

Four fiery days in February

CALM's wildfire response strategy was pushed towards its limit during a series of 'blow up' fire weather days in late February.

The potential for widespread devastation by wildfire during the period was so great that the State Government declared a four-day bush fire emergency in the South West.

The declaration meant all the State's emergency services — including CALM fire crews — would be co-ordinated through the peak group, the State Emergency Management Advisory Committee, in the event of a major outbreak of wildfires.

Executive Director Syd Shea said no-one could underestimate the severity of the danger during those four fiery days.

He paid tribute to the efforts of the CALM crews and support staff and the volunteers and personnel from other organisations which helped during the emergency.

"Declaring a bush fire emergency is not something that is done lightly. It is an extreme measure," he said.

"The fact that CALM crews were able to respond to a spate of fires and bring the vast majority of them under control before they developed, is something of which the Department is especially proud.

"We also extend our appreciation to the many hundreds of people from volunteer brigades, the WA Fire Brigades (WAFB), Police, State Emergency Services (SES), RAAF, St John



CALM acts quickly to salvage pine logs after bushfires sweep through pine plantations. Photo by Tony Ashby courtesy The West Australian

Ambulance, the Army, Western Power, the WA Water Authority, our contractors and the private sector for their support. "There is no question — we couldn't have done without them."

The declaration was made late in the evening of February 20 after a wildfire began earlier in the day in the Gnanagara pine plantation near Wanneroo.

The fire was the second in the

plantation in less than seven weeks and followed a major blaze which ripped through more than 850 hectares on New Year's Eve.

Codenamed P89, the February fire began in a peat swamp near the plantation. The swamp fire was believed to have started on Christmas Eve after a stolen car was torched in the Melaleuca Conservation Park.

By late afternoon, more than

80 firefighters from CALM's Wanneroo, Mundaring, Jarrahdale and Dwellingup offices were on the scene with support from volunteers from Swan, Chittering and Wanneroo bush fire brigades, the WAFB and the RAAF's Pearce Airforce Base. Thirteen front-end loaders and bulldozers had been brought in to construct fire lines.

CALM had instigated an incident control team and was the

lead combat authority for the fire. Incident controller Alan Briggs was helped by a team that included John MacKenzie as Operations Commander, Greg Napier, Mike Cantelo and Gary Hartnett.

Swan Region manager Alan Walker and regional fire co-ordinator Bruce Harvey had gone to the Bush Fires Board's South Guildford complex to form part of the regional co-ordination team.

At CALMFire's Como headquarters, staff had begun preparing for what potentially was the worst fire danger period since the Dwellingup conflagrations in 1961.

Arrangements had been made to fly in relief crews from Walpole, Pemberton and Manjimup. For the next few hours, resources would be co-ordinated to ensure there were enough forces in the forest regions to respond to wildfires forecast as a result of lightning strikes.

It was a huge logistics exercise. Additional crews were brought up from Narrogin and those based in Katanning were dispatched to Collie to provide back up.

Meanwhile in Busselton and Nannup, five fires were burning in State forest and only one was under control.

At 5.30 pm, Dr Shea decided that in the interests of public safety, all national parks between Dwellingup and Walyunga would be closed. The severe fire risk was too great.

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Besides, CALM needed every available trained firefighter, and the park closure would free up rangers.

By 6 pm, more than 400 CALM firefighters and support staff were on full alert and the Bush Fires Board had responded to a CALM request to have volunteer brigades throughout the forest areas on standby.

Back at Gngalara, the headfire, which had been running at up to 2000 metres an hour, had burned through 1050 hectares of pines and extensive tracts of banksia woodlands. The fire had run out of the plantation and into the RAAF bombing range to the north.

"Fighting fires is dangerous at the best of times; but when a fire is running through an area with unexploded shells, the danger factor escalates," CALMFire operations chief Terry Maher said.

CALM's incident control team called in the

RAAF experts to advise on the location of the shells.

In State Operations Headquarters, the chiefs of the major emergency services met at CALMFire at around 8.30 pm in response to a request by CALMFire manager Rick Sneeuwjagt. They included the Police, WAFB, the Bush Fires Board and SES.

The current fire situation and the fire weather outlook for the next few days were reviewed. CALM's position — with crews either engaged at the fire face or ready to provide relief the next morning — meant resources were stretched.

It was agreed to advise Emergency Services Minister Bob Wiese to invoke a bush fire emergency for at least the next four days.

The emergency, which was declared effective from midnight, meant CALM had access to more resources, particularly heavy earth-moving machinery.

Meanwhile, an RAAF

helicopter was sent up to plot the location of the unexploded shells and bombs and relay the information along with a situation report on the fire to CALM's incident command team at the forward control point.

On the ground, 'dozers and front-end loaders were being mobilised to begin a massive scrub-rolling operation in a bid to stop the western flank becoming the headfire on the easterlies forecast for the early morning.

The big threat now was that the fire would threaten hobby farms and other private property nearby.

In the early hours of the morning, the headfire ran into some country that had been burned only four years previously.

This was the break CALM ground commanders needed. John MacKenzie, receiving reports from his divisional commanders Kevin Pollock and Clayton Sanders, directed the heavy machines to-

wards the headfire.

By about 5 am, word that the headfire had been stopped reached the control team. Bruce Harvey, still at South Guildford, was incredulous. "Are you sure?" he asked.

"It was a fantastic piece of work on behalf of the crews and the commanders," he said later.

It might have been the end of a 15-hour battle but the exercise wasn't over yet. It was only Tuesday morning and the outlook for the next three days was grim.

The mopping up would absorb virtually the same number of crews which had fought the blaze — the trouble was, the mop up would take two days or more.

Down south of Nannup, CALM crews were still chasing a fire that had burned through 250 ha in the Hilliger block, while a 'smoke' was being checked in the Ferndale plantation near Balingup.

At Collie, an early

morning lightning strike caused a small fire at Arklow and CALM crews were mopping up after a small fire 20 km east of Margaret River.

By Thursday, rain over parts of the South West had had a minor impact on the hazard but had not dampened the risk. Lightning strikes caused several fires but these were controlled before they developed.

As crews finish shifts at P89, they were stood down, enabling them to return to their home bases.

On Friday, the emergency was lifted and the national parks, which had been closed four days earlier, were reopened to the public.

Things were returning to normal — except for the Dwellingup crews who were called out the next day to combat a fire which at one stage threatened to run through the Fairbridge complex just north of Pinjarra.

