

### Investigation finds farm equipment to blame

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The blaze eventually burned around 2300ha of commercial plantation forest, property and pastures, Credits: Video: Newshub Image: Shaun Mahon

An investigation into one of New Zealand's largest plantation forest fires has found it was caused by a piece of farm equipment and has classified the fire as accidental.

The Pigeon Valley Fire, which began on the afternoon of 5 February, eventually burned around 2300ha of commercial plantation forest, property and pastures, and had a final perimeter of 35km.

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A home and shed were also lost in the fire.

Fire and Emergency Principal Rural Fire Officer for Nelson Tasman Ian Reade said the report found the fire was caused by the use of farm equipment.

"The fire was initially sparked by an agricultural contractor discing a rocky paddock," he said.

It found that sparks from the discing equipment - from metal on stone or metal on metal contact - ignited dry grass in the paddock.



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Fuelled by southerly winds, it said the fire then quickly spread onto a steep recently harvested hillside of forestry nearby.

"This fire proves that, in extreme weather conditions, a seemingly every-day rural activity can end up causing widespread damage," said Reade.

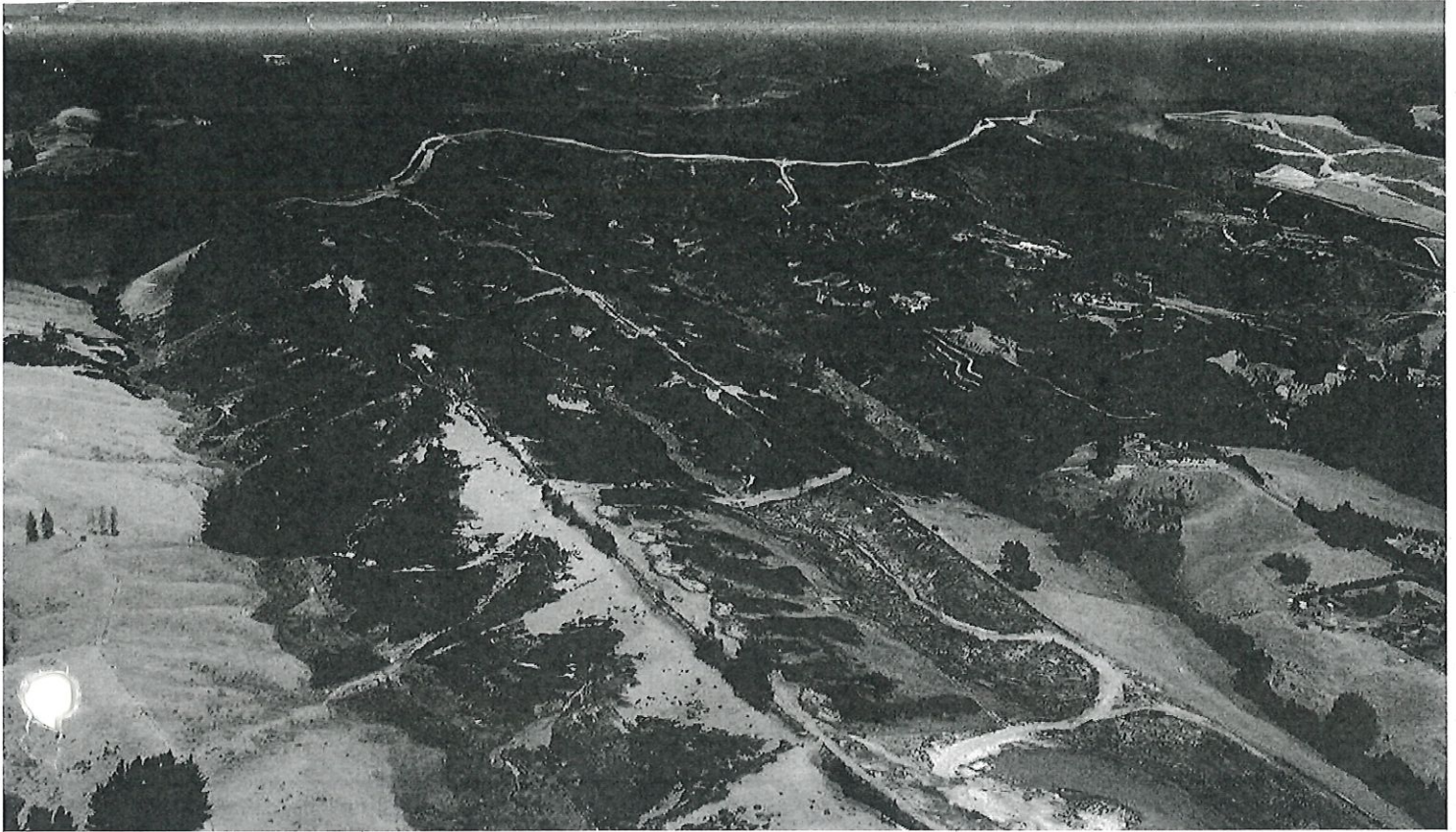
The weather conditions in the area during the six weeks prior to the fire were characterised by little or no rainfall, high temperatures, and often windy conditions.

The Nelson Tasman Rural Fire District was in a prohibited fire season at the time, meaning there was a total fire ban.

"It was the proverbial perfect storm."

Reade said the conditions Nelson and Tasman experienced over summer were extreme, but not unique.





The report said the fire was initially sparked by an agricultural contractor discing a rocky paddock. Photo credit: Newshub

"Parts of Marlborough, Canterbury, Otago, Bay of Plenty and Northland all had similar fire risk profiles."

"It is likely these conditions will become increasingly common during summer in many parts of New Zealand, particularly on the eastern seaboard."

He said it was important that people took heed of the advice, which focused on reducing the likelihood of fires starting, and mitigating the potential damage to property if a fire occurs.

"There are many simple things people can do to prevent fires starting, from not using machinery which can emit sparks in hot, dry, and windy conditions, to ensuring electric fences are not in a position or used where they could spark onto dry vegetation."







Helicopters helped to fight the blaze with monsoon buckets. Photo credit: Newshub

"Steps can also be taken to protect property from a fire, such as removing material near the home that could be ignited by flying embers, for example, leaves in gutters, firewood heaps by the house or timber stored under the house."

He said the most at-risk areas are properties which have large areas of grass, scrub or trees nearby.

"One very simple approach is to create a safety zone around your home, where trees and vegetation have been thinned out, pruned or cleared to create a barrier so the spread of fire towards the home is slowed."

Landscaping using fire resistance plants was also another effective strategy.

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