



THE JOURNAL OF THE

RFS

BUSH FIRE

BULLETIN

VOLUME 47 NO.1 2025

FIGHTING FIRES AT HOME AND ABROAD



2019/20 BLACK SUMMER FIRES

FIVE YEARS ON FROM THE
STATE'S WORST BUSH FIRES

FIRE RESILIENT LANDSCAPING

LET'S START THE
CONVERSATION

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at the RFS State Championships



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MID COAST DISTRICT AVIATION BRIGADE

The sky's the limit

BUSH FIRE BULLETIN

Acknowledgement of Country

The NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS) acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of this country and their continued connection to land, sea and culture. We pay our respects to the resilience and strength of Elders past, present and future generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

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FOREWORD



As I write this in late March 2025, we are approaching the end of the 2024/25 bush fire season. Over the course of the season, RFS members attended more than 5,500 bush and grass fires that burnt almost 80,000 hectares. Despite seven section 44 declarations for fires (mostly in the northwest of the state), only one fire reached emergency warning level and property losses across the season were minimal.

Despite this, it remained a busy season for RFS members, with deployments to every other state in Australia. Our members and aviation resources assisted with floods and storm damage in Queensland and combatted fires in Victoria, Tasmania, South Australia and Western Australia.

Along with the deployments to the US and Canada in 2024 that are outlined in this edition of the Bush Fire Bulletin, these deployments show the willingness of RFS members to help those in need, whether in their own backyard or across the country.

The 2024/25 fire season marked five years since the Black Summer fires of 2019/20. That season lives long in the memory for all RFS members, and the unprecedented scale of the fires and destruction – 5.52 million

hectares of land burnt, nearly 2,500 homes destroyed and 26 lives lost – is something I hope we never see again.

As we reflect on the 2019/20 season and mourn those we lost, it is a crucial reminder of the threat that fire poses and the importance of preparation. Our members and communities need to be doing everything they can to be ready for the fires of the future.

As my five years as Commissioner of the RFS comes to an end in the next few months, this will be my last foreword for the Bush Fire Bulletin. I would like to say a heartfelt thank you to all the RFS members (staff and volunteers) I have served alongside. Your commitment to the Service and the people and communities of NSW is an inspiration. It has been an honour to serve as your Commissioner.

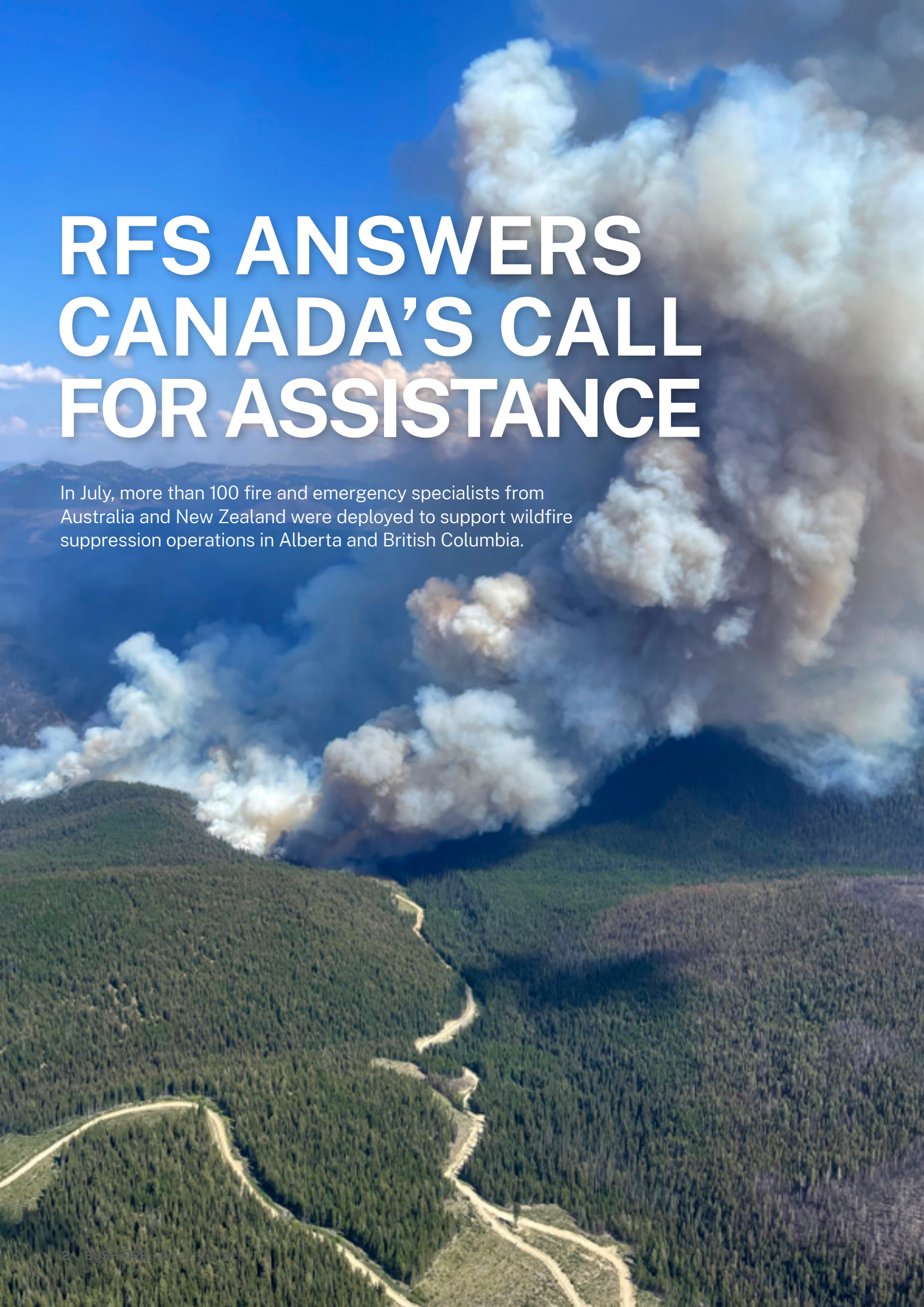
I am proud of how the Service has grown and what we have achieved in my five years at the helm, facing some of our most challenging fire and flood seasons, as well as a global pandemic. I look forward to watching on as the RFS continues to grow and go from strength to strength into the future.

Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Rob Rogers', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Rob Rogers AFSM
Commissioner

X @RobRFS

An aerial photograph of a wildfire. Thick, billowing white and grey smoke rises from a forested mountain, filling the upper right portion of the frame. The smoke has a yellowish tint near the source. Below the smoke, the forested mountain slopes are visible, with a winding dirt road or path cutting through the green trees. The sky is a clear, vibrant blue.

RFS ANSWERS CANADA'S CALL FOR ASSISTANCE

In July, more than 100 fire and emergency specialists from Australia and New Zealand were deployed to support wildfire suppression operations in Alberta and British Columbia.



A contingent of 116 fire and emergency specialists from Australia and New Zealand departed for Canada in July 2024, following a request for assistance from the Canadian Interagency Forest Fire Centre.

Facilitated by the AFAC National Resource Sharing Centre (NRSC), the Australasian contingent included representatives from every Australian state and territory and New Zealand. The contingent departed from Sydney and were deployed to support wildfire suppression operations in Alberta and British Columbia.

Canada reached National Preparedness Level 5 (the country's highest level) with significant wildfire activity, exhausting their supply of firefighters. The Australasian contingent supported their Canadian counterparts in roles including Air Attack Supervisors, Strike Team Leaders, Fire Behaviour Analysts, Public Information Officers, Heavy Machinery Managers and other Incident Management Team (IMT) roles.



MAIN: Calcite Creek fire, southern British Columbia near the US border. Photo by Andrew Beville.

TOP: IMT7 crew including members of the RFS, NSW SES, NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, Forestry Corporation of NSW and the ACT Emergency Service Agency at Princeton Sierras IA base. Photo courtesy of RFS.

ABOVE: Forward Control Point at Eastgate Fire Hall. Eastgate was a small community threatened by the Calcite Creek fire. Photo courtesy of RFS.



RFS Assistant Commissioner Paul Seager led a 15-strong NSW/ACT Incident Management Team (IMT7) on a five-week deployment to British Columbia (BC). The team hit the ground running – initially managing a 650,000ha complex of fires in the boreal forests at Fort Nelson, near the northern BC border.

The team was subsequently tasked with managing the large Shetland Creek fire in very steep high-elevation terrain near Lillooet, and finally a new fire (Calcite Creek) in a remote wilderness area on the US border.

“We had a very rich experience, handing over from two of the

pre-formed BC IMTs, handing over to two others, returning a fire to local Zone control, and taking over an escalating fire from a Zone,” says Paul. “We demobilised a base camp in the far north, and later established a base camp in the far south – utilising some of the same trailers.”

“Some of the key learnings were the ease of integration with their personnel and systems, excellent support arrangements, comprehensive handover procedures and the importance of relationship building with partners and stakeholders, including oil and gas producers, First Nations communities and ranchers.

“Travelling through an amazing variety of landscapes was one of the incredible highlights of the trip, especially flying over the Rocky Mountains in small aircraft at 12,000 feet above sea level.”

As with most deployments, the team found working with small communities particularly rewarding. During their final tasking, they were able to rescind the Evacuation Alert for Eastgate and downgrade the status of the Calcite Creek fire from ‘out of control’ (going) to ‘being held’ (contained). In response, the small Eastgate community held a BBQ at the Fire Hall to thank the Australian IMT.

CONTINUES ON PAGE 6 ►

MAIN: Fire in boreal forest near Fort Nelson, northern British Columbia. Photo by Andrew Beville.

RIGHT: Members of IMT7 with local firefighters and structure protection crews at the Eastgate community, which had been threatened by the Calcite Creek fire. Photo courtesy of RFS.

BELOW: Shetland Creek fire, near Lillooet, southern British Columbia. Photo by Andrew Beville.



THE MISSION – IMT7

- Provincial briefing
- Two x 14-day shifts, two rest days
- Shift 1 – Fort Nelson complex (nine days), Shetland Creek fire (five days)
- Shift 2 – Calcite Creek fire (14 days)
- Provincial debrief

FORT NELSON COMPLEX – IMT7

- 12 fires totalling more than 650,000ha
- Wind driven
- Holdover fires (persist through winter under the snow)
- Hard to detect, may emerge along the perimeter of any previous fire
- Depending upon weather, can escalate quickly

SHETLAND CREEK FIRE – IMT7

- 28,000ha
- Hot and dry, rugged landscape with high elevations
- Mixed forest and terrain-driven fires with low fuel moisture
- Timber harvesting, ranches
- High cultural values and assets of cultural significance
- Major road/rail infrastructure nearby

CALCITE CREEK FIRE – IMT7

- 6,700ha
- Rugged wilderness area on the US border
- Mixed forest and terrain-driven fires
- Timber harvesting, ranches
- High cultural values
- Road infrastructure

◀ Most agreed that the biggest highlight was working with First Nations communities to protect cultural values.

“Our work in this area led to the sharing of sensitive information about critical cultural values, including stands of special trees estimated at 2,000 years old,” says Paul.

“This led to the development and implementation of a three-tiered strategy – close-containment, a fallback option and a ‘last line of defence’ option. Fortunately, the close-containment strategy was

successful, and the First Nations group was grateful that a positive outcome was received.”

Paul and the team returned from BC feeling that they had provided real value to the British Columbia Wildfire Service (BCWS), having made a positive contribution to fire operations and partner relationships with a strong safety record.

“It was a real privilege to assist BCWS in this time of need, and to pay back assistance provided to NSW by BC during previous fire seasons, most notably 2019/20,” says Paul.



WHAT ARE BOREAL FORESTS?

Characterised by deciduous trees and conifers, boreal forests cover vast expanses in Canada, Alaska and Russia. Fauna species such as reindeer have adapted to withstand the year-round freezing temperatures.

Adobe Stock Photography

CREW C-36: LAC LE BICHE FORESTRY AREA, ALBERTA



LEFT AND BELOW: Jordan Burgess and the C-36 crew in the Kettle River Complex. Photos by Jordan Burgess.

RFS member, Jordan Burgess and his crew were deployed to the Lac Le Biche Forestry Area in northeast Alberta, on the Kettle Fire Complex, where a group of nearly a dozen fires burned. The team was based at a camp in Conklin and consisted of RFS firefighters working alongside crews from NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, ACT Rural Fire Service and Tasmania Parks and Wildlife Service.

