Mountains. While separate IMTs would maintain local control of the incident, this overarching IMT would provide an increased level of coordination and resourcing.

**The Plug** – high-risk, must-do containment strategy to stop the fires spreading to the whole Blue Mountains. The terrain was so steep that it took RAFT crews three hours to walk in and six hours to walk out. The job of the 40 crew (20 from NPWS and 20 from NSW RFS) was to hand cut a containment line across the narrow valley floor. They spent about 24 hours in the area preparing for and then setting a back burn. Fire managers estimated there was a 30 percent chance it would hold – and it did. Further crews entered the area in the coming days to tend to the fire and ensure its effectiveness.



**The Northern Strategic Line** is long-term strategy used by fire managers to protect the villages of the Blue Mountains from fire. The line is based on containment lines which are maintained by firefighters through hazard reduction and back burning as well as natural features that would slow or block a fire's spread.

# I WAS THERE

Date: 21 October 2013

Time: 12:20pm

Location: Lyre's Loft, Bell

Photographer: Brad Hunter © The Daily Telegraph

*"About a minute or so before I shot this frame, this was just a small spot fire behind the fence that you can see in the picture.*

*The Deputy Captain had gone over to try and put it out and he was moving branches and sticks out of the way. There were people running back and forth and I turned to see what they were doing. By the time I looked back at the fence, the fire had grown to this size.*

*That's how intense the conditions were."*



# Keeping the public informed

It was the largest public liaison effort in the history of the NSW RFS. In the period between 13 to 26 October the Service re-doubled its efforts to protect the community using current and relevant fire information.

With nearly 1,600kms of active fire edge and very bad fire weather conditions predicted for 23 October 2013, the Service put forward a huge effort to warn residents in the Blue Mountains and Southern Highlands about the dangers that lay ahead.

From 21 October the Commissioner was holding live media conferences every few hours, updating fire information and outlining contingency plans for the coming days. Meanwhile the Public Liaison Officers (PLOs) on the ground throughout the State, and especially in the Blue Mountains and Southern Highlands, were also very busy.

The PLOs function is to provide timely, accurate and relevant information to affected communities during the emergency operation. Their role is to assist the community to be well-informed of the fire managers plans, fire predictions and current fire threats. Depending on the fire conditions and the local community, the PLO coordinates and oversees the roles of Media Liaison Officer (MLO) and a Community Liaison Officer (CLO) in the IMT. Combined, these roles coordinate media conferences,

fireground access for media personnel, community meetings, street meetings, newsletters, as well as providing information for web updates and the Bush Fire Information Line.

Over the period of 13-26 October 2013, the public liaison in the Blue Mountains hit heights never seen before with a total of 12,500 residents of the Blue Mountains attending at least one community meeting run by the NSW RFS. Two key meetings on 21 and 22 October saw around 2,500 gather at each meeting. At other locations, the crowd spilled out on to the street and firefighters stood on the back of fire trucks to deliver their messages. Along with the many community meetings, 20,000 newsletters were made available and strategic doorknocking was conducted across the Blue Mountains.

One of the Public Liaison Officers for the Blue Mountains, Inspector Paul McGrath said the team of six NSW RFS staff were pleased to see the local residents adhering to the public messages sent out by the Commissioner.

"They got the Boss's message of self-reliance," he said, "and they came in droves to the community meetings to get more information. It was one of the most significant events in the Blue Mountains' history and certainly it was the biggest ever public liaison effort ever by the RFS."

According to Inspector McGrath one of the most pivotal meetings was the community meeting held at Yellow Rock on October 15. That was two days before the Linksvie Road fire moved through Winmalee and Yellow Rock destroying nearly 200 homes and damaging another 200. It was not the largest meeting held in that period but perhaps in hindsight, the most well-timed.

"You could have heard a pin drop that night," Inspector McGrath said, "We told them about how to survive, where to take shelter, how to defend their property and if they could not defend, how to take shelter."

