

VHC Dec 14-Jan 15 trip Highlights

Dec 27 – Jan 8

Day 1 – Dec 27

The main group departed from Mt Osmond truck stop at 8am on 27th Dec, a bit later than planned due to the vagaries of packing a hire trailer. This group comprised of the trip leader, Di and David Delaney (D-Cubed) driving our JKU Rubicon and towing a Star Vision hard floor camper, Steve and Cate Burt (BC) in the Landcruiser Sahara towing a Challenger soft floor camper and Ian and Mary Smith (Bluey) in a Prado diesel who joined us from the Landcruiser club and towed a hired Adventurer pull out bed, soft floor camper. The convoy trip was uneventful until lunchtime at Ouyen where we all purchased less than savoury pasties. We then continued on to Echuca where we caught up with Kerry and Brenton Sleep (Sleepy) in a Prado diesel as well and towing a Cub hard floor camper. Bluey had prebooked a caravan site out of Moama for 2 nights to await the arrival of the 5th party in our trip, Paul and Sue Robinson (Robbo) also from the Toyota L/C club who departed later due to family commitments. The rest of us travelled 8 km east of Echuca after a bit of shopping for provisions and camped at a free camping spot right on the banks of the Murray near a spot known as Christies Beach (Banyule Park) Campground.

Day 2 – Dec 28

Consensus by this group led us to stay a second night here after a day sightseeing, visiting the Moama markets and a paddle steamer cruise on the 'Pride of the Murray'. We also stocked up on more ice and refreshments as it was quite hot. That evening whilst walking to the next bend of the river (Christies Beach) we discovered we were camped only several hundred metres from Bluey in the caravan park on the other side of the river!

Both nights in Echuca were warm and the days were fine and hot.

Day 3 – Dec 29

4WD tracks: Top Crossing Trk

The 3 campers planned to leave for our intended destination by 9am but due to some issues with a fridge power cord it was about 11am when we finally headed off, stopping at Benalla for lunch and fuel. We then travelled by the shortest route (involving some dirt roads) to Whitfield where we met up again with Bluey who had to travel via Mansfield to have his new suspension lift checked at 500km for certification. (Mansfield was the only ARB dealer open on the 29th Dec anywhere) He was also joined by Robbo at Mansfield and they drove together to meet the rest of us. Finally, the full group of 5 4wd drives and campers were together and convoyed the last 24km of bitumen along the Upper King River Rd and 6km of dirt track, Top Crossing Trk (which took 30 minutes to negotiate with 2 river crossings) to reach our campsite at Sandy Flat at about 4pm. We all then proceeded to set up our sites near the banks of the King River. Sandy Flat is quite a large area with a long drop toilet and we were able to spread out a bit with our own camping space. There were also 3 other smaller camping areas separated from ours by bush which were occupied at various times during our stay.

Day 4 – Dec 30

Distance 116km

4WD tracks: Sandy Flat Trk, Long Spur Trk, Basin Trk, Stockyard Trk, Burnt Top Trk, Black Landing Trk, Circuit Rd, Clear Hills Trk, Monument Trk, Circuit Rd, Speculation Rd, Little Cobbler Trk, Lake Cobbler Rd, Basin Trk, Stockyard Trk, Long Spur Trk, Sandy Flat Trk.

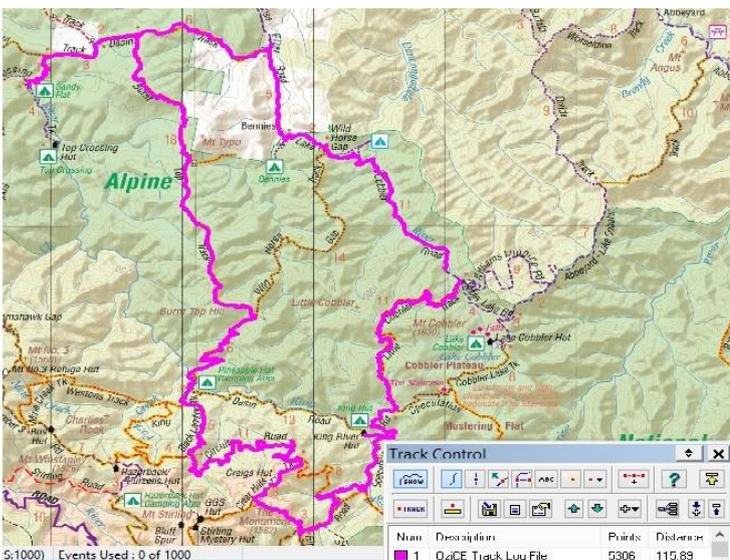
At last we prepared to do some 4wd tracks. It was a beautiful but fairly cool day. We set off about 10am expecting this not to be a long day but due to some rusty 4WD drivers, steep terrain and stopping for photos regularly it turned out to be a long day. The first track was a steep upward climb with switch backs to the top of the range. Burnt Top Track was long and dusty with some steep sections and a narrow saddle with drop offs on both sides to climb from one high point to the top of Burnt Top Hill (1211m). We eventually reached Pineapple Flat after a long and steep

