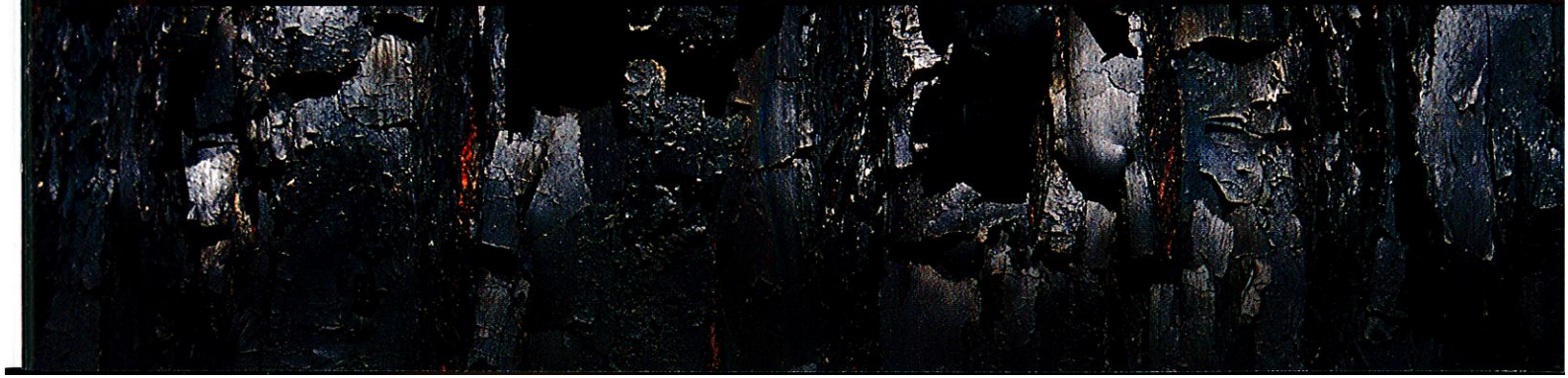


The Battle of Babbington

In early February 2012 a series of lightning strikes occurred across the Department of Environment and Conservation's Donnelly District, igniting 12 bushfires. Ten of these fires were quickly contained to less than one hectare, and one other was contained to seven hectares. Unfortunately, one fire burnt for two weeks, threatening the town of Northcliffe and the holiday settlement of Windy Harbour, and challenging fire crews as it raced through long-unburnt fuels and difficult terrain. It was 'The Battle of Babbington'.

by Jeffrey Bennett and Nikki Rouse



On Friday 10 February 2012, just after 12 noon, a Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) spotter aircraft detected a bushfire in Babbington forest block within Shannon National Park. The bushfire—identified as ‘Donnelly District Fire 28’ or the ‘Babbington fire’—is believed to have started from a lightning strike the previous night and was burning in forest that had last been burnt 19 years before. Fixed-wing waterbombers and ground crews were dispatched immediately and began what is known as a ‘direct attack’—where crews directly combat the fire edge.

By 2pm the fire was too intense, and included the occurrence of multiple ‘hop-overs’—new small fires which start when embers jump forward of the fire front, carried by wind or updrafts. This fire behaviour put the safety of firefighters at risk, forcing ground crews to fall back and employ an ‘indirect attack’—an attempt to construct fire breaks along the flank, or sides, of the fire.



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Main Smoke from the Babbington fire on its eastern boundary on Deeside Coast Road.

Photo – Paul Love/DEC

Inset Burned jarrah.

