



NSW RURAL FIRE SERVICE

A dramatic night-time photograph of a bushfire. The scene is filled with intense orange and yellow flames and a thick shower of sparks falling from the trees. In the lower center, a firefighter in full gear is silhouetted against the fire, looking towards the right. The overall atmosphere is one of a major fire incident.

# ANNUAL REPORT 2013/14



# SUMMARY REVIEW OF OPERATIONS

03

## Fire season overview

It was a challenging 2013/14 bush fire season.

Weather forecasters were expecting the 2013/14 fire season to be one of the hottest on record.

According to the Bureau of Meteorology, for some parts of the country July 2013 was their warmest in more than 100 years and for other areas September 2013 was the warmest on record.

With these underlying dry conditions, the season commenced early. The first of 48 section 44 (s44) declarations for the season was made in early September. Overall the season included 103 days under s44 declarations with significant fires in Southern Highlands, Hawkesbury, Hunter, Muswellbrook, Singleton, Port Stephens, Central Coast, Greater Lithgow, Blue Mountains, Penrith, Great Lakes, Greater Taree, Narrabri, Tumbarumba, Greater Hume and Walcha.

NSW RFS crews and other agencies attended a total of 8,032 bush and grass fires across the State, against 23,375 of all incidents attended by NSW RFS brigades in the reporting period.

The State Air Desk coordinated 2,182 aviation taskings during the season with the Rapid Aerial Response Teams deployed on 21 occasions.

The most intense fire events occurred during 13 to 26 October when there were 627 incidents and 164,054 hectares burnt. Significantly there was also the loss of more than 200 homes across the Blue Mountains region.

The significant fire activity prompted the NSW Premier to declare a State of Emergency between 20 to 30 October.

Fortunately, and to the credit of the entire Service and supporting agencies, there was no significant injury or loss of life to firefighters throughout the fire season.

Sadly, the fire emergency did bring tragedy in October 2013 with the death of David Black, a pilot in a contracted aircraft who died while engaged in firefighting and Walter Linder, a community member who suffered a heart attack while defending his property at Lake Munmorah.

At the peak of the October 2013 emergency thousands of firefighters were either deployed or strategically located ready to respond. There was also a deployment of 1,400 firefighters from interstate who supported the firefighting effort during this period.

The logistical requirements to support firefighters during the peak of the fires was significant, with the NSW RFS establishing six base camps to accommodate more than 1,500 personnel. The base camp established at Penrith in October was the largest, accommodating 850 personnel not only from across NSW but also from Victoria, Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia, ACT and New Zealand.

Despite the significant commitment by NSW firefighting agencies to the fires in NSW, during the latter months of 2013, the NSW RFS deployed more than 1,000 people and nine aircraft to Victoria and 400 personnel and five aircraft to South Australia to assist in their fire emergencies.

### ***Thirst for information***

2013/14 set a new record for the demand of public information.

The NSW RFS website saw 5.7 million visitors and 14.1 million page views during a two week period in October.

Social media increased in prominence as a reliable source of information for the community with the Service's Facebook page growing from around 30,000 followers to more than 300,000 in just a year. During the October fires, the page saw more than 108 million impressions.

Twitter also grew in popularity, with 24.2 million impressions during the two weeks in October.

The NSW RFS applications continued to grow in popularity, with the MyFirePlan app added to the Service's offerings. The application is a

*PREVIOUS PAGE: 19 October 2013. A back burn being conducted near St Columbus High School, Winmalee, crowned while the Duffys Forest Brigade kept watch. Photo by Brad Hunter Courtesy of The Daily Telegraph*

smartphone version of the Bush Fire Survival Plan, providing the community with a new tool to assist them in planning for bush fires.

The application was a key component of the continuing Prepare Act Survive public awareness campaign. The campaign, consisting of coordinated television, radio, print, online and outdoor advertising, assisted in building awareness and driving downloads of the Bush Fire Survival Plan and application.

### **Lessons of the 2013/14 fire season**

Recent investments in public information and warnings, technology, aircraft and frontline support paid off across the 2013/14 fire season. The high availability and early activation of aircraft proved to be extremely successful in protecting homes, along with strategic use of Rapid Aerial Response Teams and base camps.