descent. It was another beautiful camping area but heavily occupied where we ate lunch before attacking the Black Landing Track climb up to Circuit Rd. Here we passed a BMW X3 which had broken down with a couple and young child but they had already called for road side assistance so we continued on.



After another short climb on Clear Hills track which was very busy with traffic involving many passing manoeuvres we arrived at Craig's Hut for a bit of a look around.

With obligatory photos and toilet stops taken we continued up Clear Hills track which was quite steep and rocky to the top and descended Monument Track to join again with Circuit Rd and travel along this for a few kilometres. The turn off onto Speculation Rd was incorrect on the Hema Navigator but after a couple of multi point turns and



checking the Rooftop's paper map we found the "T" junction and continued on to take a look at King's Hut and campsites. We then took the most direct route along Little Cobbler Track heading back towards our camp. This was a gem of a track with several climbs and descents and plenty of postcard views. It met the Cobbler Lake Rd which we drove along until we passed the Basin Track. It turned out after asking the local farmer that the track goes through his property via his gates and along an easement which he pointed out to us and sent us on our way. After a cool but dusty drive along this recently maintained track we had completed our loop and followed along the final tracks in the opposite direction to that travelled in the morning to return to our campsite about 7pm.

Day 5 – Dec 31

Distance 16km

The decision was taken to have a rest day after the long day out yesterday. We established our campsites further by putting up full annexes, setting up shower tents, filling the solar water bags and putting out the solar panels. We hung around camp until lunch time when everyone agreed to drive back to the reservoir called Lake William Hovell where there was a picnic area we had passed when first coming into the area from Whitfield. It was a hot day so we had lunch by the lake and some had a quick dip. Some returned to camp earlier and when we re-joined them at the Sandy Flat campsite there was an African drumming session in full swing. This campsite is reached by crossing the King River at one of 2 water crossings which are straight forward with firm rocky bottoms but the second is fairly deep; water lapping at the bottom of the driver door of our JKU at one spot. Being New Year's Eve we all resolved to see it past midnight. We cooked dinner on the campfire, ate heated marshmallows during the evening, lit sparklers and pulled poppers at the appointed time. Ten minutes later we all adjourned to bed.

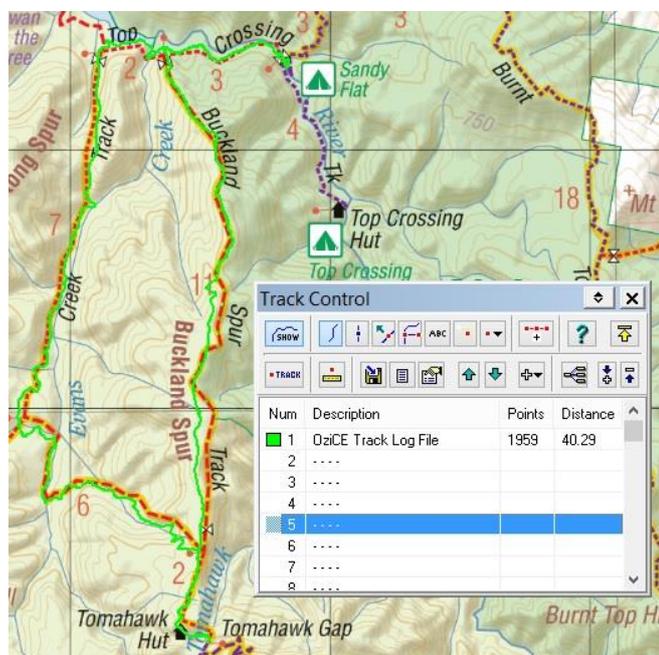


Day 6 – Jan 1

Distance 40km

4WD tracks: Top Crossing Trk, Buckland Spur Trk, Evans Creek Trk, Top Crossing Trk.

