

Vollies bear the brunt



❑ WA bushfire volunteers take to the fire front in privately-owned vehicles, saying that the government-supplied trucks are ill-suited to softer, sandier soils. Photo by Gavin Halligan.

By **BROOKE LITTLEWOOD**



WHEN a fire breaks out across rural Western Australia, the first response usually comes with privately-owned machinery pulled straight from the paddock.

Dust-covered utes, front-end loaders, speed tillers or tractors, often fitted with self-funded firefighting units and specialised equipment.

At the wheel are farmers and rural landholders, volunteers who understand the country intimately because they live and work it every day.

They are the backbone of WA's rural firefighting effort.

Across parts of the Wheatbelt, however, some brigades say the official fleet is struggling to match the terrain it is sent into.

Government-supplied fire trucks, they argue, are ill-suited to softer, sandier soils and are often relegated to water cartage, while privately owned vehicles take the front line.

As bushfires grow faster, more complex and frequent, the gap between policy and paddock reality, for many, continues to widen.

It is something being bridged, not by funding or resources, but the machinery, experience and goodwill of volunteers.

❑ A death trap

When a bushfire tore through Mogumber in December, it laid bare what

local brigades have been warning about for years.

Shire of Victoria Plains bushfire control officer, Gavin Halligan, said the issue was not volunteer commitment or training, but terrain.

Mr Halligan likened the sand at Mogumber to talcum powder, country where heavy vehicles can be bogged within metres.

When that happens, it doesn't just slow down the response.

It diverts resources away from the fire front, forcing farm fast-attack vehicles to peel off and protect those that are immobilised, while heavier machinery is brought in to recover them.

In a fast-moving and unpredictable bushfire, which can change direction

and intensity in seconds, that time simply does not exist.

"The government-owned trucks are unsafe, inadequate for the job and desperately need to be upgraded," Mr Halligan said.

"In the right terrain, the trucks do a good job, but in the wrong terrain things can turn ugly quickly.

"These things are a death trap and get bogged without a blink of an eye.

"It happens all the time."

Farmer-owned vehicles, often modified with high-clearance suspension, specialised tyres and custom-built units, continue pushing forward in conditions where tankers hesitate.

In the Shire of Victoria Plains, there are five brigades

❑ Continued on page 6



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2025/26 Season Pricing

Wheat (APW1)	326	332
Wheat (AWW1)	322	321
Canola (CAN1)	755	781
Canola (CAG1)	700	700
Barley (BFED1)	326	330

See Farm Weekly:
(Section 2) Pages 33-35

Prices kindly supplied by



WOOL (c/kg)	This Sale	Last Sale
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17.5m	2235	2219
18 m	2181	2151
18.5 m	2139	2109
19 m	2075	2052
19.5 m	2041	2017
20 m	2019	2001
21 m	2004	1990

AWEX eastern indicator c/kg: 1693

AWEX western indicator c/kg: 1894

CATTLE (c/kg liveweight)

Weaner beef (steers) c/kg:	480	480
Yearling beef (steers) c/kg:	400	400
Cow beef c/kg:	320	320

SHEEP (\$/head)

Heavy lambs (N/S 20kg+ cwt):	280	310
Heavy (26kg cwt) mutton:	260	250
Hoggets (18kg+ cwt):	234	234

AUS \$ (USc)	70.67
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Continued from page 5

and anywhere between 100 and 160 volunteer firefighters, with about 80 per cent being farmers.

This can mean hundreds of thousands of dollars of private machinery operating on the fire ground and creating breaks.

Meanwhile, government-supplied trucks are typically used to protect homes and buildings, or to cart water to fast-attack units.

Mr Halligan questioned the efficiency of sidelining expensive machinery.

"Given the cost of the government-supplied trucks and the appliances onboard, it seems a waste of resources and money," he said.

"But those vehicles are just not suitable for the sandy terrain, and it is not worth the risk.

Mr Halligan said concerns about inadequate equipment had been raised loudly, strongly and often, but had fallen on deaf ears.

Despite repeated calls, he said there had been no response in terms of supplying new or better equipped vehicles.

"(State government) used to put it down to training, but in reality the vehicles need to be changed," Mr Halligan said.

"Our shire is very good at fighting fires – there is a massive push on training and ensuring equipment and gear is up to spec.

"It's about learning how to read the terrain and our volunteers, who live and work on the land, know how to do that better than anyone."

