

# Social media comes into its own **Out west**

By Inspector Robyn Favelle, Far West Team

Although in 2012 the far west has a significantly higher fire threat than it has faced for a number of years, the use of new technology is assisting the local NSW RFS in the early detection of fires, especially following an electrical storm.

The Australian Federal Government website Sentinel ([www.sentinel.ga.gov.au](http://www.sentinel.ga.gov.au)) has been the 'eye in the sky' over the past few summers, sometimes alerting staff to the fire even before any smoke has been reported. Sentinel is a public website which can be accessed by anyone with internet access, with regular satellite images of fires or hotspots. The site is very accurate, with the ability to provide firefighters with exact coordinates and size of fire. Other lightning tracking websites are also used to monitor lightning activity and allow staff to alert brigades if their area is affected.

The NSW RFS Far West Team, the Barwon Darling Zone and a number of local brigades are also using social media sites such as Facebook which allow instant communication between staff and brigade members. These new technologies complement other advances in communications, such as new radio repeater sites, use of pagers, mobile phones, spot trackers and satellite phones. The very remote Barrier Range Brigade is one brigade that has embraced the use of social media to communicate with each other and with NSW RFS staff in the Far West Team.

## Barrier Range leads the change

Barrier Range Brigade covers an enormous area from Broken Hill north to Milparinka along the South Australian border. Despite decades without any significant fire activity, the brigade structure remained firmly in place, holding regular meetings, election of officers and social functions. When they realised that they were facing a real threat from fires in 2011, they started to develop strategies and plans

to deal with the issue. One of these strategies was to start a closed Facebook group with membership restricted to brigade members, family and a small number of staff from Far West Team. This has proven to be an invaluable tool in an area where the main communication is landline or satellite phones and UHF radio. There is no NSW RFS PMR radio system north of Broken Hill.

The system works like this:

- At first sign of fire, one of the administrators will post info to Facebook and ask for assistance. As information comes into the brigade, the Communications Officers will provide further updates and list members and resources which are responding
- Lightning is the primary cause of fire and there are often multiple ignitions. Many property owners in the area also own aircraft so if possible, someone will fly the fire to obtain accurate information for the Captain and senior officers. The Captain will then prioritise the fires and coordinate the response accordingly. This information is all placed on the Facebook page for everyone's benefit
- As the members move around the various firegrounds, they report back to the closest homestead via UHF radio and their movements are tracked on the Facebook page. This allows NSW RFS staff to update ICON with either intel or Sitreps as situation and resources change
- The Facebook page allows for great information flow between the brigade and staff. The Far West Team Operations Officer will post weather updates, Sentinel maps, logistic details and aerial reconnaissance details while the brigade provide staff with constant Sitreps on all fires, fireground weather, logistic requests and photos from fireground
- Members of adjoining brigades also joined the group as the fires spread and these brigades are now looking at starting their own closed group Facebook sites using similar guidelines as Barrier Range Brigade.

Another of the challenges faced by this resourceful brigade is that many of their fires originate in South Australia. This amazing border country landscape is very sparsely populated with the closest SA Country

Fire Service unit hundreds of kilometres away. In the past 12 months, the Barrier Range Brigade has successfully stopped up to six fires from crossing into NSW, with two of these fires burning a massive 160,000 hectares. One fantastic asset for the brigade is the assistance provided by the staff and resources from the Wild Dog Destruction Board who manages the maintenance of the dingo fence along the South Australian and Queensland borders. A glimpse into the world of these remote area firefighters was provided by one of the Barrier Range members who remarked that "the only thing more common than fires across the SA border is wild dogs".

During a recent Section 44 bush fire emergency, the brigades in the Unincorporated Area successfully contained 19 fires, using social media and other cutting edge technology to overcome the tyrannies of distance and isolation. Far West staff remained in constant contact with the brigade and had a clear overview of the fires and conditions, despite the fact that the staff were working in an IMT more than 700 kilometres from most of the fires.



ABOVE: A grader working along the dog fence, building containment lines on the NSW/SA border. Photo by Mark Lacy.