THE BEECHWORTH–MUDGEGONGA FIRE 14

14 THE BEECHWORTH–MUDGEGONGA FIRE

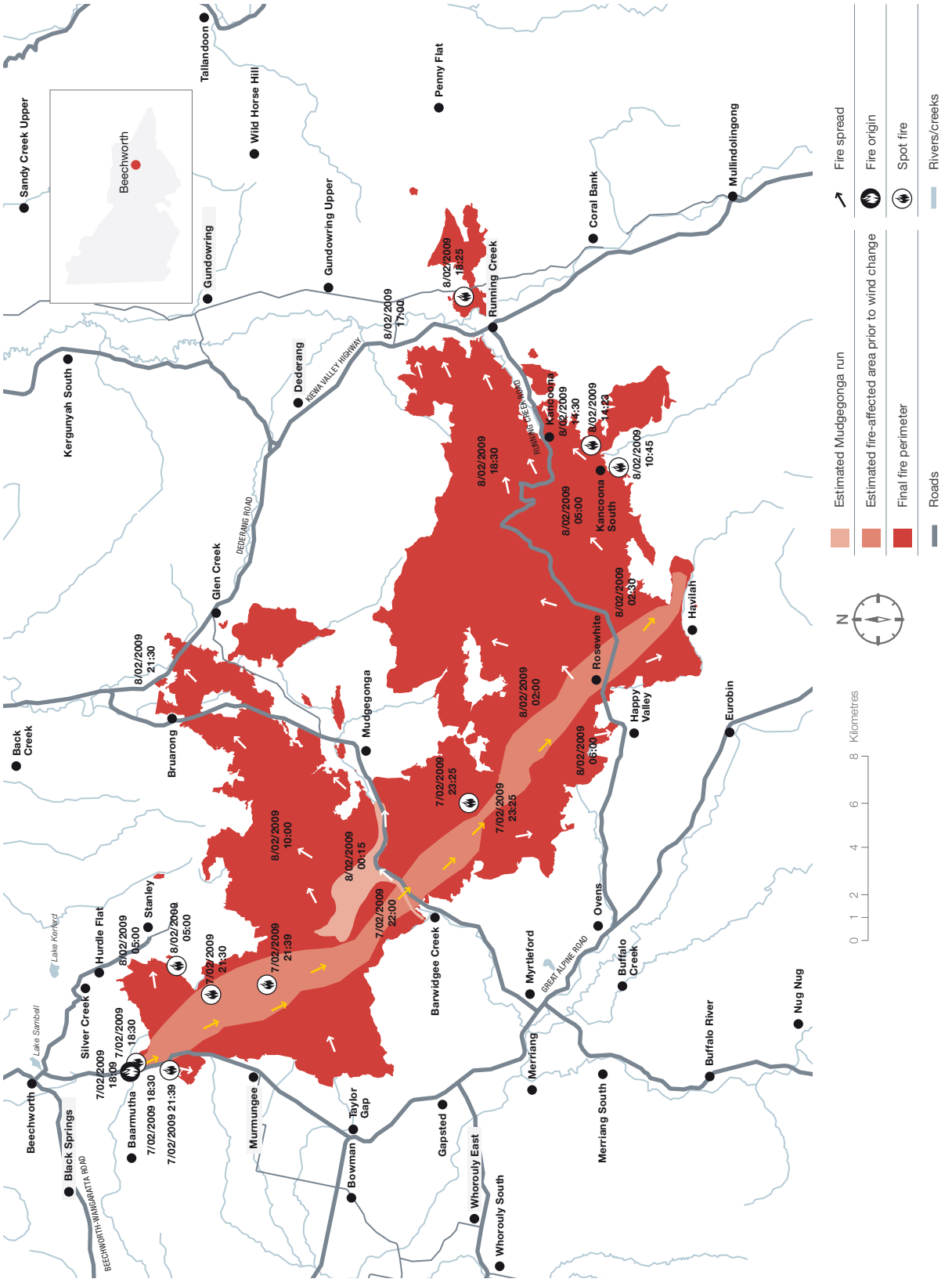
The Beechworth–Mudgegonga area is about 300 kilometres north-east of Melbourne, on the edge of the Alpine National Park and in Indigo Shire.

The 7 February 2009 fire in the area began at about 18:00 and burned fiercely until weather conditions moderated in the early hours of 8 February. The fire was not contained, however, until 16 February. Two people died, 38 houses were damaged or destroyed, and sheds, farming equipment and stock were destroyed. Overall, the fire burnt 33,577 hectares, including about 23,000 hectares of state park. Figure 14.1 shows the extent of the fire.

OVERVIEW

Maximum temperature	The maximum temperature recorded was 45.5°C at Wangaratta automatic weather station at 15:01.[1]
Minimum relative Humidity	The minimum relative humidity recorded was 6 per cent at Wangaratta AWS at 15:01.[2]
Wind	The maximum wind recorded before the wind change was a north-north-westerly at 35 kilometres an hour, gusting to 57 kilometres an hour, at Wangaratta AWS at 14:01.[3] The south-westerly wind change was recorded by the Wangaratta AWS at 23:01 at 20 kilometres an hour.[4] Ahead of the wind change the wind tended back to the north and eased to 15 to 20 kilometres an hour by 01:00 on 8 February.[5]
Fire danger index	The maximum Fire Danger Index was 126 at Wangaratta AWS at 13:30.[6]
Cause	Electrical failure.[7]
Fatalities	Two fatalities.[8]
Casualties	Twelve casualties.[9]
Houses destroyed	Thirty-eight houses.[10]
Overall area burnt	33,577 hectares.[11]
Firefighting resources	On 7 February, 113 CFA and 97 NEO personnel attended the fire. They were supported by 23 CFA appliances, 89 NEO appliances and 2 aircraft.[12]

