

Research to help DEH take care of their firefighters

Key research findings into understanding the health and wellbeing of firefighters will be presented to the Department for Environment and Heritage (DEH) on Thursday 11 December.

According to Deakin University PhD candidate Jenni Raines, who is conducting her research in conjunction with the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre, bushfire fighting is unmistakably a hazardous occupation.

"Firefighters perform physically demanding work in hot weather while wearing protective clothing for multiple days at a time, often in smoke logged areas," she said.

"For these reasons alone, it is not surprising that bushfire fighting can endanger firefighters' health and safety.

"The focus of my research has been to determine the physiological strains of bushfire firefighting over consecutive days of prescribed burn operations.

"I did this by spending a number of days with staff from the Department for Environment and Heritage (DEH) who were undertaking fire fieldwork projects earlier this year.

"The research showed that prescribed burns shifts significantly stress the cardiovascular system's ability to recover from physical work. It is possible that firefighters' cardiovascular stress may be related to dehydration.

"While this may seem like common sense, it is an essential first step in determining future OH&S management plans for firefighters."

Jenni now hopes to complete her PhD research into the direct effect that food and fluid intake can have on a firefighter's hydration and work pattern.

According to Dr Meredith Henderson, DEH's Senior Fire Research Scientist, research such as this is essential to ensure the safety of all firefighters.

"DEH has 391 trained staff available for deployment to bushfires across the state, including 38 seasonal firefighters," she said.

"Fire management is an essential strategy for reducing the risk of a bushfire damaging public and private assets; however we are also conscious of the safety of our firefighters.

"Jenni's research will provide valuable information as to how to keep our staff fit and healthy while undertaking the task of helping to keep South Australia safe."

DEH is a partner in the Bushfire CRC, a national research centre for the fire and land management agencies in Australia and New Zealand.

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