

On Fire

Southern Rural Fire Authority Winter Newsletter 2010



Athol VRFF Profile

The first attempt by Southland County Council to form a volunteer fire brigade in Athol was about 1954/55 and resulted in a public meeting with unknown success. At the time the County was forming a large number of brigades around Southland and equipping them with trailer pumps.

A letter dated 17 March 1971 to the County Clerk of the Southland County Council from DS Winefield, of Athol, advised a meeting was attended by 25 men from the Athol – Garston area and they had agreed to proceed with the formation of a fire brigade for the district.

At this time the call-out method was through the local store, which would then ring around the area, starting with the closest volunteers. Two separate Fire Chiefs had been elected for the single brigade, one being based in Athol and the second in Garston, each handling fires in their areas co-operatively.

On 2 October 1980, a major fire broke out and as a result the Garston store and part of the pub were burnt down. Difficulties were experienced in controlling the fire and highlighted the need for better organized fire forces in both Athol and Garston.

On 24 October 1980, a meeting was held in Garston to form its own rural fire force under the Queenstown Lakes County Council, the territorial authority at the time. Five men volunteered their services for the newly formed fire force.

Athol also reformed its force at this time under the Southland County Council, responsible for Athol, and assisting Garston when required.



Athol's first tanker a 4x4 Bedford donated by D. McKnight and converted into a tanker in 1982.



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Athol fire station in 2007 with the J20 Jeep and the Hino appliance briefly located at Athol.

Purpose of this *newsletter*

This newsletter is to let those involved with the Southern Rural Fire Authority know what is going on around the area. We would like to focus on a Volunteer Rural Fire Force in each newsletter and any other news items.

If you have an article and/or pictures you wish to contribute please let Deputy Principal Rural Fire Officer Elton Smith know.



A Thames Trader fire appliance was purchased from the NZ Fire Service in 1981. The appliance had previously been in service with the Balfour fire brigade. Following this in 1982 a 4x4 Bedford truck, which had been donated by D. McKnight, was converted into a water tanker with a water tank donated by the Southland County Council. These appliances were housed in various locations over the years until 1987 when the current fire station was constructed on land donated by the then Rabbit Board which had maintained a workshop located next door.

In 1988 the Southland County replaced both the Bedford tanker and the Thames Trader fire engine with a 4WD Bedford forestry fire appliance purchased from the NZ Forest Service.

1993 saw a time of change when both the Athol and Garston VRFFs, which both were now responsible to the Southland District Council, were merged to form the Athol - Garston VRFF. This created a single constitution; however both stations were maintained, each with a separate controller. This arrangement continued until 1999 – 2000 when the Athol Garston VRFF was dissolved and each location

was reinstated as separate entities.

In 2003 the Southern Rural Fire Authority took over the control and running of the Athol VRFF. Change came quickly with the addition of a second vehicle, a 1980 J20 Jeep fire appliance, as well as additional training and support for the team. Unfortunately in 2005 the Bedford appliance suffered mechanical problems which ultimately saw its demise. A number of temporary appliances came and went until 2009 when the current brand new Isuzu appliance arrived, paid for by the Southern RFA & National Rural Fire Authority. This compliments the Toyota Hilux also located at Athol, which replaced the J20 Jeep in 2008.

Today the Athol VRFF respond on average to 10 to 20 calls per year. The nature of the calls tends to vary depending on the time of year, with the majority being vegetation fires, medical assists and motor vehicle accidents. All fire fighters within the team are qualified rural fire fighters, with most close to finishing the required unit standards for their level 2 national certificates in fire & rescue services – vegetation, and an additional two completing their level 3 national certificates. This is the result of dedication to structured training over a number of years.



Above - Athol crew attending a bus accident during a snow event in the mid 1990s. A common call of assistance during the winter months

Below - Some of the Athol crew in 2009 during hand-over of Isuzu appliance L-R: Richard Soper, Robert Durling, Barry Skilling, Shane Woods, Winston Soper, Andrew Sellans





Rowallan Fire



– started 27 February 2010

About 4.30pm on 27 February a hunter found a small area of vegetation on fire, alongside Zig Zag Road, 5km inland from the Rarakau homestead and called 111. Within 10 minutes, a fire appliance and SRFA tanker from the Tuatapere Volunteer Fire Brigade responded.