We arose late after NY celebrations to a sun filled sky and a warm day. We opted for a shortish day's driving and started about 10am by crossing the King River and headed back to the north western corner of the Alpine Park where we turned up Buckland Spur Trk which was a very long and steep climb to the ridge top. It was a dusty drive along the top so we spread out and UHF communication became difficult between 40 and 80 channels at times and the mountainous terrain.



After about 90 minutes we reached Tomahawk Hut and had a look around. We returned back up the track until we reached the 'T' junction we had passed by earlier and turned down Evans Creek Trk. It started with a steep descent and switch backs before crossing a creek and flattening out to an easy drive until we reached Evans Creek Hut where we stopped and ate lunch. A group was camped here and a young woman had just purchased a white diesel JKU Sport and it was parked at their campsite on its virgin outing. She has plans to lift it and put on a bulbar; she already has the muddies. Her previous car was a Hyundai Getz! After lunch we continued down Evans Creek Trk. It was easy driving with few climbs and we arrived back at camp about 3pm. As it was quite hot we had a dip in the King River near our campsite. Someone had built a wall from the river rocks to create a bit of a dam and water hole where we could submerge in the refreshing waters.

Day 7 – Jan 2

Distance 160km

4WD tracks: Sandy Flat Trk, Long Spur Trk, Basin Trk, Upper Rose River Rd, Rose River Rd, Buffalo River Rd, Great Alpine Rd and return via King River Rd and various back roads(using Sat Nav).

We awoke relatively early on this planned sightseeing day. Rangers stopped by before we left camp to warn us of the severe heat conditions forecast for the next 2 days with potential strong wind gusts and that campfires were banned during that time and we should consider our situation where we were camped. We started the drive to Bright with the usual climb up Sandy Flat, Long Spur and Basin tracks to the Upper Rose River Rd which then turned onto the Rose River Rd and eventually the Buffalo River Rd from Dandongadale (where we said goodbye to Roger last year). As it was now bitumen we aired up so we could travel faster into Myrtleford. There was a street market active here and in its 25th year (always on 2nd Jan) so we had a look around. It was very hot, about 37°C, so we bought some food and cherries on offer, deposited our campsite rubbish in a large bin and continued on along the Great Alpine Rd to Bright where we ate lunch and drank coffees in cafes, did some shopping for more provisions and stopped at the local micro-brewery to sample their ales. The drive back was mainly on the black top so we could travel more quickly but with a couple of gravel road sections and some detours to look at potential campsites we could move to it took 2½ hours to get back to camp via King River Rd and back around the lake along Top Crossing Track. Due to the heat it was certain the mandatory dip in the river had to occur.

Day 8 – Jan 3

Distance 0km

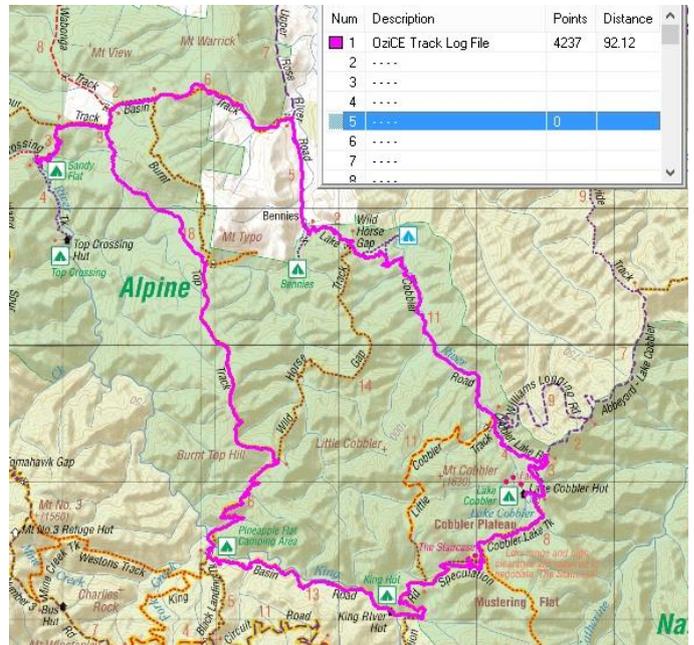
Also due to the heat and forecast winds we decided not to drive anywhere this day. Even the potential for our vehicles to start a fire when pulling off the track into longer grass deterred us from any driving and we stayed around camp. We sought out the shade as it moved around during the day and took several cooling dips in the river with stubbies in hand. A decision was also taken not to move to any new campsite so I had to fashion some more routes that we could drive in the next couple of days from our Sandy Flat location.

