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Fire tower staff on guard in bushfire defence

2019 - Matt Deans

Scanning the bush from a fire tower 45-metres above the ground, Sally Knox is the first line of defence for the Central West when it comes to bushfire.

One of Forestry Corporation's newest recruits, Sally has recently started as a fire tower operator based in Bathurst.

The fire tower team will be watching over the forest estate this summer alerting ground crews to rising smoke.

It is an important career calling given that most of the bushfires contained in the state forests of the Central West are initially spotted from the towers.

"I have spent a few shifts in the Sunny Corner tower and watched a couple of fires," Sally said.

"I have to say there's a level of pressure with the job. I feel the weight of responsibility, but it's also satisfying work knowing I could potentially save someone's property or someone's life by spotting a fire before it takes off.

"When the winds pick up you certainly feel that responsibility."

Taking in 360-degree views of the forest canopy, fire tower operators also relay important weather updates to the Fire Duty Officer.

"We do weather observations every hour and report those across radio," Sally said.

"I like to do them half an hour beforehand so I can see the consistency in the average daytime temperature, wind speed, wind direction and the relative humidity.

"We use all this information to calculate the Fire Behaviour Index, which is a measure that has been in place in NSW since the 2019-2020 bushfires. We put together all this important information to get an accurate reading on the bushfire risk.

Three days into the job and Sally faced her first big test in the towers.

"Climbing up the Shooters Hill tower in strong winds was extreme. It was 60 to 65km/h wind gusts. It took a lot longer than normal due to the winds, but it was also the first time I have had to harness on since I completed my working at heights course," Sally said.

"There are many great things about this job. The landscapes are beautiful, it's a workplace with a great view. Before I found the position, I told myself the next job I am going to get would be one where I can enjoy the outdoors as I came from a desk job. So yes, this has been a stark contrast. It's unlike any other job I have ever worked," she said.

Dave Anderson, Stewardship and Fire Supervisor for the Bathurst Management Area, said Forestry Corporation will rely on 18 seasonal and contracted staff in the Central West this bushfire season to complement Forestry's staff firefighting ranks.

"It is very important to have seasonal firefighters and fire tower operators assisting Forestry Corporation during the fire season. While all Forestry Corporation staff members serve in firefighting

and fire support capacities the intake of seasonal firefighters allows us to fill our firefighting standby rosters to make sure we have firefighters ready to respond at any point,” Dave said.

“In the Bathurst area, just about every fire in the forest is spotted from the fire towers. The towers are invaluable assets for the Central West.

“The fire towers are important in the landscape - when we notice smoke, we can figure out where the fire is and alert our other firefighting agencies such as the Rural Fire Service and National Parks and Wildlife.

“Early warning on bushfires is vital and early suppression is often so important allowing us to act quick and stop small fires spreading into large uncontrolled bushfires,” he said.

To find out more about seasonal firefighting positions or for more information about Forestry Corporation of NSW, visit forestrycorporation.com.au

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