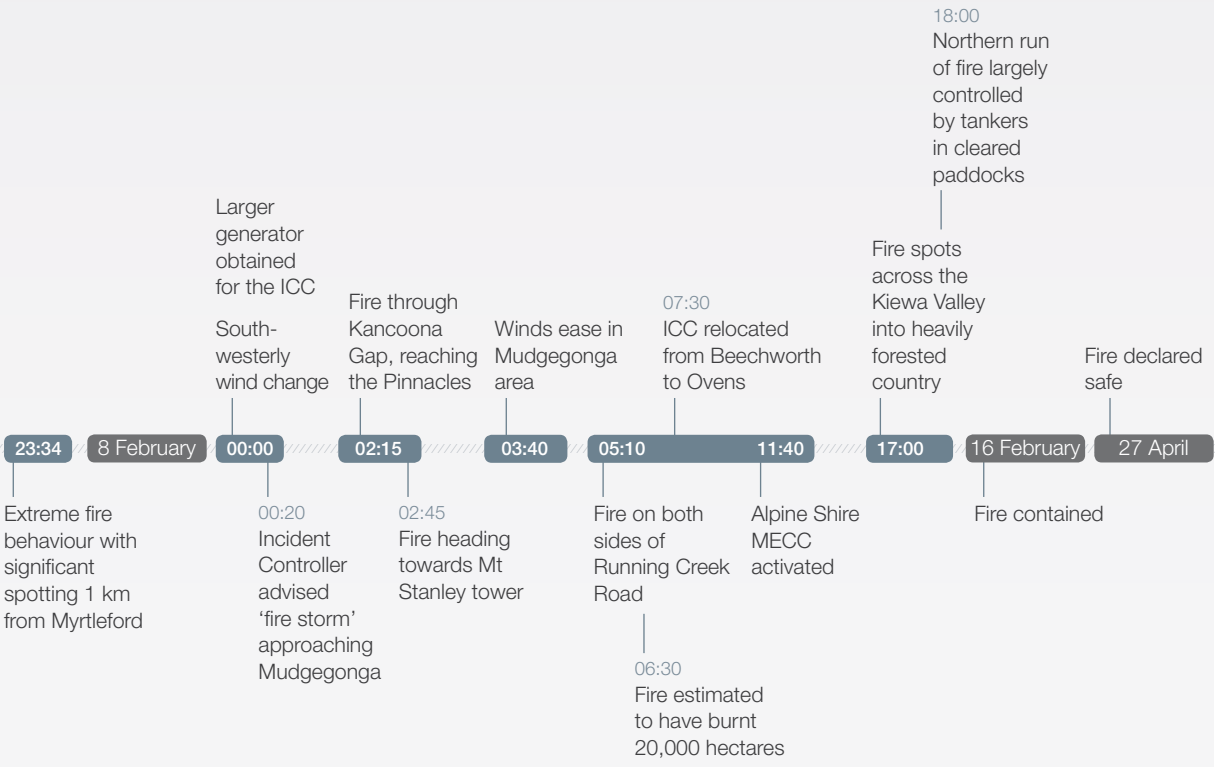
Figure 14.1 The Beechworth–Mudgegonga fire



Source: Exhibit 994 – Beechworth–Library Rd Fire – Fire Spread Map.[13]

Beechworth–Mudgegonga 1 February – 27 April

The following time line summarises events associated with the Beechworth–Mudgegonga fire. For the most part, the times given are approximate. Further details about the events are provided in the accompanying narrative.


23:34
Extreme fire behaviour with significant spotting 1 km from Myrtleford
8 February
00:00
Larger generator obtained for the ICC
South-westerly wind change
00:20
Incident Controller advised 'fire storm' approaching Mudgegonga
02:15
Fire through Kancoona Gap, reaching the Pinnacles
02:45
Fire heading towards Mt Stanley tower
03:40
Winds ease in Mudgegonga area
05:10
Fire on both sides of Running Creek Road
06:30
Fire estimated to have burnt 20,000 hectares
07:30
ICC relocated from Beechworth to Ovens
11:40
Alpine Shire MECC activated
17:00
Fire spots across the Kiewa Valley into heavily forested country
18:00
Northern run of fire largely controlled by tankers in cleared paddocks
16 February
Fire contained
27 April
Fire declared safe

14.1 SEQUENCE OF EVENTS

14.1.1 BEFORE 7 FEBRUARY

Between 1 and 3 February 38 fires started in the Department of Sustainability and Environment's North East Area. All except the Nariel ski hut fire were controlled within 48 hours. On the morning of 4 February the Nariel ski hut fire was still burning and had the potential to develop into a 'campaign' fire. There was concern that this fire could affect DSE's capacity to prepare for 7 February.[14]

Between 4 and 6 February containment lines were built around the Nariel ski hut fire. At 17:00 on 6 February the fire was declared under control, although it continued to demand resources. On 7 February 68 DSE and Networked Emergency Organisation staff were still working on the fire.[15]

In preparation for 7 February DSE arranged for personnel to be on duty at various work centres in the region and for others to be on standby. Alpine Shire Council positioned earth-moving and other equipment, including trucks and fuel trailers, at depots throughout the municipality. In addition, from the morning of 7 February the Benalla Integrated Fire Agency Coordination Centre was on standby.[16]

Table 14.1 summarises the state of preparedness for the Beechworth–Mudgegonga fire.

