

SA BUSINESS

South East forestry industry trials new hi-tech equipment, software to keep an eye on fire hot spots

New technology using cameras with 360-degree views is being trialled in the state's South East, to detect fires up to 30km away and help bring blazes under control more quickly.

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 Subscriber only | September 4, 2020 8:52pm



 Ian McDonnell, director of N.F. McDonnell & Sons Sawmill, Mt Gambier, is concerned about the impact of border restrictions on the forestry industry. Picture: Tait Schmaal

The forestry industry in the South-East is trialling new technology – the first of its kind in Australia – which uses cameras with 360-degree views to alert people when fires start in the area.

The Green Triangle Fire Alliance, which represents forestry businesses in the South-East and over the border in Victoria, is spending about \$55,000 on the trial.

If successful, it plans to lobby the State Government to use the technology more widely across forestry sites, in a move it says could save lives and help extinguish fires much more rapidly.

The move follows the recent decommissioning of two fire towers at Tantanoola and Penola North.

Computer-aided detection system “Fire Hawk” is being used in conjunction with a camera on a communications tower near Tantanoola, allowing users to zoom in on fire spots and determine their coordinates. The technology can detect fires up to 30km away.

Martin McDonald, of fire management company Working on Fire, said while staff were pulled out of towers at dusk or in dangerous conditions, the technology, already used widely in countries including South Africa and Brazil, kept rolling 24/7.

Laurie Hein, who chairs the fire alliance, said if the trial was successful, the region could have a complete network of cameras within two years. He had “major concerns” about the towers being decommissioned after they were deemed unsafe.

Meantime, the Green Triangle Forest Industries Hub is lobbying the Government to allow SA-based staff to carry out works over the length of its plantations.

Staff travelling as cross-border community members must not travel more than 40km into Victoria. Mr Hein said this was hampering SA-based companies’ efforts to carry out fire season preparation works on their Victorian properties.

Hub deputy chair Ian McDonnell said that work was critical for businesses such as his Mount Gambier sawmill.

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Primary Industries Minister David Basham said the Government was supporting the technology’s trial. “ForestrySA will work with emergency management agencies to ensure high level fire prevention and detection capability this summer,” he said.

“Border restrictions are a key part of our plan to keep South Australians safe ... throughout the coronavirus pandemic and we will continue to work with each sector to address any concerns.”

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