

**Quarterly Report for Councils****NSW RFS MID MURRAY ZONE****Report on Rural Fire Activities 1<sup>st</sup> July 2016 – 30<sup>th</sup> September 2016****GENERAL OVERVIEW**

The first quarter of the financial year has been very quiet operationally across the zone with 19 incidents recorded. Incidents responded to were mainly structural fires or Motor Vehicle Accidents.

All Brigades AGM's have now been completed and brigade field officers appointed for the 2016/17 year. Brigade membership remains static with the exception of a couple of brigades where there has been an increase in interest which is pleasing to see. One area of concern coming into the fire season is in regard to the availability of members who are able to make themselves available during week days for brigade operational duty. Unfortunately many of our volunteers are not in a position to commit to long periods of operational duty due to work or family commitments. This will challenge how we manage responses to fire this season which threatens to be a very busy one.

Over the winter period it has been extremely pleasing to see the number of brigades requesting Person Protective Clothing (PPC) for their members. In the past, many remote rural brigades didn't see the need for PPC but their change in thinking can only ensure their ongoing safety on the fire ground. As part of the build-up to the fire season, the zone tanker servicing program has also been ongoing with brigade equipment levels inspected and readied for operational use.

The annual pre season fire preparedness meetings have been completed or scheduled involving NPWS, NSW Forests Corporation, FRNSW and interstate agencies. As this fire season is sure to be a busy one, these meetings are vital in reviewing each agency's fire response capabilities and resource availability. As part of the build up to a busy fire season, the MMZ again held our bi-annual Zone training exercise. This year the exercise was held at Wakool with around 180 volunteer fire fighters participating from across the local area including teams from Victoria. The day was a great success with everyone enjoying various training events in a relaxed and friendly environment.

As part of our pre season checks, the RFS heavy plant register has been reviewed and listed contactors contacted to confirm availability. As in previous years Council heavy plant will be the first engaged if available with private contractors used when needed.

All pre-season Captains meetings have been completed as has the Mid Murray Zone Bush Fire Management Committee meeting in accordance with operational and legislative requirements.

## OPERATIONS & INFRASTRUCTURE

### Incidents

For the September quarter there were 19 incidents recorded across the Mid Murray Zone.

	Fire related	Motor Vehicle	Other	Total
Conargo	2	0	0	2
Deniliquin	3	0	0	3
Murray	5	3	1	9
Jerilderie	0	2	0	2
Wakool	1	0	2	3
	<b>11</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>19</b>

### Capital items

#### New tankers delivered this quarter:

New Cat 1 Village Tanker for Koraleigh brigade  
New Cat 6 heavy tanker for Booororban brigade  
New Cat 6 heavy tanker for Jerilderie brigade

#### New Stations under construction:

New single bay station for Booororban brigade (Edward River LGA) has been funded and construction will commence in the coming months.

## LEARNING and DEVELOPMENT

The recent focus on training has been based around the bi-annual Mid Murray Zone exercise held this year at Wakool. The exercise consisted of five different scenarios; a relay pumping and property protection stand, a chemical awareness workshop at the Wakool GrainCorp facility, an all-round skills challenge, a stand for Motor Vehicle Accidents involving LP gas and bulk fuel transportation and a split technical workshop involving Defibrillator use and basic Thermal Imaging Camera use.

With the retirement of long serving L&D Officer Chris Barron, the Zone training plan has had to be reviewed due to a lack of personnel to deliver training. With the introduction of on line learning via a RFS portal it is hoped that new members in future will be able to complete much of the basic training package on line and undergo practical assessment at their leisure.

As training of volunteers is a priority for the MMZ, future training strategies will be based around a mixture of face to face training, on line training and recognition of prior

learning (RPL). It is hoped to attract a fully qualified L&D staff member to the Zone in the next twelve months to manage the delivery of training.

## **COMMUNITY SAFETY**

Well above average rainfall across the Zone in recent months has resulted in prolific growth in all areas. The amount of continuous fuel in grassland areas has been the most for many years and, once fully cured, will present a major hazard to the community. Road side spraying programs have been largely successful which will help mitigate the spread of fires when they occur during the summer months.

As part of pre-incident planning for the fire season, all Neighbourhood Safer Places (NSP's) have been inspected, reviewed and reported on. A number of NSP's have been deleted from the register in the past six months as they have proven not to be necessary due to other refuges being located in the immediate area or being a low threat area.

The Bushfire Danger Period (BFDP) commenced on October 1<sup>st</sup> in line with the Statutory Bushfire period from which time permits are required to burn off for agricultural or other purposes. Whilst conditions remain wet, BFMC members are aware of how quickly conditions can change and are comfortable with retaining the BFDP statutory period to maintain consistency.

Leading into the 2016/17 fire season, the MMZ will implement a community information program involving local media, social media and media releases to highlight to the public the heightened fire risk that will be experienced this fire season.

