



Rural Bay thirsts for firefighters

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As summer heats up, many Hawke's Bay volunteer fire brigades are struggling to find new recruits, while other urban stations boast waiting lists.

Each year about 50 new recruits are drawn into the Fire Service's Hawke's Bay stations.

However, smaller communities are falling behind. Stations such as Otane, Tikokino and Onga Onga have fewer people able to man the truck.

Tikokino Chief Fire Officer Mike Harrison said his brigade received on average 30 calls a year. The station has 11 volunteers.

"We could have 14 (volunteers), so we are down - we would definitely like to get more." After fundraising for the past year, the Tikokino community recently reached its \$100,000 target and purchased a new tanker.

Mr Harrison said many people expressed interest in joining the brigade.

"But, when push comes to shove, they don't take the next step."

Mr Harrison said there had been vast improvements in training for volunteers, with a week-long course replacing weekend training.

While rural stations are looking to boost numbers, Taradale volunteer brigade has a waiting list. The station has 21 volunteers.

Taradale volunteer firefighter Chris King said the brigade received about 180 calls a year, but lately it had been attending three to four calls a day. Juggling fire service duties and full-time employment can be difficult.

"It is getting harder but most of us are lucky and have good bosses who release us," he said.

Volunteer Support Officer Noel Brock said that in rural towns fewer people were available during the day, with locals often commuting to bigger cities for work each day.

He encouraged locals, especially women, to become volunteers. Not only do volunteers give back to their town, they also gain skills valuable to employers, including first aid.

Mr Brock said it was not hard to become a volunteer. Volunteers must pass a medical test, police security check, and complete a seven-day training course. The Fire Service reimburses lost wages for the seven days.

There are two courses each in Hastings and in Gisborne each year, taking 20 to 24 volunteers each time.

The next course in Hastings begins in March.

It can take time to get the ball rolling, so Mr Brock suggests people should get in touch with their local station now.

There are 20 fire stations in Hawke's Bay under Fire Service control. Only Napier and Hastings are manned stations, the remaining 18 are volunteer brigades.

New Zealand has 11,000 volunteer firefighters, about 2000 paid firefighters and more than 85 groups under the National Rural Fire Authority.

The National Rural Fire Authority runs brigades in rural communities, outside the realm of the Fire Service. In Hawke's Bay the Hastings District Council helps coordinate the brigades.

There are 17 brigades in the Hastings District under the rural umbrella, with about 300 volunteers manning the yellow trucks. Hastings district is the third driest nationally.

Training is different for these volunteers, as the response is community-based.

They nip fires in the bud, or try to contain the spread, while they wait for resources from other brigades.

The volunteer firefighters are often the first port of call for people requiring medical assistance, or help with civil emergencies.

Deputy principal Rural Fire Officer Paul Hawke said they were always looking for new volunteers.

Anyone interested should contact their local fire station.

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