Their primary tasking was to grid search, map edges, find hotspots and cut helipads. Working in teams of 10, firefighters were either inserted by helicopter or hiked in from the staging area.

By the end of the deployment, the crew had worked on three fires: LWF152, LWF154 and LWF147.

DID YOU KNOW?

Hotspots were located by using infrared drone-based scanning. This method is commonly used on the fireground to help identify areas for firefighters to extinguish. **RFS**





RFS LENDS A HAND IN THE US

In August 2024, Australian firefighters were deployed to the United States to assist in the battle against several large and uncontrolled fires. The 67 firefighters in the first contingent, including 21 from the RFS, were deployed to Washington state and Oregon to bolster local firefighting efforts.

We spoke to former RFS Director of Logistics and Equipment, and volunteer at Kellyville Brigade, Josh Torrens, about his first ever deployment and the highlights of representing the RFS in a remote part of Oregon.

What was your role over in the US and the roles of other members who were sent?

I was deployed as the Area Representative to look after those deployed from Australia and New Zealand within a geographical region of the state.

There were 67 specialists who departed as part of the contingent, fulfilling mid-management roles including Safety, Task Force Leaders, Aviation, Divisional Commander and Plant Boss roles.

How many deployments were there?

There were multiple deployments to Canada given the challenges they had during their season, but only one deployment went to the US this year.

ABOVE: US Crews Oregon USA. Photo by Josh Torrens.

**Where were you sent?**

We initially arrived at Boise, Idaho for a few days of briefing and familiarisation in the field. Those deployed were then dispersed across multiple fires in both Washington state and Oregon. The initial distribution was across 10 fire complexes.

How long were you over there?

I departed with the first contingent on 7 August and returned home with the bulk of those deployed on 9 September. We were away from home for approximately 33 days. The second contingent returned two days later, having completed the same duration.

What experiences can you share?

As my first ever deployment internationally, it was a lot of hard work based on the geographical distribution of the teams and the challenges that we faced logistically.

These challenges made the experience even more rewarding, as my assigned camps alone saw me having to make connections and relationships with 16 different IMTs that our teams worked through across the deployments. I had to ensure that they were being assigned and completing meaningful work on their deployment and that they were well rested and supported for their requirements.

The scenery, although seeing it through the windscreen of a moving car, was breathtaking. The connections you make with the people over there and the way in which they respond to campaign fires gave me a new and appreciated perspective of how we respond to fires back here in Australia.

I think the thing that stuck with me the most from the whole experience is that no matter where you go in the world, firefighters of all types and locations are all like a big family. Once you identify who you are and what you do,



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Josh Torrens, Oregon USA. Josh Torrens and Lindsey Flynn. NIFC airbase Boise Idaho. Josh Torrens (left) and Jody Preston (right) with a South Australian firefighter; Josh Torrens and Dane Freeman at the National Interagency Fire Centre in Boise, Idaho.



TOP: The NSW and ACT crew at Sydney Airport.
ABOVE: Campsite at Idaho. Photos by Josh Torrens and RFS.

you are welcomed into any firehouse. They will treat you like family and will literally open the doors to the firehouse for a tour, a meal, a place to sleep or even to do a load of washing.

Did you learn anything while away?

That other people do things differently and that is okay. Other countries have different fuels, different response conditions, different domestic and organisational boundaries and challenges, and that is okay.

Just because you are fighting fires, it doesn't always mean that it's hot – you can still be firefighting in the snow and having your morning briefings in negative temperatures in a camp covered in frost.

What advice do you have for anyone who may be thinking of applying for deployments?

It is a fantastic experience, although not always easy work when you get over there, but it needs to be done nonetheless. The mundane work is what allows somebody who has been having a hard fire season a little bit of reprieve, to visit their family and collect themselves before getting back into it.

Don't get me wrong, you will work, and you will work hard and long hours, but if you are open to the experience, you will be able to absorb a huge amount of knowledge and experience about how other fire practitioners tackle the issues they face.

I truly think this is the reason that this relationship has been established with the US for more than two decades and why deployments will continue to happen into the future. **RFS**

CALFIRE AND THE RFS JOIN FORCES



A partnership between CalFire and the RFS is part of a significant move in advancing firefighting capability, safety and efficiency for both agencies.

From June to September 2024, the RFS Large Air Tanker (LAT) 'Marie Bashir' was deployed to the US to help ground crews and communities. But according to Commissioner Rob Rogers, the collaboration between CalFire and the RFS spans beyond just firefighting assistance and will deliver a vast number of benefits for both agencies moving forward.

"We realised that a memorandum of understanding (MOU) could be more broad ranging than just working with a LAT, as discussions with CalFire made it clear that each agency was able to pass on to the other differing skills, tactics and experience," says Commissioner Rogers.

Besides cooperation on aviation, the RFS and CalFire are looking to collaborate on issues such as hazard reduction and management, firefighting technology and urban interface firefighting truck design.

Commissioner Rogers would like to see the cooperation between the two agencies not just continuing but expanding in scale and scope over time.

"As long as both agencies find it beneficial, there's no reason that it shouldn't keep developing," he says. "One of the major benefits of the ccooperation will be the transfer of skills from working in different environments, with a different organisation.

"The RFS sent two Air Attack Supervisors (AAS) to training in the US last year, and we are planning to send two more AAS this year. CalFire AAS training will also be conducted here in the future."

Although numerous international agreements already exist for deployment of firefighters between nations in

times of need, the RFS-CalFire MOU provides a simpler and more streamlined mechanism for cross-deployment of personnel other than firefighters.

"Our people could work in fuels and incident management, picking up new skills so we can refine our processes and learn from them. I think the Californians have much the same view and it will be a win-win for both agencies." **RFS**

Excerpts from [Heliopsmag.com/airattack](https://heliopsmag.com/airattack).

ABOVE AND BELOW: The LAT back in NSW. Photos courtesy of Coulson Aviation.

DID YOU KNOW?

Almost all RFS firefighters are volunteers, but when they are deployed to other jurisdictions – such as Canada or the US – they are required to be firefighting agency employees, so the RFS employs them for the term of their deployment and upon their return they once more become volunteers.



RESUPPLYING MILLIONS OF LITRES OF WATER DURING THE HUNTER FIRES

In the last days of 2024, lightning strikes ignited several fires in the Hunter Valley region, with a section 44 declared as local firefighters struggled to contain the blazes. RFS bulk water carriers moved up to 1.5 million litres of water per day from multiple sources, in an enormous joint effort to combat the area's lack of water. We spoke to Deputy Captain Alex Milgate who was working in the bulk water carriers.





What was your role during the Hunter fires? I am the Deputy Captain of Northern Beaches Headquarters Brigade and worked in the capacity of Driver/Officer of the Northern Beaches bulk water carriers during the Hunter fires.

How long were you rostered on during the fires?
We were on the ground for 3-4 days.



Who was involved? There were several teams with their bulk water tankers and carriers involved – Northern Beaches Headquarters, Round Corner, Cumberland, Teagardens, Orana, Bulli and their bulk water semi-trailer and multiple Hunter Valley units and contractors.

How did the fires in the Hunter differ to other fires?
The Hunter fires posed a significant threat since there was not enough water to source locally for the RFS aircraft to carry out their air drops. With so many aviation resources draining the local water supply, we had to find sources further away and act fast. This was a massive challenge, especially when it came to the vast litres needed to fill all the aircraft. The Chinook's tank carries 11,000 litres alone on one drop.

Where did you source the water from? Multiple locations including several dams, with our main water supply coming from the Upper Hunter.

How was most of the water moved? A very large fleet of RFS bulk water tankers, carriers and contractor water carts worked tirelessly, on almost two-hour turnarounds.

How many litres of water were moved and resupplied?
A huge amount of water was moved during the fires, roughly 1.2 to 1.5 million litres per day was transported into the Martindale Dam. Being able to source enough water elsewhere was vital to the success of the whole operation.

Did access to the water make a difference to the outcome of the fires? Absolutely, but in a more logistical way. Before we got there, the local town supplies were being smashed, so the water had to come from a lot further away.

How did the teams and contractors work together?
Considering how many different units and contractors came together to work on the fires, the camaraderie between local crews and out-of-area crews was fantastic. It was a huge success. **RFS**

FACT:

The RFS often uses bulk water carriers, also known as water carts, to transport water to fires.

LEFT: Warringah Headquarters bulk water carrier fills up its tank.
TOP: Bulk water carriers resupplying water into the Martindale Dam.
Photos by Alex Milgate.



FIREFIGHTERS' TRASH IS ANIMALS' TREASURE

Decommissioned fire hoses are finding new life as enrichment items at Sydney Zoo, thanks to an environmentally friendly partnership between the RFS and the animals' keepers.

Under the partnership, old hoses from RFS brigades across the Cumberland/Macarthur District are being donated to zookeepers who then craft them into durable interactive features, known as 'enrichment items', for some of the zoo's inhabitants.

RFS Media Officer Victoria Quested says the arrangement not only benefits the animals, but also the community and environment.

"Sydney Zoo plays an important role in animal conservation, and this recycling initiative will provide an amazing experience for animals through items like swings, feeding puzzles and hammocks."

"By providing mental and physical challenges for the animals in their care, the zoo is

essentially replicating the way animals look for and acquire food in their natural habitats," says Victoria.

"Through the donation of worn-out hoses, not only have we been able to create unique enrichment items for the zoo residents, but we have also cut down on waste going into landfill."

To date, dozens of items including swings, feeding puzzles and hammocks have been made from the donated firehoses.



ABOVE AND OPPOSITE PAGE: Elephants and giraffes look for food hidden inside plaited hoses.
RIGHT: Small animals such as otters use handcrafted rafts made from old hoses on the water.
 Photos courtesy of RFS.



WHAT IS ENVIRONMENTAL ENRICHMENT?

Environmental enrichment refers to enhancing the environment of animals to promote their physical and psychological wellbeing. All zoo animals need mental and physical activity that mimics aspects of their natural habitat in the form of:

- **Physical objects:** puzzle boxes, various feeders, dens and platforms
- **Social interactions:** allowing interactions with other animals in the exhibit
- **Food enrichment:** hiding food or making animals work for it
- **Toys:** providing toys and engaging in playtime. [RFS](#)



RFS ASSISTS BROKEN HILL AND SURROUNDING TOWNS HIT BY POWER OUTAGES

On 17 October 2024, a freak storm ripped through the Far West of NSW, damaging transmission towers and causing widespread electricity outages to the remote townships of Broken Hill, Menindee, Tibooburra, White Cliffs and Wilcannia.

At the time, reports in the media claimed the transmission towers had collapsed like Meccano sets. More than 10,000 residents were without power as a result of damage to the main transmission line and the 66kV distribution line between Mt Gipps and Sunset Strip.

RFS members provided operational support within their communities during the outage, including assistance to energy utilities in doorknocking for welfare checks and at-risk customers.

Staff from the RFS Far West Team provided support to effected communities, brigades and their members, attended emergency management meetings and ensured continuity of operations.

A backup gas turbine generator at Broken Hill was activated to provide power to Broken Hill and surrounding towns, with some load sharing (blackouts) in Broken Hill during peak times to ensure the system was not overloaded.

However, at 5pm on 21 October, the Broken Hill generator went offline due to activation of the carbon dioxide fuel suppression system. Darryl Dixon, Operational Officer at Area Command Western, remembers the mayhem.

“This sent the entire Far West back into a blackout,” says Darryl. “Respite areas were set up and were staffed by welfare agencies and local Brigades and District staff



“The transmission towers had collapsed like Meccano sets...”



STARLINK UNITS DEPLOYED ALLOWED FOR:

- RFS and other emergency services to have connectivity to ensure continual communication and operational availability throughout the power outage.
- Communities to have access to ‘000’ emergency services and internet, allowing them to obtain information as it was distributed by agencies.

supported operations in a number of communities, such as Menindee, White Cliffs and Wilcannia.

Local RFS Brigades and District staff supported operations throughout the power outage event in a number of communities, such as Menindee, White Cliffs and Wilcannia.

Logistics support to this operation, and resources including generators, fuel pods, mobile fridge and freezer capability, Starlinks, and transportation were mobilised and deployed across the affected towns at the request of local and regional emergency management committees and other agencies.

“It wasn’t until the early hours of 23 October that power from the turbine generator was restored within Broken Hill and surrounding areas.”