Table 14.1 The Beechworth–Mudgegonga fire – IMT preparedness

Pre-designated level 3 ICC	Yes[17]
Pre-formed IMT at ICC	No[18]
Pre-identified level 3 IC	No[19]
Pre-identified IMT members	No[20]
Time fire started	About 18:00[21]
Full IMT in place by	8 February 2009[22]
Safety adviser appointed	No[23]

14.1.2 7 FEBRUARY

The area around Beechworth remained relatively free of fire during much of 7 February. Local firefighters and senior personnel were focusing on helping with the firefighting effort for the Kilmore East and Murrindindi fires, which by 18:00 were at their height. During the day personnel were sent to these fires, among them one of the two qualified level 3 Incident Controllers, who acted as Deputy Incident Controller for the Kilmore East fire. Only one qualified level 3 Incident Controller remained in the Beechworth area. At 18:00 a 21-member strike team was stood down to rest and told to report for duty at 06:00 on 8 February, to travel to the Kilmore East fire.[24]

Origin and cause

At about 18:00 on 7 February a fire started 3 kilometres south of Beechworth. A number of witnesses told the Commission they had difficulty contacting emergency services via 000.[25]

A tree had fallen on a power line on Buckland Gap Road, pulling the conductor furthest from the road off the supporting insulators at poles 169 and 170 on the Myrtleford-7 feeder. The conductor was energised when it fell, and as it fell it came into contact with pole 170. The Commission is satisfied that arcing between the conductor and pole 170 was the probable cause of the fire, which started in vegetation at the base of that pole. The incident resulted in the power supply to Beechworth being cut.[26]

The tree that fell divided into two 'leader' trunks approximately 3.5 metres above the ground. The northern side of the divided trunk was dead, possibly as a result of a lightning strike, and had probably been dead for about 18 months. Mr Colin Bertuch, an arborist for Alpine Shire Council, told the Commission that, because the dead section contained most of the tree's weight, it was likely that at some stage the tree would fall towards the road, in the direction of the power lines.[27]

The tree in question was outside the regulated clearance zone but was 'hazardous', as determined by the SP AusNet guidelines. As at 7 February SP AusNet had not identified any hazardous trees between poles 169 and 170 of the Myrtleford-7 feeder. Standard SP AusNet procedures do not incorporate a systematic method for detecting hazardous trees. Vegetation assessors—who are not trained arborists—are responsible only for identifying hazardous trees while carrying out standard assessment tasks. They are obliged to look only for 'obvious defects' and are not required to examine every tree. SP AusNet's Hazardous Tree Program, which is applied to some parts of the network, provides for qualified arborists to inspect all trees in designated areas. Had the tree that fell on the power line on 7 February previously been seen by an arborist, the potential hazard would probably have been apparent.[28]

Automatic circuit reclosers, or ACRs, are circuit breakers that open to break the circuit when a fault is recorded and then reclose the circuit to restore power. ACRs had been installed on the Myrtleford-7 feeder power line. The settings could have been changed to suppress the reclose function entirely (which could be done remotely) or to make other changes (which might have been possible remotely, depending on the model). Because the ACR was not suppressed on 7 February it reclosed twice for 1.5 seconds (in addition to the initial 1.5 seconds before the ACR first operated) before the current was stopped by the ACR tripping to lockout. This resulted in about 200 amperes of current flowing for 4.5 seconds rather than for 1.5 seconds (as it would have if the ACR had been suppressed). It is not possible to determine whether ignition of the fire occurred as a result of current flowing during the 1.5 seconds before the ACR operated for the first time or whether it occurred during the two subsequent recloses. Nevertheless, the probability of a fire starting was greater with current flowing for 4.5 seconds than with it flowing for 1.5 seconds.[29]

Chapter 4 in Volume II discusses the role of ACRs, inspection of electrical assets, and Chapter 7 in Volume II discusses vegetation management.

Fire run, response and management

From the point of ignition the fire burned on public land in eucalypt forest, moving south-east under the influence of a strong north-westerly wind. Initial witnesses described a small fire—only 2 to 3 square metres—burning directly under power lines on the eastern side of Buckland Gap Road (also known as the Beechworth–Myrtleford road), just south of Library Road.[30]

Mr Brian McKenzie immediately assumed the role of Incident Controller and established an Incident Control Centre at the Beechworth DSE office. Mr McKenzie was Planning Manager, Land and Fire, for the DSE Ovens District and duty officer on the day. He was a level 2 Incident Controller with extensive fire experience and an intimate knowledge of the local area, having worked for DSE and its predecessors for 33 years. The intention was to 'run [Mr McKenzie] through the first night' and if possible bring in a level 3 Incident Controller at the change of shift on the morning of 8 February.[31]

Mr McKenzie understood the importance of first attack in extreme weather conditions. On being notified of the fire at about 18:05, he immediately dispatched crews from the Beechworth DSE depot; they were at the fire within minutes. At 18:06 the strike team that had been stood down to attend the Kilmore East fire the next morning was recalled. But containment by first attack was not possible: the fire was in a difficult location; the power line was down; and weather conditions did not permit placing crews in front of the fire.[32]

There were insufficient resources to have a level 3 incident management team at every level 3 incident control centre in the area. The regional strategy was to ensure that there were sufficient resources available to manage first attack and enough people to build a team to 'come in behind' once an incident had started, wherever the fire might occur. Within an hour of the Beechworth–Mudgegonga fire being reported an IMT was ready.[33] Although the strategy proved adequate in this instance, it was found wanting in the case of other fires the Commission examined—namely, the Kilmore East and Murrindindi fires. Chapters 5 and 10 of this volume discuss how incident management evolved for those fires; Chapter 2 in Volume II discusses incident management more broadly.

An initial fire report issued at 18:20 noted that 14 personnel had been dispatched to the Beechworth–Mudgegonga fire, along with three slip-on units and one first-attack bulldozer. The report noted that the potential for losses and the risk of the fire spreading were high.[34]

Soon after the initial fire report from crews on the scene, Mr McKenzie contacted Victoria Police to ask it to establish a Municipal Emergency Coordination Centre for Indigo Shire. He also contacted Mr Mark Green, the Municipal Emergency Resource Officer for Indigo Shire, to ask for his assistance in establishing the MECC.[35]

The fire initially burned in areas where the amount of fuel had been reduced by the 2003 bushfires and by fuel-reduction burns in the autumns of 2005 and 2008. As a result, the fire's behaviour in its initial run was moderate, with flame heights of about 10 metres and spotting of about 500 metres. This meant the fire did not initially develop into a crown fire, which would have had the potential to progress much more rapidly. Between 18:00 and about 21:30 to 22:00 the fire travelled about 8 kilometres.[36]