Calls for roundtable

Shire of Victoria Plains president Pauline Bantock said a series of major fires had exposed challenges in tackling blazes in the region's sandy terrain.

She said three significant fires had occurred in the western parts of the shire since 2019, highlighting concerns about the suitability of existing appliances.

"In that sandy country, the local Mogumber-Gillingarra fire truck is simply not suitable," Ms Bantock said.

"The heat of the fire is instead fought by local volunteers in their own private units, which can get in and out of boggy terrain."

Following a December bushfire that burnt 7000ha, and through Central Wheatbelt MP, Lachlan Hunter, The Nationals WA, the Shire is seeking a roundtable discussion with the Emergency

Services Minister Paul Papalia to examine the response and identify improvements.

Ms Bantock said the proposed talks would focus on challenges experienced during the fire, including access to fit-for-purpose firefighting assets and telecommunications.

"The December bushfire was confronting," she said.

"I am a local brigade member myself, and I saw the fear and worry in the faces of other members.

"Investing in fit-for-purpose vehicles directly supports firefighter safety, which is a core priority."

Ms Bantock hoped the request for a roundtable would come to fruition, saying there were lessons to be learned from emergencies faced.

The cost of stepping up

For York farmer Tony Seabrook the decision to use his own truck to fight fires is not ideological, it's practical.

He said government-supplied trucks were over-complicated, restrictive and came with expectations that blurred the line between volunteer and paid professionals.

Once a volunteer is rostered onto an official unit, the flexibility that often makes volunteering possible disappears.

"It's a hell of a responsibility and one you can't get away from," Mr Seabrook said.

"They put you on the roster, but need to remember we are volunteers, not paid firefighters.

"We still have farms and businesses to run, crops to harvest and livestock to look after."

At the same time, using private equipment carries its own risks.

A single call-out can involve machinery worth as much as \$100,000 operating in extreme heat, smoke and dangerous conditions.

If something fails, rolls over or burns, the financial consequences initially sit squarely with the owner, and navigating insurance can be slow, adversarial and deeply frustrating.

Mr Seabrook and his son John designed and built a 12,000-litre, six-wheel-drive, heavy-duty firefighting unit from an old army truck.

It cost about \$100,000, roughly one-sixth of the price of a standard Department of Fire and Emergency Services (DFES) unit.

The Seabrooks' unit was built for purpose, with high clearance, simple systems and high water capacity.

"We have five firefighting units

in total, but that one is the biggest," he said.

"I don't think we have ever actually attacked a fire with it – usually our first job is to fill up smaller units, which are waiting on the burnt fire ground.

"Often among those is the \$600,000 or so DFES truck, which has run out of 4000 litres of water as well."

Mr Seabrook recalled an early morning incident only three weeks ago, when a neighbour put out a call that there was a fire threatening their property.

He said dealing with the bureaucracy of DFES often resulted in triple zero not being called.

"This was not a formal fire call out; this was a neighbour in trouble," Mr Seabrook said.

"My son headed out there at 5am in our own fire truck, because as neighbours and volunteers that's what we do.

"What if there was an accident? What if something went wrong?"

While the Seabrooks do carry insurance, Mr Seabrook said it missed the point.

He said, as a non-



❑ Damage to farm machinery, after a fire at Mogumber in December. Photo by Gavin Halligan.

negotiable, volunteers' insurance should be funded and they should be compensated for any damage to their vehicles, while fighting a fire in good time.

"In reality, and from past experience, when something does go wrong DFES

starts the blame game," Mr Seabrook said.

"Who was in control of the fire? Was the fire reported? Who is at fault?"

"Instead, an onsite assessor should be quickly sent out, someone who is friendly enough to ask what happened, how it happened

and to fill out the form so compensation can be made.

"Not someone who thinks we are trying to manipulate the system and escape taking responsibility."

Beyond the major losses, it's the steady drip out-of-

❑ Continued on page 8

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Farm WEEKLY

Published by:
Western Australian Primary
Industry Press Pty Ltd
ABN 94 009 399 044
Publication No. PP255003/00604
Registered by Australia Post.

Cover price \$6.00 per issue (inc GST)

Annual print subscription:
\$314.60* (inc GST) *Australia only

Annual digital subscription:
\$220.95# (inc GST) #billed annually
upfront

Subscription hotline:
CALL: 1300 131 095

Address: 72 Melville Parade (cnr
Charles St), South Perth, WA 6151

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Vic Park East, WA 6981
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Advertising Rates:

General (inc. colour):
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Continued from page 7

pocket costs that also wears people down.

