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Ricky Ballard-Lestrangle jailed for 22 months for lighting two bushfires at Nabiac

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Ricky Kenneth Ballard-Lestrangle sentenced for lighting two bushfires near Nabiac.

A FORMER firefighter who lit two bushfires near Nabiac during 45-degree heat because the children with him “liked fire trucks” has been jailed for a maximum of nearly two years and ordered to pay more than \$14,000 in compensation.

Ricky Kenneth Ballard-Lestrage, 32, appeared in Taree Local Court via audio visual link on Monday where he was sentenced to serve at least 12 months in jail after pleading guilty to two counts of intentionally cause fire and be reckless as to its spread.

He was also ordered to pay a total of \$14,460 in compensation to two landowners affected by the fires.

Ballard-Lestrage lit the two bushfires within a few kilometres of his own home as temperatures surpassed 45 degrees on February 12, and admitted to police he knew the blazes would “go stupid” and could even put his own property in danger.

But he lit them anyway because the children who were with him “liked fire trucks”.

The former NSW Rural Fire Service volunteer, who spent five years in the organisation until resigning in 2007, 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 he smoked a cigarette.

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

Ballard-Lestrage then drove four kilometres along the rural road before stopping near a turf farm and using the lighter to spark another blaze.

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-Lestrage was arrested about 30 minutes later and admitted to starting both fires in an interview with police, stating one of two children who were with him at the time “liked fire trucks”.

Ballard-Lestrage was one of three people charged with lighting bushfires across NSW during a catastrophic heatwave in February.

The arrests prompted an outburst from Rural Fire Service Commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons, who slammed the offenders for the “heinous crimes”.

“How dare they,” Commissioner Fitzsimmons said.

“You put the lives of our firefighters at risk.

“How dare anybody add to the extraordinary conditions we’re experiencing.”