

News and Fire Advice from the West Gidge VBFB Jan/Feb 2010

What a season so far. Gidge Brigades have so far probably attended more incidents than the past 2 seasons combined, with a number of fires in Gidgegannup and assisting at many fires in other parts of the City of Swan including at Brigadoon. While not part of the initial response to Toodyay, each Gidge Brigade did send units as requested later.

The Toodyay fire resulted in the greatest loss of property from bushfire in WA since the 1961 Dwellingup fires and with the Dandaragan/Badgingarra fire occurring simultaneously really stretched resources.

A common denominator this season has been the very active fire behaviour with soils drier than normal and consistently high temperatures with this summer looking like being the hottest in the Perth Region since records began, and the longest spell without significant rain in many years.

Total Fire Bans

These have been imposed on several occasions and generally compliance has been good in Gidge. Bans are applied when conditions are such that fires would be very difficult to control, or if incidents are already really stretching response resources.

TFBs are promulgated on the FESA website www.fesa.wa.gov.au, also **1300 657 209**. They are usually announced with weather forecasts which should be passed on by the media. ABC radio 720 am is a very good source of fire related advice including TFBs. You should check for TFB status on the day concerned, as sometimes TFBs can be applied at short notice due to changing conditions.

Restrictions during TFBs include bans on operation of vehicles and machinery in paddocks and bushland, welding or grinding in the open air, solid fuel fires (including for cooking) in the open air, use of gas appliances except in designated areas and any other activity likely to start a bushfire.

Exemptions apply for ensuring essential stock or human welfare but any vehicle or tractor used MUST be accompanied by a fire unit or be a fire unit itself. Note that a fire unit under the Bushfires Act must have at least 400 lts water, have a hose at least 15 metres in length and at least 19mm diameter, have an adjustable jet/spray nozzle and have an efficient pump. It can be a "slip-on" or trailer unit that is actually carried or towed by the vehicle or tractor which is operating under this exemption.

Certain other exemptions can be applied for well in advance.

Penalties for Non Compliance can be up to \$25,000 and/or 12 months jail

However please don't let the fact that there is no Total Fire Ban on any particular day relax your vigilance. Some of the activities banned during TFBs should be only carried out with extreme care and discretion on many non TFB days during the fire season.

Fires and Machinery

Machinery has been implicated in starting a number of bushfires in the City of Swan this season. This has been due to breakdowns, sparking from rocks, sparks from exhausts and accumulation of flammable debris and/or oil around hot components. Ride on mowers have caused at least 3 of these.

Where possible machinery operation in paddocks or bushland should be avoided during the hotter parts of the day, and totally avoided if possible on higher risk days.

Please be reminded that under the Bushfires Act all tractors, self propelled harvesters, bulldozers, graders, loaders and certain other types of machinery etc must have vertical or near vertical exhausts with appropriate spark arrestors fitted unless specifically exempted.

In addition some types of machinery, especially dozers and graders, are required to carry fire extinguishers (under the Bushfires Act a minimum of 7.5 lts water and a pump to deliver it). A stored pressure 9 ltr water extinguisher or a knapsack spray comply. A dry powder extinguisher, while great for extinguishing machinery fires, does not cover the Bushfires Act requirement. CO2 extinguishers are virtually useless in the open air.

Some items of machinery such as chaffcutters require 150 lts water to be immediately available. If your machinery causes a bushfire, as well as the penalties under the Bushfires Act, you could be open to civil action from other property owners who suffer losses as a result if your machinery does not comply. It is your responsibility to check the requirements for your machinery.

Property Preparation for Bushfire – Frustrated Firefighters

Feedback from firefighters involved in recent bushfires impacting on property has shown considerable frustration that there are still many property owners in some areas who could have done far more to make it easier for firefighters to protect their properties. This also exposes firefighters to additional risks and may have contributed to the smoke inhalation cases experienced at the Brigadoon fire. Typical concerns are

- High levels of fuels such as long dry grass, bush and trees close to buildings
- Pastures in general not adequately grazed down or slashed
- Lack of appropriate hazard management in bushland areas
- Firebreaks poorly maintained
- Poor access into properties, narrow heavily vegetated driveways, vehicles parked to hinder access, yards so cluttered as to prevent or restrict fire units from manoeuvring.
- Flammable material such as timber, firewood etc stacked against or close to buildings, under decking etc
- Leaves filling gutters and accumulated against structures.

PLEASE HELP FIREFIGHTERS TO HELP YOU BY PREPARING YOUR PROPERTY.

Expect renewed focus on firebreak compliance and hazard reduction from Local Government in the near future. Is your property up to scratch?

Prepare, Act, Survive

Recent fires have seen some residents effectively apply their **Bushfire Survival Plan**. Others have just relied on luck and efforts by others. You are strongly advised to set up a Bushfire Readiness Group for your immediate area or if not at least have your own robust Bushfire Survival Plan. Contact your local Bushfire Readiness Coordinator for advice.

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Airconditioners and Fire Risk

FESA has reported many structure fires sparked by air conditioners in the past few weeks. A common cause is breakdown through simple wear and tear and susceptibility to overheating. Airconditioners should be properly installed, well maintained and serviced.

Evaporative airconditioners are particularly susceptible to ember attack from a nearby bushfire. The filter pads are often flammable and once alight burning debris will be sucked into the house setting it alight. There have been cases of this happening from bushfires that never get nearer than 1km or so. If there is a bushfire in the vicinity you should shut the airconditioner down but leave the water running through the system if possible to keep the filter pads wet. It is also possible to screen the pads with ember resistant screens and/or to fit non flammable filter pads. With split system air conditioners you should clear away debris, leaves, spider webs and other material from around the outdoor motor unit.