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Like a lighthouse keeper, Murray Ferguson sits high above the land, scanning the horizon for signs of trouble. But unlike the lighthouse keepers of times past, he gets to go home every night. And he's scanning a horizon of bushland instead of sea.

Murray has been the Mount Cowley fire tower operator for 23 years. He sits in a box perched on a telephone exchange tower, looking out for signs of bushfire in the Otways.

While he missed Ash Wednesday in 1983, Murray has seen many small bushfires beginning in his time. He feels safe in his office at the highest point on the Otways, but he can't help feeling nervous when there's lightning about on a dry day.

"We get the odd fire; our main problem in the summertime is lightning," he says. "That's our biggest trouble. If we get thunderstorms coming through and we get lightning, it can keep us fairly busy, plotting out where they land and if anything starts, well, it's all on."

When Murray's keen eyes spot smoke in an often remote location, he then kicks off the Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) response.

"We have three towers spread across the Otways, one's on the eastern end, the other on the western end and Mount Cowley is right in the middle," he says. "If we get a smoke sighting we can usually cross bearings with one of the other towers, that gives us pretty well a general location. Once we see smoke, one of us reports it back to Colac [the regional DSE office]. We're mostly there to monitor any outbreak of fire. Inside the cabin we have a compass bearing. If we find smoke anywhere we take our bearings from that, we get a rough location and the distance from the tower. Then that is relayed back to our main office...then it's left to them to handle."

With the Great Otway National Park and Otway Forest Park being tipped to burn in the two summers previous, Murray wonders what's in store this season.

"Up until now it's been fairly mild on the top here," he says. "But once you get towards the coast, towards Airey's Inlet, Anglesea and Lorne, that area is always dry. You only want a bad day, and it doesn't take much to start that country down there on a bad day. It's very dry at this stage. [But] I'd say it's not as bad as last year; last year was extremely dry. But we're starting to get into our dangerous period now."

Murray first started his job as a tower operator on a 12-month contract; it wasn't something he could see himself doing for longer. Now into his 23rd year, doesn't he get bored up there in his cabin?

"Some people say it gets boring but we never get bored up there," he says. "We've always got one another to talk to; there's always something going on. We can watch the ships go along the coast so we're all right."

There's always the beautiful view as well, being surrounded by the Otway ranges with the ocean in the distance.

"The tower looks out to everything from Anglesea, to the Princes Highway, back toward Lavers Hill...and back along the Great Ocean Road."

Murray has seen the technology change over the time he's worked in the tower.

"Our radius system has improved a great lot since I first started," he explains. "Today we get a lot more aircraft into the jobs. If I spot anything and the Colac office is concerned about it they don't take long to get an aircraft into the area. The trouble with the Otways is, a lot of it is rough terrain. If we get lightning strikes or a fire starts in it, it makes it very difficult to get crews in. They get helicopters in pretty quick and if I need any back-up assistance, we've always got a surveillance aircraft that will fly around on a bad day."



Murray Ferguson has been the Mount Cowley fire tower operator for 23 years. (Jarrod Watt)