Further calls were received from properties under threat and locals were evacuated, the RFO responded with two helicopters. Additional crews were also mobilized from Blackmount and Drummond Volunteer Rural Fire Forces, and a second SRFA tanker manned by the Otautau VFB, and later a further three helicopters to the original two.

The Tuatapere brigade arrived at 5.20pm and began to size up the situation. It found a rapidly escalating fire 1km long by about 300m wide. Vegetation ranged from commercial pine forest, cutover native vegetation, tall standing native and scrub and gorse. The Deputy PRFO arrived at 5:45pm shortly behind the first helicopter, with the additional crews



Above - SRFA 4x4 tanker manned by the Tuatapere Volunteer Brigade making another trip for water.



Above - View of HMD making a drop on a spot fire which had breached the containment of the creek.



Above - Crew from Te Anau rural fire team working on deep seated burning around the Pines

from Blackmount VRFF and the Otautau tanker arriving shortly after.

During the early stages of the fire some time was spent rounding up local youths, who had arrived by the truck load armed with 24 packs (of beer) and had proceeded down into the fire itself “for a better look”. This was particularly disappointing and tied up crews looking for and removing these people from the fire ground rather than being able to focus on fire suppression. Order was restored once additional police arrived.

Shortly after 9pm, air attack on the fire had ceased due to failing light. At this time the fire was observed to be flanking towards the one property at risk, with the only road in and out compromised, resulting in no safe access to the house by ground crews. It was clear at the time that the chances of saving the property were at best 50% and it would likely be lost.

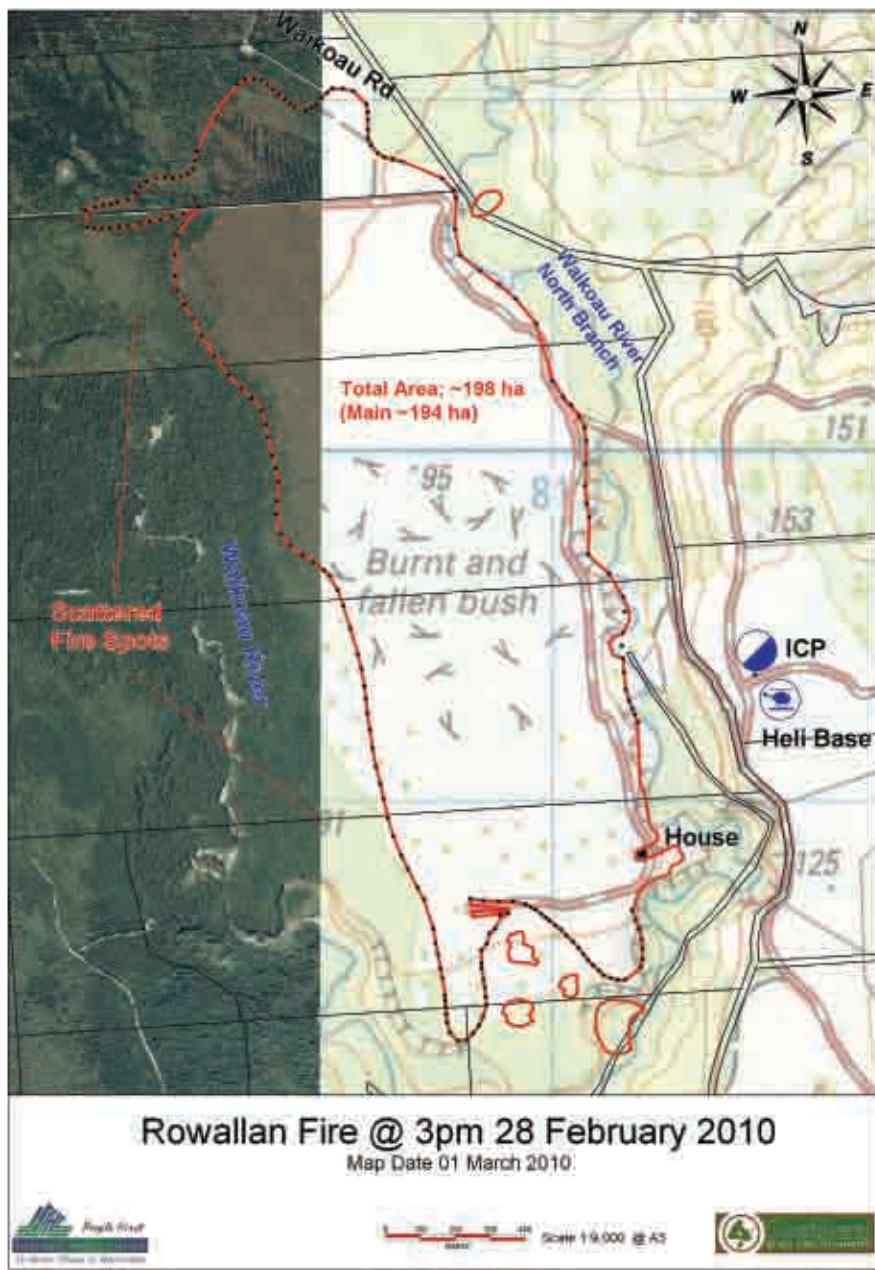
By 10pm, once all remaining aircraft had departed and a brief search for hunters who had been reported missing within the fire ground had been concluded, fire fighters from Otautau, Tuatapere and Drummond were released from the incident. Shortly after this a small crew from Blackmount and Southwood Export, led by Elton Smith, proceeded into the fire towards the house following a reconnaissance. On arrival at the house, there was heavy fire activity surrounding the property with sustained ember attack taking place. This was causing multiple spot fires including the letterbox, fence, gardens, and other “treasures” surrounding the house and out buildings. By midnight the majority of the threat had passed and all

