



# Speed and fury



## The Cobbler Road grassfire

The Cobbler Road fire, which started under Extreme conditions, burnt quickly, travelling 35kms and covering 14,000 hectares within six hours. It caused significant damage to farming country including extensive livestock losses.

Much of the activity took place overnight on 8-9 January 2013. The strong westerly wind did not ease overnight and nearly 150 firefighters worked intensively to protect properties in the path of this remarkably fast moving grass fire. The work conducted by ground units to identify and protect houses was so effective that no houses were lost. The work undertaken by NSW RFS and FRNSW (Fire and Rescue NSW) crews on the Tuesday afternoon and night was exemplary. The massive suppression effort overnight resulted in the containment of the fire the following couple of days.

ABOVE: Fire jumping Burrinjuck Rd around 1130hrs. Photo by Group Officer Max Hedges

**8 January 2013**

It was the day when fire weather conditions broke NSW records. On the Southern Slopes Grassfire Danger Ratings were at Extreme with temperature at 42 degrees Celsius, low relative humidity and wind from the west gusting to 80 kph. The area was under a pre-emptive S44 (Bush Fire Emergency Declaration) when the fire started. Other pre-emptive arrangements included four quick response Strike Teams on call, earth moving equipment identified, the locations of fixed wing and rotary wing aircraft identified and a full seven-person Incident Management Team (IMT) in place.

**1550hrs**

At 1550hrs on the 8 January firefighters worst fears were confirmed when a Triple Zero (000) call was received of a smoke sighting at in the Bald Hill area. Weather conditions were at their peak on what was already a terrible day. Not only that the area where the fire started was hard to reach.

Within the first 20 minutes, three NSW RFS tankers, as

well as two private tankers were on scene. A further two tankers were en route as well as a Strike Team from Harden consisting on five tankers. Earth moving equipment was requested immediately. Under the Extreme weather conditions active fire suppression opportunities were limited.

**1610-1700hrs**

All crews were focussed on property protection and Strike Teams from Cootamundra and Young and three tankers from Yass were making their way to the fireground.

The fire was running hard in an easterly direction and within the hour of the Triple Zero (000) call the fire was estimated to be 400ha. At 1642hrs the first Emergency Warning area was identified and issued.

**1700-1800hrs**

There were now 23 tankers on scene on the Hume Highway near Cobbler Road with up to 20 homesteads in the path of the fire. One shed had already been destroyed.

At 1715hrs the fire was estimated to have already

tripled in size since first reported being at 1,200ha. Fixed wing waterbombers arrived soon after 1700hrs.

**1800-1900hrs**

Fire was moving very quickly to the east and firefighters were maintaining property protection. A parallel attack on the southern flank of the fire saw dozers building containment lines.

At 1810hrs the fire crossed Bogalara Road.

**1900hrs**

An Emergency Warning was issued for residents in on Childowla and Talmo Roads. Three houses were under direct threat. Reports came in that 1,000 head of stock had been lost and although the fire was uncontained all properties had so far been successfully protected.

The focus was now firmly on protecting property and life.

The fire was once again doubled in size and was estimated to be 2,500ha and fears were that the Murrumbidgee River to the south would not contain the fire on the southern flank.

Thirty five tankers were on scene and three fixed wing aircraft were waterbombing the area, one property had been saved but another 40 rural homesteads were under threat.

Around 1945hrs a house was reported as lost. Additional crews arrived in the nick of time, however, and although the verandah of the house was licked with flames, it was saved by the exemplary work of ground crews.

Emergency Warnings to residents in the area continued.

**2000hrs**

Fire crews were operating in very trying conditions with very erratic fire behavior conditions which did not match the weather forecast.

Soon after 2000hrs the fire came close to the Talmo and crossed Childowla Road. Property protection was ramped up and all 20 houses and farmhouses were saved by property protection.

With a southerly change predicted, protection of the northern flank became a priority. The westbound lane of the Hume Hwy had been closed as a precaution. The fire was less than 2km from the Hume and running parallel to it.

Further north, dozers prepared Asset Protection Zones around the village of Bookham and Carrolls Creek Road was prepared as a further containment line. An evacuation centre had been established at Bookham with Police in attendance.

Strike Teams from Yass, Goulburn and Wingecarribee were answering the call for assistance.