Day 9 – Jan 4

Distance 92km

4WD tracks: Sandy Flat Trk, Long Spur Trk, Stockyard Trk, Burnt Top Trk, King Basin Rd, Speculation Rd, Cobbler Lake Trk, Cobbler Lake Rd, Lake Cobbler Rd, Basin Trk, Stockyard Trk, Long Spur Trk, Sandy Flat Trk.

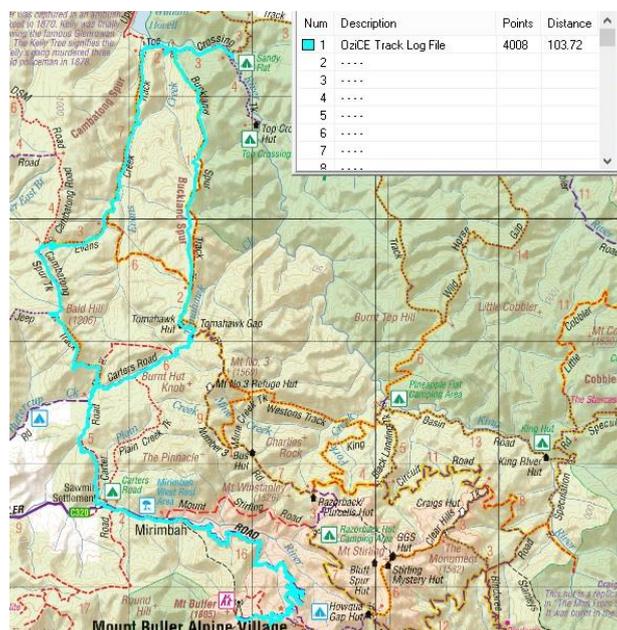
I thought this could be a long day of driving so we departed at 9am along a similar route to day 4 but I had learned that stockyard track met up with Burnt Top track so we took it as an alternate towards Pineapple Flat. It was very scenic and eventually met Burnt Top as mentioned just before the tricky saddle and rocky climb that everyone had enjoyed the first time along it. This was a great morning's driving as steady light rain overnight ceased at sunrise and now left dust free tracks along which we could make faster progress and keep closer together. From Pineapple Flat campground, which had emptied out considerably compared to the first visit, we crossed the river and turned onto King Basin Rd which again had multiple river crossings until we reached King's Hut once more. We followed Speculation Rd past Little Cobbler Trk turnoff this time and climbed for a long time until we had negotiated 'The Staircase' which is a steep, narrow and rocky climb with several switchbacks until we reached the Cobbler Plateau and turned on to Cobbler Lake track and followed it into Lake Cobbler and the Cobbler Hut. It was very busy here as a guided tour was visiting with 10 cars in the group, another 4 vehicles also and several campers. Shortly after we arrived and started eating lunch they all departed and left the lake to us and the campers. It was only a ten minute walk from the carpark to the top of Dandongadale Falls which had only a trickle pouring down the rocks but would be spectacular in the wet and seen from the road on the drive back which shows the falls dropping over an escarpment. We walked back to our vehicles for the easier drive back to camp starting with a long steady descent down Cobbler Lake Rd until it passed the other end of Little Cobbler Trk and changed to Lake Cobbler Rd which we had driven several days earlier we returned to our campsite via the usual tracks which were becoming more familiar.



Day 10 – Jan 5

Distance 104km

4WD tracks: Top Crossing Trk, Evans Creek Trk, Cambatong Rd, Cambatong Trk, Buttercup Jeep Trk, Carters Rd, Mansfield-Mt Buller Rd, Carters Rd, Buckland Spur Trk, Top Crossing Trk.



