

## **DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION, FORESTS AND LANDS VICTORIA**

### **Summary of Significant Events – 1984/85 Fire Season**

**Presented to the AUSTRALIAN ASSOCIATION OF RURAL FIRE AUTHORITIES  
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#### **NEW DEPARTMENT**

Firefighting in State forest, national parks and protected public land in Victoria is now controlled by the Department of Conservation, Forests and Lands. The Department is an amalgamation of former agencies, viz Forests Commission, Lands Department (part), Fisheries and Wildlife (part), National Parks Service, Soil Conservation Authority and Ministry for Conservation (Part). It exercises its legal responsibilities with respect to fire prevention and suppression through the Forests Act 1958 which, pending review and consideration by Parliament, remains in place.

The total resources of the new Department comprising some 4,500 people and a great deal of equipment and other resources are available for firefighting and close support services. Only some of the people from agencies other than the former Forests Commission had previous firefighting experience. Two hundred (200) training schools were conducted to introduce many of the others to the basics of firefighting prior to the fire season. Now that the fire season is over this training program is being continued and broadened to improve skills at all levels.

#### **THE FIRE SEASON**

The 1984/85 fire season was preceded by good rain in late Winter-early Spring which produced excellent crops of grass throughout most of the State. Summer months were very dry and the North-East of Victoria experienced the same drought that affected the south east slopes and southern tablelands of NSW.

In mid-January an unprecedented number of fires started from lightning strikes. One hundred and eleven (111) such fires started on public land between late afternoon on 14 January and 0900 hours the next day.

At the same time these fires occurred the Department was heavily involved in assisting the Country fire Authority with major fires at Anakie, Werribee gorge, Avoca, Broadford and Beechworth.

As well as the fires which started in Victoria, a large fire at Dora Dora in New South Wales entered Victoria on a wide front near Mt Lawson between Thologolong and Burrowye and burnt 7,600 hectares before being brought under control on 19 January. Another large fire at Khancoban, NSW, threatened Victoria for several days.

Many of the lightning strikes in forest areas started in remote, inaccessible mountain country where firefighting was difficult, hazardous and time-consuming. They burnt more than 150,000 ha and had a perimeter in excess of 1,000 km before they were brought under control. About one-third of the perimeter had to be established and held in steep mountain country where there was no conventional access.

An unprecedented effort was made in the Buffalo National Park to minimise environmental damage by the wildfire and firefighting. Ground crews supported by helicopters and fixed-wing firebombers constructed control lines on steep rocky escarpments and successfully held the fire out of sensitive areas and ski slopes. This section was undoubtedly the most costly firefighting per unit length of fireline ever undertaken in Victoria. The effort was justified by the result. Much of the Park is unburnt and that part which was burnt by backfire was burnt by fires of relatively low intensity.

The campaign mounted to fight the fires was the largest ever undertaken against forest fires in Victoria. At the peak of the campaign more than 3,000 people were on the firefronts and in close support including 2,000 from the Department, 500 CFA volunteers, 449 Armed Services personnel, 120 sawmill employees and 50 State Electricity Commission employees. Major equipment used included 75 bulldozers, 400 tankers, 20 helicopters and 16 fixed-wing aircraft.

The fires were brought under control without any help from the weather. The campaign lasted two weeks and cost approx. \$7 million (Excluding contribution by Armed Services).

Whilst the fight was going on the potential for damage to life, property and forest values from the fires, was enormous. For a period of two weeks settlements at Harrierville, Freeburg, Bright, Porepunkah and down the Ovens Valley as far as Myrtleford, were directly threatened as were tourist facilities on Mt Buffalo and Mt Hotham. The Mt Lawson fire near Tallangatta was a "half day's run" from the Department's pine plantations at Koetong. The fires in the Mallee threatened farmland. The Mt Murray fire was poised to cross the Wongungarra River onto the Dargo High Plains.

The area burnt and losses incurred in the most significant fires are summarised as follows:

**Summary of significant Fires, January 1985**

<i>Name of Fire</i>	<i>Area Burnt in hectares</i>	<i>% Private Property</i>
Mt Buffalo	51 400	
Mt Sugarloaf	4 600	
Mt Murray	800	
Wabonga Plateau	18 500	9
The Bluff	2 300	
The Governors	300	
Mt Lawson	7 600	12
Coleman Creek	2 200	
Werrimull	28 600	
Patchewollock	19 900	30
Wyperfeld	12 700	
Swan Lake	1 300	

NB: CFA fires – Anakie, Werribee Gorge, Beechworth, Broadford and Avoca/Maryborough are excluded from these figures.

**LOSSES**

- Houses – 1 unoccupied
  - Fencing – some lost in Mallee and at Wabonga
  - Vehicles: 3 Departmental
    - 1 hired
    - 1 tanker rolled - \$1500 damage.
  - Dozers - \$250 000 damage to Departmental and hired (incl. two destroyed)
  - State plantations
    - 1100 ha P. radiata Moses Creek }
    - 200 ha P. radiata Rose Valley } cost \$1.2 million
  - Private plantations
    - 40 ha P. radiata Rose River
    - 25 ha P. radiata Buckland River
- All the commercial sized P. radiata killed in the fires will be salvaged.

**TECHNOLOGY**

Two developments, previously researched and tested operationally, “came of age” in the 1984/85 season, viz:

(I) **Infra-red scanner**

The scanner, mounted in a Kingair 200C aircraft was used to monitor the spread of all the major fires and the progress of backburning. Scanning was usually done between midnight and 0200 hours and the imagery made available to the fire controller by 0500 hours. This enabled firefighting tactics to be developed well before the day shifts were due to leave base camps. Victorian forest firefighters have rarely ever had such accurate and detailed information available to them at that time of the day.

Operational costs of the system are high, viz approximately \$1500 per day plus \$1250/hour flying time. The cost is justified only when the information obtained cannot be gathered by cheaper means and the fire controller is in a position to make effective use of the information.

(II) **Helitack**

- (a) Fire bombing. Three Bell 205s fitted with Canadian built belly-tanks were used for firebombing – often to provide close support for ground crews working the fire edge. Their ability to pick up from small dams, tanks or streams, their short turn-around time and accuracy made them very effective firefighting tools.
- (b) Rappelling. Specially equipped and trained crews, usually in multiples of 4 or 6 were lowered from Bell 212 helicopters to attack small fires in remote locations. They were also used to construct helipads at larger fires where there were no vehicle tracks and all fire crews and supplies had to be ferried in and out by helicopter.