At the conclusion of the season the NSW RFS conducted numerous After Action Reviews and Debriefings. The information and feedback gathered from these sessions was analysed for opportunities to enhance current processes, identify new initiatives and promote cross-border relationships and resource sharing. In addition, Bush Fire Management Committees (BFMCs) conducted their own debriefings and provided localised feedback to further strengthen local emergency management strategies.

### **Preparing for the fire season**

The prevention of bush and grass fires remained the NSW RFS major focus; however there was also considerable effort in the identification and reduction of hazards through the BFMCs and preparation and strategic placement of resources for the fire season during the reporting period.

### **Hazard reduction**

Substantial works to reduce bush fire hazards were completed in 2013/14 despite adverse weather conditions. Of the 8,962 proposed hazard reduction activities, 71.5 percent were completed.

Nearly 53 percent of annual hectares treated historically are treated between March and May each year. March and April 2014, however, were very wet months having 35 percent more wet days

than the 10 year average, as well as May starting wetter than usual. This reduced the treatment window in the months when most treatment occurs, leading to a 27 percent reduction in area treated, with a consequent reduction on properties protected by these works.

Despite the adverse weather conditions a total of 157,222 hectares were treated by hazard reduction activities, providing protection to 124,414 properties.

A full report on hazard reduction activities can be found on [Appendix A](#).

### **Upgrades to incident reporting**

Post incident reporting was given a significant boost in March 2014 when ICON received a new direct data feed from the ESCAD system. All Triple Zero (000) calls are now directly and automatically fed into ICON. The introduction of a post incident reporting module into ICON has seen a further upgrade in the data quality and overall review of the incident types. ICON can now function as the single source of truth for all NSW RFS attended incidents rather than reporting being spread across separate but duplicate systems. Data on NSW RFS incidents is likely to improve even further over the coming year due to these upgrades. [See Incident Reports on pages 10-11.](#)

### **Operational capacity**

#### **Arson prevention**

The 2013/14 fire season saw some success in the area of arson prevention due to the combined efforts of NSW RFS fire investigators and NSW Police Force. Several persons were apprehended for arson-related offences in the reporting period. Improved information sharing between agencies has been made possible by the Arson Trend Analysis System (ATAS) which was introduced in 2012 as well as analysis undertaken by the NSW RFS Arson Intelligence Office.

In the reporting period, fines for arson-related offences were increased under the *Rural Fires Act 1997* and government agencies were given greater powers to issue fines in their local areas for careless ignitions by landholders.

## ***Fire Behaviour Analysis***

The Fire Behaviour Analysis (FBA) section experienced its first significant fire season in 2013/14 producing a total of 249 manual predictions and 346 computer generated models.

Substantial fire activity in August and September 2013 required numerous fire spread predictions initially for Region North. As the dry spring continued into October the FBA Section was scaled up to provide predictions for the Blue Mountains and other fires across the State. In October 2013, 181 manual predictions were completed along with 202 computer-generated models. The outputs proved valuable for developing strategies and priorities, identifying warning areas and providing outlooks. For the first time, analysts were deployed to Incident Management Teams (IMTs) in addition to the core service provided at NSW RFS Headquarters.

The FBA Section also worked on the development of the Fire Weather Viewer. This is an on-line fire weather viewing platform which replaces the obsolete Bureau of Meteorology Fire Weather Forecast Explorer. Fire Weather Viewer enables agency staff to view Graphical Forecast Editor weather grids and visualise weather and fire danger across the landscape to support text based forecasts. It also provides an interface for viewing NSW RFS weather station data. The Fire Weather Viewer was released for user acceptance testing during the reporting period.

The Prescribed Burn Forecast Tool (PBFT) is an experimental product developed by the FBA Section and is currently undergoing evaluation by the CSIRO. The Tool is used to identify the best times for low to moderate intensity prescribed burning in predominantly forested areas of NSW.

Six additional Portable Automatic Weather Stations were purchased in the reporting period, bringing the total to 14.

