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The *BlazeAid* POST

An Insight into the BlazeAid Organisation and its efforts to Rebuild Communities Affected by Natural Disasters

Current Statistics

Total Volunteers:

34,413

Total Volunteer Days:

353,599

Properties supported:

11,739

Fences cleared:

16,420km

Fences rebuilt:

16,012km

Current Camps:

- Biggenden QLD
- Murgon QLD
- Toogoolawah QLD
- Woolooga QLD
- Casino NSW
- Coolah NSW
- Forbes NSW
- Grafton NSW
- Oxley Island NSW
- Wauchope NSW
- Corrigin WA
- Denmark WA

From the ashes: Cobden VIC

Not just rebuilding fences, but helping rebuild lives

St Patricks Day 2017 was certainly far from any ordinary day here in the South West of Victoria.

Where I call home, the small rural town of Cobden, known to many as the heart of the nations Dairy Industry, surrounded by incredible agricultural landscapes, and hard working farming enterprises, Saturday 17 March was a very hot, dry, and concerning windy day.

Our region was on high bushfire alert following severe weather warnings and elevated fire danger ratings. By 8pm that evening our local CFA volunteers, along with Regional and State Control Centres were standing down with sighs of relief, presuming we had all dodged a bullet.

However, at 9pm the first of multiple Triple O calls began. Massive, strong and gusty northerly winds hit our area and an emergency event had begun!

Wind speeds up to 143km were recorded nearby to town, and, with that, unravelled multiple energy disruptions, roads blocked and compromised, and local telecommunications

completely shut down, affecting Vic emergency warnings to residents.

Next to evolve was the multiple fires breaking out as a result of the wind, damaged power lines, and to make this even more of a nightmare, unfolding was the fact it was now night time and completely dark!

Our local landscape now had multiple, fast moving grass fires. This was an unprecedented night time fire that just took off, ultimately destroying 26 homes, 83 farm sheds, at least 3,000 animals, the majority being beloved dairy cattle and about 3,000 km of fencing critical to

livestock. We ended up with three events in one! Wind, fire, and the uncontrollable burning fires of toxic Peat.

53 days later the event was declared safe. But, we got lucky, incredibly NO human lives lost!

I was serving my third term as the Mayor of the Coranagmite Shire, and my community had just been left devastated by such a significant emergency. The following days, emotions were certainly high and reality of what was occurring still setting in.

It was Wednesday 23, 5 days following the initial event when I first became aware of the organisation BlazeAid. I was standing on stage at the Cobden Civic Hall, which had become one of our local relief centres, peering into the eyes of a couple hundred exhausted, emotional, yet engaged locals, intently hanging on every word that I, and fellow emergency service representatives

“We were getting towards the end of questions from the floor when this lady wanted to introduce herself.”

were providing as we gave them an update on the current situation and how the relief and recovery was unfolding.

It was just prior to the beginning of the meeting that I was told that a lady by the name of Chris, was in the room and wanted to speak on behalf of BlazeAid, with that I added her name to the list of organisations represented in the room, not knowing what she looked like, or even what BlazeAid was all about.

The meeting was being livestreamed so those that couldn't attend were still able to get the relevant updates in their own time. We were getting towards the end of questions from the floor when this lady wanted to introduce herself.

Right there in that moment our communities' lives were changed, and for the better!

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From the ashes: Cobden VIC



Mayor Jo Beard addressing large community meeting in Cobden following fires when first introduced to BlazeAid

Chris Male, from BlazeAid had come to our town to set up camp and help our farmers rebuild their lives, whilst rebuilding fences. Chris had the perfect charisma, or should I say spunk, to immediately engage and gain the trust and confidence from our locals, especially me.

So with that, pretty much immediately following the South West Complex Fires (as our fires were now affectionately known) two BlazeAid camps were established in the Corangamite Shire towns of Cobden and Terang.

The camps were set up at the Cobden Kart Club and the Terang Racecourse with both camps opening on 23 March 2018. The Terang camp conducted operations for three months following the fires, whilst the Cobden camp operated for nine months.