"Within 72 hours a major fire had whipped through Yellow Rock and I can only hope that all the safety messages we gave them were prominent in their minds when the fire did come through."

Public Liaison Officer Rolf Poole facilitated the two large community meetings on 21 and 22 October along with representatives from local NSW RFS Brigades, local council and all the local National Parks and Wildlife Service.

"Community Meetings are essentially to enforce the notion of a shared responsibility," Mr Poole said, "The affected community should not only be seen as stakeholders, but partners in the operation." On 21 October Mr Poole knew the level of public interest had gone up a notch when he couldn't get a park on arrival at the Blue Mountains Christian School, Blackheath where the meeting was being held.

"In the morning we had been informed that maybe 30 people might come, but in the end we had this massive turnout - it looked to be about 2,500 people."

The Mayor of the Blue Mountains, Cr Mark Greenhill, opened the meeting.

"He did brilliantly," said Rolf Poole, "He said: Tonight is not about questioning the strategies and tactics of the fire operation. Tonight is about getting the vital information you need, in order to survive."

"We set the mood and then let the local firefighters drill down with local knowledge about local streets and local conditions," he said, "Because

the fire emergency was so big it was impossible to know all the finer details of what is happening on the ground. Our priority was to provide the community with 'what we know', 'what we don't know' and 'what we want the community to do'. Here are the facts now you need to make an informed decision for yourself."

"Mentally, as firefighters, we struggled with this," Mr Poole said, "For smaller fires we can answer every phone call and every enquiry about every house! But once the emergency becomes so large we simply can't provide the minute detail for individual properties. In these circumstances we have to 'speculate responsibly', and maintain a consistent theme in line with the bush fire alert level."

The ABC TV recorded an Exit Poll at the 21 October meeting in Blackheath and the majority of responses were very positive - people felt that they got the information they needed to stay and defend or to leave.

The Katoomba/Leura Brigade were planning a small meeting at their brigade station the following night. When they heard about the Blackheath meeting they changed tack. The meeting was held at the Katoomba Conference Centre and another estimated 2,500 residents turned up eager to listen and learn.

Adding social media to the Public Liaison toolkit turned out to be very successful in the Southern Highlands during the Hall Road Fire which started on 17 October, threatening homes and infrastructure for several weeks. When a community meeting needed to be called quickly the PLO David Stimson didn't have time to use traditional communication channels.

"The meetings were announced exclusively on local social media channels," he said, "It was staggering to us when 3,000 turned up to one meeting alone! It's a fact we are proud of actually."

Interest in the Southern Highland's Facebook page exploded over the period of Hall Road Fire rising from less than 2,000 to around 16,000 'likes' within two weeks. In fact, by Day Two of the Hall Road Fire it was clear that a full-time resource was required to monitor and update the local Southern Highlands Facebook page.

"We used local media 100 percent," said Mr Stimson, "and we used social media 100 percent. You could say it was 200 percent! We introduced a new stream of information which was incredibly advantageous to us and to the public."

"Keeping the public informed is a very, very integral role in Incident Management and I think we are all on board with that now."

## The role of Public Liaison

In the past 12 months the role of the PLO has become pivotal on any Incident Management Team. Utilising the nationally consistent warning arrangements the NSW RFS Public Liaison system establishes the mechanisms with which to communicate and engage so that individuals and the wider community can ultimately make informed decisions. The Public Liaison system ensures a consistent message is aligned to the current bush fire alert level and is disseminated through emergency alerts, internet, social media, mainstream media, the bush fire information line and local community networks.

Training for Media Liaison Officers (MLO) and Public Liaison Officers (PLO) has been offered since 2007. In all 150 NSW RFS members have been through these courses, with about 60 active MLOs and another 12 PLOs regularly called upon. The PLO is now an integral role in any Incident Management Team which is a measure of how important this role is.

**BELOW: 22 October 2013: With so much media attention and public liaison from the NSW RFS, the community meeting held on the eve of the 23 October at the Katoomba Conference Centre was packed to the rafters. Photo by Gary P Hayes**

Tonight is about learning what you need to do right here and now to survive this emergency.