Transgrid was required to repair a total of seven towers and had them erected by 28 October. Restrunging of lines and reenergising of the main power lines occurred on 31 October, ending a two-week period without mains power for these remote townships. **RFS**

ABOVE: Transmission towers damaged in a storm.
Photos by Bill Ormonde.

A large, intense bush fire with a kangaroo in the foreground. The fire is bright orange and yellow, consuming structures and vegetation. A kangaroo is silhouetted against the fire in the foreground. The text is overlaid on the top left of the image.

5 YEARS SINCE BLACK SUMMER: THE MOST DEVASTATING BUSH FIRE SEASON IN THE STATE'S HISTORY

The 2019/20 fire season was unprecedented in terms of conditions experienced, the lives and property lost and the threat to communities across large parts of NSW.

During Black Summer, RFS crews and other agencies responded to more than 11,400 bush and grass fires that burnt more than 5.5 million hectares, the equivalent of 6.9% of the state. Over the course of the season, fires spread south from the Queensland border to the Victorian border, leaving huge numbers of people displaced.

House fire in Lake Conjola. Photo by Matthew Abbott, Daily Telegraph.

The long and arduous fire season started in winter 2019 with more than 1,000 fires per month in June, July and August and losses in the north of the state. It was a dire sign of things to come, with much of the region still fighting fires right through summer, and repeated flare ups when weather conditions deteriorated.

The season saw six days where areas across NSW recorded catastrophic fire weather conditions. At the height of activity, there was on average

around 2,500 firefighters in the field each shift with up to 4,000 on days of increased fire danger and impact.

There was a combined interagency response from the RFS, Fire and Rescue NSW (FRNSW), National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS), Forestry Corporation NSW, NSW State Emergency Service, NSW Police, NSW Ambulance and the Australian Defence Force, as well as assistance from our interstate colleagues and from Canada, the United States and New Zealand.



STATS

Area burnt:

5.52 million

hectares of land, or about

7%

of NSW, was burnt

Number of fires:

11,774

bush and grass fires occurred

Cause of ignition:

Lightning

was the suspected cause of most of the largest and most damaging fires

Impact on communities:

The fires destroyed nearly

2,500 homes

and killed

26 people

including four RFS volunteers and three US aerial firefighters

GOSPERS MOUNTAIN, AUSTRALIA'S LARGEST EVER FOREST FIRE

The Gospers Mountain fire was started by lightning strikes in very remote bushland in the Wollemi National Park in October 2019.

During November and December 2019, the fire grew and threatened homes in the Hawkesbury and Blue Mountains, posing problems across the statewide Total Fire Ban from 18-21 December, when the region experienced Extreme and Catastrophic fire danger conditions.

The fire burned more than 500,000ha across the Lithgow, Hawkesbury, Hunter Valley, Lower Hunter, Cudgegong, Blue Mountains and Central Coast districts – an area more than twice the size of the ACT. It also joined the Kerry Ridge, Little L Complex, Grose Valley and Three Mile fires, resulting in a combined burnt area of nearly 1,000,000ha.

The fire was finally contained in January 2020 and set to out after significant rainfall in early February. This massive campaign involved thousands of RFS members both on the ground and in IMTs, as well as crews from FRNSW, NPWS and interstate and international agencies.

FIRE BEHAVIOUR

The season saw a critical escalation in the number of recorded fire-induced thunderstorms or pyrocumulonimbus activity. Researchers found that more than double the amount of pyrocumulonimbus events were recorded compared to any other season in the last 40 years.



GREEN WATTLE CREEK FIRE RAVAGED THE SOUTHERN HIGHLANDS

The Green Wattle Creek fire was started in November 2019 by lightning in the Blue Mountains National Park, southwest of the Warragamba Dam. As the fire spread over the following weeks it encompassed five separate LGAs and threatened communities as far apart as Jenolan, Colo Vale, Megalong Valley and the western outskirts of Sydney.

Fire activity peaked just before Christmas when the blaze ripped through the communities of Buxton, Balmoral and Bargo to the southwest of Sydney. By the time it was extinguished in February, the fire burnt through 278,200ha and destroyed 37 homes.

CURROWAN BLAZE BURNT THROUGH SHOALHAVEN

The Currowan fire started in November 2019, as a result of lightning in the Currowan State Forest northwest of Batemans Bay. Continuing through December and January 2020, the Clyde Mountain, Morton and Charleys Forest fires all broke out from the original Currowan fire.

The fire burnt east from Currowan towards the coast, before spreading north as far as Bundanoon and south as far as Moruya. It impacted towns and holiday destinations such as Ulladulla, Milton, Tabourie, Falls Creek, St Georges Basin, Bomaderry, Nerriga and Lake Conjola.

LEFT: Bush fires burned out of control across many parts of NSW, such as Port Macquarie, Photo courtesy of the Daily Telegraph.

BELOW: RFS members mapping the Gaspers Mountain fire. Photo by Ned Dawson.

PUBLIC RELEASE OF PREDICTIONS

Fire Spread Prediction Maps were released in 2019/20 for the first time in NSW. These maps were prepared on days when dry conditions and dangerous fire weather could lead to significant and dangerous fire behaviour, and they displayed predictions of how far or fast the RFS thought a fire could travel.

The published maps included a combination of different fire spread prediction types including best estimate, extended outlook, modelled worst case scenarios, breakout scenarios and computer-generated simulations.



At its peak on New Year's Eve, almost 500 personnel were deployed to the fire and an Emergency Alert was issued covering 90 percent of the Shoalhaven LGA. The fire burnt 314,599ha and destroyed 312 homes.

FAR SOUTH COAST FIRES UNRELENTING IN THE NEW YEAR

Large fires impacted almost every community in the Far South Coast as the district burned in late December 2019 and early January 2020. One of the most destructive of these was the Clyde Mountain fire.

When the southern tip of the Currowan fire crossed the Kings Highway from the Shoalhaven into Eurobodalla, coastal and inland communities such as Mogo, Malua Bay, Batemans Bay, Nelligen and Broulee were severely affected.

The fire was at its worst on New Year's Eve 2019, cutting off power to coastal communities. More than 1,000 people sheltered on the beach at Malua Bay. It was finally extinguished in February after destroying 490 homes over 49 days of activity.

Further south, the Badja Forest Road, Countegany fire was started by lightning in December in the Badja State Forest, just east of Cooma. It grew quickly in dangerous fire conditions, impacting the towns of Cobargo and Quaama on New Year's Eve 2019, when the historic main street of Cobargo was razed and three people in the area tragically died. The fire would eventually grow to 315,512ha and destroy 399 homes before being extinguished.

LARGE FIRES BURN THROUGH RIVERINA HIGHLANDS

The Riverina Highlands district also faced several large fires over the New Year period in 2019/20, with blazes stretching from the southwest tip of the ACT all the way to the Victorian border.

One of the largest fires was the Dunns Road fire, which was started in December by lightning in a pine plantation west of Adelong. The fire spread quickly throughout the district, impacting the towns of Batlow and Tumbarumba and



burning through farmland, forestry plantation and national park.

Destroying 182 homes in the Snowy Valleys LGA, the fire eventually merged with the Green Valley, Talmalmo and East Ournie Creek fires to combine for more than 600,000ha of active fire.

The Green Valley, Talmalmo fire was started in December by lightning in bushland to the north of Talmalmo, near the Victorian border. It quickly crossed into Victoria and continued to burn through remote areas in both states with intense activity, growing to 208,275ha. In just one night in early January 2020, the fire moved an incredible 80km after jumping containment lines.

REMEMBERING THE FALLEN

Tragically, 26 lives were lost during the fires of 2019/20, including four RFS volunteers and three US aerial firefighters. The Service felt their loss deeply and we continue to honour the sacrifice they made to selflessly protect communities across NSW.

Deputy Captain Geoffrey Keaton and Firefighter Andrew O'Dwyer from the Horsley Park Brigade passed away when their tanker was hit by a falling tree and rolled over during firefighting operations on the Green Wattle Creek fire near Buxton.

Firefighter Samuel McPaul from the Morven Brigade died in the Green Valley, Talmalmo fire at Jingellic, when the tanker he was working in was

ABOVE: Melted Western Plains Zoo sign stands in front of burned bushland near Bilpin. Photo by Ned Dawson.

flipped by extreme winds associated with a pyrocumulonimbus event.

Firefighter Colin Burns of the Belowra Brigade died while he was on active duty protecting his own property in the Belowra Valley, 50km northwest of Cobargo, from the Badja Forest Rd, Countegany fire.

US aerial firefighters Captain Ian McBeth, First Officer Paul Hudson and Flight Engineer Rick DeMorgan Jr all sadly perished when their air tanker crashed during firefighting operations at the Good Good fire near Cooma.

WILDLIFE DEVASTATED

The season's fires not only affected people and property, but also had a devastating impact on the state's wildlife. Many estimates put the number of animals killed at over one billion.

Well over 30 percent of identified koala habitat in NSW was wiped out in the fires, and it is likely more than 2,000 koalas perished. One spot hit particularly hard was the Port Macquarie-Hastings area, where a significant population of genetically diverse koalas was almost wiped out by the Crestwood Drive fire in late October 2019. **RFS**

FIRE TRAIL AIR INSPECTIONS: PROTECTING LIVES AND COMMUNITIES

The RFS and the NSW Government are currently working together to carry out helicopter inspections of fire trails across the state to prioritise necessary maintenance work.



Aerial inspections started in the Sydney region in September 2024 before working their way around the state. More than 540 fire trails are currently being inspected, covering more than 2,400 kilometres.

The NSW Government has provided Crown Lands with more than \$7.9 million in 2024/25 for on-ground maintenance and upgrades of strategic fire trails. A further \$4.8 million has been allocated for hazard reduction activities including controlled burns and Asset Protection Zone (APZ) maintenance and upgrades to protect communities.

Helicopter inspections are more efficient than ground patrols by vehicles, particularly in remote and less accessible areas and where fire trails cross multiple property boundaries or have other access issues.

Helicopter crews monitor the trails from the air to identify whether trees have fallen and require removal, if erosion or vegetation growth has impacted trails, or where creek crossings may need repair. The helicopter is also fitted with a camera to help record where follow-up work is needed.

Following the aerial inspections, Crown Lands partners with the NSW Soil Conservation Service and the RFS to prioritise and undertake any required maintenance works.

The work could include vegetation removal, erosion repairs, drainage and fire trail stability work, and construction and maintenance of vehicle passing and turning bays.

In some areas, this extends to installing signage, gates and bollards



to protect fire trails from unauthorised access and rubbish dumping.

MAJOR FIRE TRAIL UPGRADE FOR NORTHERN TABLELANDS

The community of Hanging Rock in the Northern Tablelands of NSW will be better protected from bush fires after the NSW Government contributed \$1.15 million to upgrade the fire trails around the village.

The Hanging Rock village, 10km southeast of Nundle, sits at the top of a ridge with a sloping westerly aspect and is surrounded by timbered areas including Crown Lands, National Park and Forestry land. The western side of the village has a series of fire trails located on a Crown reserve.

The project has upgraded three major fire trails to latest RFS standards:

Hanging Rock Village Fire Trail, Ryans Fire Trail and Inverary Fire Trail. The upgraded trails will allow firefighters to access the area in the event of bush fires as well as during hazard reduction burns.

Work included grading and shaping of fire trails, creating vehicle turning and passing bays to allow firefighting vehicles to better manoeuvre, and installation of drainage to direct stormwater away from trails to protect them against erosion.

The Hanging Rock Village Fire Trail and Ryans Fire Trail were formerly dirt trails but have been capped with compacted gravel aggregate so that they are accessible to firefighting vehicles year-round in all weather conditions. Access gates and directional signage have also been installed on the fire trails.

An APZ has also been created behind property boundaries on the western side of Hanging Rock. APZs act as fuel-reduced buffers between bushland and properties to provide a clear space to fight fires and reduce the risk of flames, radiant heat and ember attacks.

“It is vital we continue to carry out regular maintenance of our fire trails,” says Paul Best, Supervisor of Strategic Fire Trails Implementation. “Many are in remote areas that are difficult to access by ground vehicles, so air inspections allow us to see in detail which areas need to be prioritised.” **RFS**

LEFT: Fire trails in remote NSW. Photos courtesy of RFS. **TOP:** A RFS helicopter departs on-route to an aerial inspection. Photo courtesy of Coulson Aviation.



