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MEDIA RELEASE

MARYKNOLL PREPARES FOR EARLY SEASON FIRES

Maryknoll Fire Brigade volunteer captain Peta Waterhouse knows all too well that you have to be ready for an early fire season.

Two years ago on October 6, 2015 the Maryknoll brigade lead a concerted effort of 180 CFA volunteers to save the town from a quickly spreading fire.

The volunteer brigade again has its systems in place for another fire season and is helping the community to prepare by hosting a free pizza night and bushfire information session at the Maryknoll Fire Station from 6.30pm on Friday October 27.

In 2015 the fire hit on the first Total Fire Ban of the season.

“As a group we were prepared with strike teams ready to go if something happened, but because it was early in the season we didn’t actually expect it,” Captain Waterhouse said.

A teacher, Captain Waterhouse was on lunch yard duty when she noticed the winds pick up. During her last class for the day the pager went off. “When it’s in Maryknoll your heart starts beating,” she said. “It was too close for comfort.”

The brigade had two trucks ready to go; the first went to the paged fire address and Captain Waterhouse took the second to a vantage point.

“When we came up to the vantage point it turned out to be the head of the fire,” she said.

She promptly cancelled school buses and called for extra support.

Maryknoll has a three-brigade response to its calls with back-up from neighbouring Nar-Nar Goon and Tynong volunteer brigades.

“We had four trucks but obviously that wasn’t going to be enough so we got more trucks on the road, plus air support,” Captain Waterhouse said.

“It’s quite bushy in the area and right on the edge of town so we wanted to attack it quickly. With the wind pushing, it was going to go through the town and we had to stop it before it got there.”

The grass at the time was quite green but the fire spread quickly, especially in the trees.

The CFA's well-established surge capacity came to the fore with 29 brigades, 180 volunteers and 42 fire trucks fighting the blaze and strike teams, the majority coming from the outer metro area of Melbourne, arranged to protect the town.

They were aided by a wind change. "The wind change pushed the fire back onto itself," Captain Waterhouse said. "If it had been an hour later a few of the houses in Maryknoll might not have survived."

"The fire backed on to several of our members' properties so we had a few anxious members," she added.

Captain Waterhouse said it wasn't unusual for the Maryknoll brigade to join strike teams at this time of the year and the 2017-18 fire season is starting to heat up.

"At this stage, things are drying out very quickly and it looks like it's going to be an early and busy fire season," she said.

The volunteer brigade has been undertaking regular summer pre-training and is encouraging property owners to prepare their properties for the season.

"This is the busiest time for getting our skills up," Captain Waterhouse said. "The trucks are always ready to go and so are we, but we make sure everything is in top working condition ready to go at this time of year."

Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria CEO Andrew Ford said volunteers like those at Maryknoll are essential to public safety and provide a professional service that is effective and affordable.

"Maryknoll is a fully volunteer brigade servicing a very busy fire risk environment, working alongside, supporting and being supported by surrounding brigades with paid firefighters and volunteers working together to keep the community safe," Mr Ford said.

"The 2015 Maryknoll fire is a perfect example of how the surge capacity of CFA volunteers helps out when needed," he added.

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