# 23 October 2013 Keep going

TO: All NSW RFS Staff  
 FROM: Commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons  
 DATE: 23 October  
 TIME: 5.18am  
 SUBJECT: Keep going

As you would no doubt be aware, NSW has been experiencing a difficult, dangerous and destructive start to the fire season over recent weeks - one in which homes, infrastructure and life has already been lost. Today we have areas of NSW facing very serious fire threat conditions, particularly where fires continue to burn uncontained.

As I have stated quite publicly in recent days, the forecast weather conditions, combined with the large amount of fires already burning, are about as bad as it gets.

On Sunday, a State of Emergency was declared by the Premier, due to the already significant loss of property, the large amount of fire activity and the threat posed to communities such as those across the Blue Mountains, Hawkesbury, Southern Highlands and Central Coast. Already, the current fires have burnt close to 120,000 hectares and there is nearly 1,600 kilometres of active fire edge.

We have been working with communities across the fire-affected areas in recent days to ensure they are informed about the potential for fire impact. There has been an incredible response from the community, such as the many community meetings held last night where I'm told more than 4,000 people turned out to hear about the fire situation in the Blue Mountains and ask questions of local crews.

As is always the case, this is a team effort and it is a credit to all involved, whether that is out on the frontline or working behind the scenes. This includes the many thousands of NSW RFS members, both volunteer and salaried alike, as well as those from our partner agencies such as Fire & Rescue NSW, National Parks and Forests NSW. The role of agencies including Police, Ambulance, SES, the ADF (Australian Defence Force), interstate colleagues and other key partners and functional areas in the emergency management sector, has been critical. The effort of everyone involved is sincerely appreciated by the community and has resulted in some very heartfelt messages of praise and thanks being extended by those affected in support of what you are all doing.

There are approximately 1,600 additional firefighters organised for deployment to the Blue Mountains or strategic locations across Greater Sydney and other fire danger areas. This is in addition to the thousands of firefighters already in the field.

While we all need to be planning and preparing for the worst, of course, we hope that the forecast conditions and potential fire path predictions do not eventuate. However with so much fire activity and such widespread potential, it would be irresponsible to not issue advice, warnings and information. We will continue to work with local firefighting crews and IMTs, using their local knowledge, to deliver tailored information and warnings to these areas and any other areas that come under threat today.

Again, thank you to every single person who has played a role and who will continue to play an important role. We must recognise that for so many of our own, it has been really tough going and a very emotional experience. I am sure you would join with me in offering our thoughts, prayers and support for those who have worked to save as much as they could and of course, for those in our community who have lost so much.

Finally, to all our team, and particularly those crews out in the field, please look out for one another and take care of yourselves. We want everyone - our own people and the people they are seeking to protect - to return home safe to their families and homes at the end of their shift or when the threat eases. Keep up the outstanding work!

Regards,

**Shane**

NSW RFS Commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons, AFSM

24/10/2013  
 TOTAL OF FIRES  
 ACROSS THE STATE  
**126**



**CLOCKWISE FROM THE TOP:**

Mt Wilson Brigade Captain Beth Raines briefs her crews on the morning of 23 October on the strategy for the coming hours. Photo by Kathleen Oakes, Mt Wilson Brigade.

Wentworth Falls Brigade preparing for the day ahead. Photo by Matt Cooper, Wentworth Falls Brigade.

Helitak 412 waterbombing at the Dudley Redhead Gateshead Fire. Photo by Kevin Griffiths, Cameron Park Brigade.

Devils Pinch Brigade on standby at the Penrith Base Camp.

Victoria's Country Fire Authority crews on standby at the Penrith Base Camp.

All the interstate crews gathered at Penrith Base Camp in preparation for the day ahead.