## **BUSINESS AND MANAGEMENT**

### **Staff**

With the retirement of Chris Barron, efforts to obtain a replacement through the current RFS recruiting program have failed. Offers of employment to eligible candidates within the system resulted in none of the candidates being willing to relocate to the local area. As a result of this, an Expression of Interest (EOI) was circulated to all MMZ volunteers offering six months temporary employment until the position can be filled full time. As a result of the EOI, Mr Terry Campbell of the Koraleigh RFS brigade has been appointed to the temporary position and will commence duties on October 4<sup>th</sup>.

The appointment of the temporary staff member brings the operational staff back to full strength allowing the afterhour's duty roster to be fully staffed over the fire danger period.

## **FINANCE**

The Zone Liaison Committee meeting was held on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of September at which the 2015/16 annual report and the 2015/16 M&R expenditure reports were tabled for information and review. Due to issues with Council amalgamations, the final quarter M&R figures were not fully provided resulting in an incomplete final report being tabled. This situation can be corrected when the final figures become available.

The 2016/17 budget allocation was advised to Councils on August 31<sup>st</sup> under the new format. Capital items allocated included a new Cat 1 Grasslands tanker for Caldwell brigade (Murray River), a new Cat 6 heavy tanker for Denimein brigade (Edward River), a new Cat 12 support twin cab utility for Deniliquin brigade (Edward River) and a new Group Officers vehicle for Jerilderie North Group (Murrumbidgee). Funding for a new brigade station at Booroorban and power connection to Hill Plain station was also allocated.

Councils will have noted that under the new finance system, Councils now receive individual budget allocations as opposed to a zone allocation that was advised in the past. Under the new finance system, bids and estimates are no longer required to be lodged due to the implementation of the set percentage formula in relation to the RFFF for each Council.

## **SUMMARY**

The MMZ has experienced its best seasonal conditions for many years leading up to the Fire Danger Period. Well above average rainfall has produced prolific growth in some areas that has not been seen for many years that, once cured, will become a major concern in grasslands areas. Recent flooding has inundated most forested areas in the MMZ and this will alleviate the fire risk along the rivers in the short term.

Long range weather forecast predictions remains on the positive side of neutral in regard to expected rainfall over the summer months. If this is the case, the fire risk may be reduced if frequent rain events occur. On the other side of the coin, if hot windy conditions prevail we will see many days of extreme and above conditions that will have high potential to carry major fire events.

At the last meeting of the Bushfire Management Committee (BFMC), operational arrangements for the coming fire season were discussed. The Committee considered the current climatic conditions in deciding if the Bush Fire Danger Period should commence as per the statutory period from October 1<sup>st</sup>. The Committee decided that although the Zone is currently wet and green, climatic conditions can change very quickly and this may accelerate curing rates of fine fuels if warm windy conditions occur during October. The Committee also felt that retaining the start of the BFDP from October 1 retains consistency in the public eye.

The Senior Management Team (SMT) also considered response arrangements and operational procedures for the coming fire season at their last meeting. The main concern of senior volunteers coming into the summer months is the amount of continuous fuel that is prevalent across all areas of the Zone. If hot dry conditions

combined with dry thunderstorms occur, fast running grass fires will be difficult to contain. For this reason the Zones Cat 6 fleet crews will receive additional training on convoy fire fighting strategies prior to the summer as the cat 6's will play a major role alongside heavy plant and aircraft in controlling fast moving grass fires.

Aviation support will be vital this summer if large fast moving grass fires do occur. The new east – west airstrip at Jerilderie will be operational in time for the fire season which will reduce the turnaround time of aircraft in the Jerilderie area when strong westerly winds restrict operations from conventional strips. An aviation training day will be held in the coming weeks at the Deniliquin airport where crews will brush up on the different fire fighting agent loading techniques. This fire season, members from the Volunteer Rescue Association will be trained in aviation support to compliment members of the NSW Fire & Rescue and RFS.

As Councils are aware, recent Council amalgamations have had a major effect on the previous RFS Zoning arrangements. At this time it is still unclear if the new Murrumbidgee Council will be a part of the MMZ or the MIA, however it is anticipated that this will be resolved in the coming weeks. Once boundaries are finalised, new Service and Zoning agreements will need to be negotiated to reflect the new Zone boundary.

On September 28<sup>th</sup> a representative from RFS Infrastructure Services met with the Zone Manager and Edward River Council representatives for further discussions on the building of a new Fire Control Centre at Deniliquin Airport. Discussions were very positive with agreements reached on timelines for building approvals and a Project Management Team. A follow up planning meeting is scheduled for October 25<sup>th</sup> to finalise project management strategies to take the project forward.

As mentioned earlier in this report, this fire season threatens to be one that may see our resources stretched to its limits, particularly our volunteers. As our volunteers are the backbone of our organisation, we are requesting that Councils and other employers consider putting in place contingency measure that may allow employees to assist with fire suppression over the summer.

We sincerely hope our volunteers remain safe over what is sure to be a busy fire season.

The NSW Rural Fire Service again thanks all Councils for their continued support and looks forward to maintaining a strong partnership over the coming fire season.

For Council information.

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**Mid Murray Zone**  
**NSW Rural Fire Service**

4<sup>th</sup> October 2016