The tyres, fuel, pumps, hoses, services and repairs – all absorbed by volunteers who are already stretched in their own businesses.

Mr Seabrook said what stung most was not the work itself, but the lack of recognition and protection for those doing it.

He said there was a reliance on the big “spiritedness” of WA’s farming communities to continue doing this.

However, volunteers were feeling angry, unappreciated and a little burnt out.

“The number of farmers in our district has probably halved in the past 15 years,” Mr Seabrook said.

“We are desperately short of people.

“Most of them are under enormous pressure in their own businesses.

“Sometimes we are at fires, with people who are being enormously well remunerated for being there, with deluxe gear, fridges and cold water onboard, all while doing the same job.

“It’s not hard to see why people are starting to feel jaded.

“And, on top of all of this, we are still obligated to pay the emergency services levy, in many cases many times over.”

Investing to keep pace

In Esperance, chief bushfire control officer Phil Longmire has observed a steady shift toward greater private investment in firefighting capability.

This was due to farming businesses becoming more conscious of liability and risk, prompting many to upgrade their own equipment.

As such, the size of privately owned firefighting units has grown markedly in recent years.

“A lot of that comes around by putting people in a safer environment on a proper fire truck,” Mr

Longmire said.

“Units are bigger, they have better firefighting capability and they are safer – that’s probably just a natural progression.”

Ground-engaging equipment such as speed tillers was now routinely incorporated into fire response, he said, reflecting a higher level of organisation and preparation.

While grateful for the infrastructure provided through local brigades, Mr Longmire believes there were practical ways the system could better support volunteers who chose to invest privately.

One option would be to offer decommissioned fire trucks to private buyers with their componentry still intact.

At the moment, when trucks come out of service, they are typically decommissioned and all of the components are removed.

This includes lights and radios, which are only replaced later by private owners for the same purpose.

“When you go to auction, they have generally taken everything off,” Mr Longmire said.

“It would be nice to have the ability to buy those with the units on them.”

He said reducing upfront costs – including stamp duty on registered firefighting equipment, enabling volunteers to purchase components at cost or offering subsidised repairs would encourage further investment.

“If you want people to invest in better equipment, anything that assists them to do that is a good strategy,” Mr Longmire said.

“We will invest in it if it is a low-cost, sensible approach.

“I think a better structure, where people easily register equipment and recover any losses would be beneficial.

“The better invested we are, the faster the response.”

DFES responds

DFES deputy commissioner operations, Craig Waters, said the department provided a range of vehicles designed to operate in sandy and off-road terrain.

He said suitability was regularly assessed through reviews of operational requirements and volunteer feedback.

“Vehicles also undergo modifications which are often aimed at strengthening off-road performance and safety, including automatic tyre inflators/deflators,” Mr Waters said.

“Additionally, DFES provides specialised off-road driver training for optimum performance of heavy vehicles in difficult or sandy terrain.

“During large or complex bushfires, where terrain may limit ground access, DFES deploys a range of fire suppression strategies, including aerial firefighting assets.”

Mr Waters said the department continued to review operational requirements and feedback to ensure vehicles and equipment remain reliable and fit-for-purpose.

He encouraged volunteers to raise concerns through established channels to ensure they can be properly assessed.

When asked about the reliance on privately owned vehicles to fight bushfires, Mr Waters said it was uncommon for DFES to request the use of such machinery.

“DFES maintains contracts with earthmoving machinery suppliers and has agreements in place with mining companies,” Mr Waters said.

“It can also access machinery and resources through the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions.

“With those arrangements in place, DFES said it does not rely on privately-owned machinery from farmers or volunteer firefighters

"However, where operational needs require, an incident management team may engage non-contracted suppliers."

In such cases, he said documentation and induction processes must be completed before work begins to ensure eligibility for coverage under DFES' operations insurance.

With more than 26,000 volunteers Statewide, Mr Waters acknowledged their contribution to volunteer safety.

He recognised that volunteers have primary employment, farming and business responsibilities, and said participation in emergency response was voluntary.

"Volunteers have the right to decline a deployment request at any time," Mr Waters said.

"For those who have deployed to an incident,



□ Tony Seabrook and his son John (pictured) designed and built a 12,000-litre, six-wheel-drive, heavy-duty firefighting unit from an old army truck. Photo by Tony Seabrook.

they may return home or to their workplace when they choose."

Mr Waters said DFES did not rely on the use of farmer-owned machinery for emergency response.

