

Former RFS volunteer Ricky Kenneth Ballard-Lestrangle refused bail after allegedly putting homes, including his own, in danger by lighting two bushfires at Nabiac

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13 Feb 2017, 3:47 p.m.

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ACCUSED: Ricky Kenneth Ballard-Lestrage has been charged with lighting two fires near Nabiac.

A FORMER firefighter who stands accused of lighting two bushfires within a few kilometres of his own home during Sunday's heatwave admitted he knew the blazes would "go stupid" and could even put his own property in danger, but lit them anyway because children who were with him "like fire trucks", a court has heard.

Ricky Kenneth Ballard-Lestrage, 32, was refused bail on Monday, with Taree Local Court hearing a friend had taken a photograph of the accused's dashboard just minutes before he allegedly lit the two blazes near Nabiac – the image depicting a temperature gauge reading 47.5 degrees.

Mr Ballard-Lestrage, a former Rural Fire Service volunteer who spent five years in the organisation until resigning in 2007, was one of three males, including a 13-year-old boy, who were charged with lighting fires despite the warnings of horrendous conditions.

The charges attracted the wrath of RFS Commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons, who slammed the alleged offenders for the "heinous crimes".

"How dare they," he said.

"You put the lives of our firefighters at risk. How dare anybody add to the extraordinary conditions we're experiencing."

The court heard Mr Ballard-Lestrangle had two young children with him when he drove along Darganvilles Road, near Dyers Crossing, and stopped to allow one of the children to go to the toilet while the suspected firebug smoked a cigarette.



It was then he decided to use a lighter to ignite some grass and leaves.

Police facts tendered in court alleged Mr Ballard-Lestrangle had driven four kilometres along the rural road before stopping near a turf farm and using the lighter to spark another blaze.

A witness allegedly saw a man leave the area before seeing flames and smoke billowing from the bush about 3.30pm.

Fire crews were able to extinguish both blazes before they took hold, one fire burning about two hectares of bush and grass and the other approximately one hectare.

Mr Ballard-Lestrangle was arrested about 30 minutes later and allegedly admitting to starting both fires in an interview with police, stating one of two children who were with him at the time "likes fire trucks".

"The accused stated he was aware that given the high temperature, low humidity and dry grass that the fire would spread rapidly, would "go stupid" and be difficult to control," the facts sheet alleged.

"The accused stated that at worst his house, that is located four kilometres (in a direct line) from the second fire could have burnt down, along with other rural properties between his house and the fire.

"Police submit that given the prevailing fire weather, the accused person's knowledge of fire and how it spreads, along with his admissions as to the potential for property damage, his actions are at the higher end of objective seriousness regarding [the] offences charged."

Manning-Great Lakes detectives charged Mr Ballard-Lestrangle with two counts of intentionally cause fire and be reckless as to its spread, a charge which carries a maximum 14 years in jail.

He was refused bail on Monday and will reappear in Taree Local Court on February 21.