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MEDIA RELEASE

LEONGATHA DIGS DEEP FOR FIRE VICTIMS

The Leongatha Fire Brigade has dug deep this summer to help bushfire victims in eastern Gippsland as well as protecting the local community.

In addition to volunteers joining strike teams, the brigade coordinated 48 pallets of donated goods and \$11,000 in cash and vouchers to send to East Gippsland communities.

And the community is rallying behind the brigade, with nine new volunteers signed up over the past month.

Locally, the brigade attended 77 fire calls last year, down from the 90-100 average but still enough to require more volunteers.

Captain Dale Carruthers said nine new members, mostly women, had joined in recent weeks following an open day and in response to the summer's bushfire disaster.

They join about 35 existing members, including about 15 who actively respond to calls.

The huge amount of donations coordinated by the brigade were sent to Buchan and Mallacoota to assist fire-affected residents.

Brigade member Mike Wight was driver of the Leongatha tanker on the night the Strzelecki Group rapid response strike team was deployed to Johnsonville. After seeing the destruction first-hand, he was inspired to coordinate the drive.

"Mike called me a couple of days after and asked if he could run a charity drive to support the East Gippsland area," Mr Carruthers said. "He thought we would only get a few pallets of goods, and was blown away when we started to get people traveling over 100km to donate items. The Facebook page was swamped with messages from people wanting to donate.

Mr Wight was helped by a number of other brigade members in the planning and setting up of the station to receive the goods, and the local SES unit helped with sorting and packing of boxes.

Wonthaggi CFA Brigade saw the Facebook post and ran their own campaign, receiving more than 100 pallets of goods.

Mr Carruthers said the brigade was keen to attract more members, including those who don't want to fight fires but could help with background support.

"We're just regular people who put some time aside to make sure the community is safe," he said. "We're from all walks of life and all backgrounds."

Many members of the brigade, joined strike teams to fire-affected East Gippsland and also into NSW in the Port Macquarie area in November. "Helping out is what Australia's culture is all about," Mr Carruthers said.

Mr Carruthers along with first lieutenant Scotty Hillis and firefighter Charlie Preston were also recently featured on an interview on the Today Show to encourage tourists and visitors back to Gippsland.

Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria (VFBV) CEO Adam Barnett said the efforts of the Leongatha brigade and the local community epitomised Australia's volunteer spirit.

"This support, in addition to what the brigade does locally to protect the community, reflects the dedication, professionalism and community spirit of volunteers," Mr Barnett said.

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