Photo – Dennis Sarson/Lochman Transparencies

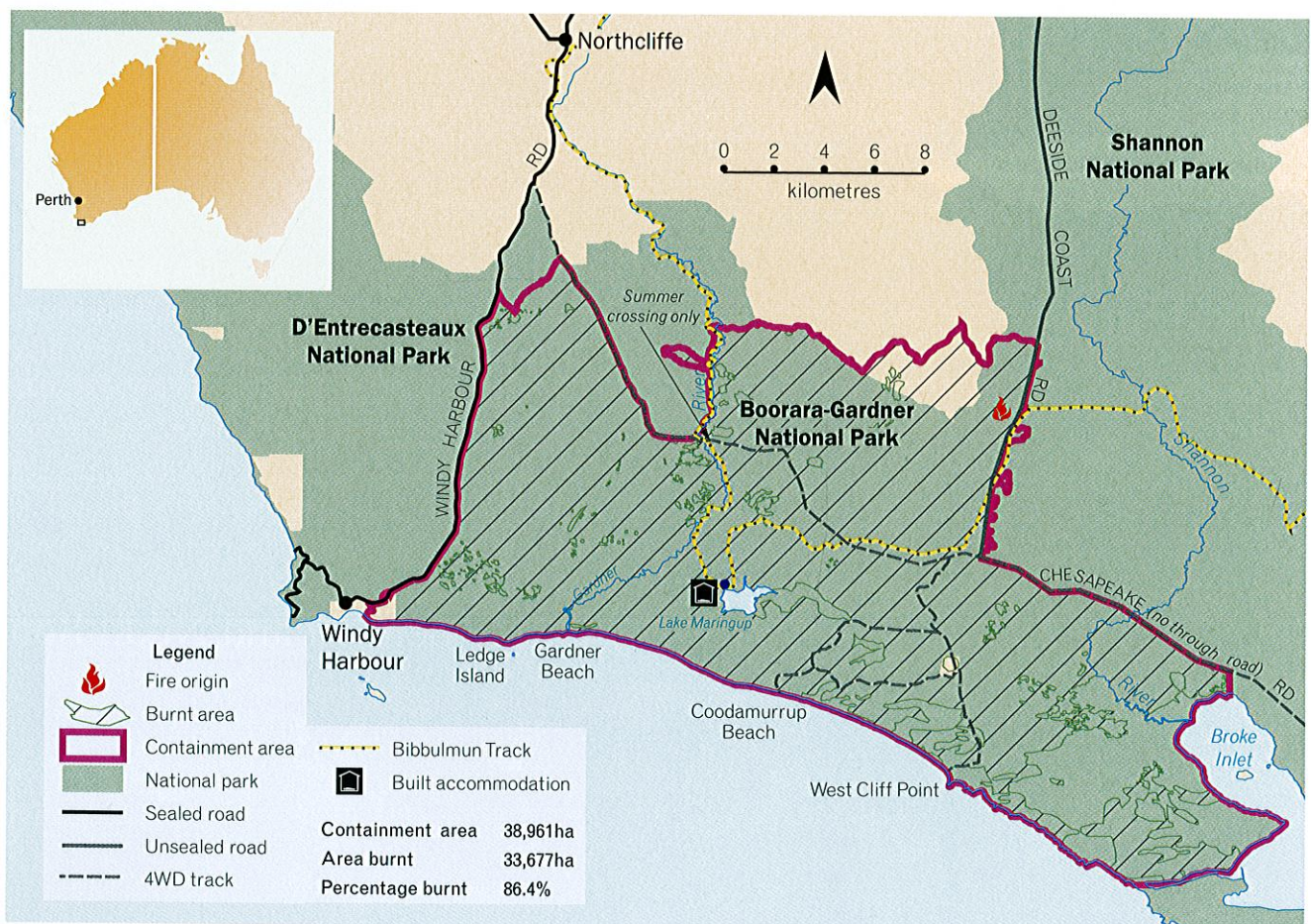
Left Emergency services fighting the Babbington fire during the night.

Photo – Wayne Fox/DEC

By 4pm it was too smoky for firebombing aircraft to continue working safely and they were stood down. Firefighters continued to work throughout the night to try to contain the fire as it burnt towards Chesapeake Road and the Bibbulmun Track, including the track’s Lake Maringup shelter. This task included constructing fire breaks and back burning (a fire suppression technique in which the amount of flammable material ahead of the fire front is reduced, aiming to slow the advance of the fire).

Several people camping along the Bibbulmun Track were escorted from the area for their safety. Park visitors to D’Entrecasteaux National Park were also guided out of several popular recreation sites during the night, and this section of the national park and Bibbulmun Track were closed to visitors.

By around 10:40pm Friday the fire had travelled eight kilometres, spreading at a rate of about 1.1 kilometres an hour. In the early hours of Saturday morning the fire was threatening a





historic hut—known as Moores Hut—originally used by cattlemen grazing their stock in the area. Firefighters carried out protective burning around the hut, hoping to protect it.

Bring out the big guns

Despite valiant efforts by local staff, the fire continued to burn uncontrolled, and the southern containment line became the Southern Ocean. In the early hours of Saturday morning a decision was made to call in additional resources, including more firefighters and machinery. DEC has five pre-formed teams of about 70 people each, who are deployed to fight fires wherever they occur across the state. In this instance, DEC's 'Blue' pre-formed team was activated with team members beginning to arrive in Manjimup and Northcliffe by mid-morning, enabling local firefighters to have a well-earned rest after working at least 24 hours straight in extremely difficult conditions.

Through Saturday and Sunday firefighters worked to establish containment lines around the north, west and east of the fire. Due to the long-unburnt fuels and intense fire behaviour, containment lines often failed as burning embers were carried long distances, causing new spot fires. This posed a major concern for the safety of firefighters.

AIIMS

The Department of Environment and Conservation manages fires using the Australasian Inter-service Incident Management System (AIIMS). AIIMS is an emergency response management system that has been adopted by agencies across Australia. The system supports a coordinated and controlled approach to an incident, whether it's a bushfire, search and rescue operation, whale stranding, aircraft crash or other emergency.