Previously, I had hoped to drive up to Mt Buller but when we lost a day or 2 and planned to move camp I thought my chances were lost but as things turned out and we didn't move it became today's journey.

Again we left camp about 9am and did the reverse of our previous trip to Tomahawk hut by taking Top Crossing Trk and turning south along Evans Creek Trk but when we reached a fork after about half an hour we veered right onto Cambatong Rd. This was a pleasant steady climb up a creek valley until we turned onto Cambatong Trk which climbed steeply up a narrow rocky track to the top of Bald Hill (1211m) and gave spectacular views of nearby ranges. We turned onto Buttercup Jeep Trk (of course) which was a tricky and steep (first gear low range) descent down to the valley floor and Carters Rd which we followed to the bitumen of Mansfield-Mt Buller Rd. Here we aired up for the ascent to the top of Mt Buller. It was a steady easy climb on the bitumen. When we arrived we had

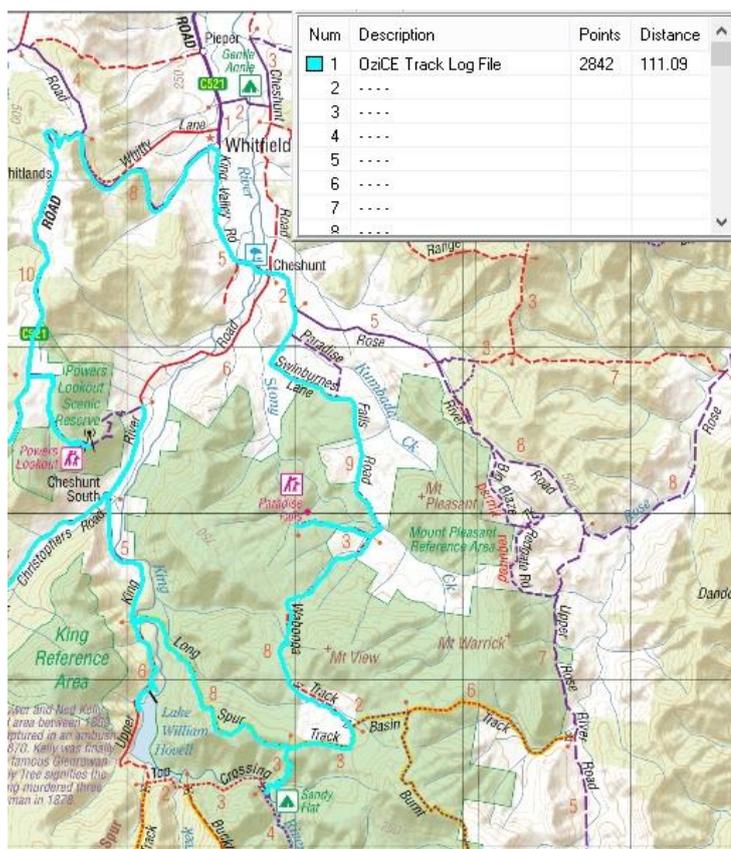
a look around the village bought some supplies at the Foodworx store ate lunch on the grass outside the tavern and drove as close to the top of the mountain as was allowed before walking the final 500m to the top of Mt Buller (1805m). The panoramic views from the top were spectacular in all directions. The drive back down the mountain was uneventful except that on the sharp switchbacks the asphalt was melting and it was only 22°C. We retraced our steps back onto Carters Rd where we deflated our tyres once more in a picnic area carpark on the banks of the Ovens River and then made good time on this gravel road until we reached the top at Tomahawk Hut (recognise that name?) The drive along the long ridge of Buckland Spur was quite straightforward until we reached the long steady and steep descent which slowed our progress somewhat having to use low range first gear back down to Top Crossing Trk where we turned back to camp and a dip in the river with coldie in hand.

Day 11 – Jan 6

Distance 111km

4WD tracks: Sandy Flat Trk, Long Spur Trk, King River Rd, Christophers Rd, MacDonald Trk, Mansfield-Whitfield Rd, King Valley Rd, Rose River Rd, Paradise Falls Rd, Wobonga Trk, Stockyard Trk, Long Spur Trk, Sandy Flat Trk.

