

Will it take a wildfire to get people involved in your local fire brigade?

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The challenge for any volunteer Rural Fire Brigade is to maintain and improve membership capacity and increase community awareness and support. Established in 1954, Korora Rural Fire Brigade services a semi-rural community on the northern edge of Coffs Harbour. Active membership has varied over the years with the Brigade under threat of extinction in the 1980s due to lack of interest and changing land tenure. Membership increased in the 1990s with the construction of a new shed.

In the 3 years since I have been Chairman of the 25-member brigade, we have increased community awareness and support by publishing an annual newsletter, conducted a trash and treasure open day at the shed and displayed the truck at the annual Kororo School fete. We promote the brigade with a road sign and target potential new members to support us, either by attending our monthly meetings or making a donation. Our increase in membership, donations and associate members who are Treasurer, Auditor and Maintenance Officer are tangible evidence of increased community support.

Maintaining interest and building capacity with the members is more difficult as most members have families and work fulltime. However, the brigade has instigated a training schedule for members, obtained a Volunteer Small Grant to purchase equipment, erected an honour board of Captains and recognised long service membership and initiated an annual volunteer fire fighter award. Effective communication between members is paramount to a successful brigade, with agenda items, actions, training activities and social events distributed electronically prior to our monthly meetings. The Internet plays an important role in keeping members updated, with all but four of our members on-line.

Volunteer Brigade membership is declining, locally evidenced by the brigade on our western boundary dissolving, and the findings of the Bushfire CRC Voluntarism Project published in May 2005 suggesting that volunteer numbers in Victoria have declined by over 20,000 since 1988. This paper discusses some practical ideas that a local volunteer brigade may implement to arrest the decline in membership, and maintain and increase community support and awareness towards bushfires.

Facilitating increased community consciousness towards bushfires