

Dry season blazes expected

■ Robert Dougherty

Missing tourists, bushfires and flooding are all day-to-day work for Department of Fire and Emergency Services district officer Dallas Wheatley.

Mr Wheatley, who took over the role in September, warns the West Kimberley might be in for a stronger bushfire season than usual as wet season rains provide ample fuel for dry season blazes.

"The five categories we focus on are floods, cyclone, storm, earthquake and tsunami — I haven't had to experience the last two," he said.

"Over the wet, the danger has been the floodways and I guess in the coming months I expect it to be fire time and that's probably going to be most of our time.

"(With) a nice wet, everything grows and is a lot healthier and as it dries off it creates that fuel for fire.

"I'm expecting to be busy with the weather cooling off and tourists in the area, increased fire risk obviously, but with the increased tourists you are more likely to get missing people, rescues and those accidents that happen."

Mr Wheatley, originally from Queensland, has experience in the Kimberley as he attended Fitzroy Crossing High School and worked in Broome as a court security guard with Serco before making the leap to hazard management.

"Originally I was up here and did



Department of Fire and Emergency Services district officer Dallas Wheatley. Picture: Robert Dougherty

all my schooling at Fitzroy Crossing High School and moved to the Mid West," he said.

"My background is State Emergency Services events such as floods, cyclones — I do love it up here and hadn't been back for a long time. The opportunity came expected to be — make sure to

up and I jumped at it." Mr Wheatley also reminded people to take care of themselves while travelling.

"In any remote area take lots of water with you, tell people where you are and where you are expected to be — make sure to

check in," he said. "We get a lot of people who just don't turn up or people don't know where they are."

"We go looking and they may be OK or genuinely in need — but if they let people know, then that eliminates that chance."

Changes to visa program a concern

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Kimberley business owners have voiced their dismay that the 457 visa program would be replaced.

Last month Malcolm Turnbull announced a new plan would limit skilled job visas to a two-year period instead of four, removing the permanent residency option.

Owners of melon farm Shamrock Gardens and Roebuck Tree Service have raised concerns about availability of employees under the new plan.

Shamrock Gardens owner David Galwey said the businesses relied heavily on travelling workers and 457 visa holders where Australian workers were unwilling to be employed.

"The workforce is not mobile, which is why we have to rely on backpackers and 457 visas. I think this decision is going to be a huge drawback to conducting business in remote areas," he said.

Roebuck Tree Services owner Mike Dunnett said they employed visa and non-visa workers, but had always struggled to find staff.

"We might get someone for the next few months but as soon as it gets hot they're gone ... I've got equipment and work to run two teams if I could get the people," he said.