At 18:45 Mr McKenzie telephoned the Benalla Integrated Fire Agency Coordination Centre to arrange for the issuing of an urgent threat message. The first message was issued at 19:10. It described the fire as burning 4 kilometres south of Beechworth and moving in a south-easterly direction and said the communities of Stanley, Barwidgee Creek and Mudgegonga should prepare for direct ember attack. The message was uploaded to the DSE external website at 19:30. Similar messages were released at 19:50 and 20:40. In all, 14 threat messages were released between 19:10 on 7 February and 05:15 on 8 February.[37]

In keeping with arrangements developed before the fire season, ABC Goulburn–Murray began rolling coverage of the fire soon after ignition and broadcast warnings throughout the night.[38]

At about 19:00 it became clear to DSE personnel fighting the fire that first attack had been unsuccessful and the fire would become a level 3 incident. By 19:15, 16 Country Fire Authority tankers, 12 DSE slip-on units, two first-attack bulldozers, one large bulldozer and a helicopter were at the scene.[39]

Aerial support had been sought almost immediately after the fire was reported. At about 19:40 two fixed-wing water bombers arrived and dropped retardant near the pine plantation on the fire's eastern flank in an effort to slow the fire's spread. It was getting dark, though, and the water bombers were not able to reload and return for any further drops.[40]

The primary operating difficulty the IMT faced on 7 February was the lack of electricity. The DSE office in Beechworth lost power at about the time the fire started. (A back-up generator for the district had previously been dispatched to DSE's Broadford office, which was dealing with the Kilmore East fire.) Without power, the staff found conditions difficult: the office was hot because there was no air-conditioning and staff had to use torches in order to see.[41]

Additionally, the lack of electricity seriously constrained communications and reporting and planning. The ICC was unable to fax incident reports and press releases; nor could it map fires electronically. Reports had to be phoned through to the Ovens office or the Benalla Integrated Fire Agency Coordination Centre to be written up and forwarded to the integrated Emergency Control Centre. Communication and coordination were done using mobile phones and radios.[42]

The power failure also affected the Indigo Shire MECC, which was initially set up in a 'booze bus' (mobile breathalyser unit) that had been dispatched from Wangaratta. Because of the limited space in the vehicle, police liaison officers were not able to operate from it on 7 February.[43]

By 20:30 the number of CFA tankers had increased to 20. Shortly after, a strike team from the New South Wales Rural Fire Service was sent to Beechworth to help with asset protection.[44]

A Bureau of Meteorology forecast issued at 20:36 said the south-westerly change was approaching the area and would probably reach the fire ground between 23:00 and 24:00. At about 21:30 to 22:00 the fire emerged from the fuel-reduced areas, and there was a marked increase in fire activity. A large crown fire developed, and spotting began to occur up to 9 kilometres ahead of the main firefront. The fire was still burning mainly in forested public land, although some private property and private pine plantations were affected.[45]

A further urgent threat message was issued at 21:25, warning residents of the potential impact of the wind change. Throughout the night, threat messages continued to be issued, alerting residents of Barwidgee Creek, Mudgegonga, Stanley, Yackandandah, Bruarong, Rosewhite, Murmungee, Ovens, Myrtleford, Glen Creek, Kancoona, Kancoona South, Running Creek and Dederang and along Carrolls Road (near Mudgegonga).[46]

At about 21:30 Senior Sergeant Douglas Incoll, Municipal Emergency Response Coordinator for Alpine Shire, was told of the fire and that the Indigo Shire MERC had established a temporary MECC.[47]

At 21:50 Mr McKenzie received reports of a spot fire in Mudgegonga. This was earlier than expected, and it meant the fire was spotting long distances. He issued a fire situation report at 21:59, advising that there were new spot fires east of the firefront at Barwidgee Creek.[48]

At about 22:00 the Beechworth ICC obtained a small generator from the Victoria State Emergency Service, but it provided only enough power for a floodlight to light part of the ICC.[49]

At 22:35 a further local forecast had the wind change reaching the fire area between midnight and 01:00, with a wind speed of 30–40 kilometres an hour.[50]

At 23:34 Mr McKenzie reported that there was extreme fire behaviour and significant spotting, including up to 1 kilometre from the township of Myrtleford. He issued a fire situation report saying the fire was 'going'. At about 23:46 he received word that the fire had crossed the Yackandandah–Myrtleford road; this meant the fire was moving very quickly. Between 21:30–22:00 on 7 February and 02:30–03:00 on 8 February the fire travelled 24 kilometres.[51]

The location of roadblocks in the area of the Beechworth–Mudgegonga fire on 7 February was largely determined by Victoria Police, with heavy reliance on the observations of police in the field. At the time and subsequently, the roadblocks were 'constantly' being relocated because of the encroaching fire and the immediate threat to police. Inspector David Ryan stated that police received from the ICC very little information about the location or direction of the fire. All road closures introduced on 7 February were full closures; in subsequent days some closures were only partial.[52]

14.1.3 8 FEBRUARY AND SUBSEQUENTLY

The predicted south-westerly wind change reached the fire ground at about midnight, turning the northern flank—which was at that stage about 32 kilometres long—into the main firefront. The fire began heading north-east, towards cleared agricultural land, mountainous forest and Mudgegonga.[53]

At about 00:20 on 8 February Mr McKenzie was told a 'firestorm' was approaching Mudgegonga and heading into the Rosewhite Valley.[54] Ms Pat Easterbrook and her husband, Lindsay, lived across the road from the two people who were killed by the fire. She described the fire as it approached Mudgegonga:

> It … sounded as though a few jets were … taking off over the top of our house. I said to Lindsay, 'What the hell is that?' He said, 'That's the fire' … [Shortly after] everything just burst into flames … It was like bombs were going off. The mountain on the left side, on the creek side, the north side, that just exploded. The tree breaks that were coming up from the creek were on fire. The shed was burning down. It was roaring down from the south side as well.[55]

At about 01:00 on 8 February, Mr Andrew Taylor, Alpine Shire Municipal Emergency Resource Officer, and Senior Sergeant Incoll were told the fire was heading towards Carrolls Road in Mudgegonga. At about 01:50 they decided to defer a decision on establishing the Alpine Shire MECC until they had further discussions with the Ovens ICC in the morning.[56]

