

Badja Fire Edge Community

Information from Zoom bushfire information session with Marty Webster, 24 October 2020

1. Background

Marty Webster is the Community Safety Officer of the Bega Valley Rural Fire Service. He's the man who was interviewed on Facebook each day by Ian Campbell of the Bega Valley Shire Council during the Black Summer fires, to tell us about the situation as it unfolded.

Marty agreed to take part in a Zoom information session, where he responded to a document of questions from workshops of road groups in the Badja Fire Edge Community as well as questions from individual members of the community.

About 40 members of the community attended the Zoom information session with Marty and asked some additional questions during the session via the Zoom chat function.

Here's what we learned from Marty during the session.

2. Preparations for the 2020-2021 bushfire season and what was learned from the Black Summer fires

2.1. This fire season

Forests and vegetation are much wetter going into this fire season – about drought factor 5 at present compared to drought factor 10 (the maximum dryness) going into the previous fire season.

Also, 58 per cent of the Bega Valley land area burned in the Black Summer fires – almost all of the valley's forests. So the fuel loads going into this fire season are far less.

If things dry out we could still have short, sharp fires, but we won't see the massive fires of the previous season. The largest worry for the RFS is the grasslands in the south of the valley – around Candelo and Wollumla, and up towards Bemboka – particularly where there's African lovegrass, and where farmers haven't yet restocked after the drought, so that with the rains the pastures are long and, if it dries out, there could be grass fires.

2.2. Lessons from the fires

What the RFS learned from Black Summer is that things can be worse than previously imagined – so many fires going on for so long and causing so much destruction. Black Summer was very hard on the RFS, and its members are still suffering the aftermath. The community is also still greatly suffering. RFS volunteers and staff are still tired, disoriented.

Now, however, we know how bad it can get, and so it won't come as such a shock. The main lesson from the fires is how to cope with a 'campaign fire' – self-management and resilience – making the most of days when the fire risk is less – switching off and not obsessing – just doing what we can.

3. Evacuation points, fire stations and local RFS areas

3.1. Which RFS area?

If you live between two RFS areas and want to help one of them (e.g., as a volunteer), choose the one you feel the greatest connection with.

The RFS can always use volunteers; there are lots of roles that don't involve getting on to a fire truck. For example, people to help with logistics such as getting food to the crews are always needed.

If you're wondering which RFS station will respond when you have a fire, the RFS dispatchers choose the station(s) to send crews based on the information about the fire, location of the fire and the crew's average response time. For a big fire a number of stations will be asked to respond.

3.2. Fire refuges and evacuation centres

Decisions about fire refuges and evacuation centres are made by the Local Emergency Management Committee (LEMC) depending on the type of emergency and the situation at the time. For this reason the LEMC doesn't like to provide lists of refuges and evacuation centres in advance. It does maintain a list of places suitable for refuges in different emergencies, to hold more or fewer people as needed.

The LEMC has representatives of the police, State Emergency Service, shire council and the power agencies, plus the RFS. In an emergency it has an emergency operations centre. The shire council facilitates the LEMC, and it's chaired by the operation controller – generally a senior police officer.

3.3. Safer fire stations

On the suggestion of making the Bermagui RFS fire station safer (possibly meaning, as a refuge), Marty replied that in general evacuation centres and fire refuges should be separate, so that the RFS and its vehicles can come and go without being impeded by evacuees or with risk to evacuees being near the vehicles. In some small towns it may be necessary to use the fire station as a refuge, but in Bermagui with its several large facilities surrounded by lawns, this isn't necessary.

3.4. Too many tourists?

In response to a question whether Bermagui should limit the number of tourists coming here in summer, Marty observed that Black Summer was the first time a 'tourist leave now' zone had been used in NSW – and many tourism operators were unhappy. In a bushfire the RFS can make recommendations about people's safety to the Emergency Operations Committee, and if the committee decides people need to be made to leave for their safety, the police can make them leave.

4. Clearing/hazard reduction

4.1. How hazard reduction burning works

Each local government area has a bushfire risk management plan, which involves identifying a range of assets, their level of risk and assigning treatments to mitigate the risk. Treatments include:

- using machines (e.g., mowers, slashers) to clear vegetation in 'asset protection zones' (30 to 50 metres from a dwelling where people live regularly)
- hazard reduction burning in the 'strategic fire advantage zone' outside that – a band of land around settlements; and
- in the 'land management zones' further from settlements, mainly burns for ecological purposes.

To carry out a hazard reduction burn, the RFS can now apply for an environmental approval using the Bushfire Environmental Assessment Code. This has simplified the process of obtaining environmental approval, but still means that there are some constraints on hazard reduction burning.

4.2. Why isn't more hazard reduction burning happening around here?

After so much of the Bega Valley was burnt last summer, the RFS is refraining from doing much hazard reduction burning here at present, because it would add to the huge area that has just been burnt – and which will be building up to a fuel load again in 2024 and 2025. 'We don't want an environment where all our fuels are the same age.'

How long to leave an area unburnt depends on the vegetation types. In the strategic fire advantage zones (see 4.1) the environment is sacrificed somewhat to mitigate risk.