He said the State maintained its own dedicated fleet of appliances, which were allocated across Career

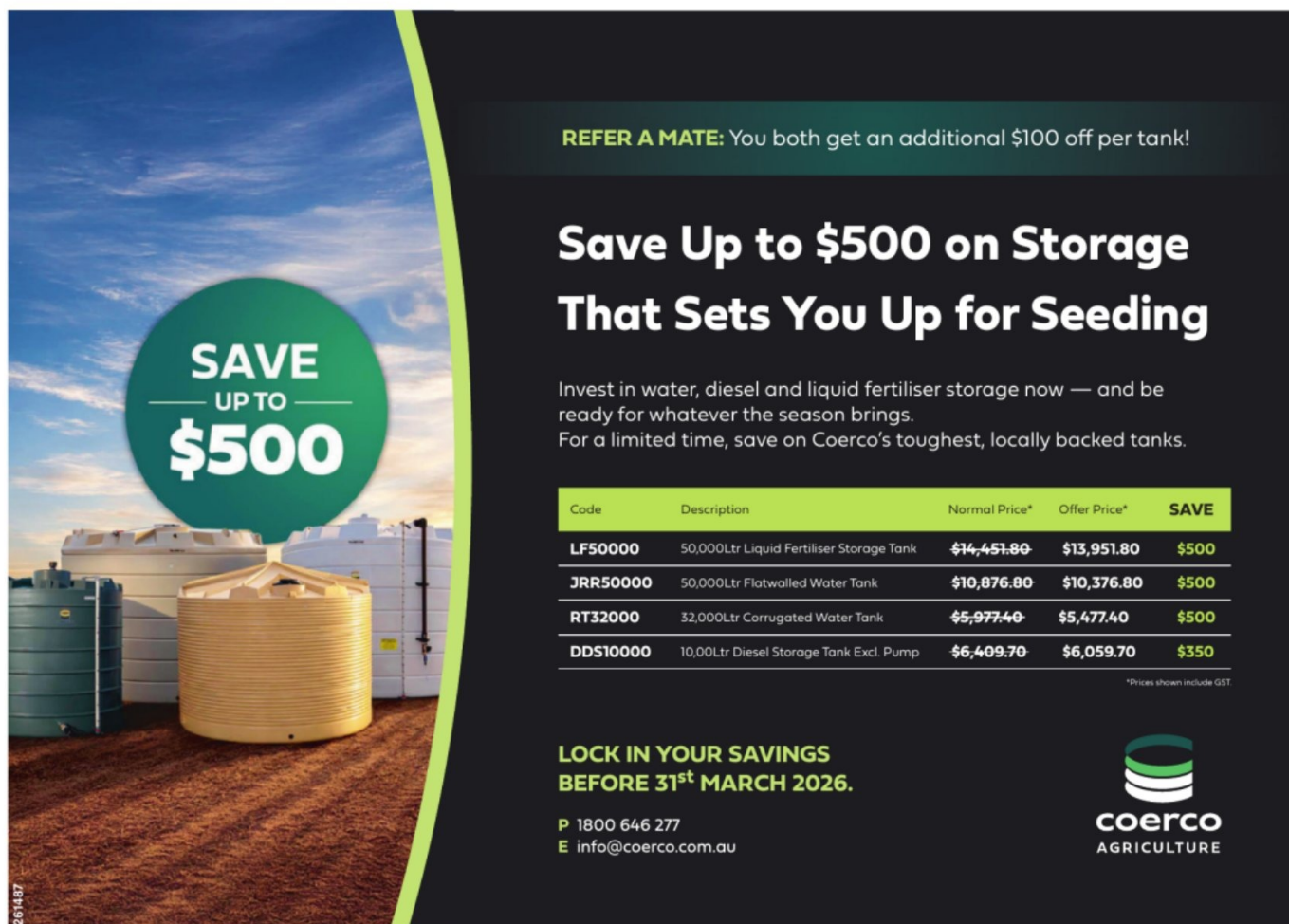
Fire and Rescue Services, the State Operational Support Fleet and volunteer brigades.

In addition to the ground-based resources, WA's emergency response is supported by the State Aerial Suppression Fleet, jointly managed by DFES and the DBCA.

The fleet comprises

38 aircraft providing intelligence, reconnaissance and firefighting capability, particularly during periods of heightened bushfire activity or in hard-to-reach areas.

"These varied resources enable a co-ordinated, scalable response across urban, regional and remote areas of WA," he said.



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