Staging Area for the FRNSW Strike teams on standby



## I WAS THERE

**Date:** 23 October 2013

**Time:** 8:00am

**Location:** Grose Valley Lookout, Blue Mountains

**Photographer:** Matt Cooper, Wentworth Falls Brigade

*"This was taken on the morning of the 23 October. D-Day. This was the day of a diabolical forecast for fire weather in the Blue Mountains.*

*This crew from Wentworth Falls Brigade were doing an early reconnaissance check to see the state of fire activity in the Grose Valley after the 6mm of rain the night before.*

*It was only 8am and the wind was already howling. Despite the overnight rain, the wind was already managing to stir up fires under tree stumps and in unburnt patches of fuel.*

*Deputy Captain Peter Lang (centre) was looking into the Grose Valley towards The Plug containment line which had been put in place on previous days.*

*It had been called The Plug as it had to stop any fire between two very large vertical escarpments, Mt Banks to the north and Perry's Lookdown to the south. The sheer cliffs have a significant influence over the wind in the Grose Valley and one of the concerns was the fire could run the Valley floor and break out to the east of The Plug.*

*By the grace of God and some bloody good RAFT work it held. That's what these firefighters can see as they look out into the Valley."*

# Coming good

## The media steps up to keep the community safe

The scale of the media coverage and media involvement in distributing public safety information during the October 2013 fires was greater than ever before. NSW RFS Media Officers, Matt Sun and Natalie Sanders, take a look at the changing relationship between the NSW RFS and the media.



FF

...around 5,000 media personnel have now participated in the NSW RFS's Media Training sessions.

On Thursday 17 October 2013, the day the Blue Mountains burned, 1.27 million Sydneysiders tuned in to the evening ABC News, Seven News, Nine News and Ten News bulletins - a 320,000 viewer increase on the previous day.

Hours before those evening bulletins went to air, the networks had begun broadcasting rolling coverage of the bush fire emergency.

Radio stations across NSW broadcast important information about the fires, with many turning their programs over entirely to the unfolding crisis and frequently airing live interviews with Commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons and Deputy Commissioner Rob Rogers.

Newspapers and news websites also devoted plenty of space to the fires, with flames on the front pages of every major masthead the following day. *The Daily Telegraph*

splashed: "FLAMING HELL" on page one, the *Sydney Morning Herald* declared NSW to be a "STATE IN FLAMES" while national broadsheet *The Australian* led with "FIRESTORM DESTROYS COMMUNITIES".

### Social media is expanding

NSW RFS Group Manager Corporate Communications Anthony Clark agreed that there were three elements to the expanded relationship between the NSW RFS and the media that was seen in the October 2013 bush fire emergency - social media, NSW RFS Media Training and the role of Commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons.

"We are using social media much more and the media are monitoring our social channels," Mr Clark said.

In 24 hours at the height of the October emergency, the NSW RFS Facebook page

recorded nearly one million views per hour. The number of @NSWRFS Twitter followers almost doubled from 20,000 to 37,000.

The effort to maintain accurate and timely information on all the social media channels is the responsibility of the Public Liaison Unit located in the State Operations Centre in Headquarters in Lidcombe.

"Information is flowing from the fireground to the media channels faster than ever before," Mr Clark said, "For example you could send out a Tweet and before you had time to walk around to the tea room to tell the journalists the information, it was already showing up on the ticker tape on the ABC 24 News!"

### Media training over 10 years

For almost a decade the NSW RFS has invested in the media by providing fire safety training and fireground accreditation

to journalists and camera crews. In fact, around 5,000 media personnel have now participated in the NSW RFS's Media Training sessions.

Acting Media Manager Inspector Ben Shepherd has been facilitating the Media Training for the past several years.

"The course is a Bush Fire Awareness course which is targeted to the needs of the media," he said, "It teaches them where to go to get information, who to talk to you on the fireground and what kind of information they can expect to receive from the volunteer on the hose right through to the Incident Controller," Inspector Shepherd said.

"They learn what to wear and basic survival techniques. We have had everyone from Heads of News and well-known news presenters through to freelance photographers complete the course."



