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## **MEDIA RELEASE**

### **FIRE RESPONSE PROVES VALUE OF VOLUNTEERS**

When the community needed them, fire brigade volunteers around Gazette were there to help, and now the community is returning the favour by boosting support for brigades.

The St Patrick's day fires – and the conditions that led to them – were among the worst in memory in the region.

The Gazette blaze destroyed 112km of fencing and 1740 hectares of pasture, killed 770 sheep plus some cattle, and burnt three houses, two hay sheds, a water system and a blue gum plantation.

But it could have been so much worse if not for the efforts of local firefighters and those who travelled to the region to boost the CFA response.

The success has drawn attention to the importance of having strong local CFA brigades.

Local volunteers were joined by strike teams from across western Victoria to battle the fire and then help with mopping up.

Volunteer local knowledge was also vital when radio communication systems became congested.

If any good news can come from such a disaster, local brigades like Gazette have experienced a surge in interest as people recognise the value of being trained to help in times of crisis.

Ten new recruits have signed up with Gazette since March 17.

Gazette captain Lindsay Morton said the fires and windy conditions were the worst he's seen.

Although captain for only eight months, Lindsay was able to call on training and experience gained over 20 years with the CFA and the support of his fellow volunteers.

Gazette has about 30 members; not all are active but on the night everyone turned out to help.

“When the crap hit the fan, we got a big response and since then we’ve had 10 new people sign up which is really good,” Lindsay said.

Two months after the fires, Lindsay, a 37-year-old local sheep farmer, looks back with pride at the brigade’s response.

“What I did surprised me but it’s all down to training and the support of your fellow volunteers,” he said.

“It showed the importance of having people trained so when they turn up they know what to do.”

Lindsay was alerted to the fire about 9pm and reported it to Vic Fire. He called for back-up support and joined fellow volunteers on the Gazette truck for a direct attack while others went straight to asset protection.

“We tried but it got too big too quickly,” Lindsay said. “I’ve seen a few different fires but nothing at night like this. The head of the fire was so big it was difficult to do anything.”

Officially there were 38 trucks recorded on the books as fighting the fire, but unofficially Lindsay believes there even more than that.

Alongside deputy group officer Jeff Semmens, Lindsay ran the Gazette control and then the handled the Stonefield sector.

At one stage the fire shed and volunteers’ cars were under threat, but a quick-thinking American backpacker who was staying nearby helped to move the cars to safety.

Lindsay’s family-run partnership farm had properties under threat. “If the wind was a couple of degrees different it would have got one of my farms, if it had been coming from a couple of degrees the other way it would have got the other farm.”

It was a tough and exhausting night. “When we got a shower of rain around 3 or 4 in the morning and the wind had dropped we knew good things were getting done,” Lindsay said.

“We were able to contain it but there was also a red flag warning for 100km winds in the morning from the west so after a long night we had to get crews to blacken out the eastern side.”

Typical of a country community, people rallied to help. Along with the new CFA volunteer recruits, a working bee a week after the fire attracted about 120 people, all based on word-of-mouth from the brigade.

“I pulled down some fences with the backpacker who moved the cars on the night. He was amazed at how quick we were able to respond,” Lindsay said.

Jeff Semmens is a veteran of more than 35 years as a CFA volunteer and has been part of crews at Ash Wednesday, Black Saturday and other major fires. This one at night and with huge winds stacks up alongside the worst but the results weren’t nearly so bad.

“You don’t have to do it very often but when it happens you just do it,” Jeff said.

“We lost three houses, including two that were unoccupied, but they were virtually undefendable in 100-kilometre plus winds,” Jeff said. “Losing three houses was a great disappointment but in the big scheme of things no-one got hurt. I think we did a really good job and the community pulled together amazingly well.”

In the middle of the night with radio systems overloaded, the local brigades responded to a phone call from Stonefield Lane and used their local knowledge to take 14 trucks to the area to protect properties.

“We had every truck in the district and then strike teams came in on the Sunday,” Jeff said. “I saw brigades from Snake Valley near Ballarat, Edenhope, Purnim and many others. We drew strike teams from a pretty big area. We went flat out for about 10 days.”

The blaze partly reignited five days after the main fire and this time 20 trucks, two planes, a helicopter, two graders, a semi-trailer water tanker and another tanker were on hand.

“We were extremely happy with the response,” Jeff added.

One of his lasting memories is pulling into the fire shed with Lindsay about 10pm on Sunday March 18, after spending more than 24 hours in the field.

“There would have been 100 people there helping. It was fantastic. It looked like something out of a movie set. The fire shed was still standing on its concrete base but the whole surrounds were glowing. We were standing there in the middle of it all.”

“We were just helping out the community and the community has been fantastic in return,” Jeff said.

Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria CEO Andrew Ford said the response to fires across south-west Victoria on St Patrick’s Day proved the value of a strong volunteer system.

“When they were needed, volunteers were there with their local knowledge, expertise and leadership,” Mr Ford said.

“The response by volunteers to these major fires was nothing short of outstanding and proof that the system continues to provide exceptional service to our communities,” he said.

“These dedicated and skilled volunteers might not be called on every week but when major incidents happen it’s comforting for communities to know that in their time of need our volunteers will be there to help.

“While the damage to land and property was terrible, it was extremely pleasing that no lives were lost and I have no doubt that volunteers played a significant part in that. Conditions that night was among the worst ever seen in the region and we can thank all firefighters for their dedication, professionalism and bravery.”

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