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Three decades of smoke spotting Eyes in the sky

BY SHERYL LOWE

SIRENS are often the first warning most people receive of a fire in the region; however, one specially trained officer will notice a fire and alert Forest Fire Management Victoria before emergency services are activated.

For the past 30 years, Vernon Collings has been a Fire Lookout Observer.

One of the most important jobs in the region, with one of the best views, he watches for any sign of smoke.

Perched at the highest point above Stawell, he has a bird's-eye view of the Grampians as he continually scans the area for any sign of smoke.

"It's the best view in the world," he said.

His job description is simple: detect smoke.

However, a trained eye and his full attention are also required, as well as the ability to tell the difference between smoke and haze and act quickly at the first sight of smoke.

The job means you are on duty when you are needed, especially during summer, regardless of anything else.

The day shifts are eight hours long or as needed, depending on the weather conditions.

"During the summer months, there are more tour-



Fire Lookout Observer Vernon Collings at work keeping an eye on the region from his tower at Stawell during fire season. Picture by Sheryl Lowe

ists and holidaymakers in the area, so the likelihood of a fire can increase; more people mean more risk," he said.

"I haven't had many Christmas Day lunches at home over the 30 years but that's okay, I have mine later after my shift."

Night shifts were trialled

years ago, but there was no perception of depth to gauge where the smoke was in the night sky accurately, so they only operate from the towers during the day.

However, Fire Lookout Observers may soon be assisted by the use of Artificial Intelligence.

Testing is underway in Victoria to explore how AI can be used to detect bushfires early and keep communities safe.

It will assess the reliability and timeliness of smoke-detecting AI software using 24/7 ground cameras mounted on specific fire lookouts across

the state and configured to detect only smoke.

One of these systems will operate from Big Hill Lookout in Stawell for the 2024-25 fire season.

It's part of a \$1.5 million investment from both the federal and Victorian Government for the trial to help

better prepare and protect communities for the fire season ahead.

Mr Collings said any system that can help detect smoke early is an advantage, but he doesn't envisage a time when cameras will replace people.

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NEWS

Vernon looks back at time in tower

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"You still need people on the ground," he said.

In his three decades on the job, technology has been the most significant change he has seen in fire prevention and management.

"It has advanced in leaps and bounds," he said. "This is a good thing; it can help. Even improving our computers and systems makes the job more effective."

"When I started this job, we weren't using aircraft; it was a new concept then, but their introduction has meant crews get to fires quicker and to places you can't reach by land. The aircraft is undoubtedly easier and faster."

While he is talking, he is continually scanning the horizon.

"Over there is Mt William and Halls Gap," he said. "From up here, you get an appreciation for the area, but seeing it from the air is even more incredible."

Before watching the world from his advantage point, Mr Collings volunteered with the CFA for 50 years and worked at Best Wines.

An accident during a fire, which injured both wrists, meant he couldn't continue working actively on the ground.

Working in the industry as a Fire Lookout Observer was an excellent opportunity



The view from the fire tower in Stawell overlooking the town towards the Grampians covered in a haze. Picture by Sheryl Lowe

for him to continue what he loved doing: helping keep the community safe.

The tower at Stawell was opened in 1964 and upgraded in 1997 with an official opening by the Police and Emergency Services minister, Bill McGrath on September 9, 1997,

Federal Emergency Management Minister Senator Jenny McAllister said new technology has the potential to transform disaster preparation and response.

"The early bushfire technology deployed in this trial could help authorities detect

and suppress bushfires before they impact communities," she said.

Forest Fire Management Victoria is conducting the trial, which is funded by the government's Disaster Ready Fund.

The software and cameras will support the work of FFMVic's Fire Lookout Observers, who work across 64 fire lookouts - especially at times when lookouts aren't staffed after hours or due to health and safety concerns such as operating or climbing in the dark and extreme weather conditions.

Bryce Dridan ordered to stand trial over three dangerous driving charges

The driver of a modified ute that ploughed into a spectator at a burnout event in Stawell will stand trial, a court has determined.

On Thursday Magistrate Guillaume Bailin handed down his ruling in the committal hearing of Bryce Dridan, 29.

Dridan faces three dangerous driving charges over his alleged role in a November 4, 2023, spectator death at the LOO5E-NATS burnout event in Stawell.

It's alleged that Dridan drove dangerously while performing burnouts at the motorsports event, failed to register with the event organisers and ignored safety protocols at the site.

Police say Dridan's brakes likely failed while he was performing a burnout, resulting in him taking the ute off the burnout pad and eventually into spectator 18-year-old Trent DeZoete

Police further allege Dridan ignored directions from fire marshalls at the site and barricades he could have used to stop the car, instead taking the car into a food court area.

The four-day proceeding heard from 11 witnesses, including multiple attendees at the LOO5ENATS event, a toxicologist, investigating police members and the passenger of Dridan's car.

After hearing the evidence, Magistrate Bailin decided the case was fit to go to trial, and took Dridan's plea to the three charges.

He pled not guilty on all counts.

The matter will proceed to a pre-trial directions hearing in the County Court on January 23, 2025.

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