In total, there were 178 properties who registered for assistance from BlazeAid, both for the removal and the rebuilding of fences. Highlights of the work undertaken by the Cobden camp specifically, included the following:

- 669 registered volunteers,
- 5,600 volunteer days,
- approximately 200km fences cleared,
- and 660km rebuilt,
- 94,285 posts put in at 7 per 100 metres,
- 20 days average volunteer stay,
- 6,800 meals prepared and served,
- 24 different catering groups, 17 teams out on one day, \$1.76 million in labour value, and countless lives touched by BlazeAids presence.

To assist in building relationships with the community and BlazeAid, the 'BlazeAid Cup' was conducted on the 14 July 2018. The cup involved Terang and Cobden Football Netball Clubs and was an aggregate. Council worked with both clubs to have them conduct and deliver the day, in line with the community led recovery, and whilst Council provided the trophy, the clubs allowed BlazeAid volunteers to attend for free, provided a space for them to sit and watch the game and had the Camp Leaders present the trophy to the winning club at the end of the day. It was a successful event, with positive outcomes and helped in the healing process for the community, as well as another opportunity for the communities to mix with and thank the volunteers for all they were doing



BlazeAid Cup, Cobden versus Terang Football Netball Clubs



Cr Jo Beard presenting Chris and John Male on behalf of BlazeAid with a special Australia Day Recognition Award on 26 January 2019

Chris and John Male, along with their incredibly generous volunteers, supported and transformed the way in which our local community recovered from our devastating fires. As Local Government, our Recovery Team, led by Jarrod Woff, partnered with, and worked closely with BlazeAid, supporting and enabling them to do what they needed to do for the benefit of our local farmers.

Without them and their selfless dedication I dread to think of potential outcomes.

To have these special human beings come into our lives - complete strangers, and yet still to this day, remain friends, along with Kevin and Rhonda Butler, no words will ever be enough to thank each of them for what they did for our community, and we will forever be grateful.

BlazeAid volunteers do far more than rebuild fences, they rebuild lives.

They reconnect communities during the toughest of times. They give back hope, company, and an ear when required, the rebuilding of infrastructure is the bonus!

Councillor Jo Beard
Corangamite Shire



Fire affected farmers and BlazeAid volunteers come together to say farewell in Cobden after 270 days of camp

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My first BlazeAid camp was at MacArthur, mid-west Victoria in April 2018. The camp was at the sports centre which had a large kitchen and dining area. We were made most welcome and were advised of the meals' procedure. All meals are provided free while you are in camp, even if you are having a rest day. Some caravans had access to power and water. We had access to the showers and toilets.

The morning muster gave an insight as to what to expect at the work site. The Co-ordinator also advised that some of the farmers were still traumatised. We were advised that if the farmer wanted to sit and talk that was OK as it is as much about mending their minds as their fences. Being an ex-farm worker, I made a point of riding in the ute with the farmer, Arthur, to the work sight so we could talk about farming. After 2 days Arthur said he was relieved to see fences being built and that he was finally sleeping better at night.

I volunteered for Blazeaid as being an ex-farm worker I was keen to help farmers. I was impressed with the Blazeaid trailers which contained everything required to remove a damaged fence and build a new fence.

I had fencing experience, but no experience is required as the Team Leader will teach you on the job. You work in teams of 4/6 so you will get to meet new people and will enjoy being part of a team.

I would encourage women to volunteer for fencing as there are fencing jobs that do not require experience, but you will be taught new skills.

In March 2021 I joined BlazeAid for the Wooroloo fires in Western Australia. I enjoyed it so much I did over 60 days volunteering. As mentioned earlier I encourage women to volunteer. One day our team of 5 was 4 women and me and I was not Team Leader. I was OK with that. There were quite a few women Team Leaders at the Wooroloo camp.

At the end of the day's work the farmer would be most grateful for our help. I would say to the farmer "we are volunteers so we would not be here if we did not want to be. We feel a great satisfaction knowing we have helped so it's a win for you and a win for us".

You will learn new skills. As per the attached photo I learnt to strain a ringlock fence through a strainer strut assembly.

Stuart Ledwith



"We make a living by what we get, but we make a life better with what we give."