Between midnight and 02:00 the Beechworth ICC obtained a larger generator; this provided enough power to operate some of the computers, the air-conditioning and the lights. The phones were still inoperable, though, because they were part of the La Trobe University Commander® phone system, which did not have power. A generator was also obtained and set up at the Senior Citizens Hall in Beechworth at 02:30. The Indigo Shire MECC moved to the hall, and a number of police liaison officers were then able to operate there.[57]

The only communication available to the Beechworth ICC until restoration of power in the township at about 02:00 on 8 February was radio and mobile phones. Threat messages were approved by the Incident Controller and relayed by mobile phone to the Benalla Integrated Fire Agency Coordination Centre, which then relayed them to ABC radio and the integrated Emergency Coordination Centre in Melbourne for posting to the DSE website.[58]

At about 02:15 the fire had passed through Kancoona Gap and reached the Pinnacles. At 02:45 it was heading towards the Mt Stanley tower. It was so intense that the radio communication domes on the tower melted and a building—which was two to three bricks thick and thought to be fireproof—collapsed.[59]

Soon after, the weather and the fire behaviour moderated. The fire was, however, on both sides of Running Creek Road by 05:10. At about 06:00 Mr McKenzie started deploying new crews for changeover. Resources from the New South Wales Rural Fire Service, Hancock Victorian Plantations, DSE, the CFA and the Network Emergency Organisation had all been involved in the firefighting.[60]

By 06:30 on 8 February the fire had burnt about 20,000 hectares. The IMT understood that houses had been burnt and that there might have been fatalities, although the extent of the destruction had not yet been confirmed. Access to parts of the fire was restricted because a major transmission line through the fire ground needed to be 'rebooted'. In addition, there had been many lightning strikes throughout the region, and a fire near Bogong Village also required firefighting resources.[61]

At about the same time Mr Taylor discussed with the Alpine Shire Municipal Recovery Manager the possibility of opening an emergency relief centre. They had very little information about which areas of the municipality had been burnt or were burning, so they decided to wait for further advice from Senior Sergeant Incoll.[62]

At 07:30 Mr McKenzie handed over as Incident Controller to Mr Shaun Lawlor, air attack supervisor on 7 February and DSE District Manager for the Ovens District. At the same time the incident control centre was moved from Beechworth to Ovens because the only power supply to the level 2 Beechworth ICC was provided by the generator and the fire was moving away from that area and towards the level 3 Ovens ICC. The Commission was advised that an earlier transfer of the ICC from Beechworth to Ovens was neither appropriate nor feasible since it would have necessitated the establishment of another IMT overnight. This would have been extremely difficult to resource and would have resulted in even fewer IMT resources being available for the following shift, and an interruption to information flows.[63]

The main challenge for the IMT on 8 February was to devise a strategy for bringing the fire under control. The areas of greatest concern were those between Mudgegonga and Bruarong and between Kancoona and Running Creek. The Commonwealth Government had also asked that the telecommunication towers and infrastructure on nearby Mt Big Ben be protected.[64]

At 09:30 on 8 February Senior Sergeant Incoll was informed that a dead person had been found at burnt-out premises near Mudgegonga (in Alpine Shire). Soon after, at about 10:00, Mr Taylor began preparations for activating the Alpine Shire Municipal Emergency Coordination Centre.[65]

At 11:40, following discussions with Senior Sergeant Incoll and a briefing at the Ovens ICC, the Alpine Shire MECC was activated. A call centre was established in a room adjacent to the MECC; it was staffed by Alpine Shire personnel. The purpose of the call centre was to be a central information point for the community.[66]

About midday the south-westerly wind began to increase in strength, and the fire began major runs between Mudgegonga and Bruarong in the north and Rosewhite and Running Creek in the east. As the fire approached Running Creek, between about 17:00 and 18:00, it spotted for several kilometres across the Kiewa Valley into heavily forested terrain. This area had undergone fuel-reduction burning in the autumn of 2007, and the result was that the fire behaviour moderated considerably.[67]

Shortly after 18:00 on 8 February the northern run of the fire was largely controlled by fire crews in cleared paddocks.[68]

On 9 February weather conditions moderated further, and fire crews constructed control lines and conducted back-burns. This work continued until 10:30 on 16 February, when the fire was declared contained. The fire was reported under control on 25 March.[69]

Image 14.1

Source: Courtesy of the *Herald & Weekly Times*.

During the fire, emergency relief centres were opened at Myrtleford, Dederang and Mudgegonga.[70]

Two people died in the Beechworth–Mudgegonga fire. The circumstances of their death are described in Chapter 20 of this volume.

Thirty-eight houses were destroyed, as well as sheds and farming equipment. Overall, the fire burnt 33,577 hectares—about 10,000 hectares of private land and the remainder state park. The fire burnt already drought-ravaged pasture, and farmers faced difficult decisions: should they slaughter their stock, try to sell them, or pay substantial sums to agist them until feed became more available.[71]

14.2 COORDINATION WITH THE MECC

Between 7 February and 30 March the Municipal Emergency Coordination Centre received requests for the following:

- assistance with residents' emergency evacuation and access
- equipment, machinery and water tankers
- stockfeed
- disposal of injured stock
- drinking water for people and stock
- fuel.[72]

During the initial stages of the fire the MECC received these requests for support and resources directly from the field or from residents. Mr Taylor said this led to inefficiency and frayed tempers because each direct request had to be reported to the incident control centre, which would then respond. Usually, all requests for support are channelled through the ICC or CFA regional headquarters, which avoids confusion and duplication of responses.[73]

Mr Taylor reported that in the first few days of the emergency it was difficult to obtain from the Ovens ICC information about the location and spread of the fire in the municipality. During this time the MECC relied on ABC radio and the DSE website. A liaison officer from the Ovens ICC was not provided to the MECC until Tuesday 10 February. To compensate for this, staff from the MECC went to the ICC to obtain information.[74]

