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<b>I am making this submission as</b>	Emergency services
<b>Submission type</b>	Organisation
<b>Organisation making the submission (if applicable)</b>	Milsons Passage Rural Fire Brigade
<b>Your position in the organisation (if applicable)</b>	Captain
<b>Consent to make submission public</b>	Public
<b>Your story</b>	<p>Milsons Passage Rural Fire Brigade (RFB) is a water based brigade of 35 members in the Hawkesbury River settlement of Milsons Passage, on the northern most tip of Hornsby Shire (Postcode 2083). We are a community of 44 properties. We meet as a brigade on a monthly basis for a training day and to prepare equipment and our local area to defend against bushfires.</p> <p>Over the October '19 to January '20 period, we attended Gospers Mountain Fire, Three Mile Fire, Little L Complex Fire, Green Wattle Creek Fire, Good Good Fire in Brooklyn 1 Fire Truck with composite crews including Dangar Island and Brooklyn brigades</p> <p>We also patrolled Hawkesbury River and Mangrove Creek on multiple days as support for Gospers Mountain Fire from Spencer to Wiseman's Ferry in the Milsons Passage RFB Fireboat.</p>

### **1.1 Causes and contributing factors**

As captain and crew leader I got to see first hand fire behaviour. The fires I attended were very travelling and starting very easily due to very hot and dry weather conditions. Embers landing on even the lightest fuel including leaf litter and low grass would take off and spread fast. We attended a number of fires that started by lightening strike. Eleanor Bluff fire in the Ku Ring Gai Chase national park started after I witnessed lightening and thunder over the area that shortly after smoke was sighted.

### **1.2 Preparation and planning**

As a brigade we assist with district Hazard Reductions and we keep our local community prepared and clear of leaves and excessive fuel including around properties, clearing fire trails that run behind all 44 properties backing on to Muogamarra Nature Reserve. As a brigade of the Rural Fire Service we plan on an ongoing basis and ahead of and in the lead up to TOBAN and Catastrophic Weather days for fire threat, by manning the GRN radio network and setting up fire fighting pumps and hoses to cover the 44 properties.

### **1.3 Response to bushfires**

Milsons Passage Crews joined Brooklyn RFB and Dangar Island RFB to form Crews and joined strike teams on Brooklyn 1 Fire Truck to various locations from St Albans, Wollombi, Lithgow, Balmoral, Bilpin, Mittagong, Warragamba Dam, Cooma.

Crews were effective and fully engaged in firefighting and property protection. Crews and strike teams remained agile and responsive to changing fire situation and threats. Everyone remained engaged and positive and focussed on the tasks.

Very long hours sometimes becoming a risk to crew welfare and safety. Everyone was running on adrenalin and wanted to keep working on the tasks. In some cases, particularly the drivers were not well rested and worked 20 hours in a shift.

Milsons Passage Boat Crews: Patrolled Hawkesbury River and Mangrove Creek on multiple days as support for Gaspers Mountain Fire from Spencer to Wiseman's Ferry.

Milsons Passage crews were on standby and were responsive to call outs and requests for patrols. Milsons Passage Boat performed well as a patrol boat being able to reach small shallow waterways and provide SITREPS, weather reports and update sector leaders on fire and smoke behaviour in very heavy smoke drifts where visibility was down to 50-100m.

Crew welfare was challenged with breathing in smoke for long periods at a time, 12 hour shifts in open area heavy smoke. P2 masks were not sufficient to aid breathing fresh air. Milsons Passage boat does not have a cabin or area to retreat to (such as an air conditioned truck cabin).

Milsons Passage Boat does not have a navigation system and skipper and driver relied on visibility and iPhone Google Maps in very heavy smoke drifts where visibility was down to 50-100m. Marine navigation markers were not sufficient (i.e. you could not see one marker to the next marker) and this resulted in vessels running aground in shallow muddy water.

Portable GRN radio coverage is very limited and there are coverage gaps. The boat radio is a bit better.

Milsons Passage TOBAN and Catastrophic Days (local crews): On each declared TOBAN and catastrophic day, Milsons Passage station was manned for 12 hour shifts. Members manned the GRN radios in the brigade station. RFS and CFU members (up to 18 members) enacted the Milsons Passage RFS Plan and set up portable pumps on pontoons in 7 locations along Milsons Passage properties from 1 to 44, with hoses and

firefighting equipment set up to cover the back of every house.

After the first day we identified gaps in equipment to achieve full coverage that were subsequently ordered. Moving equipment along the Passage is aided by the fireboat. Potentially a motorised buggy for firefighting, e.g. Polaris Fire and Rescue vehicle could be useful

<https://military.polaris.com/en-us/applications/fire-and-rescue/>

Milsons Passage station was extremely hot to operate from on TOBAN and catastrophic days. We are planning to install an air conditioning unit as part of the planned station upgrade of facilities.

Milsons Passage Crew attending strike teams as part of Brooklyn 1 Truck gained new skills and experience and particularly as we do not regularly operate on Trucks. It was great that Tim O'Mahony (Brooklyn RFB Captain) made Brooklyn 1 available to composite crews from the three water brigades. This helped with crew availability and scheduling and meant we had the crews and truck on the road in strike teams almost every day of the bushfire season. It also took the load off of Brooklyn RFB to be able to keep crew members at the station for local call outs.

Tim managed a Google Docs spreadsheet that each strike team shift could be seen by each brigade. Captains could add their crew availability. Once a full crew, CL and driver were filled, the truck and crew were submitted to FCC for strike team deployment.

Comms between Hornsby Ku Ring Gai District Fire Control Centre (FCC), Captains and Crews worked well, were open, frequent and helped manage crew expectations and readiness and to allow our crew members to assist in fighting fires across NSW.

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#### 1.4 Any other matters

Improvement processes: What can we do better next time?

1. Crew Hours could be better monitored and managed to ensure firefighters and in particular drivers are not working unacceptably high hours and putting crew safety at risk.
2. Keep doing what we did with the composite crews in Brooklyn 1 Fire Truck in future HR and Bushfire seasons. Improve Google Docs spreadsheet online crew building tools for Brooklyn, Dangar, Milsons Passage crew scheduling worked easily.
3. Milsons Passage boat needs navigation system and better option for crew to breath fresh air in heavy smoke drifts.
4. Crews stepped up when needed and worked long hours (18+ hour shifts) and prolonged periods (daily for several months) including crew scheduling, crew and brigade management and fire fighting.
5. What for many members has always been a commitment of a few days a month to prepare and protect our local community, it transformed in to a full time firefighter role. In a volunteer brigade capacity, and this is probably not sustainable for a volunteer RFB if these bushfire conditions become more regular and more frequent.

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