Winston Churchill



Being a city office worker with a double hip replacement, fencing was never on my radar. After the recent bushfires, I just wanted to help and the amazing volunteers at BlazeAid showed me that with teams of people ranging in skills, ages and physical fitness, you really can help rebuild communities. After a day out fencing, I'm ready for a nice long hot shower but I'm filled with a great sense of pride and look forward to the next time I can volunteer. I will forever treasure the strength and courage of the wonderful property owners and volunteers I have met.

Rachael

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My first BlazeAid camp was at Wirrabra, SA in 2013. I had recently retired and was looking for an activity that I thought I would enjoy & at the same time help somebody. I had heard of BlazeAid on Macca's "Australia all Over" on the ABC. On arrival at Wirrabra, the first thing that struck me was how friendly and welcoming everyone was. We were from all walks of life but that didn't matter, we were there for one purpose – help the farmers who had lost property and fences in the recent fires. And so my BlazeAid journey began. I knew nothing about fencing, my background being finance and senior management – a city slicker! But I loved the outdoors and the Bush. It wasn't long before someone who did know about fencing started teaching me. Strainers, Box Sections, Straining Up, Knots, Twitching, Droppers, "Watch out for the Barb"! A lot of foreign language but now a new skill I have mastered. But it doesn't matter if fencing is not your thing – there are plenty of other tasks that volunteers can do at a BlazeAid camp. Clearing the old fence, kitchen and bathroom duties, camp cleanliness, administration, answering the phone (it never stops!) and so the list goes on. Anyone, any age, is welcome at a BlazeAid Camp. I guess volunteering is a part of my life in retirement. I also help with Scouts SA (property maintenance at Woodhouse Activity Centre) and the Farina Restoration Group (preserving the old outback town at Farina). At BlazeAid, I see it as my contribution to helping our farmers who are our food source and a vital part of the economy.

It is not just the farmer either, their families, the community, all suffer in natural disasters. BlazeAid does more than just repair a fence, it helps to repair lives. Since Wirrabra, I have volunteered at four other camps within SA, some for just a week or two, others for a few months. In SA, we are very fortunate to have the strong support of Viterra Grain who have given us an old grain storage facility in which we are able to store all of our trailers and equipment under cover and in a secure environment. Volunteering for BlazeAid doesn't stop at camps. The trailers and equipment all need maintenance and checking between camps.

*"It's not for money, it's not for fame
And it's not for any personal gain.
It's just for the love of fellow man
It's just to lend a helping hand
It's just to give a little of self
That's something you can't buy with wealth
It's not the medals worn with pride
It's just for that feeling deep inside
It's that reward down in your heart
It's a feeling you've been a part
Of helping others far and near
That's what makes you a VOLUNTEER"*
Author Unknown

We have a small group of BlazeAiders who check the brakes, bearings etc on all the trailers, others do maintenance on the tools and prepare kitchen and administration trailers ready for the next callout. The comradery developed at a camp flows on and on.

We also have a six monthly "catch up" function at a very supportive Pub (Arkaba Group) and this helps us all keep in touch and maintain that BlazeAid Family. At BlazeAid you encounter all walks of life, have lots of fun, enjoy the company, get to feel good about what you are doing and develop lifelong friends.

You also see and hear the tragedies of natural disasters but the morning joke always sends you on the way with a smile.

There is always sadness too. My most vivid memory is of the time I was chatting with a farmer who had come in to camp to register for help. His wife had "pushed him" to visit! We started chatting and he told me how he had just started to take on the farm from his Dad, had a young family and was about to start harvest when the fire ripped through his property. All his fences and some machinery were burnt but the house was saved. The worst was that Dad had forgotten to pay the insurance. I assured him that we would be out to his property in the next day or so to help him clear the fence line. I then mentioned that we would also come out and help him rebuild his fences. He looked at me and said "John, I won't be able to afford to build a new fence for five years", his eyes welling up with tears. I too started to tear up. The good news is that by the time we had closed that camp, BlazeAid had rebuilt his boundary fence and run an internal fence to divide a paddock so he could run his sheep and plant a crop. That's why I volunteer for BlazeAid. Come join us.

John Tuckwell.