OPPOSITE PAGE: 10 September 2013 Winmalee. ABOVE: 11 September 2013: TV camera crews on the fireground at Winmalee. Photos by Rolf Poole

The investment in training the media paid dividends last October when television, radio and print journalists quickly relayed vital bush fire information and updates to affected communities and told the stories of the men and women fighting the blazes across the State.

Commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons said the media are an important part of the Service's bush fire management and response strategies, as well as being a partner in "the public information business". This was no more pointed than in October 2013 when the threats to large numbers of the public were heightened.

"Journalists worked with fire and emergency services to get to the right spots and get the right story out," Commissioner Fitzsimmons said.

"They broadcast the warnings and information that were so important to the affected communities. They understand the fundamentals of our warning systems, why we use them and as a result they put out accurate and critically important information in support of the firefighting effort."

All of the major media outlets were in the field, capturing footage of the fires from their helicopters and recording the fires on the ground. Typically, reporters are driven by one purpose – getting the story. But during the October fires the media pack was also acutely aware of their equally important journalistic responsibility to inform the public.

NSW RFS Learning and Development Officer Matt Reeves, who worked as a Public Liaison Officer in the Lithgow area during the October fires, said the practical benefits of media training were evident in his dealings with the media.

"While they obviously wanted to get vision," Mr Reeves said, "they were also very conscious of the fact that they had a role to play in disseminating the message."

"There was a lot of fact checking (by journalists) and a lot of time spent talking and interpreting and trying to understand fire behaviour and

its potential, so they could report it as accurately as possible."

On Wednesday 23 March, the day for which horror fire weather had been forecast, the Blue Mountains media pack was given a morning briefing of what conditions to expect.

"Straight away they were prepared to pool vision (share video footage)," Mr Reeves said.

"They understood that on a day like that, Channel Nine might be johnny-on-the-spot and get the shot of the day, but they would share that among all the TV channels. It made it that much easier for us to facilitate their needs."

Mr Reeves said journalists genuinely appreciated being able get on to firegrounds and that access enabled them to file more informed stories.

"Opening up and giving the media access really gives them a better, stronger understanding of our culture and our people," Mr Reeves said, "They weren't in a newsroom, so they had all the sights and the sounds of the fireground and their senses were in overload."

"I saw their growing appreciation for what the volunteers were doing. It wasn't a sanitised environment."

They themselves were staying locally, mingling with the crews and even eating with them at staging areas. By day four or five they were seeing the same faces and it opened up to them that these people weren't just there for one shift. Often they were there for three, four or five or more days.

"They came to realise there were people there from the local community as well as people who had never been to that part of the world yet were happy to put their hand up to help."

### Front man

The media blitz between 13 and 26 October 2013 saw the profile of Commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons rise dramatically. According to Anthony Clark it was the Commissioner's willingness to make himself available that made the difference.

"I don't think there was anyone in Australia who did not see Shane's (Fitzsimmons) face that week and hear his fire safety message," Mr Clark said.

After the destructive fires in Winmalee on 17 October the media's thirst for information magnified beyond the Service's capacity. A partnership between the NSW RFS and media had to be brokered.

"We just couldn't keep up with the demands from the media," Inspector Shepherd said.

"It was not just local media and national media but it started to become global media as well. The Commissioner and Deputy Commissioner's time was being eaten up by media interviews and things were only going to get more intense."

Pushed to their limit, on Sunday 20 October, the Public Liaison Unit called a meeting between the News Directors of all the key media outlets.

"We proposed that we hold eight media conferences a day to keep the public fully informed. We discussed it and we agreed that Shane should be the front man. We needed consistency in the messaging and the Commissioner was the best person for it. We suggested it to them and they were agreeable right away," Inspector Shepherd said.

While the Commissioner fronted the media, the information presented was a team effort. The Premier and Minister for Police and Emergency Services were often present at the conferences to answer questions.

