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## **MEDIA RELEASE**

### **FIRE BRIGADE HELPS RURAL COMMUNITY UNITE**

Neil Labbett laments that there's not much left of the Millbrook community near Ballarat.

The post office has gone, so has the school...but the fire brigade still brings the community together.

As chief track master at the Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria (VFBV) state rural championships on April 7-8 in Warrnambool, Neil will have his eyes firmly on ensuring the competition runs smoothly.

But he also sees the bigger picture of the fire brigade championships.

Millbrook has about 30 volunteer CFA members plus 13 juniors. "The juniors and the junior championships are important because they're our future," Neil says. "A lot of our brigade began as runners years ago and they came back to do their training and become volunteers."

He says the brigade continues to unite the community.

Neil shares the chief track master duties with David Gerrard from Beaufort, officiating at alternate events. At Warrnambool he will be in charge of the championships on the track, ensuring all equipment is safe and that the rules are followed and resolving any protests.

"We don't have much to worry about because they're always run in good spirits," he adds.

Neil has worked through the ranks, starting as a lane coordinator and progressing to track master before being appointed to the chief's role. He was a running team member many years ago "not very competitively, but the kids and grandkids are," he said.

Neil says Millbrook has been blessed this year to avoid major fires, especially considering the dry land. The brigade has a solid base of well trained volunteers.

Neil's wife Sue works as an official results recorder at the state championships, his son Mark and daughter-in-law Amanda and granddaughter Chloe compete.

VFBV CEO Andrew Ford said junior brigades and the championships were the best way for young people to become engaged and learn practical skills before being old enough to attend fires.

“The VFBV state championships can set young people on a pathway to serve their communities,” Mr Ford said.

“They encourage family participation and help to instil a sense of community service and volunteerism in young people while raising the importance of local fire brigades,” he added.

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