The core unit of the AIIMS system is the 'incident management team', which is made up of the managers of each of the functional areas, or sections—operations, planning, logistics and public information—together with the incident controller for that incident. One of the system's key benefits is that a number of different agencies can come together and work cooperatively under one structure, using common language, with people stepping into predetermined roles and reporting structures.

Escalation

One technique used in an escalating bushfire response, and in incident management generally, is the concept of triggers—the pre-determination of events or situations at which an agreed-upon action is taken. By Sunday night, trigger points had been established by the incident management team for additional warnings for the town of Northcliffe, north-west of the fire, and the nearby holiday settlement of Windy Harbour, to the south-west. If the fire broke containment lines at pre-determined locations this would then lead to an escalation of bushfire warnings to the community.

Above Emergency services carrying out edge burning on Chesapeake Road.
Photo – Wayne Fox/DEC

On Monday, protective burning was conducted around several recreational huts near Broke Inlet to protect them if the fire travelled quickly to the east. On Monday afternoon, the fire breached the north-west containment lines and continued burning towards Northcliffe. Firefighters, machinery and fixed-wing waterbombers concentrated their efforts to contain this outbreak, and eventually—around midnight—contained the fire in an area of low fuels which had been burnt five years earlier in a DEC prescribed burn.



Left Heading towards the Babbington fire as seen from a DEC vehicle.

Below left DEC and Fire and Emergency Services Authority staff work with the community at Windy Harbour to inform them of the fire's status.

Photos - Ashlee Docking/DEC



Strengthening containment

The next day (Tuesday 14 February) firefighters continued to consolidate existing containment lines. Fire retardant was successfully used to protect another historic hut in the area, known as Hester Hut. During the following four days firefighters continued to strengthen containment lines around the fire, often hampered by boggy and sandy terrain. The Blue pre-formed team finished its tour of duty and was replaced by the Black pre-formed team, most of whom were staff from the Pemberton, Manjimup, Walpole and Albany DEC offices. Patches of unburnt vegetation within the fire ground continued to ignite and place pressure on containment lines.

However, there was some welcome news. Firefighters were able to inspect the Bibbulmun Track shelter at Lake Maringup from the air for the first time, and were happy to report it had not sustained any serious damage. Protection works carried out by the Northcliffe DEC crew in previous months had certainly paid off.

Expect the unexpected

On Sunday 19 February patrol and 'mop-up'—the systematic extinguishing of residing burning embers—continued along the containment lines and arrangements were put in place to hand back management of the fire from the Black pre-formed team to the Donnelly District at the end of the day shift. The mop-up standard is for all logs and stumps within 20 metres of the edge of the fire break, and trees within 100 metres of the edge, to be extinguished. However, this plan was placed on hold when an outbreak occurred on the western boundary during the heat of the afternoon due to very strong south-easterly winds. A burning ember from the re-ignition

Agencies involved in the Babbington fire

- Department of Environment and Conservation
- Forest Products Commission
- the then Fire and Emergency Services Authority (now the Department of Fire and Emergency Services)
- local volunteer bushfire brigades
- Volunteer Fire and Rescue Service
- Western Australian Police
- Main Roads WA
- Shire of Manjimup
- State Emergency Services
- Western Power
- Department of Agriculture and Food
- local contractors
- private timber companies
- Department for Child Protection
- local businesses (particularly local food businesses and supermarkets)
- St John's Ambulance
- Department of Health
- Department of Education
- WA Water Corporation



Above Mount Chudalup boardwalk damaged by fire.

Photo – David Meehan/DEC

of a small unburnt patch of vegetation about 70 metres from the boundary carried over the containment line and started a new spot fire. Firefighters were unable to extinguish the spot fire, which quickly escalated in a north-westerly direction and was unable to be contained by direct attack, despite the use of waterbombing aircraft.

The fire, fanned by strong easterly winds, was now burning towards Mount Chudalup in D'Entrecasteaux National Park. Fixed-wing waterbombers were tasked with protecting the radio communication equipment on the summit of Mount Chudalup, which is used by DEC, the Department of Fire and Emergency Services (DFES), formerly the Fire and Emergency Services Authority (FESA) and police. The fire ran into Mount Chudalup and reached Windy Harbour Road in the early evening. A containment line was constructed along Florence Road to prevent the fire spreading to the north and threatening the Northcliffe community, and Windy Harbour Road was closed. Firefighters managed to

contain the fire along Windy Harbour Road. The area to the west of this road and south of Summertime Track had been prescribed burnt two years before. This recent prescribed burning significantly aided the fire suppression efforts along Windy Harbour Road. While the communication equipment was undamaged, boardwalks and associated DEC infrastructure were damaged by the fire in and around the Mount Chudalup recreation site.