Also present at many of the press conferences were the NSW Police Commissioner



ABOVE: 11 September 2013: TV camera crews on the fireground at Winmalee. Photo by Rolf Poole

and the Fire and Rescue NSW Commissioner, as well as representatives from the State Emergency Service and Australian Defence Force.

Between Monday 21 October and Thursday 24 October 2013, the Commissioner fronted 19 media conferences, some of them lasting up to 30 minutes. Information was flowing directly from the Operations Centre to the public and importantly to the fire-affected areas.

The immediacy of the information was highlighted at the 2pm briefing on Wednesday 23 October 2013.

Journalist: Can you give us an update on the Springwood fire?

Commissioner: There is a lot of activity in the Springwood/Winmalee fire area, there was a lot of ember shower activity and they were contemplating changing the fire alert level but due to weather conditions decided against it. Having said that even while we are here, the phone could be ringing and additional information could be forthcoming ...

(Commissioner is passed a note)

As a matter of fact, the Emergency Alert for that fire

is being issued right now...the message will be: prepare for embers, work with firefighters and shelter in place where appropriate.

We are taking a very deliberate and very targeted approach to our alerts and messages today - that one will be issued as we are speaking here today."

The new partnership between media outlets and the NSW RFS resulted in the Service being able to manage time and resources and in changing and volatile conditions, the public got the best possible information.

### Local is best

Along with the major and national media outlets, the local media in each fire area also played a vital role in distributing very specific fire safety information.

"While the big media outlets maintained the big picture it was the local radio stations and newspaper websites that maintained a closer view of the fires and kept people safe in their local communities," Inspector Shepherd said.

Some regional newspaper websites ran hourly updates

on local fires, and included live NSW RFS Twitter and Facebook streams including photos sent in from readers across their regions. Local radio has a long history of broadcasting community safety information and in some areas this flourished encouraged by the local Media Liaison Officers.

In the Southern Highlands, Public Liaison Officer David Stimson was very, very pleased with the success of the public liaison effort in October. Long-standing relationships with the local media came to the fore when on 17 October 2013, the Hall Rd Fire (Balmoral) started in dangerous conditions.

"The fire took off very quickly from Balmoral. The village of Yanderra and the large school there, was in its path," Mr Stimson said.

"The fire was bearing down and we had to evacuate the school quickly. Emergency Alerts were issued for the whole village and very quickly we had Police Liaison with us. They initiated the evacuation on the ground. I don't know what they did, but police cars came from everywhere! Within an hour of the fire starting, the school had been evacuated."

Along with the major and national media outlets, the local media in each fire area also played a vital role in distributing very specific fire safety information.

Meanwhile, Mr Stimson was on local radio doing live crosses from the Fire Control Centre.

"As the fire was unfolding and we were getting reports and mapping in from the fireground, we were telling the public about it," Mr Stimson said.

"We were giving them the critical information they needed to make a decision about what to do. I was telling people specifics about what direction to evacuate. 'If you are here, then you should go north and if you are there, you should go south'...Evacuation centres were established pretty quickly so we told people about those as well."

During the Hall Rd fire, which burned for another 25 days, local radio stations and websites continued to keep the local community abreast of changing fire activity, road closures and even adjusted school bus timetables.

"We just kept feeding information to them and they reported it," Mr Stimson said, "And they were calling us, I didn't have to chase them! In the wrap up we were very, very happy with it."



ABOVE: 22 October 2013: Commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons faced the media eight times a day when the fires were at their height. Photo by Jacqueline Murphy.



