



Noojee News

Edition 10

Your Community Newsletter

Summer 2025

A day in the life of a fire spotter...



By Colin Booth

On the peak of Mount Toorongo stands an 18-metre tall observation tower. The tower is part of a network of towers across the state located on prominent peaks and high points as part of a state-wide early detection network, operated by the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA). Their purpose is to observe the surrounding landscape for the first hint of smoke.

Built in 1969 to replace a two story hut, the Mount Toorongo tower is one of two managed and operated from DEECA's Noojee depot. This summer, the responsibility for the tower falls to Martin Pumpa, now in his fourth year of keeping watch over the district's forests.

A typical day for Martin usually begins in a fairly routine way. After arriving, the first task is to get the binoculars out and scan the area for any signs of smoke. If all is clear, he completes a weather report and checks that the radios and other equipment are functioning properly. On a quiet day, a few coffees may be needed throughout the shift to help him stay alert. Most of the day is spent scanning the bush for smoke, keeping in touch with neighbouring towers and completing another weather report later in the day. Monitoring the weather is also a big part of the job. Lightning is a major cause of bushfires, so knowing where storms are likely to occur and keeping a close eye on those areas is very important.

When smoke is first sighted, the immediate task is to take a bearing from the tower's location. Neighbouring towers are then contacted and made aware of the sighting. Those towers, if they can also see the smoke, take their own bearings and together they use the two or three reference points to triangulate and pinpoint the fire's exact location.

The more towers that can see the smoke, the easier the task is to identify its precise position. But sometimes other towers have cloud cover or the smoke is too faint. This can make pinpointing a location quite challenging. When that happens, Martin relies on his maps, binoculars and his observations of the surrounding terrain — roads, farms, ridgelines, hills and mountain peaks to estimate a location. This method often gives an approximate position rather than a precise one.

In these circumstances, a DEECA ground crew or spotting aircraft is deployed to confirm the exact location. Once the location is confirmed a plan can be developed for the best way to manage the fire. The tower continues to monitor the smoke closely, tracking its movement, size and behaviour throughout the day.

Some stretches can remain completely quiet with weeks passing without a single sighting. Other days are far busier. When lightning has occurred in the area over the previous few days, it can be particularly challenging as several small fires may be smouldering undetected and only become visible as the day warms up.

Despite the challenges, Martin finds the role rewarding, "Playing an important role in protecting the bush and surrounding communities is very rewarding. Working in the bush and having a great view is also rewarding. It's a decent office being on top of a mountain," he said.



The Noojee News acknowledges the original inhabitants and traditional custodians of Noojee and surrounds and pays respect to Elders past, present and First Peoples of Australia who live in this district.