remaining crew soon withdrew from the fire ground overnight.

At 6am operations resumed with 4 helicopters and 50 rural fire fighters from Drummond Hedgehope and Blackmount VRFFs, Southroads fire crew, Heslip Forestry Contracting fire crew, Southwood Export and DoC Invercargill fire crews, along with the Deputy PRFO remaining as the Incident Controller. The conditions of the following day were abysmal with a cold southerly change around 8am bringing some rain and cooler temperatures which did little but make a tough and dirty job even worse.



Crew from Te Anau rural fire team working on deep seated burning around the Pines



An extensive fire break was put in place around the burning block of pines, which was mopped up along the edges and left to burn out under supervision. Significant mop up work was also required to re-establish safe access to the house, whose owner was rather keen to go home and stay home. Over the following weeks numerous flare ups were dealt with and burning spars and dead trees felled to maintain containment. It was three weeks after the initial call until the last resource left the incident. The five involved crews from most parts of the district at some point during the operations. The final area burnt was 198 hectares.

Today the area is still live despite winter rain, with very deep seated burning continuing in some peaty areas. This will continue to be monitored coming into the fire season.



View of the head of the fire at 9:15pm as the remaining aircraft were standing down for the night.



The role of a Duty Rural Fire Officer



Currently we have four duty rural fire officers who are on roster one in every four weeks. The primary role of a duty rural fire officer is to receive and co-ordinate fire response activities in the district.

The duty officer is automatically notified of all vegetation incidents via pager and other incidents when they reach a pre-determined alarm level. RURALSOUT1 will appear on pagers along with other appliance call signs which have been responded during turn out when the duty officer has been notified automatically.

It is absolutely critical that good quality information is passed back through the communications centre (who then pages this to the duty officer). For example sit-reps from the fire ground should detail:

- Location of fire and size
- What is at threat
- Current weather conditions
- Strategy of attack
- Likely incident development
- Any additional resources required

This information gives the duty officer an appreciation of the incident.

