

WINE NEWS

Fire spotting people might be old technology but it still works well

ABC Mid North Coast By Kerrin Thomas

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PHOTO: Jesse Beaumont has finished his first summer as a fire spotter and hopes to come back next year. (ABC News: Kerrin Thomas)

You don't have a desk, fridge or bathroom but those who do this job say it's worth it.

Welcome to fire spotting.

Jesse Beaumont is one of Forestry Corporation of NSW's (Forestry) newest recruits to the job on the NSW mid north coast.

He's just finished his first summer term and said the view was his favourite part of the job.

"It's good to come up here in the morning, see the morning haze, and throughout the day see how everything changes, cloud coverage, dew, and how clear it gets," he said.

"You can see really far out, and then in the afternoon the sun goes down and [you see] the pretty colours in the sky."



PHOTO: Karel 'Zeb' Zejbrlik is proud of son Jesse's work as a fire spotter. (ABC News: Kerrin Thomas)

Forest protection manager, and Jesse's dad, Karel 'Zeb' Zejbrlik said the job was all about good surveillance.

"There's no point having a fire get going until it's big and people can see it from miles away and then trying to get to it," he said.

"If we can get on it quickly we've got a whole lot better chance of putting it out so that's why we have the people up there in the towers — they're our eyes in the forest."

Eyes on the bush



PHOTO: Bearings are marked on the tower to help with reporting sightings of smoke. (ABC News: Kerrin Thomas)

Forestry operates a network of almost 50 fire-spotting towers across NSW.

"We just keep a lookout, keep watch, look for any smoke sightings and write it down if we can," Mr Beaumont said.

"If we do see smoke we watch it for five to 10 minutes just to make sure what it's doing so when we report it in we can give them a straight answer."



PHOTO: The team uses bearings from at least two towers to determine the location of fires. (ABC News: Kerrin Thomas)

And it takes more than one spotter to pinpoint the location of a fire.

The towers all have bearings from 0 to 360 degrees marked on them, which correlate to a map in the local fire control centre.

"As soon as they see the smoke, as soon as there's an indication of a fire starting, those spotters are on the radio and we know about it," Mr Zejbrlik said.

"That means we can contact another tower and see if they can see the smoke and when we get a different bearing we can triangulate those bearings so we get a cross on our map back in the fire room.

"We can tell with a pretty good degree of certainty where that fire is in the landscape and we can react.

"So it's old technology but it works; it still works and it's still applicable today."

Balancing technology and people



PHOTO: The view is the best part of working as a fire spotter, according to Jesse Beaumont. (ABC News: Kerrin Thomas)

Fixed cameras are also used by the NSW Rural Fire Service in a handful of locations across the state to monitor the landscape for smoke and fires.

As well as two towers in the Blue Mountains and in Sydney's north, which are staffed on very high fire danger days, the three cameras, in the Warrumbungles and near Yass in regional NSW, and the Macarthur region in south-west Sydney, have a 360-degree view and pan, tilt and zoom capabilities.

"We don't have to have somebody there and we can log onto the camera and have a look around to see what's going on," Senior Assistant Commissioner, Bruce McDonald, said.

Mr Zejbriik said using people had definite benefits.

"With people you can ask them questions like has there been any change over time, has the colour of the smoke changed, what's the wind doing, has it changed, all kinds of questions we ask to try to get a better idea of where this fire might be or what the fire might be doing," he said.

"People are able to give a lot more interaction and answer any questions the controllers might have."



PHOTO: Jesse Beaumont is one of a dedicated few who spend all day with their eyes on the land around them, keeping a lookout for signs of smoke. (ABC News: Kerrin Thomas)

Topics: fires, disasters-and-accidents, bushfire, forests, rain-forests-and-forest, wauchope-2446

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