

No love for this grass

The area south west of Bega is Lovegrass country and even before the official fire season began, fire managers in the area were on high alert. This year they were especially anxious as fuel loads were at record levels.



Lovegrass is an introduced weed that grows vigorously and dries quickly in the perennial frosts common in the State's Alpine areas. This year, due to record rainfalls in late summer, Lovegrass south of the Snowy Mountains Highway grew abundantly. By the end of the winter, heavy frosts had left the thick grass 70-80 percent cured.

Bega Valley Fire Mitigation Officer Garry Cooper said fuel loads like that have deadly potential.

"Our biggest worry is that in the windy months of August and September a spark in that country can get away from us," he said.

Thinking ahead

In September 2011, firefighters in the Bega area had a glimpse of just how quickly Lovegrass fires can take off, when 90 hectares near South Wolumla were burned within a single afternoon.

Heeding the warning of last year's fire, in July 2012

senior volunteers from Bega Valley Group Central brigades gathered for a 'pre-incident' planning meeting. The meeting identified resources and set priorities if such a Lovegrass fire were to ignite. Part of the pre-incident planning included locating an extra Cat 7 tanker on the property of John Wilson, captain of Wolumla Brigade. It turned out to be best planning possible.

On 28 September 2012, a day of very high fire danger, hot and windy conditions caused power





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lines to come down and start a blaze in Lovegrass on the Warren property on Towridgee Lane, Wolumla.

Local Group Captain Richard Cochrane spotted the smoke from his property at South Wolumla and called the duty officer to respond units immediately.

A farmhouse was in the direct path of the quickly moving fire and Group Captain Cochran estimated the house would be under impact within five minutes. Wolumla, Candelo, Bega, Jellat and Bemboka Brigades were responded to fight the blaze.

Significantly, the extra Cat 7 Tanker at Wolumla was only 5kms from the fire and it proved to be a key factor in saving the dwelling. The Cat 7 arrived within minutes but the fire had already run across mown grass and was within a metre of the farmhouse. The Wolumla Brigade crew used direct attack, saving the

structure and diverting the fire away from assets. New crews arrived and within three and a half hours the fire had been contained. A total of six hectares had been burned but the property was safe.

Prevention better than the cure

Between July and October, brigades from Candelo, Wolumla, Bemboka, Numbugga, Bega and Jellat carried out around two hazard reduction burns per week assisting land owners with burns and ensuring they remain in control. These burns have provided valuable protection to the townships of Wolumla and Candelo.

State Mitigation Support Service crews have also been providing mechanical mowing and brush cutting support on unmanaged Council and Crown land reserve roads in and around the township of Candelo. These areas had previously not been treated

due to difficulties of access but the SMSS crews have the right equipment and are able to significantly reduce the fuel load around the township and provide a huge support to the local community.

Hazard reduction burns play a big role in reducing the build-up of fuel but burning alone will not remove the problem this weed has become. If not managed after burning by spraying, ploughing or pasture improvement then the weed grows very vigorously and becomes a bigger issue the following season with even greater fuel loads.

"This is a major concern to firefighters in the area," said Garry Cooper, "The more we can learn and educate members on how to deal with this, the better prepared they will be in the future. This problem is not going away any time soon."

Volunteers in the local brigades have been conducting fuel load

sampling and fuel moisture readings in plots heavily infested with Lovegrass in order to learn more about the weed. Additionally the Far South Coast Team is developing a short DVD to teach brigades how best to deal with Lovegrass both before it cures and also when it is a running fire.

Community engagement has played a big role in making the landowners aware of the dangers of Lovegrass fires. In conjunction with the NSW RFS State-wide media campaign on grassfire threats, local initiatives such as signage, letterbox drops and local radio interviews have been employed to sell the message.



LEFT: Lovegrass agricultural burn in Candelo in October 2012 at 1900hrs. Despite mild conditions, the flames are burning at a high temperature, showing just how hot and dangerous Lovegrass fires can be. Photo by Ian Heffernan, Candelo Brigade

RIGHT: Towridgee Lane Lovegrass fire 28 September 2012. A total of six hectares was burned. The house saved by firefighters quick work can be seen at the top of the burnt area. Photo by Gavin Mills

OPPOSITE: This photo shows Fire Mitigation Officer Garry Cooper standing in the Lovegrass about 10 kilometres out of Bega. Garry is 1.8 metres tall – and the grass is around 1.2 metres. Photo courtesy of Garry Cooper