A BUSH FIRE RESILIENT GARDEN TO STAND THE TEST OF TIME

On the edge of the Ku-ring-gai National Park in Sydney's north, the forward thinking Ku-ring-gai Brigade has transformed their patch of reclaimed land into an impressive fire resilient garden. Deputy Captain and Community Engagement Officer, Samantha Tucker, who also works as a Horticulturalist, headed up the initiative.



How did the idea come about?

The Hornsby Ku-ring-gai District is one of the most bush fire prone areas in Greater Sydney, with more than 35,000 homes within 100 metres of bushland.

Set on the edge of a large playing field next to the Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park, our Brigade is in a location that is assessed as having extreme risk in a bush fire. As our members regularly discuss bush fire preparedness with the community, we decided to design a garden using fire resilient plants for fire prone areas.

We wanted to personalise risk and show how to prepare gardens in bush fire prone areas.

Who was involved? We are fortunate to have a strong partnership with our local

Council, who were thrilled to get on board as it lined up with their Climate Wise Communities Program and their Sustainability and Resilience sections.

All labour was done by our volunteers, we also worked with local landscape suppliers, the Ku-ring-gai Wildflower Nursery and others. We chose locally sourced species suitable to our location that have been tested by CSIRO to not ignite or be flammable after the impact of flames.

How long did it take? We committed a little over 350 people hours, over four weekends. As our site is reclaimed land, there were also some limitations on what we could and couldn't do, such as limits on the depth of soil disturbance and size of plants and their height. The design did not involve any difficult



LEFT: Garden beds separated from lawn areas by a compacted deco granite path, demonstrates how to break the run of ground fuel fires with non-flammable surfaces. **BELOW:** Samantha Tucker speaks to members of the public about aspects of the garden. Photos by Samantha Tucker and RFS.



“Plants are the primary source of fuel for a bush fire; understanding how vegetation influences fire behaviour is important when planning a garden”

landscaping and was achieved without too much hard work.

What was the approximate cost?

Although we received a generous grant of \$7,000 from Ku-ring-gai Council, smaller projects may be supported at a local level through donation, sponsorship and support of the community and are not necessarily limited by money.

On a smaller scale, we created a bush tucker herb garden and a traditional European herb garden and both are small enough to be achievable over a weekend and for very little cost.

What are your favourite elements in the garden? As the garden establishes, the different fire resilient species have started to fill out the space. We took inspiration

from gardens like the Botanic Gardens at Mount Annan and Cranborne, and it was important for us to show that not all native plants are highly flammable.

How did you get the community involved? We had a soft opening, networked through Bushcare groups and community pages on social media.

Ku-ring-gai Council provided on-the-ground support, and we also held a plant give away from our list (choosing endemic species) to encourage engagement from the local community on building a bush fire resilient garden at home.

Any tips for brigades looking to do similar? I think what is important is to have everyone on board and know where your strengths and weaknesses are. For example, we're grateful we have a member who was able to create the website, QR code link and make the content appear in a user-friendly way. We were also able to secure a RFS grant to cover costs associated

with the website, as this was a community engagement initiative.

How did you work with external organisations to get this off the ground? Building relationships with your local stakeholders is a great way to help educate the community about being bush fire ready.

To mitigate risks outside of hazard reduction burns, find a way to work with local councils and other stakeholders to support any ideas you may have.

We put forward a pitch to council, then by understanding what we needed to do to support them, and what they must do (such as compliance as a stakeholder under the local Bush Fire Risk Management Plan), allowed for a successful outcome.

Having a plan that is thought out and respectful of the financial commitment goes a long way towards collaboration, funding opportunities and other grant opportunities. **RFS**

GROWING RESILIENCE

A GUIDE TO LANDSCAPING IN FIRE-PRONE AREAS

Making simple changes to your garden can help to reduce the bush fire risk to your property. Lets continue conversations with the community around being bush fire ready. This approach incorporates the strategic placement of plants with lower flammability, a regular maintenance plan, and the use of non-combustible materials.

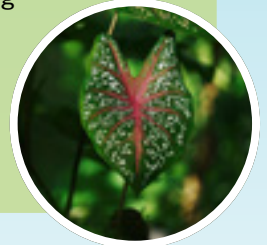
PLACEMENT

- Avoid dense plantings that can act as fuel for fires, create vertical and horizontal spacing around plants to reduce the risk of flames spreading
- Maintain a safe distance between plants and your home as well as other structures like sheds and fences
- Create separation between plants, garden beds and tree canopies
- Avoid garden beds at the base of trees which may encourage a fire to climb
- Keep plants away from structures; vines and creepers can act as ladder fuels



PREFERRED PLANTS

- Succulents
- Plants with high moisture content in their leaves
- Plants with low oil and resin content
- Plants with smooth bark
- Plants with open and loose branching
- Plants with broad or fleshy leaves
- Plants with salt in foliage (e.g. many silvery-grey leaved plants)
- Grass species that stay green during summer



NON-COMBUSTIBLE MATERIALS

- Provide barriers to wind, radiant heat and embers such as stone walls and non-combustible fences
- Use materials such as brick, earth, stone, concrete and galvanised iron that can act as heat barriers
- Consider non-flammable mulches like gravel, pebbles, or rocks





DEFENDABLE SPACES

Defendable spaces are areas which allow emergency services access and provide a relatively safe area for fire fighters and home owners to defend property

- Prioritise plants with lower flammability and keep vegetation to a minimum
- Decrease the ground fuel and maintain a well-managed landscape
- Placement of pools, water features, dams, driveways or paths help slow an approaching fire



WATER

- Keep plants irrigated and hydrated to increase resilience
- Install automatic sprinkler systems to help protect structures

WATER TANKS

- Place tanks where they will be readily accessible and easy for firefighters to find
- During a fire, water supply must have appropriate pressure and connections such as Storz fittings
- Above ground tanks should be constructed of fire-resistant material such as metal or concrete.
- Plastic water tanks should either be underground, on a concrete base or surrounded by a non-flammable border
- Pipes from the tank should be underground to prevent melting



MAINTENANCE



- Create a regular maintenance plan
- Regularly prune and remove dead plants
- Clean-up ground bark, leaf litter and dead limbs and foliage
- Cut lower limbs on larger shrubs
- Keep the lawn well hydrated
- Keep shrubs away from windows and door entries
- Ideally grass should be no more than five to ten centimetres in height



RFS representatives being cleansed in the smoking ceremony.
BELOW: Field trip to Orchard Hills.
Photos by Paul Scott.

A FIRST NATIONS CULTURAL TOUR: WORKING TOGETHER

In July 2024, RFS leaders took part in a Cultural Burn and three-day immersive tour led by First Nations people, to learn about the significance of their culture and their unique connection to Country. Through new initiatives, we are committed to working towards a better understanding, together, into the future.

ORCHARD HILLS BURN

RFS leaders were invited to join Shaun Hooper, Wiradjuri man and Senior Cultural Scientist from the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, and Brad Moore of Dharug Ngurra Country to participate in the educational tour.

On the first leg of the tour, Dharug Ngurra Country and First Nations people led a cultural exercise and burn at Orchard Hills, explaining the benefits to Country and community. Later in the day, the group travelled to Darkinjung country (Watanobbi) and took part in a yarn over a campfire.

Brad explained the significance of the burns.

“While the burn holds importance in managing the vegetation for food in Country, it equally holds spiritual and ceremonial value by cleansing the land

and renewing the deep connections First Nations people hold,” said Brad. “Access to Country can be managed by the community, who share the journey towards generational investment in healing ecosystems.

“It was also great to be able to practice culture on Country to strengthen community bonds and share the value of cultural fire with

organisations, such as the RFS, who play an important role in how fire is used in our landscapes.”

Brad hopes the frequency of burns will increase as there are more opportunities for First Nations people to have access and return fire to Country, supported by land managers and relevant agencies such as the RFS and Local Land Services.



KOALA HOSPITAL VISIT

On the second leg of the tour, the RFS contingent visited the Port Macquarie Koala Hospital. The hospital staff are first responders trained to conduct search and rescue, with teams available 24/7.

They are on the front line, searching for up to 12 hours at a time, enduring extreme heat and challenging conditions in full firefighting PPE to find and rescue koalas. Over the last 30 years, the rescue teams have completed hundreds of search and rescue missions in NSW and Victoria.

The Port Macquarie Koala Hospital also has a dedicated koala ambulance. Once rescued, koalas are transported to the Koala Hospital Clinic for admission and treatment.

During fires, intense burns can change foliage availability and quality and the forest structure, which affects the timeframe of habitat recovery. By conducting smaller cultural burns or cool burns led by experienced First Nations knowledge holders, the tree canopy is preserved, helping to ensure many species survival.

COOL BURNING

Cultural burns are imperative to keep landscapes healthy and vital for protecting our biodiversity and wildlife. These ‘cool burns’ not only remove debris from land, but ensure seeds and nutrients in the soil are not baked and destroyed.

By using the right fire for the right Country, vegetation structures can be returned to a healthier, more resilient state, and we can manage the density of certain plants that can lead to extreme fuel loads.

CULTURAL BURNING GUIDE

The RFS is currently developing a Cultural Burning Guide to assist districts and brigades with the integration of cultural burning as a component of fire management. If you would like to contribute, please email kelwyn.white@rfs.nsw.gov.au

FACT:

Koalas risk extinction by 2050 due to urbanisation and the clearing of trees in their natural habitat. Koala numbers were heavily impacted by the Black Summer fires of 2019/20 and they now face the long term challenge of more frequent and intense drought and bush fires.



COFFS HARBOUR VISIT

Bularri Muurlay Nyanggan Aboriginal Corporation (BMNAC) hosted the RFS group on the Coffs Harbour leg of the tour. The Cultural Experience took place at an important cultural site of the Gumbaynggirr people, the stunning location of “Niigi Niigi” (Sealy Lookout) within the Orara East State Forest.

With a 360-degree view backdrop, the group were able to immerse themselves into Gumbaynggirr culture through stories, songs, language and the uses of native plants.

RFS leaders then visited a local school, and the group discussed broader initiatives in Western Sydney, the Blue Mountains and beyond and how they are being implemented to empower First Nations communities. **RFS**



“The immersive tour delivered meaningful and engaging insight into First Nations people’s history, culture, food and their environment.”

ABOVE: Indigenous display in Coffs Harbour. Photo by Simon Heemstra.

RFS MITIGATION CREWS DISCOVER SIGNIFICANT SCAR TREE

RFS crews find a culturally significant tree while inspecting a site near the Coffs Coast.



By Scott Summerhill, Mitigation Crew Leader, Coffs Harbour

In April 2024, the Coffs Harbour, Urunga and Ulmarra Mitigation crews were preparing for a large hazard reduction burn on private land near the village of Ashby on the Coffs Coast.

Crews were on the site for more than a month to undertake considerable works for the hazard reduction. The site has some very enchanting sections and small pockets of rainforest and swamp areas that made for a fantastic meal area. Many times, the crews were touched by the beauty and sounds of the location.

During our time onsite we were lucky to find what we speculated was a scar tree, with crews aware of the potential significance of the tree located well within the burn area. Following further works, a crew member noticed a significantly large mark on a tree in his work area and proceeded to consult me as to what it could be.

At this stage I was consulting with RFS Aboriginal Programs Coordinator Jamie Bertram about what we had located within the work site. With Jamie's assistance, we contacted local Yaegl Elder Shane McLeay. The crews onsite began to work around the scar tree to provide a protection zone and also better viewing for the Elder to make a determination as to if in fact we had found a scar tree.

Mr McLeay visited the site the next day, and within minutes of walking to the site, he was of the belief that what we found was in fact a large canoe tree – a tree that had bark removed for the creation of bark canoes. The canoe shape cut out of the tree was more than two metres high and half a metre wide and had significant depth into the bark.

Mr McLeay educated the crews on the significance of the find, saying it was to his knowledge a family canoe for up to three people to use

for transportation or gathering of food. We were told there was a small community site within a short distance of the tree and that this type of tree made for better water resistance.

Mr McLeay was very knowledgeable and was excited the crews had a number of questions about the canoe and that they had seen other markings on trees throughout the site. He promised that over time the Yaegl people would investigate and ascertain to the significance of the other trees in conjunction with the canoe tree.

