

PRESIDENT'S REPORT

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING 2020

Dear Members

Since BlazeAid was born in 2009, we have never been as busy as we were during the 2019-2020 financial year. What we achieved in the first six months of 2020 as a consequence of the Black Summer Fires in Australia, one could never imagine that BlazeAid would ever be asked to respond to such devastation, let alone have the resources at such short notice to do so. The fires burnt an estimated 18.6 million hectares (72,000 square km), destroyed around 6,000 buildings, and killed more than 34 people. These fires were unprecedented and unlike anything that BlazeAid had experienced in its lifetime.

As a result of the calls from thousands of desperate farmers across three states, all needing urgent assistance to rebuild their fences, the mammoth task of setting up more than 40 BlazeAid camps began. Not being prepared for such a massive response, urgent calls went out for not only volunteers but we were experiencing a severe shortage of camp Co-ordinators. We were able to utilise a few former BlazeAid Co-ordinators and in addition we put out a call for anyone prepared to be trained as a Co-ordinator. Several training weekends were organised and many people served apprenticeships working under an experienced Co-ordinator. These people were eventually deployed to run a camp and my heartfelt thanks goes out to those people who stepped up to help us.

Not only did we have a shortage of volunteer workers and Co-ordinators, we were also desperate for tools, equipment and trailers. To supplement the available trailers that were being towed all over south-eastern Australia and being shared between camps, many more had to be quickly purchased and stocked with the necessary fencing tools and equipment.

The unimaginable magnitude of the fires saw an incredible amount of donations flow into BlazeAid and together with corporate and government financial assistance, we were able to purchase what we needed. Without this funding, we could not have responded in the way we did to an otherwise impossible task of helping these needy rural communities.

As a result of the donations and financial grants received, BlazeAid was able to assist hundreds of farmers with the purchase of much needed fencing materials. The management of this funding placed an extra burden on our volunteer Co-ordinators and BlazeAid's administrative staff. I can't thank them enough for making this exceptional effort to ensure everything went as smoothly as possible with the distribution of funding and materials.

I will give a summary of the camps that were set up in the various states and the overall achievements of those camps.

Victoria

A total of 9 camps were established across the State. Many of these camps were still operating at the end of the financial year so some of their statistics will carry over into the 2020-2021 financial year's report. In all, 2060 volunteers worked a total of 16,172 volunteer days on 585 properties.

Up until the end of last June, they had cleared 395 kms of damaged fencing and assisted the property owners to rebuild a total of 713 kms.

New South Wales

Intense bushfires burnt across NSW for many months. These fires were made worse by the severe drought conditions that existed across 95% of the State and the above average temperatures. Fires heavily impacted the North Coast, the Mid North Coast, the Hunter Region, the Hawkesbury, the Blue Mountains and severely impacted the South Coast and Snowy Mountains areas. At one time, there were more than 100 fires burning across the State.

Twenty-seven BlazeAid camps were progressively opened across the State to help the rural communities, many of which are still operating. A total of 6,020 volunteers completed 78,100 volunteer days on 3,690 properties, and up until the end of June, had cleared 2,162 kms of damaged fencing and assisted the property owners to rebuild a total of 2,230 kms.

South Australia

South Australia was experiencing abnormally high temperatures and low humidity. Large fires broke out on the Yorke Peninsular which impacted on Yorketown and Edithburg. In addition to those fires, a large fire took hold in the Adelaide Hills near Cudlee Creek. Then came the shocking and deadly fire on Kangaroo Island which destroyed 211,000ha of the 440,500ha island, including homes and a massive number of wildlife as it roared across the island.

Four BlazeAid camps were established to help South Australian farmers with their fencing and some are still operating. A total of 1,895 volunteers completed 16,554 volunteer days on 601 properties, and up until the end of June, had cleared 1,964 kms of damaged fencing and assisted the property owners to rebuild a total of 1,050 kms.

Western Australia

An emergency started in Katanning after lightning strike hit and homes, buildings and farms were impacted. BlazeAid set up a camp to help those out as well a pilot camp was set up at Hyden. A total of 60 volunteers completed 607 volunteer days on 15 properties, had cleared 31 kms of damaged fencing and assisted the property owners to rebuild a total of 42 kms.

Statistic Summary for all BlazeAid camps for the Year 2019-2020

	Total Volunteers	Volunteer Days	Properties	KM Cleared	KM Rebuilt
TOTALS	9,970	110,807	4,878	4,521	3,992

BlazeAid Too Far Away Program

Our "Too Far Away Program" (TFAP) program also helped out over 100 property owners affected by the fires in areas where camps were not established. This program gives farmers who have been devastated a voucher to spend on fencing material. I would like to say a big thank you to both Shane Stafford, one of our Committee Members and Chris Carr for running this program. Their

fantastic work with this program certainly alleviated my worries knowing it was being handled in such an efficient way.

Summary

Setting up and managing 40 BlazeAid camps at the one time had never been attempted before and we were certainly in uncharted waters. We dealt with dozens of councils, most of whom were obliging but unfortunately some were less than helpful. Where are we going to set up each camp? Are the premises suitable for our needs? We needed hundreds and hundreds of volunteers. What about Co-ordinators, the tools and trailers, have we got enough funds to do what we need to do? The list goes on. We were literally run off our feet almost from day one, living one day at a time, organising and reorganising as we went, and even changing the locations of a few camp sites. I am sure we have all learnt a lot but I sincerely hope that we never have to go through a disaster of this magnitude again. BlazeAid then pushed the Government to change the Rules on 88 day Visas to allow them to volunteer with BlazeAid to have their visas ticked off. This was a game changer as it brought lots of volunteers to BlazeAid and without this we would not have had the volunteers needed to complete this enormous task.

I must thank the hundreds and hundreds of Australians who believe in what we do, and who give so generously to BlazeAid to allow us to continue our work to help the rural communities recover from the effects of natural disasters. It would be remiss of me not to mention the assistance we receive from scores of individuals and community groups which all worked so tirelessly to provide meals and other support at our numerous basecamps in the three affected states.

The past 12 months has been very hectic to say the least, but matters don't happen of their own accord. We would be lost without people like Debbie Buttler our Administrator who have an enormous workload, our Treasurer who organises the payment of accounts and the members of the BlazeAid Management Committee who make the decisions and set the course for our Association. Finally, a big thank you to our dedicated Co-ordinators who bring it all together and make it happen on the ground.

Rhonda and I sincerely thank everyone involved in helping us to provide this humanity support to those in need. It's a combined effort and we could not do it without you. Back in 2009, we would never have dreamt that one day we would have 40 base camps operating, virtually at the same time. I will admit that doing what we do, places an enormous strain on relationships, not only ours but also the lives of our volunteers. But this is somewhat insignificant when one takes into account the enormous effect a disaster has on the lives of those who have been devastated by this or any other disaster. Anything we can do to alleviate the suffering is worthwhile.

Thank you everyone.

Kevin Butler

President