Volunteer Insights

I have always loved volunteering, but in this journey I had the opportunity to learn and meet true blue Aussies with vast experiences in their lives and I love where their travels have taken them to. Those that I met are mostly grey nomads from all over the state as well as local retirees who have their own caravan and set up camp. All are dedicated to the same cause. We volunteers are not unpaid because we are worthless but because we are priceless. We start where we are with what we have and with what we can. Our hearts are not measured in size but the depth of the commitment to make a difference in the life of others. One of the greatest gifts we can give is our time as we work for a cause and not applause.

Volunteering my time to support a cause I am passionate about is something I will never regret. It enriches my life.

I can familiarise myself with the community and connect with people and ideas that will positively impact my perspective for the rest of my life. It helped me to grow as a person, to better understand how I fit into the world around me.

At the end of the day, it's not about what you've accomplished, it's about who you've lifted up, who you've made better. It's about what you've given back. Giving back involves a certain amount of giving up and in my case my garden is truly suffering. The weeds, the prunings, leaves to rake etc. But it can wait. For now my present volunteering with BlazeAid and helping to rebuild is more important. The happy faces of the property owners when their fences are done, the Thank You's, the hugs, that's what drummed into me why I give.

Rocky



One Of Our Own

You may have seen Lawrie at our camps, he had been volunteering for BlazeAid for nearly two years straight in the Casino area when he took his truck, tractor and caravan up to Murgon to help with the flood recovery there.

Lawrie was returning home to help his lovely wife Valerie celebrate her birthday when the floods hit his own property. Two metres of water went through Lawrie and Val's shed. As you can see from the photos, it was devastating. A houseboat even ended up in his front yard. The ADF, BlazeAid, SES, family and friends all came to help our beloved Lawrie clean up.

Wishing you both the best Lawrie and Val, The BlazeAid Family.



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After the recent disastrous Wooroloo fires I was looking for a practical way to help – I found BlazeAid, they said no experience necessary, and boy what a welcoming, fun group they turned out to be!

Young, old, experienced farmers or novices like myself, we work as a team and every little bit helps. At the end of the day we all share the same sense of achievement when a fence is complete, and it's both humbling and gratifying to know we are helping in some small way to get a whole community back on its feet.



“Couple Of Days”

How long is a “couple of days”? If you're a BlazeAid volunteer it can be a couple of weeks or a couple of months, even a couple of years. This is often how volunteering starts, “I'll come and help for a couple of days”.

I got a call from Danny (Victoria), who like many, was touring and found themselves close by. Danny said “I've seen where you need volunteers, my partner and I aren't far away, could we come for a couple of days?”. “Of course”, I said, “that would be wonderful”, and “when can you be here?” Next came an answer that warms a co-ordinator's heart, “today”. Danny and Barb came for a couple of days and stayed until the camp closed.

If you're in a BlazeAid camp now, or going out to help tomorrow, ask the person next to you how long they offered to help the first time they volunteered for BlazeAid. Was it “a coupla days”?

Jo Delaney



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BlazeAid: Behind The Scenes



The front line of BlazeAid is our incredible volunteers on the fencelines.

Every time your trailer comes back from the fenceline the Team Leader is charged with checking that all the fencing gear has come back with you.

Have you ever wondered how much 'stuff' BlazeAid has?

For starters there are 279 trailers and 70 cars, as well as caravans and shipping containers. They are spread around Australia from Denmark WA to the Sunshine Coast hinterland and they are being re-located all the time as camps close and new camps open in response to fire, flood and cyclone.

As well as all the stuff in current camps, we are developing several storage depots around the country. Currently we have one in WA, one in SA, two in Vic and two in NSW. If you know of a secure, lockable, covered building in NSW South Coast or Queensland SE please let us know.

Keeping track of all these BlazeAid assets is a daunting task. We rely totally on Coordinators to feed back information and a photo every time an asset is relocated. Why a photo? Because we all make the occasional typing error and one typo creates a phantom asset that we don't really have!

So how do we keep track of these very expensive assets? - in three ways:

First, we maintain an Excel spreadsheet – the Asset Management Master. When a trailer moves from one camp to a new one, a volunteer updates the spreadsheet based on the Co-ordinator's information.

Second, the assets are fitted with a satellite tracking device that updates in three ways. The Tracker sends its location to a satellite once a day, when it can 'see' one. Alternatively, it can update location by piggybacking on the bluetooth function of your mobile phone and lastly, it updates when it comes within range of a free Wi-Fi signal.