14.3 THE IMPACT OF FUEL REDUCTION

The firefighters' experience on 7 and 8 February at Beechworth–Mudgegonga was that, because the fire burned through fuel-reduced areas, at critical stages the fire's behaviour was reduced in intensity. Mr Lawlor noted, 'If the initial phase of the fire had developed in areas where fuel loads had not been reduced, then the main run of the fire on 7 February would have been at least an extra 12 kilometres based on the observed fire behaviour on that day'. If the run had extended that extra 12 kilometres, the front would have become much wider when the wind changed to the south-west.[75]

Mr Lawlor also considered that fuel-reduction burns helped protect the telecommunications towers and infrastructure on Mt Big Ben and helped halt the fire before it spread into forested areas on the eastern side of the Kiewa Valley. If the fire had spread to that extent it would have been extremely difficult to bring it under control: the area is remote, and the terrain makes firefighting very difficult.[76]

Having observed the fire behaviour, firefighters considered that, were it not for the fuel reduction, it was highly probable that the entire Ovens Valley between Myrtleford and Bright would have been directly affected, with significant potential for further loss of life and damage to infrastructure and assets. Fuel-reduced areas were also used as a basis for the containment strategy that was implemented on 9 February.[77]

Dr Lachie McCaw, a principal research scientist for the Department of Environment and Conservation in Western Australia, and Dr Kevin Tolhurst, a senior lecturer in Fire Ecology and Management at the University of Melbourne, assessed the effect of previous burning on the Beechworth–Mudgegonga fire. Both agreed that the rate of spread and the final perimeter of the fire were greatly moderated because of previous prescribed burning.[78]

Dr McCaw agreed with Mr Lawlor that, had the same fire started in a non-fuel reduced area on a day of such extreme conditions, the fire would have become more intense, travelled faster and spotted further in the initial two hours than actually occurred. He also agreed that the effect of the reduced fuel load was to slow the run of the fire before the south-westerly wind change and that previous fuel-reduction burning helped with containing the fire by providing 'anchor points' for suppression activity.[79]

Fuel reduction is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 7 of Volume II.

14.4 WARNING THE PUBLIC

In addition to warnings issued by the Benalla Integrated Fire Agency Coordination Centre and the incident control centre, local police and firefighters warned residents about the impending fire. After being notified of the fire, Sergeant Geoffrey Still, Municipal Emergency Response Coordinator for Indigo Shire, asked the Yackandandah police to personally alert residents of Stanley to the potential fire risk. Other units were directed to warn residents on the southern side of the Beechworth–Stanley road and the Stanley–Myrtleford road.[80]

Senior Sergeant Incoll placed a police liaison officer at the ICC as soon as the Municipal Emergency Coordination Centre was opened. He said that once he became aware that fire was approaching an area he arranged for the Victoria State Emergency Service and police to do doorknocks in that area to warn people of the approaching fire and give them the fire agency warning.[81]

Despite the efforts of Victoria Police, the CFA and the Victoria State Emergency Service, not all residents who chose to defend their house could be personally warned or assisted. Ms Pat Easterbrook, who with her husband saved their house, said nothing could have prepared them for the impact of the inferno they experienced.[82]

14.5 CONCLUSIONS

With commitments to the Nariel ski hut fire before and on 7 February and to the Kilmore East and Murrindindi fires, DSE resources in the North East Area were much depleted by 18:00 on 7 February. Although this reduction in resources did not compromise the first-attack capability, it did cause some delay in getting additional resources to the Beechworth–Mudgegonga fire. The Commission notes the appropriate focus on first attack and the rapid response of ground crews.

The way the Beechworth–Mudgegonga fire started suggests that examination of the role of the particular type of electrical circuit breakers used on the power line (automatic circuit reclosers) and the management of vegetation around power lines is warranted.

On a day such as 7 February 2009 it was a high-risk strategy to develop an incident management team once a fire had started and first attack had been initiated. It did prove adequate in this instance, but the Commission, noting the shortages of staff, does not accept it was a suitable approach for such a severe day and reflected flawed judgment on the part of those concerned with regional planning and management.

Mr McKenzie did not consider that the lack of a generator and the delay in locating a back-up generator for the incident control centre interfered with the effort of firefighters on the fire ground. He said that, although the power loss created difficulty, the incident management team was 'able to cope' and did the best job it could in the circumstances. The lack of power did not delay the issuing of warnings. Mr McKenzie praised his team for working together very effectively on the night of 7 February.[83] There is no evidence that the initial absence of a level 3 Incident Controller or the lack of power adversely affected the management of the fire.

The Commission accepts Mr Lawlor's evidence that, even if aircraft had been immediately available, their effectiveness would have been limited in the conditions of the day in the absence of support from ground crews.

Although the fire did result in substantial losses, had the same fire started in a non-fuel reduced area, the fire could have resulted in far greater destruction.

The use of liaison officers was not routinely effective. In some cases liaison officers were not appointed; in others, police liaison officers, although appointed, were unable to gain the information they needed.

The Commission notes the efforts of police, the Victoria State Emergency Service and others to personally warn residents, but it considers it will never be possible to guarantee that such action will be feasible in all cases, and nor should individuals expect it. CFA material distributed to the community consistently stresses this.