## I WAS THERE

Date: 24 October 2013

Time: 9:00pm

Location: Mount Banks, Blue Mountains National Park

Photographer: Dallas Kilponen © Fairfax Media

*"On Thursday 24 October I had been over on the other side of the mountain for the day and met up with a journalist at a lookout along the Bells Line of Road, just west of Mount Tomah around 6pm.*

*I was perched on a rocky outcrop, watching the progress of the fire and waiting for the sun to set.*

*When we first arrived there was no smoke or indication of a fire on Mount Banks in the Blue Mountains National Park. Just on dusk I noticed some smoke coming off the side of the mountain. It appeared to be a new fire. There were a few smaller spot fires and it was ahead of the body of the fire which gave me the impression it was the result of ember attack.*

*The weather was fairly calm and I couldn't see any flare ups, but it looked unreal with the silhouette of the mountain against the pink sky. The photo was taken around 9pm. Once it was completely dark we left to meet up with the NSW RFS crews working along the Bells Line of Road."*



## VALE: David Black

On 24 October David Black, a contracted pilot, died while fighting a fire in a remote region on the South Coast. This moving eulogy and photos were provided by David's widow Julie Black.

### 24 October 2013

Afternoon all,

*This afternoon Police have confirmed the death of one of our valued fixed wing water bombing aircraft pilots. At approximately 10.00am this morning, a fixed wing turbine dromader aircraft crashed whilst working on the Wirritin fire some 40kms west of Ulladulla. The crash occurred in remote and rugged mountainous terrain. Police and rescue services responded to the scene and the aero medical team had some difficulty in winching into the crash site due to weather and terrain.*

*This is a tragic accident and tonight there is a wife and young family who will not have the benefit of welcoming home their husband and father.*

*The RFS, the firefighting community and more particularly, a young family has lost somebody very special today.*

Regards

**Shane  
NSW RFS Commissioner**

### May 2014

By Kathy Mexted.  
With thanks to Phil Hurst  
and Julian Fraser

As winter sets in across the southern hemisphere, David Black's (Blackie's) family try to make sense of a life without him. Christmas came and went, back to school, birthdays and an anniversary. They say the first six months will leave you numb, and while privately, families would be carefully pasting photos into an album and maybe, if she can bear it, a widow might carefully fold away his clothes, Julie Black has continued to run the business that she and Dave had only owned for a couple of years.

Blackie's aircraft went down on 24 October 2013 while fighting the fires west of Ulladulla. It is little wonder that RFS Commissioner, Shane Fitzsimmons had to fight back

the tears while making the announcement of David's death to the media.

Dave was born in Adelaide and completed Year 12 at St Peters College. After completing a degree in Mechanical Engineering in South Australia, he bartered with his parents to trade farm work for flying lessons. Aviation became a central part of his life and he pursued a career as an agricultural pilot – one that took him from Adelaide to Griffith to Borneo. It was not only his broad smile and laconic personality that made him popular and immediately put people at ease, but his natural flying ability and continuing quest for improvement that saw him admired as a pilot and later, a business man.

Life took a turn when in his early twenties Dave walked into the aerial agricultural office in Moree and met Julie who

was running the office of her family's business.

Dave was one of the youngest pilots to graduate to turbine aircraft when they were introduced into Australia during the early 1990s and during his career he logged around 10,000 hours, predominantly in aerial application, and continued to study throughout his aviation career, attaining an Air Transport Pilots Licence, a Command Instrument Rating and won a scholarship to study a Masters of Aviation at Newcastle University.

With the arrival of their second child, Dave and Julie moved onto the family farm at Forbes where he continued to fly their AT502 while managing the farm. Then he progressed from ag pilot to business owner, continually broadening his outlook from flying to business management. When the opportunity to buy Rebel Ag was presented to them in 2011,

the family moved to Trangie in central NSW. Firebombing became a core part of the business.

As with farming, Dave applied a methodical approach to Rebel Ag, which served local clients and the wider community through firebombing.

Blackie's true passion in life was aviation - he lived it and breathed it. He used to say he should try to get a hobby like golf or fishing, however aviation always got in the way because it wasn't just his profession – it was all he wanted to do.

He had trained as a firebomber about 18 years ago with Aerotech in South Australia and gained his early experience on campaigns in Coonabarabran and Cooma.