Everyone was keen for a shorter drive on the last day in the VHC (but it turned out longer due to some detours) so I integrated some sightseeing along the way. We left camp and straight up the now familiar climb of Sandy Flat Trk but at the junction onto Long Spur Trk we turned left instead to the right where we had previously been. This took us across the top of the mountain plateau and then slowly and first and then steeply at the end descended to the King Valley floor where we forded the King River below the reservoir and onto King River Rd. We detoured back to the lake picnic area to deposit our rubbish and then headed back down the highway. It was meant to be only a short



drive on bitumen so we didn't inflate our tyres but when we reached the turnoff we found a gate and a road closed sign with an additional sign saying access to the Electricity Suppliers vehicles only. We doubled back a couple of kms and then turned onto Christophers Rd which was a fairly flat dirt road and was pretty benign but deteriorated a bit the further we went along. We passed through a couple of gates and the track turned sharply to the right onto MacDonald Trk and upwards steeply where a sign said dry weather track only which was what we had. This track continued to climb sharply for a couple of kilometres with switchbacks and ruts and met the bitumen of the Mansfield-Whitfield Rd abruptly. We turned right towards Whitfield and after about 9km we turned back onto the dirt towards Powers Lookout. Great views were enjoyed up and down the King Valley from the 2 platforms here. We returned to the bitumen and continued onto Whitfield having stopped once when we saw an Echidna on the edge of the road.

At Whitfield it was suggested that we should visit a winery as there were several along the King Valley Rd so we pulled into the first one along our way which was named Pizzini Wines where we enjoyed some tastings and a cappuccino. Shortly after leaving the winery we stopped for lunch in a park by the road bridge over the King River on the edge of the township of Cheshunt. After a relaxing lunch in the shade of the big trees there we continued onto Rose River Rd for a few kms before turning off the bitumen onto Paradise Falls Rd and into Paradise Falls which was a 500m walk from the carpark and was bone dry. It would have also been spectacular with a bit of rain. We were on our way back to camp now along the Wobonga Trk which had recently been graded and was very smooth albeit very dusty. It was a steady climb and we were interrupted once by a fallen limb across the track which was easily removed. The track continued across the Wobonga Plateau until we reached the turnoff onto Stockyard Trk (been

there before?) from the opposite direction and quickly back onto Long Spur for the final descent onto Sandy Flat track and camp. It was another hot day and a dip in the river was again called for. That evening everyone started packing up their campsites in preparation for our departure.

Day 12 – Jan 7

Distance 340km

Everyone was up early to pack up which was good as it was to be a very hot day. We left camp at about 10am and after about half an hour we reached the bitumen and aired up by the lake. We deposited the last of our garbage in the big bin and at about 11am the convoy headed towards home via Moyhu to Glenrowan, down the Hume Freeway to Benalla and onto Shepparton where we split up for lunch. After 45mins we got back together to continue to Swan Hill. The bitumen was breaking up in parts and melting in others due to the extreme heat of 41°C. About 5pm we arrived at Swan Hill where 3 couples had booked into a motel for the night. BC and D-Cubed had intended to stay on the banks of the Murray at Nyah State Forest but after checking out the site it was deemed unsafe under too many large gum trees with the heat and strong winds forecast so we retreated to Swan Hill and checked in for the night with the others and dined at the Commercial Hotel before retiring for the night.

Day 13 – Jan 8

Distance 515km

Sleepies were up early and departed shortly after 7am for a commitment back in Adelaide. Bluey and Robbo left about 8:30 whilst BC and D-Cubed lingered for a slightly later breakfast and a quick look up the main street before too heading home and the rain that awaited us at the border.

This was a fantastic trip with plenty of great company, weather and scenery and lots of rivers to cross and one great river to camp near for 9 nights. We negotiated most of the tracks this North West corner of the Alpine National Park above Mt Buller has to offer. We stayed through severe fire danger warnings and were told by the rangers as we were departing that torrential rains were expected in the next 24 hours which if we had stayed would have kept us there.

We also discovered belatedly that the King Valley is a great wine region with numerous well known and respected wineries which had we known at the time we would have visited more of them.

Every driver improved their driving technique, learnt a lot more about their vehicle, the challenges presented when driving in this very steep terrain and all came away unscathed apart from a few panel scratches and a lot of dust - everywhere.

Camping was easy and still free for our 9 nights in VHC (and 2 near Echuca) and campfires were allowed all year round; except on days of severe fire danger.