

Base Radio Operator BFAC Report - April 2024

The base radio operators have had a (long and) busy season, and I'd like to start by saying thank you very much to my team, being Ron Caudwell and Jacqui Burcham. They put a lot of time into the job, and I really appreciate their support, hard work, and the experience they bring to the role. The three of us enjoy this volunteer role, and supporting our bushfire brigade volunteers. I'd also like to thank the Chiefs, the Brigade Captains and all the bushfire volunteers for their support of myself, Ron and Jacqui.

This season will be the last for Ron, as he is moving on to focus on other things. I would like to thank Ron for his amazing service to the role and to the community of Plantagenet. He never backed down from the role, and would be up in the middle of the night and on the radio all day as the job required. We are going to miss his voice on the radio, and the enthusiasm and dedication that he brought to the role. It has been a real honour working with him, and Jacqui and I will miss him being a part of our team.

We have tried to find a replacement for Ron, and at the writing of this report none have come forward. Moving forward to the 2024/2025 season, if there are only two of us we will not be providing a 24/7 service. We will be available for incidents, to do the scheds as required etc, but we will be unable to monitor the radio as we have been doing, as we both work full time on our respective farms, and have other life commitments, just like everyone else. We will do our best, but unless there is another person who is able to share the load ie. be available more than one day a week, we will only be available as necessary.

The following are a few points that base operators have observed this season

- Too much fire traffic is done through WhatsApp when it should be on the radio. This causes confusion, and means base is having to monitor more than just the radio. There seems to be an increased expectation that base is on every brigade WhatsApp to monitor traffic and incidents. The official method of communication during a fire is the radio, base monitors and records all traffic that goes over the radio. If the radio isn't used properly, there is no guarantee that things are followed up properly or actioned if required. WhatsApp works for individual brigades, and internal chat, but we have guidelines and protocols that have been developed, so the official conversations go through the radio, ie. truck movements, crews, weather, permits etc. The following of these guidelines and protocols has lapsed and are no longer being followed. What happens when we no longer follow these protocols?
- Base would prefer that ALL traffic for fires goes through the radio. Please don't phone or message unnecessarily, like saying for example that you have a crew. Deploying that crew is not a base decision. If/when the Chief, Deputy or an IC asks your brigade to organise a crew, when they are ready to roll, please get on the radio and let the Chiefs, the IC, and base know. If you are taking an appliance home please get on the radio and let us know, which will also inform the IC and other brigades as well. It is our aim to monitor the radio, if we're taking unnecessary phone calls as well, then we are not available or listening to the radio when required.
- If base is not updated of what is happening on a fire ground, or what is required, we are unable to relay this information to other brigades and members as required. We can only provide the information we have, and we can only support brigades with the information we have been given. Everything that pertains to an incident should go over the radio so others are informed, and base can pass on the information as required.

- The IC of a fire needs to be identified early during an incident, and this person needs to be ringing comcen to determine exactly where the fire is, and communicating what is required, and in turn inform comcen what the response is.
- Not many stations have called in on the radio scheds at all this season. Radio scheds two days a week hasn't been enough, especially with some of the weather conditions we have had this season.
- It's not necessary to let us know if you're not going to call in on the sched (unless it's for a protracted period), we call lots of stations that don't ever reply, one more won't matter.
- Permit email isn't being monitored. Base did a register for a start this season, but it became unsustainable, so we relied on the Plantagenet FCO's WhatsApp group. Who monitors this email to ensure that permits are being issued correctly?
- Permits being lit only being put on local brigade groups has meant that base hasn't been aware when burns are lit, unless a member of the brigade WhatsApp group. Not all burns have been put on the emergencywa website and some permit holders have had to be reminded. When did it stop being a requirement to notify base when permits are being lit? When did it stop being a requirement to read permits out on the sched?
- Base has not found BART to be useful or an effective tool in our role, just extra noise.
- The new food protocol brought in by the CESM and MWS was recently tested out and wasn't an easy system to navigate. SES is not prepared to run food as suggested, instead for local government fires we are expected to find a volunteer to run food to a fire ground. This system will need some tweaking for it to be effective moving forward.
- Please remember that we are also volunteers, we do not get paid for the role that we play, and we service the whole Shire. We do this job around our work, families and other commitments. At present with the season the way it is, our workload on farm has increased. We do our best, and we do carry a radio with us all the time, but it is unrealistic to expect us to be available all the time. Like the firefighters, we will always be on the job for an emergency. The extraneous non urgent demands and expectations at other times, however, can be a strain.

Mietta Skinner
Base Radio Operator