1 Exhibit 557 – Meteorological Aspects of the Murmungee Fire (BOM.901.0131) at 0149

2 Exhibit 557 – Meteorological Aspects of the Murmungee Fire (BOM.901.0131) at 0149

3 Exhibit 557 – Meteorological Aspects of the Murmungee Fire (BOM.901.0131) at 0149; Exhibit 6 – Supplementary Statement of Waller (WIT.002.002.0001) at 0101

4 Exhibit 557 – Meteorological Aspects of the Murmungee Fire (BOM.901.0131) at 0150

5 Exhibit 557 – Meteorological Aspects of the Murmungee Fire (BOM.901.0131) at 0145

6 Exhibit 6 – Supplementary Statement of Waller (WIT.002.002.0001) at 0101

7 Exhibit 6 – Supplementary Statement of Waller (WIT.002.002.0001) [359]

8 Exhibit 215 – Supplementary Statement of Hollowood (WIT.3010.003.0287_R) [22]

9 Exhibit 215 – Supplementary Statement of Hollowood (WIT.3010.003.0287_R) [22]

10 Exhibit 980 – Correspondence – Houses Destroyed – Breakdown by Fire (CORR.1003.0048_R) at 0048_R

11 Exhibit 787 – Further Statement of Fogarty, Annexure 1 (WIT.3024.005.0260) at 0262

12 Exhibit 939 – Details Regarding Emergency Response (CFA.600.005.0195) at 0195, 0196, 0198; Exhibit 939 – Day by Day Breakdown – Beechworth (DSE.HDD.0048.0545_18); Exhibit 939 – Aircraft Data 0809 (DSE.HDD.0048.0544_20) at 0544_25

13 Exhibit 994 – Beechworth–Library Rd Fire – Fire Spread Map (CFA.600.006.0006)

14 Exhibit 254 – Statement of Farrell (WIT.3024.002.0219) [30]

15 Exhibit 254 – Statement of Farrell (WIT.3024.002.0219) [34], [44]

16 Exhibit 245 – Statement of McKenzie (WIT.3024.002.0144) [9]; Exhibit 248 – Statement of Taylor (WIT.4002.001.0001) [47]; Exhibit 254 – Statement of Farrell (WIT.3024.002.0219) [27]

17 Exhibit 254 – Statement of Farrell (WIT.3024.002.0219) [12], [14], [17]; Farrell T7288:8–T7288:11

18 Farrell T7289:30–T7290:13, T7290:21–T7290:28

19 Exhibit 254 – Statement of Farrell (WIT.3024.002.0219) [54]

20 Farrell T7290:21–T7290:28

21 Lawlor T6916:14–T6916:19

22 Farrell T7291:26–T7292:5

23 Edgar T16751:3–T16751:4

24 Exhibit 254 – Statement of Farrell (WIT.3024.002.0219) [14], [51]; Exhibit 245 – Statement of McKenzie (WIT.3024.002.0144) [15], [17]–[18]; Exhibit 249 – Statement of Lawlor (WIT.3024.002.0187) [14]; Farrell T7292:5–T7292:12; Lawlor T6916:14–T6916:15

25 Exhibit 245 – Statement of McKenzie (WIT.3024.002.0144) [18]; Exhibit 254 – Statement of Farrell (WIT.3024.002.0219) [53]; Exhibit 230 – Statement of Johns (BCHM.001.001.0001) at 0002; Exhibit 226 – Statement of Matthews (WIT.3010.003.0172) at 0173; Exhibit 228 – Statement of Higgins (SUMM.044.002.2255_R) [6]–[11]; Higgins T6932:24–T6934:20; Lawlor T6916:14–T6916:15; Johns T6940:25–T6941:26; Matthews T6927:16–T6928:9

26 Exhibit 237 – Statement of Lane (WIT.5100.001.0001) [183]–[184]

27 Bertuch T7134:13–T7134:18, T7136:7–T7136:26, T7141:12–T7141:17, T7144:28–T7145:3, T7146:16–T7146:22

28 Exhibit 243 – Statement of Peters (WIT.5101.001.0001) [143], [146]–[153], [172]–[175], [221], Annexure 7 (WIT.5101.001.0225) at 0232; Peters T7187:3–T7187:20, T7193:31–T7195:19, T7203:23–T7204:11; Bertuch T7141:19–T7142:24

29 Exhibit 237 – Statement of Lane (WIT.5100.001.0001) [108]; Exhibit 520 – Supplementary Statement of Lane (WIT.5100.002.0001) [35], [43]; Lane T7031:21–T7031:28, T7032:10–T7032:17; Sweeting T11376:2–T11377:27

30 Exhibit 228 – Statement of Higgins (SUMM.044.002.2255_R) [3]; Exhibit 230 – Statement of Johns (BCHM.001.001.0001) at 0001; Johns T6938:17–T6938:24, T6940:18–T6940:20; Matthews T6925:9–T6926:6, T6928:15–T6928:17; Lawlor T6916:14–T6916:19; Higgins T6931:4–T6931:20

31 Exhibit 245 – Statement of McKenzie (WIT.3024.002.0144) [2]–[3], [8], [18]; Exhibit 254 – Statement of Farrell (WIT.3024.002.0219) [54]–[56]

32 Exhibit 254 – Statement of Farrell (WIT.3024.002.0219) [51]; Exhibit 245 – Statement of McKenzie (WIT.3024.002.0144) [17]–[18]; McKenzie T7217:5–T7217:19, T7233:23–T7233:30

33 Exhibit 245 – Statement of McKenzie (WIT.3024.002.0144) [22]; Farrell T7288:17–T7289:4

34 Exhibit 245 – Statement of McKenzie, Annexure 2 (DSE.HDD.0032.0222_R)

35 Exhibit 245 – Statement of McKenzie (WIT.3024.002.0144) [21]

36 Lawlor T6915:24–T6915:27, T6916:19–T6918:10

37 Exhibit 245 – Statement of McKenzie (WIT.3024.002.0144) [30], Annexure 3 (DSE.0017.0115.0070), (DSE.0017.0115.0067), (DSE.0017.0115.0039); Exhibit 254 – Statement of Farrell (WIT.3024.002.0219) [59];

38 Exhibit 254 – Statement of Farrell (WIT.3024.002.0219) [65]; McKenzie T7223:24–T7223:27

39 Exhibit 254 – Statement of Farrell (WIT.3024.002.0219) [54]; Exhibit 245 – Statement of McKenzie, Annexure 4 (DSE.0001.0004.0093_R)

40 Exhibit 245 – Statement of McKenzie (WIT.3024.002.0144) [27]; Exhibit 249 – Statement of Lawlor (WIT.3024.002.0187) [24]–[25]; McKenzie T7229:5–T7229:10