Third, we regularly ask Co-ordinators to audit all the camp cars and trailers and send us the list, so we can verify that our records match reality.

After the Primary Assets - the Cars, Trailers, Caravans and Containers, there are all the Secondary Assets needed to operate a camp; Swift Shelters, washing machines, computers, mobile phones, fridges, printers, lawn mowers, toasters, urns etc, etc, etc. Separate spreadsheets are maintained to keep track of as many of these items as we can.

So you can see it is a complex business managing the storage and movement of all this equipment.

Next time you talk to your Camp Co-ordinator, give them an extra pat on the back for all the work they are doing 'behind the scenes'.

Andrew Gibson



We are very pleased to announce the Domino's registered Charity Give for Good have entered into a Tier 3 partnership with BlazeAid, with a donation of \$56,000. The funds will be used to purchase tools, providing the gear we need to help the community.

Here's to a successful and rewarding partnership!



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Co-ordinator Thank You !

Broni and Rob Edwards

Broni and Rob live in Virginia SA, north of Adelaide. Their careers were in transport and logistics, working for a large interstate road transport company. Rob was the state manager, and Broni was the office manager (the one that knew what was going on).

Together they have volunteered at Lobethal, Springhead and Lucindale in South Australia, and most recently at Edenhope in Victoria.

Broni and Rob enjoy travelling with their van hitched on the back, they haven't done "the" long trip yet, however they are heading to WA to set up a camp in Narrogin WA in a couple of weeks and are looking forward to a new adventure and helping.

They have four children and seven grandchildren. All their grandchildren are adults and live in various parts of South Australia and Tasmania.

Rob is so very into music that when they got the call from Melissa on New Years Day to see if they would co-ordinate the Edenhope camp, Rob was in the middle of what turned out to be a 5 hour concert at the Milang Caravan Park. Broni just couldn't get him to sit down, the request threw him a bit, but he kept singing. The couple sing at retirement villages, clubs and nursing homes.

Rob plays the ukulele and banjo, whilst Broni 's hobby is making candle melts, it's a bit hard to take in the caravan though, she might have to find something else. She's thinking reading sounds good and it's easy to pack.

Broni and Rob are enjoying being part of the BlazeAid family and hope they can continue for quite some time.

Thank you Broni and Rob, you make a difference every day !



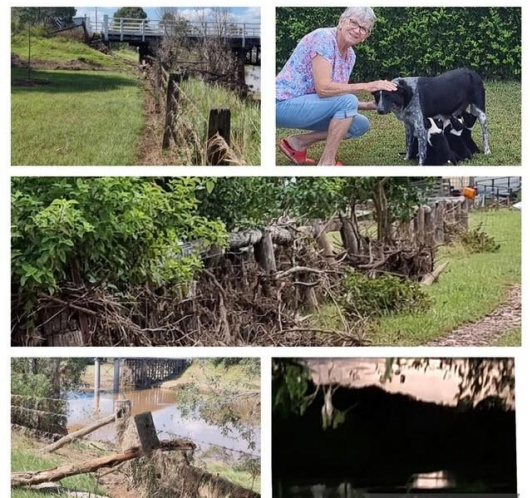
Broni & Rob presented this photo to council as a thank you for their support of the Edenhope volunteers. If you look carefully, the volunteers spell out BlazeAid.

Kerrie at Woolooga, QLD

Kerrie is the co-ordinator at BlazeAid Woolooga, where the farms are still drying out from the February floods. A lot of farmers are registering through the local church groups and government agency, so Kerrie is seeing the farmer registrations steadily growing. With the past couple of weeks sunshine they are getting busy on the fenceline.

Amongst the keen and supportive volunteers is a father and son duo who drove all the way from Victoria, towing a bobcat to come and help out. Pictured here providing a little tenderness to a local Mum is Dawn, she and husband Mike have been to 11 BlazeAid camps.

Thank you Kerrie, your community appreciates all that you do !



Guest Editor – Jo Delaney

Do you have a BlazeAid story to share about a person, place, or experience? If you do, drop us an email at admin@blazeaid.com.au or contact Melissa on 0436316955. We would love to hear from you!



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