While ag flying, Dave had always maintained a hand in firebombing and bought an AT802 in 2011 to be utilised on spraying and fires. Dave

believed that firebombing was a growth area that offered better utilisation of the aircraft. After an enormous amount of preparatory work on the tender, it was a great achievement to win a NAFC contract for NSW. Dave was keen to expand Rebel Ag and to have enough turbine aircraft available to service agricultural clients and the NSW RFS and to be able to utilise those assets between the two as demand dictated.

For an ag pilot, used to flying in calm conditions (albeit very low to the ground), firebombing work offers a stark contrast. "You pack your bag and off you go. You are working in hot and windy conditions in unfamiliar areas. You might be on a fire at Griffith and then across to Jindabyne and finish up at Cooma. You never know where or which other pilot's you're going to be with and that was a part of the excitement for Blackie, no day was ever the same. says Julie.

"I appreciate the support and comfort shown by the RFS, particularly when dealing with (Chaplain) Ian Spall, (Commissioner) Shane Fitzsimmons, and on the Air Desk team (Chief Superintendent) Maryanne Carmichael and (Superintendent) Keith McKay. Rebel Ag is dedicated to carry on Dave's legacy and continue on the path he laid out. We knew what his big picture plan was and that's what we're working towards today."

David was well regarded throughout the industry and had served in a leadership role as a director of the Aerial Agricultural Association of Australia. He achieved a lot in his 43 years, but it is his character, humour, personality and passion that made him so loved.



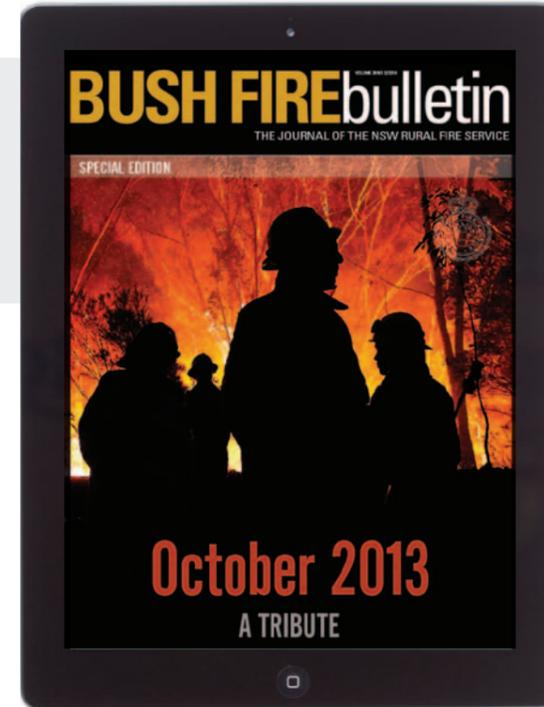


# KEEP CALM AND THANK A FIREFIGHTER

Dignitaries of every kind have taken time out to thank the firefighters involved in the October 2013 fires and to visit those who had lost their homes and communities.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Her Excellency Professor The Honourable Marie Bashir AC CVO visited the NSW RFS Headquarters on 22 October 2013 to encourage all those preparing for the predicted bad weather the following day. Photo by Ben Shepherd. During the Royal Tour of Australia, Prince William wanted to meet all the volunteers involved in the firefighting effort including the catering crews. Photo courtesy of AUSPIC. Her Excellency the Honourable Governor-General Quentin Bryce visited the firegrounds in the weeks following the fires and met with some of the operational firefighters. Photo by Ben Shepherd. Their Royal Highnesses, the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, Kate and William, met volunteers and residents at the Winmalee Girls Guides Hall in April 2014 during their Royal Visit to Australia. Photo by Matt Sun. Blue Mountains Manager and Incident Controller during October, David Jones showed His Royal Highness Crown Prince Frederik and Her Royal Highness Crown Princess Mary of Denmark around the areas many homes were lost. Photo by Ben Shepherd



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- Interviews with those affected by Linksview Road fire in Winmalee

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Cover Photo 20 October 2013: Duffys Forest Brigade conducting a back burn on Mount Lagoon Road, Bilpin. Photo by Brad Hunter, The Daily Telegraph