The crews on site on this day were thrilled with what they'd found and there was a lengthy conversation about it during the lunch break. Those onsite had a very heightened afternoon, taking care of the site and looking for other trees of significance. Our awareness of Indigenous artefacts can be attributed to the education we got as part of our induction as mitigation crew members, and has no doubt been boosted by working with people like Jamie and Mr McLeay.

The excitement and sense of pride those involved have taken from this experience is unfathomable and I can only speak for myself, but I'm a lot wiser for my education on these artefacts. It was an honour to play a part in locating and preserving such an item for the local community.

I hope one day to revisit the site and speak with elders about the significance of what else, if anything, has been found on the site. Education is the key to understanding the significance of the scar tree we found and we can only learn through storytelling and opening our eyes to what we have in front of us.

I'd like to take the opportunity to thank Jamie Bertram for his guidance and professionalism and Shane McLeay and the people of the Yaegl mob for allowing our crews on Country and educating us. **RFS**

Photos by Scott Summerhill



WHAT ARE SCAR TREES?

Scar trees, also known as canoe trees or shield trees, are trees that have been culturally modified by Aboriginal Australians by removing bark for various purposes. These trees are of great cultural significance to the Aboriginal community.



Since the 1950s, many products commonly used by consumers and industry have been manufactured with or from per- and poly-fluoroalkyl substances (PFAS). PFAS chemicals are an emerging contaminant of concern due to their ability to remain in the environment for a long period of time. Historically, they were also common ingredients in firefighting foams, and while there is still work to be done, the RFS is working closely with environmental authorities to help address the issue.



TAKING STEPS TO ADDRESS 'FOREVER CHEMICALS'

The RFS, NSW Environment Protection Authority (EPA) and local councils have been working together to investigate the presence of PFAS at locations across NSW.

Dedicated to the prevention and management of environmental contamination, the NSW EPA is leading the NSW PFAS investigation program. It monitors the progress of RFS PFAS investigations and coordinates any necessary advice for people that may be exposed to PFAS impacts.

PFAS, HISTORICALLY IN FIREFIGHTING FOAMS

The three primary types of PFAS chemicals commonly found in Class B firefighting foams include Perfluorooctane Sulfonate (PFOS), Perfluorooctanoic Acid (PFOA) and Perfluorohexane Sulfonate

(PFHxS). These chemicals were used extensively worldwide for many years due to their effectiveness in fighting liquid fuel fires.

Firefighting foam containing PFAS was used by some RFS brigades in operational and training activities from 1975 for the protection of people and property.

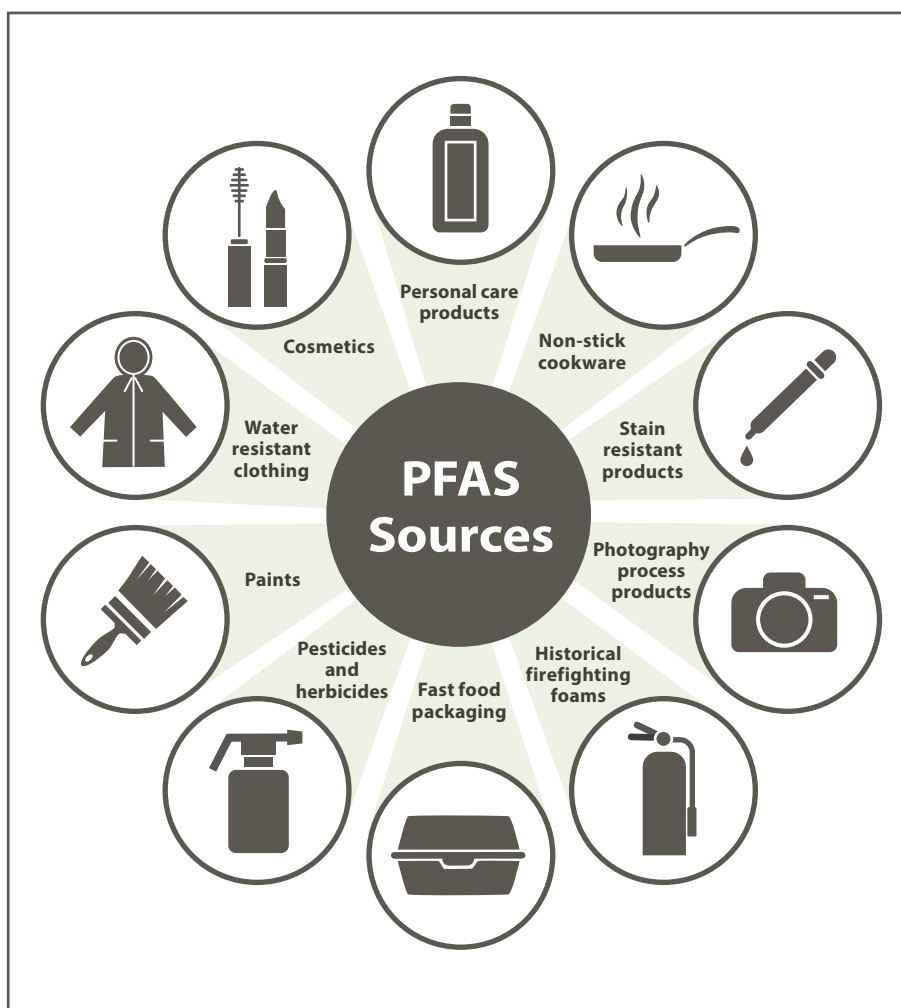
In 2007, the RFS commenced the removal and disposal of PFAS-based foams. Measures have been implemented to identify and appropriately dispose of any possible residual amounts of the historic foam that may have remained in storage after this time.

The RFS no longer uses foam containing PFAS and complies with the *Protection of the*

Environment Operations (General Amendment) PFAS Fire Fighting foam (Regulation) 2021. Firefighting foams used by the RFS are authorised by the National Industrial Chemicals Notification and Assessment Scheme, the approval body for chemical use in Australia.

PFAS IN THE ENVIRONMENT

PFAS have been used in the manufacture of many common household and industrial goods worldwide since the 1940s. These everyday household and industrial goods include, but are not limited to, stain resistant applications for furniture and carpets, non-stick cookware, fast food or packaged food containers, makeup, personal care products, paints and cleaning products.



MAIN: Photo by Aditya Wardhana, Unsplash.

Products containing PFAS are being phased out around the world. Due to their widespread use and persistence in the environment, most people living in developed nations will likely have some level of PFOS and PFOA present in their bodies.

WHAT ARE THE HEALTH IMPLICATIONS OF PFAS?

The presence of PFAS in the environment does not necessarily mean there is a human health risk. In May 2018, the Commonwealth Department of Health's Expert Health Panel provided advice on PFAS health impacts, to read more go to www.health.gov.au/resources/publications/expert-health-panel-for-pfas-report.

While there is no consistent evidence of any human health effects related

to PFAS exposure, the NSW PFAS Technical Advisory Group is taking a precautionary approach to protecting human health.

MORE INFORMATION

- Email pfas@rfs.nsw.gov.au for more information
- Read more about the NSW EPA statewide PFAS program including Frequently Asked Questions at www.epa.nsw.gov.au
- Questions about the NSW EPA's statewide PFAS investigation program can be directed to the NSW Environment Line on **131 555**
- NSW Health has a range of information available about PFAS at www.health.nsw.gov.au/environment/Pages/pfas.aspx

RFS PFAS INVESTIGATIONS

The RFS is currently working through a list of priority sites at various stages of review, investigation and remediation. The RFS to date has already reviewed and closed more than 100 sites.

PFAS investigations include the review of historical information, sampling and analysis of different types of media (including, but not limited to, soil, surface water, groundwater and sediment), interpretation of data and defining nature and extent of impacts.

The RFS and the NSW EPA review the investigation outcomes to determine next steps, which may include further sampling on and/or off-site to close identified investigation data gaps. At the completion of investigations, it will then be determined what, if any, remediation and/or management is required.

AUSTRALIA AT THE FOREFRONT OF RESEARCH

Australia was one of the first countries to adopt a national policy on PFAS to try to eradicate these substances. Since 2005, our precautionary approach has led to several new pieces of legislation. As scientists focus on how to deal with the pollutants in the environment, the RFS has been progressing the assessment, management and remediation of identified PFAS impacts.

In September 2024, more than 700 environmental representatives from Australia and around the world met at a major international conference in Adelaide, to discuss ways to reduce and restore the environmental harm from PFAS chemicals, among other things. **RFS**

CHANGES TO PUBLIC INFORMATION: INCIDENT STATUS AND ALERT LEVEL MATRIX

A Responding status has been adopted to ensure more accurate information is provided to the public through the RFS website and Hazards Near Me app. Developed to reduce the number of unnecessary push notifications received, Hazards Near Me users can now opt to receive a push notification once the incident has been confirmed by crews in attendance.



Once firefighters arrive at the incident and the Incident Controller (IC) provides a situation report, a sitrep needs to be completed in ICON. The IC now provides the status of the fire as part of their sitrep. Once provided, the status will be changed in ICON.

IMPORTANT POINTS

- The status of the incident should be updated promptly once crews arrive and provide a sitrep.
- For bush, scrub and grass fires: when completing the first sitrep to update the status, an alert level must be selected before the sitrep can be authorised.
- Once the status is changed from 'Responding' to another status, it cannot be set back to 'Responding'.

ALERT LEVEL MATRIX

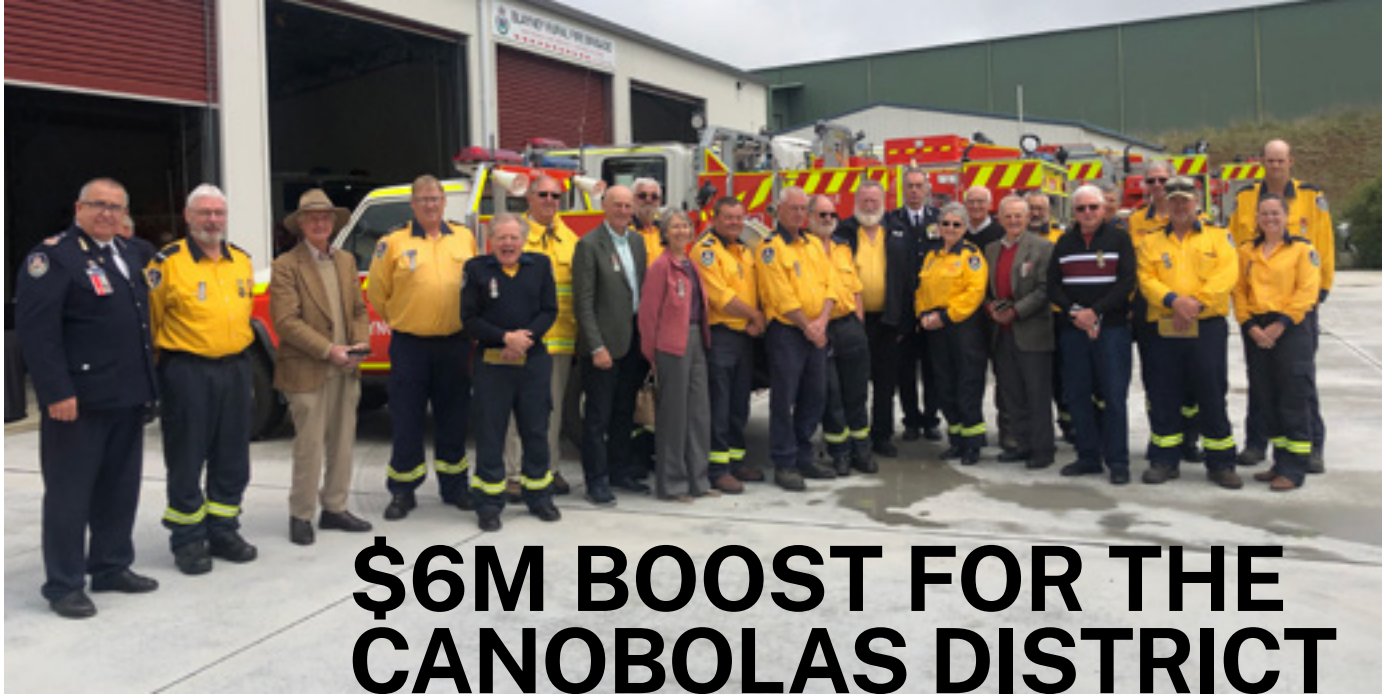
A change to the Alert Level Matrix has enabled Incident Controllers to opt against setting an alert level for a bush, scrub or grass fire.

