

Rural fire danger sign dates to 1950s



SUMMER ICONS

Mike Houlahan looks at the stories behind the places, the activities and the things which are New Zealand's summer icons.

SUMMER is not always fun and games, the fire warning sign reminds us.

While the annually screened cartoon advertisement claims some chap called Bernie adjusts the arrow on hundreds of signs right across the country, in reality fire risk assessment is handled by fire managers, based on specific scientific criteria.

The sign, visible on roadsides across New Zealand, is reminiscent of a Trivial Pursuit counter; the arrow points to whether fire risk is low, moderate, high, very high or extreme.

New Zealand's standard rural fire danger sign is an adaptation of a Canadian design, and has been in use since the early 1950s.

Different vegetation types, ground moisture levels, weather modelling, rainfall and wind direction and speed are taken into account when



Maybe Bernie will get a summer holiday this year.

fire managers determine the danger level.

The five danger classes contrast the intensity of a fire with the expected difficulty in suppressing such a blaze if it broke out. Fire managers hope communicating the danger will encourage people to be more careful about how they use fire and what they do outdoors.

This does pose a question, though, of whether what fire managers mean by their danger rating is actually what the great New Zealand public thinks it means.

Happily, Crown research institute Scion has been researching that exact issue.

Researchers found that while the signs got the message across regarding the level of fire risk, confusion reigned as to how people should adjust their behaviour according to the different ratings.

This may be why Bernie and his arrow seem set to take a holiday this



Tinderbox ... A fire warning sign on Three Mile Hill, Dunedin, sent a note of extreme caution in January 2018.

summer, with some new fire-wise messaging being trialled.

This may all sound like an abstract theoretical discussion, but the recent bush fires in Australia and severe scrub fires in Otago, Southland, Nelson and the Port Hills show fire danger is a hot topic.

"It is important that there is a concerted New Zealand view on desired behaviours in response to fire messages; this view is yet to be established," Scion's most recent research report on the issue said.

The report noted adding electronic text to the traditional "half grapefruit" signs would help people understand what they meant, as might greater use of symbols, social media and community education.

Simple, consistent and clear information is the key factor, though, so expect to see that iconic arrow and sign on the New Zealand landscape for years to come.