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MEDIA RELEASE

FOUR MEDALS CELEBRATE 157 YEARS OF VOLUNTEER SERVICE

Four northern Victorian volunteer firefighters have been recognised for a combined 157 years of service to their communities, including their significant dedication to district championships.

Neil Lonie, from St James brigade, Wayne Geisler, from Kotupna, Phillip Ross-Soden, from Strathmerton, and Alan Hendy from Naring recently received Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria (VFBV) Gold Stars for their service to the District 22 region.

All from farming backgrounds, the quartet have played significant roles in their brigades and in encouraging young people to become involved with the CFA through rural championship competitions.

Phillip Ross-Soden joined the Strathmerton brigade 40 years ago to compete in the championships and stayed to help protect the community as a firefighter, including 14 years as brigade captain.

Phillip is now vice-president of the District 22 rural championship team and continues to advocate the value of the competition.

“It’s character building,” he said. “We’re a family-orientated brigade and we’ve had 11-year-old kids start in the championships and go on to become permanent firefighters. Not all stay on but some do and that’s great.”

Alan Hendy has been part of the Naring brigade for 45 years. He was captain for 28 years, beating his father Gordon’s record of 18 years and also following his grandfather Stan, who was the brigade’s first captain.

“I started as a fireman and then started running which I did for quite a few years; then I took up judging and stuck with it,” Alan said.

“I’m a community-minded person; I just like to help out where I can,” he said.

Wayne Geisler joined the Kotupna brigade when he was 16, about 35 years ago and is currently a state judge and president of the District 22 rural championship committee.

“The championships are an important part of the CFA,” he said. “They’re a good way to get junior members involved and interested and I’ve seen a few go on to become volunteers.”

A member of the St James brigade since 1971, Neil Lonie was involved with the demonstration team from the start and has been part of the District 22 championship committee since 1985.

“I’ve been involved for 48 years and still want to be in it for a bit yet; I’ll make the milestone of 50 years and hopefully a bit more,” he said.

“It’s great to be able to train kids for the demos and then see them get the confidence to go on and fight fires. The championships give the kids good work ethics.”

All four recipients said they didn’t set out to get recognition but were humbled by the awards.

VFBV Board member and State Councillor Graeme Jilbert presented the VFBV Gold Star medals.

The first VFBV Gold Star was awarded in 1969 to WM Reid from Mooroopna Fire Brigade which is also in District 22. Since 1969 there have only been 1460 VFBV Gold Stars presented.

VFBV CEO Andrew Ford described volunteers as the cornerstone of local communities and said their experience and willingness to drop everything to provide vital surge capacity to communities in need made a huge contribution to the safety and response capacity of CFA and the protection of Victoria.

CAPTION: Wayne Geisler, Neil Lonie, VFBV Board member Graeme Jilbert, Al Hendy, Phillip Ross-Soden.

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