The decision not to assign an alert level is relevant in circumstances where there are no threats and where the messaging that accompanies a fire at Advice is not relevant. For instance, when attending a small grass fire on a cold, damp evening.



These incidents are now shown as an icon with a white filled black diamond with a black flame, like other fire incidents currently showing on the Hazards Near Me app.

The Alert Matrix has been revised to provide guidance on situations where setting no alert level would be appropriate. The matrix is to be used as a guide, and the alert level can be escalated or de-escalated as determined by the Incident Controller. Where Incident Control remains in the field, the District Duty Officer, District On Call or District Manager must support the IC to make that determination. **RFS**



The RFS has enhanced firefighting capabilities in Central West NSW, opening three new brigade stations and delivering 14 new firefighting trucks.

A \$6.5 million dollar boost from the NSW Government has enabled the opening of three stations at Washpen, Torrington and Blayney and the purchase of a fleet of new assets. The new vehicles, which cost more than \$4.7 million, are equipped with modern crew protection systems to assist the brigades in effectively responding to fires and other emergencies.

Deputy Commissioner Peter McKechnie believes this is a game-changer for the community.

“The Central West will benefit enormously from these new builds and fleet of trucks,” he said. “It’s important that our members have access to modern firefighting technology in fire trucks, when preparing for and responding to incidents.”

The Deputy Commissioner joined special guests at a number of ceremonies across the region to recognise more than 70 volunteers from the Canobolas District with the presentation of 71 Long Service Medals, six National Emergency Medals and a National Medal to volunteers with a combined service of more than 1,900 years.

Four members recognised for 60 or more years of service were Terry Drady with 60 years, Richard Bloomfield with 66 years, and siblings Allen and William Hawke who celebrated 67 and 68 years of service respectively.

“These ceremonies are an opportunity to recognise the hard work and incredible contribution of our members who should all be proud of their commitment,” Peter said.

New firefighting trucks were handed over to the Yeoval, Baldry, Barry/Hobbys, Byng Emu Swamp, Lyndhurst, Neville, Cheesemans Creek, Clifton Grove-Ophir, Lidster, Red Hill, Orange, Mount McDonald, Wattamondara and Wyangala Brigades.

The Deputy Commissioner capped off the week by opening new brigade stations at Washpen, Torrington and Blayney, he also opened Yetholme Station on the same weekend in a nearby district.

“Both Washpen and Torrington stations boast two truck bays, a workshop, multipurpose area, storeroom, kitchen and bathroom amenities, while the new Blayney station also features a larger multipurpose area for training, a laundry room and four drive-through tanker bays.

“This significant upgrade to the Central West is part of a larger initiative to strengthen local firefighting infrastructure in the area.” **RFS**



ABOVE: Medal recipients at the new Blayney Brigade station. **LEFT:** Medal recipients at the Canobolas Fire Control Centre. Photos courtesy of RFS.

RFS CONDUCTS AIRBAG TESTING IN VEHICLES



The RFS recently engaged ADR Compliance Services to conduct airbag testing in RFS vehicles to ensure the installation of MDTs do not affect the deployment of the passenger airbag. With a focus on member safety, the Service initiated the testing to immediately address a potential safety issue following a change in the airbags used by Isuzu, from the original PPN-15 model to the newer PPN-38 model.

As a result of this change, the RFS MDT Project team (in consultation with the RFS Safety and Engineering teams) determined that the most appropriate course of action was to conduct our own destructive airbag testing. This would enable the RFS to generate independent data to supplement and validate the information supplied by Isuzu, ensuring this met ADR standards.

The report concluded that there is **no risk** of the airbag causing an MDT to become a projectile in the event of a collision. Additionally, the presence of the MDT or comms boxes in the tested vehicles does not compromise the effectiveness of the airbag. Both the original PPN-15 airbag model and the newer PPN-38 airbag were found to have maximum stable deployment windows consistent with Isuzu's specifications regarding their size.

The report has been shared with the RFS Safety team and Fire and Rescue NSW for their review. If you would like further information, please contact the project team on **MDT@rfs.nsw.gov.au**

ELECTRIC VEHICLE INCIDENTS OPG UPDATE

The increasing use of Electrical Vehicles (EVs), particularly Light Electric Vehicles (LEVs) poses a significant challenge to firefighting operations. To reflect this, the EV Incidents Operational Procedure and Guideline (OPG) has been updated to identify risks to emergency responders operating around EVs and related charging infrastructure and reflect current RFS firefighting practice for operations.

The OPG now incorporates the defining characteristics of each EV type, guidance relating to LEV incidents, lithium-ion batteries and charging infrastructure, Road Crash Rescue protocol for approach and the decontamination process.

There will be ongoing updates released in the coming year given the evolving legislative and safety environment. For more information, please go to **www.rfs.nsw.gov.au/resources/publications/doctrine**





RFS MEMBER WELLBEING AWARENESS TRAINING NOW LIVE

The RFS Member Wellbeing Awareness e-learning module is a key initiative designed to equip all members with a clear understanding of processes related to health, wellbeing, incident reporting and accessing support services, as well as their roles and responsibilities within these areas. This training aligns with the RFS's commitment to fostering a culture of safety and care under the Health and Injury Management Program.

The RFS Member Wellbeing Awareness training module is available to all members and will take approximately 30 minutes to complete online via FUEL. In rural or remote locations without internet access, alternative delivery methods are available.

By participating in the training, you will:

- Gain clarity on incident reporting processes and available wellbeing support services
- Build confidence in navigating the return-to-work process and incident reporting
- Strengthen connections between members, leaders and the Health and Wellbeing Team
- Contribute to a supportive environment that prioritises safety, wellbeing and recovery

If you have any questions about the training or need support accessing it, please contact the Health and Wellbeing Team at healthy@rfs.nsw.gov.au.

DATES FOR GET READY WEEKEND 2025 ANNOUNCED

We are excited to announce the official dates for Get Ready Weekend (GRW) 2025: Saturday 20 and Sunday 21 September.

Get Ready Weekend is the Service's single largest mobilisation of brigades outside of direct firefighting activities. It is a crucial and highly impactful part of the preparation of our local communities for the statutory Bush Fire Danger Period, which commences for most of NSW on 1 October. Get Ready Weekend is a fantastic opportunity to get out and raise the awareness and preparedness in our local areas.

For Brigades, registrations for Get Ready Weekend will open from the first week of July.

Resources

Digital resources, social media tiles and social media guides will be available in early August.

Physical resources will also be available for order from the first week of August. If you require larger orders, please talk with your District office.

We encourage everyone to put the dates in your calendar and get involved in this important weekend. **RFS**



IMPRESSIVE SKILLS ON SHOW AT THE STATE CHAMPIONSHIPS

In September 2024, the RFS State Championships headed south to Albury. The event, which is held every two years, attracted teams from across the state who competed in a range of challenging real-life scenarios.

The State Championships provide a valuable preparation exercise that allows the field testing of equipment, technologies, logistical deployment and command and control techniques in the lead up to the fire season.

More than 500 members gathered to test leadership, teamwork and core skills, while Incident Management Teams, aviation, logistics and communication units were on hand to manage the different areas of the competition.



Oakville Brigade was chasing a fourth consecutive crown in the Senior competition, while new kids on the block, Vacy Brigade from the Lower Hunter District, ultimately walked away with the prize.

In the Junior competition, Orchard Hills Black Lambs pipped the Illawarra Cadets and Lavington Black Ants, who also hold the title of current Australian Fire Cadet Champions.

The ever-popular PF Olsen New Forests Chainsaw Challenge and

RFSA Eat Street Catering Challenge again highlighted the diversity of important roles available within the Service. Richard Alley of Southern Tablelands, a long-time competitor, took the crown in the Chainsaw Challenge, while the experienced Hawkesbury crew, took out the Eat Street Catering Challenge from first timers Southern Highlands.

This year saw the introduction of the Championship’s own currency, ‘the Kibble’, and the OK Corral Auction. Competitors were given the

opportunity to complete tasks to earn a fist full of money, which could be used to bid at the OK Corral Auction on Sunday. Proving that their Senior competition stream victory was no accident, Vacy also managed to earn enough Kibbles to outbid the other competitors at the OK Corral Auction and take home the training package valued at over \$26,000.

For more photos and videos visit the RFS State Championships Facebook page at www.facebook.com/NSWRFSStateChampionships **RFS**

OVERALL RESULTS TABLE

Scenario	1st	2nd	3rd
Overall State Champions	Vacy	Tuncurry	Catherine Field
Overall Junior State Champions	Orchard Hills Black Lambs	Illawarra Cadets	Lavington Black Ants
RFSA Eat Street Catering Challenge	Hawkesbury	Southern Highlands	Clarence Valley
Chaplain’s Encouragement Award	Central Warren		
Meritorious Service Award	Ross Leonard		



Photos by Aiden Adams and Braylee Mitchell.



GET READY WEEKEND

Get Ready Weekend 2024, held on 21-22 September, was a resounding success with nearly 600 brigades across NSW coming together to engage with their local communities.

This statewide initiative showcased the incredible dedication of our volunteers, who hosted activities, shared vital bush fire preparedness tips, and encouraged residents to develop or update their Bush Fire Survival Plans.

From live demonstrations to family-friendly events, the weekend fostered community resilience and highlighted the importance of working together to stay safe during bush fire season.

A heartfelt thank you to everyone who participated and helped make this year's event so impactful. **RFS**

MAIN: Community Engagement Coordinator Todd Burns at the Port Kembla Get Ready Weekend.
BELOW LEFT: Woodford Brigade GRW. **BELOW:** Linden Brigade GRW. Photos courtesy of RFS.





Mount Hunter



Mount Hunter



Mount Hunter

WEAR IT YELLOW DAY IN THE SOUTHERN HIGHLANDS

Wear it Yellow Day was initiated by the Wollondilly community following the 2019/20 bush fire season. This annual fundraising event held on 20 September, saw more than 670 students from The Oaks, Mount Hunter, Buxton, Oakdale and Cawdor Primary Schools in the Southern Highlands come together with local RFS brigades to discuss the importance of bush fire safety and having a survival plan in place in the event of a bush fire. **RFS**

Photos courtesy of RFS.



The Oaks Public School



Oakdale



Oakdale

SOME OF THE BEST IDEAS COME FROM YOUNG MINDS

In November 2024, on the outskirts of Sydney's northern suburbs, a group of Year 5 and 6 school students participated in the successful RFS and Fire and Rescue NSW STEM initiative, Project Firestorm.



Led by teacher Monica Medeiros and supported by RFS members from Ku-ring-gai and Hornsby Brigades, 64 primary students from St Patrick's in Asquith set out to help educate people about the dangers of fire and how the community can better manage it.

Over the course of the program, RFS members provided crucial support and real-world experience by attending the school at three stages.



These stages included an initial 'Firestormer' briefing to get the children excited about the project, a visit where they helped the children stress test their ideas and a final showcase where the children celebrated their learning and showed off their prototypes and final products.

During the program, students were able to learn about the vehicles and equipment that firefighters use, while planning and designing solutions to prepare for, survive and recover from bush fire events.

The program concluded with a showcase presentation where more than 20 groups of students presented their designs and products to the school, parents and carers, teachers and RFS members.

"It's absolutely remarkable how children can solve complex problems about the way bush fire impacts not only firefighters, the community, individuals,

wildlife and the environment, but the processes and outcomes they achieve through working together and with us," said Samantha Tucker, Deputy Captain of Ku-ring-gai Brigade.

A fire simulation table session with Ku-ring-gai Council was organised by the school so that parents and students could see and understand the fire risk to their own properties and take away their own Bush Fire Survival Plan to work on.

Commissioner Rob Rogers dropped in to see the showcase and chat to the students.

"I was impressed with the level of understanding the students showed and how they applied design thinking strategies to their prototypes," said Rob. "There were some impressive ideas and some which may be applied to future plans in the RFS."

St Patricks teacher Monica Medeiros praised the support she and the students had throughout the program.

"The RFS members were attentive, engaged, respectful, supportive

LEFT: Simtable modeling tool on display.
ABOVE AND OPPOSITE PAGE: Students proudly show off their projects at St Patrick's Primary School in Asquith. Photos by Todd Burns.



and encouraging towards all of the students,” said Monica. “They showed so much energy and enthusiasm for the students’ ideas, which really motivated the groups to continue to innovate, modify and think creatively.

