

# Operation Firebird takes off



Operation Firebird has drawn on the talents of many different branches of CALM and other agencies. Femina Metcalfe (left) and Leigh Davis of CALM's Information Management Branch Operations Section provided detailed maps for the planning team members Keith Low, CALMfire's Swan Region co-ordinator, Rob De Burgh of the Bush Fires Board and Les Port from Fire and Rescue Service. Photo by Nigel Higgs

**Operation Firebird**—the codename for this summer's aerial bush firefighting trial in the Swan Region—was officially launched last month by Premier Richard Court.

The trial will evaluate the role and effectiveness of 'water bombers' to combat bushfires in the outer metropolitan area, especially along Darling Scarp and pine plantations around Wanneroo.

At the launch in the Gnarup pines, Mr Court said Operation Firebird was a collaborative project co-ordinated by CALM and involving of-

ficers and crews from the Fire and Rescue Service of Western Australia, the Bush Fires Board and local volunteer brigades.

"This is a major initiative which reflects the State government's commitment to strengthen resources needed to combat wildfires, especially in high-risk areas," Mr Court said.

Fires in the Hills and the pine plantations to the north of the city account for more than half the number of fires on lands managed by CALM. A particularly worrying aspect

is that about half of these fires are caused by arson.

CALMfire manager Rick Sneeuwjagt said that under the contract—which had been let to the WA-based company Tactical Aviation Australia—two aircraft would be on permanent standby between December and March. The aircraft would be based at Perth Airport and despatched within five minutes of a bushfire being detected.

The planes—Dromader M-18As—carry 2800 litres of water-foam mix, which is highly effective in suppress-



CALMfire is playing a lead role in developing new fire suppression techniques, including compressed air foam which was demonstrated during the launch of Operation Firebird. Photo by Norm Bailey

ing moderate intensity fires. They also can use short, unsealed airstrips.

The planes have state-of-the-art satellite navigation and communications equipment, which enables them to drop water, foam or retardant very accurately.

The three fire agencies will

work in with Air Services Australia Fire Rescue Service, which will provide the primary ground support for the planes at Perth Airport. Arrangements also have been made with the RAAF to provide support from Pearce Air Base when needed.

Rick Sneeuwjagt—who pre-

pared the Australian Fire Authorities Council policy paper on aerial fire fighting—said the techniques were most effective in the very early stages of a fire.

"Water bombers do not replace conventional strategies and tactics, especially the use of ground crews," he said.

"But they do give ground forces a better chance to mount a direct attack before a fire can develop.

"Once a bush fire reaches a stage where ground crews cannot fight it directly, aerial attack is unlikely to succeed."

Emergency Services Minister Bob Wiese, who was also at the launch of the project, said the government was committed to strengthening resources for combating wildfires in the outer metropolitan area.

CALM had begun a major replacement program for its heavy duty pumper fleet. The Fire and Rescue Service had established a new permanent station at Joondalup and a new volunteer FRS brigade at Mundaring is integrated with the bush fire brigade. The Bush Fires Board had assisted local shires to upgrade equipment for volunteer brigades.

The introduction of aerial firefighting would complement these initiatives.



Premier Richard Court officially launched Operation Firebird in the Gnarup pines last month. He is pictured with Bryan Rees (left) and Bill Fox from the Victorian Department of Conservation and Natural Resources who carried the training program, CALM Executive Director Syd Shea and CALM Senior Operations Officer Terry Maher. Photo by Norm Bailey



The key to Operation Firebird is the Dromader M-18A, seen here dropping 3000 litres of foam-water mix. Photo by Norm Bailey



CALMfire officers involved in Operation Firebird training included Kevin White from Central Forest Region, Greg Napier from Dwellingup and Greg Standing from Jarrahdale. Photo by Nigel Higgs



Fire agency representatives at the launch included Graham Tweedie (left), Fire and Rescue Service; Hartley Read, BFB; Rob De Burgh, BFB; Captain Phillip Dunn from Tactical Aviation Australia and Lyndon Mutter from CALM Perth District. Photo by Norm Bailey

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