At this time, the fire south of Florence Track activated the previously determined trigger point, escalating

the bushfire warning for Northcliffe from 'Advice' to 'Watch and Act'. An urgent incident support group meeting was called early Sunday evening to discuss the risk to Northcliffe and the Windy Harbour settlement. An evacuation order was placed over an area north of the fire. During Sunday night the evacuation notification and road closures were implemented by the police, aided by the Shire of Manjimup and volunteer bushfire brigades. As a precaution against the fire breaching containment lines and threatening Northcliffe, a relocation centre was

What the alerts mean

Emergency Warning: You are in danger and you need to take immediate action to survive as you will be impacted by fire. Hourly updates are provided unless the situation changes.

Watch and Act: A fire is approaching and conditions are changing, you need to start taking action now to protect you and your family. Two-hourly updates are provided unless the situation changes.

Advice: A fire has started but there is no immediate danger. This is general information to keep you informed and up to date with developments. Updates are provided at 11am and 4pm unless the situation changes.

All Clear: The bushfire is now under control. The danger has passed but you need to remain vigilant in case the situation changes.



Left The head fire in karri forest on Kauri Timber Company Road (known as KTC Road) during the initial attack.
Photo – Paul Love/DEC

Keeping the community informed

The fire suppression effort continued throughout Monday. Community meetings and briefings were also held at Northcliffe and Windy Harbour, attended by more than 200 people. These meetings were effective in keeping the community up to date with fire suppression efforts, and information on the location of the fire front, road closures and direction of the smoke plume.

Firefighters worked on Monday and Tuesday to establish new containment lines to protect Northcliffe town site, and burn-out patches of vegetation within the fire ground to prevent further escapes. The firefighting efforts were successful and the threat to Northcliffe abated. The additional trigger point had not been activated.

Mop-up and patrol continues

Management of the fire ground was handed back to the Donnelly District on Thursday 23 February. Mop-up and patrol continued around the fire ground for the remainder of the summer and through to early April 2012. The final area contained within the fire boundary was about 38,961 hectares, with a total perimeter of about 115 kilometres.

Shannon and D’Entrecasteaux national parks—renowned for their coastal scenery, wetlands, biodiversity and high recreational value to the community—had not seen fire of this magnitude in recent times. The fire suppression effort involved a large number of firefighters and support personnel including 339 DEC personnel, 33 Forest Products Commission staff, 13 FESA staff, 36 volunteer personnel and staff from more than a dozen organisations, assisted by 27 contract personnel, seven earth-moving machines, 31 fire appliances, seven fixed-wing waterbombers, two type 1 helicopter waterbombers, a

Saves and losses in the Babbington fire

Saves	Losses
Windy Harbour settlement and Northcliffe town site	Timber boardwalks at Mount Chudalup
Coastal huts—including Hesters Hut, Moores Hut, and huts at Broke Inlet and Gardner River	
Communication facilities at Mount Chudalup	About 400 hectares of thinned karri regrowth forest in Boorara and Babbington forest blocks
Private property enclave at Fish Creek	
Lake Maringup Bibbulmun Track shelter	Boardwalks along the Bibbulmun Track near Lake Maringup
Recreation facilities at Mount Chudalup	

established by the Department for Child Protection at the Pemberton Sports Club for people evacuated from their homes. A number of people evacuated from south of Northcliffe were accommodated at the relocation centre until it was safe to return home. During the early morning it was decided in

agreement between DEC and FESA senior management that an additional trigger point would be put in place and, if the fire breached that trigger point, management of the fire would escalate from a level 2 to a level 3 incident, the most complex and highest incident classification.



Above Waterbombing aircraft were used to stop the fire breaking from containment lines.

Photo – Wayne Fox/DEC

Right Donnelly district manager John Gillard and district fire coordinator Jeffrey Bennett with thank you posters and signs from the Northcliffe community.

Photo – John McKenzie/DEC

spotter aircraft, and a reconnaissance and incendiary helicopter.

The Battle of Babbington also reinforced the value of DEC's prescribed burning program, as firefighters used areas that were recently prescribed burnt to mount successful attacks at pivotal moments in the bushfire's development. The effort by all involved was fantastic, with a large number of agencies working together, supported by the Northcliffe community. The Northcliffe Community Development Group, together with the Shire of Manjimup, hosted a barbecue in Northcliffe to thank all those involved, and messages of support and gratitude were overwhelming.



Jeffrey Bennett is the district fire coordinator in the Department of Environment and Conservation's (DEC's) Donnelly District at Pemberton and was heavily involved in the Babbington fire, both during the incident, and in the post-fire analysis. He can be contacted on (08) 9776 1207, or by email (jeffrey.bennett@dec.wa.gov.au).

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