“We certainly could not have done this without their support, we are sincerely grateful to all those involved.”

The RFS sees programs like Project Firestorm as a cornerstone of its community outreach strategy. By instilling knowledge and encouraging proactive behaviour among young people, the program not only strengthens individual preparedness but also fosters a culture of shared responsibility for bush fire safety.

“St Patrick’s Primary School has set a shining example of how schools can play a critical role in promoting bush fire resilience,” said Rob. “The enthusiasm and curiosity displayed by the students reflect a bright future where communities are better equipped to face the challenges of living in a bush fire-prone region.” **RFS**



PROMOTING BUSH FIRE SAFETY THROUGH PROJECT FIRESTORM

With the help of five elite ‘Firestormers’, each with a special STEM superpower, Project Firestorm supports students to identify and solve an authentic problem their community faces in relation to fire prevention, detection, response and management.

More information about Project Firestorm can be found by visiting the website at www.projectfirestorm.com.au



A BACKYARD BBQ FIT FOR A KING

While in Australia, the King and Queen caught up on their backyard skills, flipping sausages and chatting with locals, to show their support of our emergency services.

On 22 October, Commissioner Rob Rogers and RFS members attended the Premier's Community BBQ in Western Sydney to greet King Charles III and Queen Camilla.

The event was an opportunity for the King and Queen to enjoy a community lunch at Parramatta Park hosted by NSW Premier Chris Minns with about 500 community leaders, inspiring Australians and volunteers.

Welcomed by a smoking ceremony, the royal pair quickly eased into the Aussie way of life, taking up the tongs to flip some snags on the BBQ and watching backyard cricket and a Royal Agricultural Society sheepdog display. **RFS**

KING CHARLES VISITS THE CSIRO

On 21 October, also part of his Australian sustainability-themed tour, King Charles III visited CSIRO's National Bushfire Behaviour Research Laboratory in Canberra 'fuelled' by his passion for the environment and interest in climate change impacts.

With the increasing impact of wildfires being felt around the globe, the King gained insight into how Australian scientists work collaboratively to understand and predict bush fire behaviour, as well as help protect communities and fire crews during outbreaks.



ABOVE: King Charles III at the CSIRO laboratory. Photo by David Foote, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. **TOP:** RFS staff and members with the King and Queen at Parramatta Park. Photos courtesy of RFS.

CELEBRATED YOUNG CADETS SHINE

In November 2024, the Young People in Emergency Services Award Ceremony and Cadet of the Year Awards were held at RFS Headquarters in Olympic Park, Sydney.

Established in 2009 by the Minister for Emergency Services, the award is open to all school students who completed the RFS Secondary School Cadet Program, which was designed to promote learning, leadership and the values of volunteering and community service.

A number of further award programs have been introduced for young members under 25 who contribute by volunteering outside of school with their local brigade or unit. The Young Volunteer Awards was launched for members aged 12-15 and 16-25, to recognise those making a positive impact to their brigade and community.

RFS CADET OF THE YEAR Woojin Shin

Woojin Shin participated in the Cadet Program at Turrumurra High School. He was chosen to receive the award after demonstrating outstanding leadership, teamwork and initiative.

Excelling in many different areas, he led his group and instructed others on how to best roll out hoses and deploy the equipment in an efficient manner. Woojin was a role model for many of his peers.

Woojin's keen sense of assertiveness and responsibility grew throughout his time with the Cadets, and he has shown a keen interest in becoming a RFS member.

YOUNG VOLUNTEER OF THE YEAR (AGED 12-15) Marshall Mun

Marshall Mun is a member of the Parkes Headquarters Brigade located in the Mid Lachlan Valley District. He was chosen to receive this award after demonstrating determination,



leadership and unwavering dedication throughout the program.

During the flash floods that affected the Parkes and Forbes communities in late 2022, Marshall played a vital role in the recovery efforts, working more than 40 days with both the RFS and the SES.

Marshall has demonstrated strong leadership, unwavering dedication, and a deep passion for both his team and the RFS. His performance was exemplary, reflecting his preparedness and commitment to high standards.

YOUNG VOLUNTEER OF THE YEAR (AGED 16-25) Keeley Taylor

Keeley Taylor is an active dual member of Taree Brigade and Taree Communications Brigade within the Mid Coast District, and actively

LEFT TO RIGHT: The Hon. Jihad Dib MP, Keeley Taylor, Marshall Munn, Woojin Shin and RFS Commissioner Rob Rogers. Photo courtesy of the RFS.

assisted with the Secondary School Cadet Program at local high schools.

Keeley has shown outstanding commitment and experience in various operational commitments such as large bush fires, car fires, truck fires, house fires and Motor Vehicle Accidents (MVAs).

She has shown dedication to ongoing training, shows a passion for community engagement, teaches CAD, and assists others with radio communication. Keeley mentors new firefighters on the ground and works to instil confidence in new members. **RFS**



AUSTRALIAN FIRE SERVICE MEDALS 2025

GROUP CAPTAIN SCOTT CAMPBELL **Clarence Valley**

Scott Campbell joined the Lawrence Brigade in 2007 and has served as a Deputy Captain, Senior Deputy Captain, Captain, Secretary, representative of the NSW Rural Fire Service Association (RFS), Community Engagement officer, Training Officer, Equipment Officer, First Aid Officer and Permit Officer.

Scott has been instrumental in local and regional training for a decade and as a marshal at the Northern Exercise and Australian Fire Cadet Championships. He has driven the Secondary Schools Cadet Program across the Clarence Valley, helping increase the youth membership of local brigades. Appointed a Deputy Group Officer in 2019, Scott is a member of the Clarence Valley Senior Leadership Team, was part of the pioneering 'Your Health Matters' initiative and is currently the elected president of the RFS.

As a Strike Team Leader, Divisional Commander, Sector Commander and Crew Leader, he continues to serve locally and on interstate deployments, including twice as a Strike Team Leader to the Pilgla in 2015 and to the Namoi Gwydir and Northern Tablelands Districts, Victoria, Tasmania and Queensland.

During the 2019/20 fire season, Scott was a Divisional Commander in the Clarence Valley District, providing exceptional service to other

firefighters and the community during the most difficult of times. A natural leader, Scott encourages his peers to give their best and search for the optimum outcome.

DEPUTY CAPTAIN STUART CLARK AM **Hornsby/Ku-ring-gai**

Stuart Clark AM joined the Elouera Brigade (later renamed Westleigh Brigade) in 1973 and has since served as a member of the Ku-ring-gai, Killara and Hornsby Communications Brigades. He served as the Communications Brigade Captain from 2017 to 2024 and is currently the Killara Brigade Deputy Captain and President.

Stuart has played a key role in the Killara Brigade's establishment, engaging both state and local governments to secure land and build a brigade station, delivering enhanced local firefighting capability.

A respected senior member, he has given his time and legal expertise freely for the betterment of the RFS, contributing to projects including the development of the Code of Conduct and Ethics, disciplinary processes, Brigade Constitutional Reform and the Brigade Management Handbook.

Stuart has played an integral role in the establishment of the modern RFS, mentoring generations of leaders and contributing to the professionalism for which the agency is now known. As the architect of the Service's organisational structure, he worked

with successive Commissioners to implement necessary legislative and corporate changes to shape the Service. The RFS is indebted to Stuart for his unwavering commitment.

GROUP CAPTAIN ANTHONY CLOUGH **Riverina**

Anthony Clough has given more than 50 years' service to the RFS, including as a Captain, Senior Deputy Captain and Deputy Captain of the Wantabadgery Brigade and as a Group Captain in the Riverina District for the past 27 years.

He has ensured the Wantabadgery Brigade is always ready to respond as needed and has personally responded to numerous challenging incidents, including the Jail Break Inn fire at Junee in 2006 and the Dunns Road fire at Tumut during the 2019/20 bush fire season. Serving as a Strike Team Leader on multiple occasions, his professionalism and guidance is highly valued.

Anthony has contributed more broadly as a member of the Riverina District Senior Leadership Team since 2010 and a founding member of the Area Command South Western Team. He has helped safeguard the community and firefighters through his efforts as a member of the Riverina Bush Fire Management Committee and by helping develop practical fireground solutions and underpinning policy, including the RFS Farm Fire Unit policy. Anthony has always demonstrated the highest values of the RFS.

The Australian Fire Service Medal (AFSM) is awarded to a member of an Australian fire service for distinguished service. Congratulations to the eight RFS members who received an AFSM as part of the 2025 Australia Day Honours, recognising their commitment to the community.

DEPUTY CAPTAIN ROBERT CONROY **Northern Beaches**

Robert Conroy has made a serious and sustained contribution to bush fire control in NSW and Australia for decades, through his influential career in the National Parks and Wildlife Service, volunteer service with the RFS and membership of the NSW Bush Fire Co-ordinating Committee and the Australasian Fire and Emergency Service Authorities Council.

Joining the Coal and Candle Brigade in 1998, he has served as a Deputy Captain and Senior Deputy Captain. He is recognised as a mentor and trainer, particularly for Crew Leaders, and recently co-authored the Brigade's history.

Robert has contributed to countless Incident Management Teams since 1994 and has deployed to numerous fires and other incidents, including as a Divisional Commander to the USA in 2019, a Strike Team Leader to Tasmania in 2019 and on 13 strike teams during the catastrophic 2019/20 fires.

With renowned operational knowledge and skill, Robert provides expert advice on local risk management and mitigation planning based on an encyclopaedic memory of every major bush fire and hazard reduction activity on the Northern Beaches dating back to the 1950s. Robert's contribution is highly regarded at all levels.

DEPUTY CAPTAIN JENNIFER FARRELL **Central Coast**

Jennifer Farrell's career in bush fire management began with the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service in 1973 and has continued as a member of the Matcham-Holgate Brigade since 2012. Qualified across incident management and firefighting capabilities and with more than five decades' experience in complex campaign bush fires, Jennifer has served as a planning officer for dozens of major fires and deployed locally, interstate and internationally in both incident management and firefighting capacities.

Acting as a mentor and trainer in various disciplines, she also has served as the chair of the Central Coast Bush Fire Management Committee for the past four years and as the Planning Officer for bush fires in the Clarence Valley, Northern Tablelands and Central Coast during the 2019/20 bush fire season. She has deployed on firefighting strike teams to Singleton, Cooma and Eurobodalla and supported Incident Management in the ACT.

During the 2023/24 fire season, Jennifer was the Planning Officer for large fires at Coonamble, Narrabri and the Central Coast, as well as joining local and out-of-area firefighting efforts. Jennifer's capabilities have helped minimise the impact of bush fires on countless communities.

GROUP CAPTAIN JOHN HEDLEY **Hunter Valley**

John Hedley joined the Bulga Brigade in 1974, holding roles including Deputy and Senior Deputy Captain before his election as a Hunter Valley District Group Captain in 2001, a position he continues to hold. As well as responding to bush, grass and structural fires and motor vehicle accidents throughout the Hunter Valley, John has joined numerous Incident Management Teams and performed as a Sector and Division Commander and in Operations Support when needed. Contributing across the district, he conducts and assesses training, helps with brigade management and assists in the Fire Control Centre when staff are otherwise committed.

John devotes extensive time to building relationships and bush fire awareness through the RFS Cadets program, educating landholders as a Fire Permit Officer and working with other agencies and on the Senior Leadership Team and Hunter Valley Bush Fire Management Committee.

During the 2019/20 fire season, along with another colleague, he organised to billet out-of-area strike teams at the Lone Pine Army Barracks and acted as a Liaison Officer for Victorian crews. John is admired for his calm, confident and respectful manner.

Continues next page ►

AUSTRALIAN FIRE SERVICE MEDALS 2025

GROUP CAPTAIN WAYNE KEEL

Tamworth

Wayne Keel joined the Namoi River Brigade in 2003, quickly progressing to become the Brigade Captain.

After overseeing the successful amalgamation of the Upper Manilla and Namoi River brigades, in 2016 he transferred to Halls Creek Brigade, where he holds the positions of Deputy Captain, Treasurer and Secretary.

He has served as a Tamworth District Deputy Group Captain since 2017 and Group Captain since 2020. During the 2019/20 bush fire season, Wayne was deployed as a Divisional Commander to fires at Tenterfield, Glenn Innes and Walcha, as well as his local area. He was tasked to flood recovery strike teams in Moree, Grafton

and Gunnedah in 2021 and 2022. He organised the RFS Tamworth District flood appeal for the Forbes community following the devastating floods of December 2022.

