



May, 2017

MEDIA RELEASE

VOLUNTEER RECALLS HOW SURGE CAPACITY SAVES LIVES

Jim Buchan has seen first-hand how the volunteer capacity of the CFA can save lives and properties.

The 30-year volunteer veteran just has to think back to the 2003 Eldorado fire to understand how manpower from across the state helped to prevent a bad situation from getting worse.

Mr Buchan is now worried that the potential split of services could impact on volunteer capacity in the future.

The Eldorado brigade community safety coordinator says that without local CFA volunteers and support from volunteers across Victoria and Melbourne it's hard to know what might have happened with the 2003 blaze.

Over the life of the fire there were 270 brigades involved, including relief crews, numerous private units, seven helicopters, four fixed wing water bombers, equipment and manpower from Parks Victoria and many bulldozers and water trucks along with 115 fire fighters from South Australia.

Strike teams came to support local firefighters from the Bellarine Peninsula, Dandenong, Caroline Springs, Broadford, Cockatoo and Daylesford among other areas.

"At that time there were fires all over the north-east so there was a lot of equipment already in this part of Victoria," he said.

"It shows how the surge capacity of CFA volunteers helps out when needed," Mr Buchan said.

The fire destroyed 10,500 hectares and claimed only one unoccupied house. "Without the volunteers this fire could have been so much worse," Mr Buchan said.

The fire started on January 21 on a day of Total Fire Ban and followed months of hot and dry weather. Earlier more than 100 fires started on January 8 sparked by lightning in what became known as the northeast fires.

Mr Buchan said that as soon as he saw the smoke column on January 21 he knew there would be trouble. "I had heard reports of unusual fire behaviour this season due to the extremely dry fuel and atmosphere," he said.

As then captain of the Eldorado brigade, Mr Buchan was finally able to declare the Eldorado fire as stopped on February 15.

All these years later he remains impressed by the volunteer support that helped contain the fire. "It was amazing when you think that the other fires were still going," he said.

Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria CEO Andrew Ford said volunteers play a vital role in developing community connections, capacity and resilience.

"Our dedicated volunteers are continuing a great Australian tradition that is well respected in our communities," Mr Ford said.

Mr Ford said the Eldorado fires were a stark reminder of the importance of CFA volunteers, not just in country Victoria but also Melbourne's outer metropolitan areas.

Ends