## ***Community Protection Plans***

During the 2013/14 financial year 19 Community Protection Plans (CPPs) were completed for communities at risk of bush fire across NSW. A further 52 are in progress. This brings the grand

total of CPPs completed for NSW communities since the commencement of the initiative to 57.

## ***The Bush Fire Resilient Schools Program***

In 2013/14 the NSW RFS continued to work with education providers to develop the Bush Fire Resilient Schools Program which will enhance the resilience of bush fire prone schools in NSW.

The program strengthens a Principal's existing leadership by providing the tools required to understand the local bush fire risk. The program and its tools will also support the school to prepare its own effective bush fire emergency planning.

## ***Neighbourhood Safer Places***

Throughout 2013/14 the NSW RFS increased the number of Neighbourhood Safer Places (NSPs) within NSW to 959 sites in 128 Local Government Areas, surpassing the targets of the NSW 2021 Goal 28.2.3. In addition, the NSW RFS conducted inspections of all sites within NSW and facilitated works to improve the resilience of a number of NSP sites across NSW. [See Appendix B.](#)

## ***Hotspots Program***

The Hotspots Program provides landholders with the knowledge and skills to actively participate in fire management for risk and biodiversity. The focus this financial year was on areas of high risk and biodiversity delivering 14 workshops to 192 landholders and producing 125 fire management plans covering 35,321 hectares.

## ***Communications Strategy***

The One NSW RFS Communications and Engagement Strategy was successfully rolled out in the reporting period. The Strategy sets out a consistent and professional standard and style for internal and external communications including letterhead and emails through to posters and banners. A toolkit of easy-to-use templates equips all members in all brigades to produce effective and standardised communications for their local communities. The Strategy is subject to ongoing implementation and review and is supported by policies on communication and engagement activities across the Service.

## Our members

### ***Volunteer Recruitment and Retention Kit***

In December 2013 the NSW RFS released a Volunteer Recruitment and Retention Kit to assist brigades recruit and retain their members. Many of the stories, ideas and tools within the resource came from volunteers themselves and is adaptable to local community and brigade membership needs.

The content of the Recruitment and Retention Kit is based on the principles of flexible membership and helps brigades consider a variety of roles that volunteers might fulfil beyond the expected firefighting roles.

The Volunteer Recruitment and Retention Kit was funded through the National Disaster Resilience Program.

### ***Cooperative Research Centres Update***

While the newly formed Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC (BNHCRC) was officially launched on 1 July 2013, the older Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre (CRC) continued to operate in parallel in 2013/14.

The Bushfire CRC concluded outstanding research projects and presented a range of seminars and webinars encouraging the adoption of new research from the Bushfire CRC among AFAC member agencies.

In 2013/14 the BNHCRC consolidated the early work it undertook in establishing its research agenda, refining it into three main research themes. These being Economics, Policy and Decision-making; Resilient People, Infrastructure and Institutions and Bushfire and Natural Hazards Risks.

The NSW RFS is represented on 20 out of the 35 research projects being undertaken including two of particular note: Prescribed Burning, tailor-made solutions for risk mitigation and systems to deliver effective prescribed burning across Australian ecosystems and Next Generation Fire Modelling, including fire coalescence and mass spot fire dynamics. The NSW RFS has end users actively involved in both of these projects.

### ***Code of Conduct and Ethics Training***

As part of its corruption prevention and education role, the Service's Professional Standards Unit (PSU) rolled out Code of Conduct and Ethics Training to salaried members across the State. Over 800 salaried members undertook comprehensive training in the reporting period.

The PSU also delivered training sessions reporting conduct issues, ethical leadership and workplace information for salaried and volunteer member in all four regions.

The NSW RFS is committed the principles and standards set out within Service Standards 1.1.7 Code of Conduct and Ethics (the Code), particularly in relation to expectations of high standards of professional behaviour and respect by all members when they undertake NSW RFS duties, activities and working relationships. The Code is based on NSW RFS and NSW Government legislation, regulations and Government policies and procedures.