Known for his collaborative approach, Wayne is a member of the Area North Western Senior Leadership Team and a dedicated trainer, assessor and course coordinator on the Tamworth District Training Team. He has committed significant time and effort to youth engagement, conducting numerous RFS Secondary School Cadet Programs. This includes the Walaaybaa Junior Ranger program with the Tamworth Local Aboriginal Land Council.

Wayne is recognised by his community for his ongoing commitment to the RFS and local volunteer organisations.

CAPTAIN ROBYN REYNOLDS

Far South Coast

Robyn Reynolds has been a dedicated and highly esteemed member of the Pambula Brigade since 1999. Her commitment to her brigade and the community has been unwavering, marked by her extensive service in key roles that have significantly contributed to the Brigade's effectiveness and resilience.

Robyn has demonstrated leadership, professionalism and operational skill as the Brigade's Health and Safety, Training, First Aid and Permit Officer, as well as the Secretary, Treasurer, Deputy Captain, Senior Deputy Captain and Captain. As the previous Secretary and current Treasurer, Robyn's meticulous attention to detail and integrity ensured the efficiency of the Brigade's administration and financial management.

Throughout her progress through the ranks to her current role as Captain, Robyn has shown strategic vision and the ability to inspire and lead her team through numerous challenging and hazardous incidents, always prioritising safety and operational success. Robyn has made a wider contribution as a member of the Bega Valley District Training Advisory Group, helping shape training policies and improve the overall training framework.

Robyn's long-standing commitment and significant contributions have had a lasting impact on the Pambula Brigade and community. She is commended for her service, dedication and leadership. **RFS**





A SHINY NEW BRIGADE STATION

The Killara Brigade station officially opened its doors in February 2025. Located in East Killara, the Brigade's 56 members finally have a place to call home.

On 1 February, Commissioner Rob Rogers joined The Hon. Greg Donnelly MLC, local council representatives and RFS members at a ceremony in Sydney's north to mark the opening of Killara Brigade station.

Deputy Captain Stuart Clark, a founding member of Killara Brigade and a driving force behind the station's development, was also awarded the Long Service Medal 4th Clasp during the ceremony. For 51 years, Deputy Captain Clark has provided the most distinguished level of service to the RFS, its members, and the community. We congratulate him on this impressive milestone and the entire Killara Brigade on their new beginnings. **RFS**



MAIN: RFS staff and members join the official opening of the Brigade.
RIGHT TOP: Unveiling the opening plaque.
RIGHT MIDDLE: RFS Commissioner Rob Rogers congratulates Deputy Captain Stuart Clark.
RIGHT: Killara Brigade facade. Photos by Victoria Qusted and Conor Deans.



THE SKY'S THE LIMIT

A small brigade worthy of much recognition is the Mid Coast District Aviation Brigade stationed at Taree airport.

Operating out of a shipping container and one bay of a council shed is a small group of volunteers, who single handedly coordinate the Service's local aviation efforts out of Taree Airport.

Their area of coverage extends from Port Stephens to Telegraph Point in the north and out west to Barrington Tops, an area home to 86 land-based RFS brigades.

Captain Syd McRoy has been a member for 40 years and was part of the initial team who formed the Aviation Brigade.

"We've been operating since 2009, initially we were much smaller and were part of the Manning Aviation Support Unit," he says. "With consolidation and amalgamation of four Districts, we became the Mid Coast Aviation Brigade.

"What makes us so unique, is our brigade are not on-ground firefighters, the complete focus is on aviation."

Once a decision is made that aviation resources are needed for an incident, all levels of staffing are mobilised. The brigade has Aviation Radio Operators (ARO) – a CASA requirement; Air Base Operators (ABO) who are specifically trained to refill fixed wing aircraft as well as general on airfield work; Air Base Managers; Aircraft Operators; and an Air Operations Manager. In addition to this, one of the brigade Deputy Captains is the organiser when a request comes in for activation of the Remote Area Firefighting Team (RAFT) personnel.

Syd and the Mid Coast District Aviation Brigade members operate across NSW and interstate as required.

"We're activated during incidents and when the SES require assistance, such as air operations for major flood work," he says. "In the 2022/23 floods, we had people working in Lismore, Grafton, Coffs Harbour, Cessnock, Wagga, Deniliquin, Lightning Ridge and Bourke."

MAIN: A plane in the Barrington Coast Airshow.
Photo by Dawn Hicks.

RIGHT TOP: Captain Syd McRoy and Dawn Hicks.
Photo by Julia Driscoll © Manning River Times ACM.

RIGHT BELOW: Dawn Hicks.
Photo courtesy of RFS.



One of the Brigade's busiest periods was the 2019/20 fires, operating for 123 days straight. When their local area was no longer under threat, some of the members were deployed to Cooma.

"We had 25 aircraft flying out of Taree Airport for several days, and the rest of the time we were averaging up to 12 each day, it was non-stop."

While the Brigade's members didn't face the rigours of fighting fires on the frontline, the roles still came with challenges.

"Many of our operatives were working 12 hours plus, and the AROs needed intense concentration as they handled all communication with aircraft when they were performing their waterbombing in arduous conditions," says Syd. "The ABOs were operating in high heat on the tarmac, loading aircraft using heavy hoses underneath the body of running engines."

The Mid Coast District Aviation Brigade operates both rotary and fixed wing aircraft. As a busy regional airport, Taree has the capacity to utilise Single Engine Air Tankers (SEATs) or Air Tractor AT-802s, which are small,

single-engine aircraft used for aerial firefighting, and the FireBoss float plane, which has a capacity to carry around 3,000 litres.

"We can handle all sizes, up to the largest that the RFS operates – we've had Sky Cranes using the airport and can accommodate the Chinook if needed," says Syd. "The aircraft are used for water bombing, air observer platforms, air attack supervisors and RAFT insertion with winch capabilities."

Syd would love to have more active members, so the Brigade has been ramping up their community engagement, actively taking part in local events.

"At the Barrington Coast Airshow held in November, our stand attracted a lot of interest," he says. "It was a spectacular event with more than 7,000 people attending to see some high-quality acrobatic flying as well as beautifully prepared vintage aircraft."

Like all areas of the RFS, the Brigade needs volunteers to be able to cycle the aircraft more effectively in emergencies. Aviation volunteers work five days straight during

emergencies, whereas regular brigade members work three days.

"We need to think ahead – like every other volunteer organisation, our members are getting older, so we need younger members ready to take over when the time comes," says Syd. "Most people aren't aware of what our brigade does, they assume we're all firefighters. We enjoy any opportunity to chat to the community and spread the word, we love what we do and hope we can inspire others to join." **RFS**





A FARMING BRIGADE CELEBRATES ITS 75TH ANNIVERSARY

In October 2024, the close-knit farming community of the Downside Brigade celebrated its 75th anniversary with support from the RFS and RFSA.

A medal presentation hosted by the Riverina RFS acknowledged the long service of 19 recipients, in particular Jim Dennis (64 years), Max Chamberlain (62 years), Bruce and John Rapley (56 years) and Paul Gaynor (48 years).

The Brigade has steadily grown over the years from a small group of farmers with firefighting knapsacks, to a thriving team today using modern technology.

In October 1949, the small farming community of Downside in the Riverina area of NSW formed its own brigade, after being a sub-branch

of the Gobbagumbalin and District Bush Fire Brigade.

The breakaway group, led by Mr M Meiklejohn, Mr D McKenzie, Mr C D Hamilton and Mr W Hamilton, included landholders McKenzie, Vonarx, Chamberlain, McEwin, Mathews, Hatwell, Francis, Beck, Dennis and Rapley. Most of their families still live in the Downside area.

Up until the formation of the RFS in 1997, the brigade was under the control of Wagga Wagga City Council.

In 1953, the nearby Wagga Agricultural College District Bush

Fire Brigade formed. Then in 2004, renamed the Research Rural Fire Brigade, it merged with Downside.

Over the years, benefits came from expanding the Brigade, such as acquiring two fire tankers backed up by private firefighting vehicles.

In April 2015 a new fire station was constructed adjacent to the Downside Hall to house the growing assets and associated equipment.

Current Captain, David Meiklejohn, reflects on his family's long history with the Brigade.

"My late uncle Max was our founding Captain, and my late father Peter, the youngest of his siblings, also served as Downside Captain and Group Captain," says David. "Both my children, Gabrielle and Alice, are now proud members too.

"Of our 40-odd volunteers, many descend from the original Brigade members and are just as actively involved in everything that comes our way, particularly community engagement initiatives."



MAIN: The Brigade's lunch for past and present members, hosted by the RFSA.

ABOVE RIGHT: The brigade purchased and maintained their own trucks and equipment for many years.

LEFT: A medal presentation hosted by the Riverina RFS where Jim Dennis was acknowledged for 64 years of service. Photos courtesy of RFS.

Over the years, in addition to attending grass and bush fires, Downside Brigade has attended many motor vehicle accidents and incidents, with individual volunteers regularly stepping up to join out-of-area strike teams across the state.

"Support from the Riverina RFS and RFSA means we have continued to flourish, and with thanks to our wonderful volunteers, it's a spirited and active Brigade. Here's to another 75 years!" **RFS**

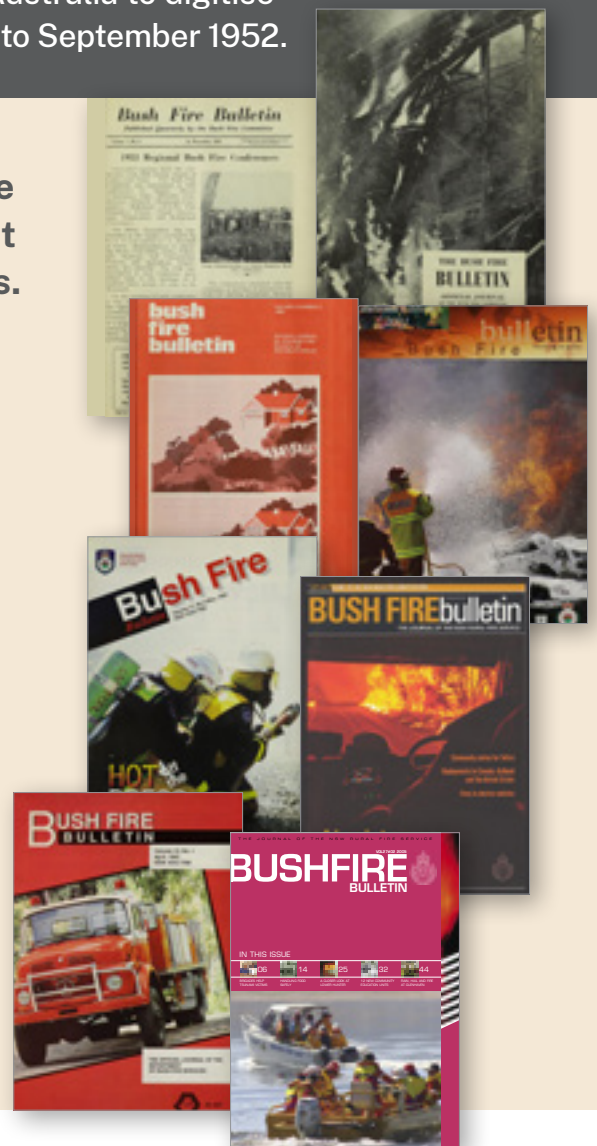
BUSH FIRE BULLETIN on TROVE

The RFS has joined forces with the National Library of Australia to digitise the entire collection of the Bush Fire Bulletin dating back to September 1952.

All editions of the Bush Fire Bulletin are available online. The collection brings to life the important work our members have undertaken over the years.

How to search for Bush Fire Bulletin on Trove

On the Library page of the RFS website, you will find links to browse the various collections of the Bush Fire Bulletin. You can search place names, brigade names, dates and fire-related topics such as 'fire trails' or 'large air tanker'.



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BUSH FIRE BULLETIN

ISSN: 1033-7598

Publisher: NSW Rural Fire Service | Produced by RFS Media and Communications.

Editor: Lyndal Sayer. **Layout and design:** Ana Heraud.

Printed on Monza Gloss; FSC (CoC), ISO 14001, IPPC, ECF environmental accreditation.

Cover photo: Helicopter Coordinator Andrew Beville at Calcite Creek Fire, Canada.

Photo by Paul Seager.



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