41 Exhibit 245 – Statement of McKenzie (WIT.3024.002.0144) [19]–[20]; McKenzie T7215:27–T7216:2

42 Exhibit 245 – Statement of McKenzie (WIT.3024.002.0144) [57]

43 Exhibit 251 – Statement of Still (WIT.3010.004.0337) [38]

44 Exhibit 245 – Statement of McKenzie, Annexure 3 (DSE.0017.0115.0039), Annexure 5 (DSE.0001.0004.0092_R)

45 Lawlor T6918:11–T6918:16, T6918:30–T6919:2

46 Exhibit 245 – Statement of McKenzie (WIT.3024.002.0144) [30], Annexure 3 (DSE.0017.0115.0033)

47 Exhibit 250 – Statement of Incoll (WIT.3010.004.0001) [29]

48 Exhibit 245 – Statement of McKenzie (WIT.3024.002.0144) [38]–[39]

49 Exhibit 245 – Statement of McKenzie (WIT.3024.002.0144) [19]

50 Exhibit 557 – Meteorological Aspects of the Murmungee Fire (BOM.901.0131) at 0169–0170

51 Exhibit 245 – Statement of McKenzie (WIT.3024.002.0144) [41]–[42]; Lawlor T6918:11–T6920:7

52 Exhibit 253 – Statement of Ryan (WIT.3010.004.0408) [40]–[41], Attachment 13 (WIT.3010.004.0479)

53 Exhibit 557 – Meteorological Aspects of the Murmungee Fire (BOM.901.0131) at 0137, 0144–0146; Lawlor T6920:8–T6920:14

54 Exhibit 245 – Statement of McKenzie (WIT.3024.002.0144) [45]

55 Easterbrook T7169:16–T7169:31

56 Exhibit 248 – Statement of Taylor (WIT.4002.001.0001) [49]; Exhibit 250 – Statement of Incoll (WIT.3010.004.0001) [30]

57 Exhibit 245 – Statement of McKenzie (WIT.3024.002.0144) [19]–[20], [45]–[46]; Exhibit 251 – Statement of Still (WIT.3010.004.0337) [31]–[33], [37]–[38]; Exhibit 253 – Statement of Ryan (WIT.3010.004.0408) [25]

58 McKenzie T7223:3–T7223:6, T7223:16–T7223:23

59 Exhibit 245 – Statement of McKenzie (WIT.3024.002.0144) [47], [61]

60 Exhibit 245 – Statement of McKenzie (WIT.3024.002.0144) [51]–[53]; Lawlor T6920:8–T6920:21, T6920:26–T6921:10

61 Exhibit 249 – Statement of Lawlor (WIT.3024.002.0187) [31]–[32]; Exhibit 6 – Supplementary Statement of Waller (WIT.002.002.0001) [372]

62 Exhibit 248 – Statement of Taylor (WIT.4002.001.0001) [51]

63 Exhibit 245 – Statement of McKenzie (WIT.3024.002.0144) [52]; Exhibit 254 – Statement of Farrell (WIT.3024.002.0219) [71]–[72]; McKenzie T7227:16–T7227:31

64 Exhibit 249 – Statement of Lawlor (WIT.3024.002.0187) [39], [44]–[45]

65 Exhibit 250 – Statement of Incoll (WIT.3010.004.0001) [31]; Exhibit 248 – Statement of Taylor (WIT.4002.001.0001) [53]

66 Exhibit 248 – Statement of Taylor (WIT.4002.001.0001) [55]; Exhibit 250 – Statement of Incoll (WIT.3010.004.0001) [33]

67 Lawlor T6920:16–T6920:21, T6920:26–T6921:10

68 Lawlor T6921:11–T6921:25

69 Exhibit 6 – Supplementary Statement of Waller (WIT.002.002.0001) at 0100; Lawlor T6921:14–T6921:28

70 Exhibit 248 – Statement of Taylor (WIT.4002.001.0001) [59]

71 Exhibit 240 – Statement of Van Dorsser, Attachment (WIT.3010.003.0242) at 0246; Exhibit Exhibit 246 – Statement of McDonald (WIT.084.001.0001) [53]–[64]; Exhibit 787 – Further Statement of Fogarty, Annexure 1 (WIT.3024.005.0260) at 0262; Exhibit 980 – Correspondence – Houses Destroyed – Breakdown by Fire (CORR.1003.0048_R) at 0048_R

72 Exhibit 248 – Statement of Taylor (WIT.4002.001.0001) [65]

73 Exhibit 248 – Statement of Taylor (WIT.4002.001.0001) [66]

74 Exhibit 248 – Statement of Taylor (WIT.4002.001.0001) [60], [62]

75 Exhibit 249 – Statement of Lawlor (WIT.3024.002.0187) [27]–[28]; Lawlor T6922:1–T6922:16

76 Exhibit 249 – Statement of Lawlor (WIT.3024.002.0187) [45]–[47]

77 Exhibit 249 – Statement of Lawlor (WIT.3024.002.0187) [28], [49], [51]; Lawlor T6922:1–T6922:16

78 Exhibit 722 – Expert Report of McCaw on Fuel Management (EXP.026.001.0001) at 0011–0013, 0020; McCaw T14897:17–T14898:4; Tolhurst T15340:8–T15349:14

79 Exhibit 722 – Expert Report of McCaw on Fuel Management (EXP.026.001.0001) at 0011–0013; McCaw T14897:17–T14898:19

80 Exhibit 245 – Statement of McKenzie (WIT.3024.002.0144) [30]; Exhibit 251 – Statement of Still (WIT.3010.004.0337) [29]–[30]; Exhibit 121 – Statement of Ward (WIT.052.001.0001_R) [20]; Hollowood T7653:23–T7653:26, T7653:28–T7653:31

81 Exhibit 250 – Statement of Incoll (WIT.3010.004.0001) [40], [50]

82 Exhibit 244 – Statement of Easterbrook (WIT.085.001.0001_R) [81]–[82]

83 Exhibit 245 – Statement of McKenzie (WIT.3024.002.0144) [58]; McKenzie T7216:10–T7216:16

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