A review of the Code will take place in 2014/15 and will include additional modules on key behavioural requirements.

### ***Industrial Relations Policies and Practices***

On 24 February 2014, NSW RFS employees previously employed under the *Public Sector Employment and Management Act (PSEM Act) 2002* were transitioned to the new *Government Sector Employment Act 2013 (GSE Act)*. This new legislative change is applicable to all NSW Government Sector employees. The *GSE Act* aims to simplify employment structures in the Government Sector, build a modern and effective workforce, attract and retain talented people and deliver the best service to the people of NSW.

The four key reform areas under the *GSE Act* are; Senior Executive Structure, Capability Framework, Performance Management and Recruitment Reform. The NSW RFS is implementing the reforms in line with Public Service Commission and Justice Cluster expectations.

### ***Statement setting out WHS performance***

The Health, Safety & Welfare (HSW) Section's main focus during the reporting period was the response to the internal OHS Audit Program 2011/12. The Section also commenced a major

project to develop health and safety Site Management Plan (SMP) tools for use at all NSW RFS fixed site locations. HSW developed of a new method for reporting health and safety hazards in the workplace and the implementation of ICAM training to District Managers and specialist personnel to enhance skills and knowledge to undertake health and safety incident investigations.

The NSW RFS has also been undertaking planned actions associated with recommendations from the NSW Auditor-General's Performance Audit Fitness of Firefighters Report April 2014.

Statistical information about Reported Injuries and Workers Compensation Claims can be found at [Appendix K](#).

### Financial services

The NSW Budget allocation for the total expenses of the NSW RFS was \$331.1 million; an increase of \$28.0 million or 9.2 percent.

The funding provided enabled the Service to:

- > continue its commitment to bush fire prone communities through a combination of fire mitigation work crews, fire mitigation grants, hazard reduction allocations to Local Government and investment in Neighbourhood Safer Places
- > progress the program to upgrade the private mobile radio network and paging infrastructure to ensure volunteers have modern and reliable communication tools
- > enhance equipment and facilities for volunteer firefighters through the provision of tankers and other firefighting vehicles, new and upgraded Brigade stations and Fire Control Centres and upgraded firefighting equipment including Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)
- > improve community awareness through the Prepare. Act. Survive. public awareness campaign
- > respond to issues that arose while responding to the January 2013 fires, including improvements to the RFS public website, strengthening of the Bush Fire Information Line and enhanced ICT infrastructure to support key systems during bush fire emergencies.

### Assets and Infrastructure

Building stronger infrastructure throughout the NSW RFS has been a focus in 2013/14.

Information Communication Technology was strengthened with the implementation of enhanced phone technology at NSW RFS Headquarters, improved speeds for the computer network for rural areas and an enhanced wireless capability at both Headquarters and District sites. All these works are targeted at improving our ability during major incidents, with the flow on effect of improving day to day operations as well.

In the reporting period redundancy of the critical corporate systems and applications was improved with seamless switching and load sharing across multiple data centres. The Service is now able to continue to function even through planned or unplanned disruptions in data centres.

Network security was improved in the 2013/14 year with the implementation of network access protection at NSW RFS Headquarters and some rural sites. The Digital Information Security Attestation statement is included as Appendix E.

Enhancements were made the SAP HR system in the reporting period. The paper based Monthly Attendance Return was replaced by an online tool in June 2014.

The SAP Enterprise Asset Management project (EAM) was launched in February 2013. The EAM is a single source of data regarding vehicles, equipment, real estate and inventory across NSW. This is a joint agency project with Fire & Rescue NSW and the NSW State Emergency Service.

The Governance, Risk and Compliance module (GRC) was implemented in February 2014. When complete, it will allow all invoices to be scanned centrally and processed through an external portal for verification prior to them being automatically loaded in to SAP.

The upgrade of the Private Mobile Radio (PMR) and Paging networks continued this year and is due to completion in the next reporting period. This major project represents a total investment of some \$50m into radio and paging systems, network and architecture. The addition of this digital radio architecture is vital in ensuring volunteer firefighters have the latest and most reliable communication capabilities.