4.3. What about cool 'mosaic' burning?

Marty supports cool 'mosaic' burning, particularly where Aboriginal people with knowledge of traditional burning techniques contribute to training and planning the burns. The RFS has collaborated with the Bega Aboriginal Land Council, and has done some training in traditional burning with Merrimans Local Aboriginal Land Council and the Gulaga-Biamanga Management Board. They're currently running the Hotspots traditional burning training program at Black Range, to equip people with basic skills in using fire in tune with the environment – fire as part of an overall land management strategy.

For the RFS, it would be challenging to get enough hazard reduction burning done using these techniques. However, Marty encouraged the Badja Fire Edge Community to contact local Aboriginal burning experts to find out about setting up our own training program with a view to doing our own cool mosaic burns.

4.4. Clearing of road verges on evacuation routes

This is the responsibility of the shire council, who do it primarily to ensure that motorists can see the road and can see pedestrians.

People shouldn't be evacuating at the last minute: they should either evacuate in good time or else stay and defend. Driving through a fire is extremely risky.

4.5. Can owners of private properties with high fuel loads be made to have a burn?

As to whether owners of private property can be made to have a hazard reduction burn, Marty said that the RFS conducts hazard assessments to identify risks to people near properties or to the residents on the property themselves. The RFS can require people to have a hazard reduction burn or to have mechanical work done to reduce the fuel load. Marty prefers mechanical work as this is easier to get to happen. Nine times out of ten this means not bulldozers but a combination of brush cutters, chainsaws and rakes. 'You can actually create a worse situation by over-clearing.'

4.6. Are pittosporum, black wattle, ti tree a fire risk?

In response to a question whether the rapid growth of pittosporum is a fire risk, Marty told us that pittosporum is actually somewhat fire retardant because it's relatively full of moisture – that's why pittosporum crackles and hisses when thrown on a bonfire – because it's wet. Pittosporum don't like fires – it tends to kill them – they don't handle hazard reduction burns well.

Black wattle grows back quickly after fires. For the first few years its green stalks aren't good fuel; after five years black wattle becomes more straggly and problematic; when it's 10 to 15 years old it falls over and then breaks down quickly once on the ground.

Ti tree and other melaleucas lose branches that end up as fuel on the ground. They tend to form a monoculture and there's a gap between the ground layer and the canopy.

5. Fire trails, fire breaks and road access

5.1. Are fire trails and firebreaks being maintained?

These matters are overseen by the shire's Bushfire Management Committee, which comprises the land management agencies and firefighting agencies, and meets quarterly. The Commissioner of the Rural Fire Service makes sure that fire trails are maintained across the different land types that the trails traverse, and there's funding for the maintenance. (Legislation to ensure this was enacted in 2016.) There can be difficulties persuading private landowners to enter the necessary agreement and add the fire trail on to the property title.

5.2. *Can Alexander Drive be upgraded?*

On the suggestion that Alexander Drive, Bermagui be upgraded so that there's a complete ring road around the town (for fire defence and evacuations), Marty told us that this suggestion is an item at the 5 November Bushfire Management Committee meeting, and he'll let us know what the outcome is.

6. **Communications**

6.1. *More accurate, up-to-date information on fires, weather*

The Fires Near Me app will probably have more accurate and up-to-date information in future. The information comes from crews on the ground and infrared 'line scan' machines carried by aircraft, which can see the fire fronts. During the Black Summer fires there were days when it was too dangerous to fly, so that the fire maps were sometimes vague. There are now more line scan machines and better information from small aircraft with improved forward-looking infrared cameras. So as that information comes through more frequently, Fires Near Me will be more accurate and up to date.

Weather information on the Far South Coast should also get somewhat more accurate, as the RFS is investing in portable weather stations to feed data into the Bureau of Meteorology's systems.

6.2. *Can we stop telecommunications going down in a fire?*

There's no guarantee the telecommunications won't go down again in a future fire, as the repeater stations have to be on top of hills where the fire is hottest. Work is under way to make those structures more resilient and to shield their cables better. Also possibly in a few years telecommunications will be through geostationary satellites, which will be out of reach of the fires.

6.3. *What'sApp as a communication channel for road groups*

Marty agreed that What'sApp is a useful way to communicate (as long as telecommunications don't go down). During the fire he and other RFS staff found it good to have What'sApp as a communication channel separate from emails and phones, which sometimes got cluttered.

6.4. *Where to leave information for the RFS if you evacuate*

The best way to leave information for the RFS is a note taped to your front door, stating whether the occupants have evacuated and, if so, where they've gone. It's also helpful if the note gives directions to any water tanks and fire fighting pumps on the property.

7. **Bushfire Prevention Corps**

Marty thinks this is a great suggestion. There's a similar initiative happening in Canada. It can engage university students who have their summer vacations across the worst of the fire season.

8. **Our own fire fighting, fire bunkers**

Marty is an advocate for staying and defending except on days when the risk is too great. The RFS can't be everywhere at once. To stay and defend you need to be strong and fit, well equipped and trained, and with a good plan. The RFS is happy to work with communities to upskill us.

On fire bunkers, Marty told us that an Australian standard for these hasn't yet been established. He advises home owners to think carefully about why they're putting one in. It may be a better investment to make the house as a whole more fireproof.