**2200hrs**

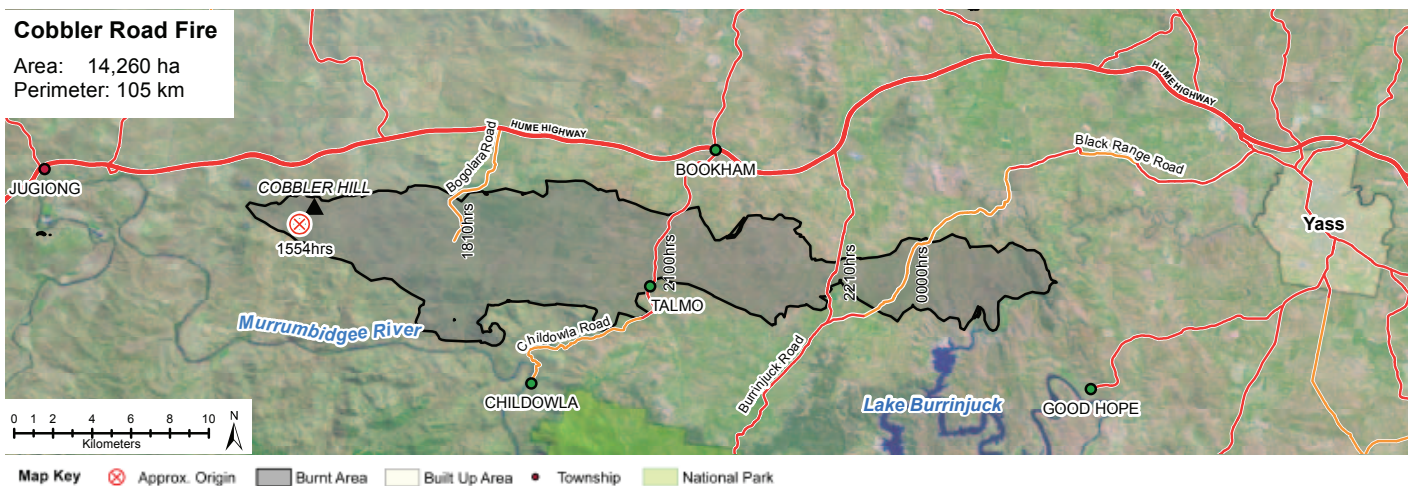
A southerly wind change was predicted but reports were that the change would be weak and will not change the course of the fire. There were fears that the fire may impact on the large town of Yass to the east. Soon after 2200hrs the fire crossed Burrinjuck Road.

**2330hrs**

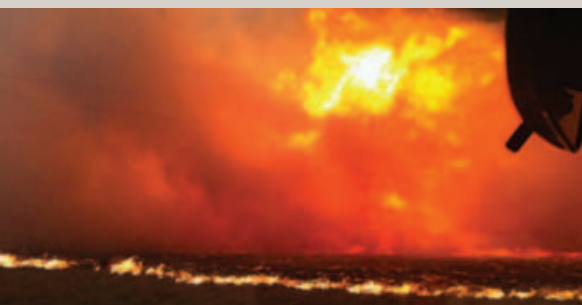
The fire was thought to be 9,000ha. Forty tankers and about 150 firefighters were busy with property protection supported by heavy plant.



Seen from space. The Cobbler Road burnt area and smoke plume could be seen from space. Photo by Cmdr Chris Hadfield



## JANUARY FIRES



The fire was running hard in an easterly direction and within the hour of the Triple Zero (000) call the fire was 400ha.

### 9 January 2013

#### Midnight

Under the influence of erratic winds, the fire forked with one heading towards Burrinjuck and another toward Bowning to the north east. One of the forks crossed Black Range Road around midnight. The fire continued to spread quickly.

#### 0220hrs

Fire took a run into unburnt country to south of Talmo. Property protection was occupying the 50 tankers on hand and graders were building containment lines.

#### 0644hrs

When the sun rose firefighters could see that there had been a significant fire extension to the east through some of the inaccessible country to the west of Yass.

Overnight heavy plant had successfully constructed four major containment lines to the west and east and south.

The southern and western end of the fire still had a fragile containment. Crews were working to strengthen containment lines pushing over timber near the fire edge.

The Hume Hwy was opened with speed restrictions in place.

#### 1000hrs

The fire was 11kms west of Yass and aircraft and heavy machinery were aggressively working to hold the fire away from the township. Fifteen heavy plant and eight fixed wing aircraft were at work.

#### 1600hrs

Fire crews assisted by water bombing aircraft and the AirCrane were undertaking property protection at a small number of rural properties along Childowla, Bibinda and Black Range Road.

#### 1800hrs

The fire was no longer spreading and containment lines were holding. Firefighters continue to mop up on

southern flank, maintain property protection and heavy plant were working on containment lines in particular removing dangerous trees that could reignite the fire.

The southern and western end of the fire had relatively good containment at this stage and crews throughout the fireground were strengthening containment lines and mopping up.

#### Following days and weeks

Following a review and discussion between Incident Controllers and senior RFS management on Wednesday evening 9 January, it was determined the greatest threat and potential for the fire was within Yass local government area. As such S44 declarations were amended to transfer control to existing IMT with Harden IMT staff bolstering IMT in Yass.

All losses and resources were accounted for under the Yass S44 report.

The Cobbler Road fire was declared contained three days later on Saturday 12 January. The fireground continued to be patrolled for next 10 days and declared out on Sunday 27 January.

Total losses for the Cobbler Rd fire included: 14,000ha, more than 10,000 sheep, 170 cattle and 11 horses. Some sheds and 1200kms of fencing were destroyed.

NSW RFS has engaged the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre to conduct the research in to the Cobbler Road fire which will examine the preparation and decision-making of residents in the area.

TOP: The following day, 9 January 2013: this aerial photo shows just how close the fire came to assets. Credit goes to the hardworking firefighters.

ABOVE LEFT: Cobbler Rd fire travelling quickly across the grasslands and overnight from 8 to 9 January, 2013. Photo by Jack Howard