When additional assistance is required the duty officer will need to know;

- What type of resource you require (i.e. a rural fire officer or rural fire crews)
- Amount of resource required
- Information on the fire itself (to ensure amount of resource requested is going to be enough to meet the need of the incident)

There is a belief that a rural fire crew will automatically respond to an incident if it has been ongoing for more than one hour. This is not correct. After the first hour the NZ Fire Service starts charging for its time at an incident, which is passed on to the rural fire authority.

Where NZ Fire Service crews are in attendance at an incident and believe they need assistance or cannot commit for the likely duration of the incident, they request rural fire to attend by going back through the communications centre (the duty rural fire officer will already have been notified and be waiting on direction from those at the incident).



Fleet *news*

The third water tanker is nearing completion, with work on the remaining electrical work, locker fit outs and installation of radios taking place.

This tanker will be located with the Riversdale Volunteer Fire Brigade and will replace the current tanker located there. The former Riversdale tanker will then be relocated to the Waikaia fire station, replacing the 1981 D series Ford which had previously been based with the Gore Brigade.

A light fire appliance concept design is currently being worked on to compliment resources located with our volunteer rural fire forces, with the aim of standardization of the fleet. There will be two variants based on National Rural Fire Authority rural fire appliance categories, one designed for troop and equipment transport (no water) and one for troop and initial response capabilities (with water).

The first of these vehicles will be going to Garston Volunteer Rural Fire Force later this year, and replaces the 1974 Chevrolet which unfortunately has already been removed from service due to mechanical issues.



Southwood Export *controlled burns*

Southern RFA crews from Athol and Blackmount VRFFs, Heslip Forestry Contracting fire crew and the Deputy PRFO assisted Southwood Export with two separate burns this year.

The first was approximately 40 hectares of logging slash near Dipton and the second 30 hectares near Nightcaps a couple of weeks apart. Both sites had previously been sprayed off by helicopter resulting in a large amount of dead dry grass and other light fuels throughout the blocks.

In both burns the blocks were surrounded on three sides by further plantation forest. Full burn plans had previously been prepared by Southwood Export and approved by SRFA staff.



Above - Warren Heslip from HFC fire crew on the Southern sector of the Nightcaps burn. Below left - Lighting up along the Western sector. Below right - View looking up the Western sector as the crews meet up in the Northern sector having lit all sides of the burn.





Update on Training - *Elton Smith*



Between October 2009 and June 2010 I have completed 299 individual competent assessments with various rural fire fighters around the district.

These assessments took place over 18 nights with Volunteer Rural Fire Forces (there went most of my Monday nights!) and 33 days of contractor and agency training, totalling 2248 man hours.

The total number of assessments was higher however, with some fire fighters not meeting the all the requirements of the particular unit standard. An example of this is of the 65 people who were assessed in 17279 (CIMS level 2), 57 have obtained the unit standard. The remaining 8 people are currently working through the remaining portions of the unit standard they missed out on.

Breakdowns of the total competent assessment are as followed;

Number of fire fighters	UNIT STANDARD
36	3270 – Establish and deliver water supplies for fire fighting
40	21417 – Operate light portable pumps
42	4573 – Communicate in the outdoors using two way radios
63	3278 – Recognise command structures of emergency services
57	17279 – Level 2 CIMS (Coordinated incident management system)
21	3287 – Use water and water additives at vegetation fires
20	14555 – Carry out external attack on vehicle and structure fires
6	3286 – Dry fire fighting
14	3285 – Protect personal safety at vegetation fires.



Kerry Tuna climbing a “Tidey looking hill” (steeper than it looks) complete with a hose pack



Southroads Lumsden rural fire crew doing what they do best – making tracks



Replay pump crew humping in a Wajax pump kit to the top of a hill.



Some like it hot... Marty, Glen and Richard from the Te Anau rural fire crew do what they do best and pose.





Burning down the house

In April, 20 fire fighters from Athol, Garston, Blackmount, Milford Sound, Hedgehope, Drummond and Beaumont Volunteer Rural Fire Forces attended a controlled house burn located in Andrews Forest in the Otapiri Gorge.

This was assisted by Fire Service Trainer Dean Lightenburg and was well received by all those that attended.

