

Up From the Ashes

Australian volunteer organization helps farmers rebuild fences after natural disasters.

by Kasey Brown, associate editor



PHOTOS COURTESY OF GREG SEGINIT

Australia is not a gentle place to live. The people are easy-going and adaptable, but the climate is anything but. Americans joke that Australia is the land that can kill you. Outlandish predators and extreme climate — bushfires, drought, cyclones and floods — are normal obstacles for rural Australians.

Despite the frequency of them, there are few things more gut-wrenching than watching a natural disaster wreak havoc on your property, especially when that property is your lifeblood. Ranchers don't get to worry solely about their house and possessions; they must continue to care for their livestock charges. Loose livestock due to damaged fences and barns just add to the stress level.

A pair of sheep farmers in Victoria, Australia, had this nightmare happen Feb. 7, 2009, deemed Black Saturday. Black Saturday was the worst bushfire in Australian history due to extreme heat, high winds and extreme drought. Kevin and Rhonda Butler, near Kilmore East, needed to quickly secure their 1,500 sheep. They asked friends, family and local volunteers for help to repair their fences.

► **Above and right:** BlazeAid has rebuilt more than 2,360 miles of fence due to natural disasters since 2009. If enough farmers hit by natural disaster request aid, then a base camp for volunteers will be set up. Long- and short-term volunteers are welcomed and little advance notice is needed to help.

Instead of finishing fences in months by themselves, the Butlers' fences were rebuilt within a week. Kevin Butler says this sparked the idea to help others with their fencing needs, which turned into BlazeAid.

BlazeAid is a volunteer organization that helps rebuild fences following bushfires, flood, cyclone and drought. Since February 2009, Butler says thousands of long- and short-term volunteers have rebuilt more than 2,360 miles of fencing. Volunteers have come from all over Australia, New Zealand, Switzerland, England, Afghanistan, Canada, Germany, Austria, the United States and France.

Help in any way

When a natural disaster occurs, farmers can request assistance from BlazeAid, Butler explains. If many families in one area request help, then BlazeAid sets up a base camp. Each base camp has a camp coordinator volunteer heading up the camp.



Butler says volunteers don't need any fencing experience, just a willingness to give it a go and learn on the job. Volunteers can help for a day or two, a week or more. They are just asked to contact the camp coordinator a few days before they are ready to come to the base camp.

He assures, "Fencing isn't only 'men's work,' and age is no barrier. Over one-third of the previous BlazeAid volunteers — Black Saturday 2009, Cyclone Yasi, and floods 2011 and 2012 — were ladies. Many of our long-term volunteers are in their 50s and 60s, with



other volunteers aged from teens to their 80s.”

“Not all of the fencing involves heavy work,” Butler notes. “Many fences need to be cleared of debris before they can be stood up and rebuilt. For new fences, the wires need to be run through the holes in the posts, and posts need to be held in place while the sighting is done.”

He says the farmers cover the fencing materials, but BlazeAid provides labor in the form of volunteers and fencing equipment. Volunteers work in fencing teams with at least one experienced fencer, and the teams work under the farmer’s guidance and directions. By working together, fencelines can be cleared, and fences can be restood, rebuilt or replaced in a fraction of the time it would take farmers to do on their own.

“We have a combination of new volunteers and experienced fencing volunteers who have worked on many different types of fences, including putting in corner posts, strainer assemblies, posts and pickets, running, straining and tying off fencing wire, etc.,” he continues.

Volunteers come in all ages, from 12 to 85. Many friendships are formed among volunteers and families as they work together on the fencelines.

Volunteer Greg Segnit joined the BlazeAid volunteer team about three years ago. Most recently from Melbourne, Segnit quips that he is now a “grey nomad” since his retirement and travels the country by caravan.

Segnit adds that each camp and each situation is a different adventure, especially because each of them is in a disaster area. Volunteers are encouraged to bring a caravan or tent, but all camps have restrooms and hot showers. Accommodation varies at each camp — sometimes electricity is limited — but BlazeAid always provides two meals, usually with help from local community groups. Often, Segnit notes, the farmers he’s helped have provided morning tea and lunch. If not, BlazeAid equips its volunteers with sandwiches to take with them.

Lifting spirits

Conditions are varied, depending on the location and type of disaster. Segnit says that each community he has encountered is truly appreciative of the assistance, and the atmosphere at camps is full of bonhomie — good-natured easy friendliness.

Butler notes, “By lending a hand in true Aussie style, BlazeAid volunteers not only build fences, but help to restore the spirits of fire survivors who lost family and friends, pets, stock, homes and property to the inferno. The survivors we assist are extremely



► BlazeAid provides its volunteers with equipment, instruction, insurance, three meals a day and work in interesting parts of the country, says volunteer Greg Segnit. Volunteers range in age from 12 to 85 and come from around the world.



grateful for the work, support and friendship of BlazeAid’s volunteers.”

Segnit agrees. He says sometimes his volunteer time is spent doing manual labor, but other days involve just listening to the farmers they are helping. Emotional support is just as needed as physical support.

He elaborates, “Rebuilding fences is the official mandate, but other duties to help the farmers are also carried out, from chainsawing fallen trees to encouraging and building up the spirits of the farmers and their families. Volunteers not only learn how to build fences of all types, depending on the area and whether they are sheep farms or cattle farms, but they make friends for life. Reaching out to people who have been bruised by tragedy helps all of us, not only the victims.”

He says being a BlazeAid volunteer is a great way to see new areas of the country and to meet really interesting people.

“All volunteers will tell you it is very satisfying and rewarding work, and many of the volunteers return every year to offer the farmers assistance through the BlazeAid camps. I myself have been to six different camps during the last three years I have been retired, and clocked up a total of 20 weeks voluntary work. There are others who have put in more time. I will definitely be volunteering at more camps in the future as, unfortunately, there is sure to be more disasters,” Segnit says.

Everything about BlazeAid is done on a



volunteer basis. There is no office headquarters. The Butlers are full-time sheep farmers and own a truck delivery business. They operate seven days a week and still volunteer their time to BlazeAid. Helene and Dennis Livingston handle donations and work from their home. Camp coordinators also are volunteers and they serve long days at the base camps.

“BlazeAid’s work over these many months could not have been achieved without the generosity of the many donors, sponsors, volunteer groups, individuals and businesses who have assisted us with tools and equipment, food, accommodation and billeting, transport and hands-on support in the fire zones. We are extremely grateful for their wonderful support and thank them most sincerely,” emphasizes Butler.

Unfortunately, as Segnit notes, there will continue to be natural disasters. Current BlazeAid relief efforts are being directed to drought relief in western Queensland. Butler says cattlemen there have not received useful rain in four years. Luckily, there continue to be helpful and willing volunteers when those inevitable disasters hit.

For more information on BlazeAid, visit www.blazeaid.com.

