

From the Chief Officer

Number 125 - 13 October 2014



The Upcoming Fire Season

This week, fire and emergency agencies were briefed on the bushfire risk by the Weather Bureau. Much of Victoria has seen below average rainfall in the last 10 months. Across parts of the State, August and September were both very much below average rainfall. The forecast is for below average rainfall in October. Forecast maximum temperatures are higher than average. What does this mean? It means that the bush is drier now than it normally is. This may herald an earlier start to the fire season. Higher temperatures and dry conditions may result in more intense fires. Long term rainfall deficiency is resulting in less rainfall runoff. Surface water supplies (dams and tanks) are lower than normal. NOW is the time to get ready for the summer season – bushfires and heatwaves.

Fire Danger Period Commences In District 18

Confirming the drying of the Mallee and Wimmera, the first Fire Danger Period for the fire season will commence in Yarriambiack, Mildura, Swan hill and Buloke local government areas on 27 October 2014.

Strike Teams: Balancing Risk and What We Do

Strike teams are the most organised element of a developing fire fight, in contrast to the dynamic environment in which they must work and operate. Strike teams are the best resource available in a developing fire. Strike teams are a complete force embedded with leadership, safety in numbers and resources and communication capability.

Getting the strike teams deployed onto the fire ground quickly enables the strike team leaders to accrue valuable information, to be used to further inform incident management. For example, any action on the fire ground, even if it is blacking out, is valuable work that can be undertaken until they are redeployed to a critical phase of the fire fight. Currently, the practice is to hold strike teams until sufficient information is accrued by incident management controllers and then they are deployed. This potentially disempowers strike team leaders from being a valuable resource in assisting to develop incident action plans.

The principle and development of strike teams has been one of the great achievements of CFA post the Ash Wednesday era. The skill and professionalism of strike teams is universally accepted. All that we have to do is utilise efficiently and effectively the skill of this highly capable resource.

However, it seems that we are not utilising this resource in a timely and efficient manner.

In the last few years, we have seen an increasing commentary and criticism about the effectiveness of our management of Strike Teams. Volunteers go on Strike Teams because there is a job to be done. They want to be deployed quickly, tasked efficiently, work hard then return home – hopefully fed and watered. But here are some quotes from conversations I have had with members of the public and from some of our senior volunteers:

- *“You said you were going to be there at our house with us, but just before the fire hit, all the strike teams were withdrawn to the Staging Area.”* [Far East Gippsland resident]
- *“The rule book has become too heavy. Rules got in the way of other rules. Rules are now used to beat up firefighters. We need to distil rules into principles”* [Tom Harbour, US Forest Service]
- *“The State Control Priorities highlight the protection of life, but they don’t pay enough attention to the protection of farm assets – our sheds, our fences, our livestock and our foodstock.”* [East Gippsland farmer]
- *“There is an absence of a culture that values privateers (private farmer firefighting units). They are useful, you know”.* [Farmer from Mickleham fire area]

“We are volunteers of necessity. We want to protect our own properties and protect the people in our community. All we want is to be allowed to have a go, to have a crack at it.”
– CFA Group Officer



- “CFA Strike Teams seem to have a culture where they rally and then wait.” [Farmer from Mickleham fire area]
- “We send people off urgently to the fire. They are directed to the Staging Area where they are registered, briefed, fed, then tasked.” “It took 5 hours to get to the fire after a 6 o’clock start.” [CFA Group Officer]
- “We used to go to fight the fire. We don’t seem to do that anymore. We seem to be over-managed and under-worked.” [CFA Group Officer]
- There is a “general unrest on waste of volunteer’s time going on strike teams.”.... We “must treat our people better or they will stop coming.” [DPC discussion paper]

These are a few of many comments that I have read or written down over the last 6 months. They are not my words – I have faithfully recorded them from others. We need to be humble and accept these comments. They have been made to me to prompt positive change and action to improve our systems of work – particularly around the use, management and tasking of strike teams.

I want to use this column (and maybe a few more) to start a conversation about how we can improve our management of strike teams.

Whilst I do not have all the answers, there are a number of points we need to keep in mind: Firstly, that **the “primacy of life” includes the safety of emergency services personnel**. But in doing so, we need to recognise that the job we do and the environment that we operate in, is inherently risky. We manage and mitigate these risks through engineering controls, protective equipment and procedures. In some cases we will determine that the risks of taking any action are so great, that we will withdraw and adopt more defensive strategies.

This balance between taking action but managing risks is tricky. **The Ten Standard Fire Orders say: “Fight fire aggressively, having provided for safety first.”** The fire and emergency service agencies have recently reviewed and re-issued a **Dynamic Risk Assessment** process that is intended to assist operational personnel to rapidly and effectively assess risk in order to decide on appropriate actions and controls. Dynamic Risk Assessment is a continuous assessment process that recognises that operational circumstance can and do change rapidly.

The public and our own members (rightly) expect us to quickly and vigorously attack new fire starts and actively spreading fires. I often use the term: **“Hit new fires hard and hit them fast.”** This resonates well with all our people. The most recent version of the Victorian Bushfire Handbook includes the following (very important) words:

“The intent is to minimise the impacts of emergencies and enable affected communities to focus on their recovery as early as practicable.” ... and ... **“First response (also known as initial attack) to fires and other emergencies will be fast, determined and thorough and will take precedence over normal agency activities.”** [Page 1 of the Victorian Bushfire Handbook 2014].

These words all build a case for the urgency of how we respond to new fires. However, I ask if we need to re-focus on our guidance in respect of Strike Team support to large or developing fires. My comments are less directed at the firefighters on the back of the truck, but more to how we manage and command these scarce resources once they are formed and deployed.