



Rail project on track

Yarra Valley Railway to rebuild part of the historical Lilydale to Healesville line

Laura Armitage

AUSTRALIA'S largest volunteer infrastructure project — based in the Yarra Valley — is on track to becoming a locomotive reality.

Yarra Valley Railway has received 5000 tonnes of stone ballast and 17.5km of steel track, which will finish half its major Yarra Glen to Healesville rail restoration project.

The excess material was delivered by the Level Crossing Removal Authority after it removed the track between Caulfield and Dandenong for sky rail.

Six years ago the non-profit group with more than 500 volunteers started its ambitious plan to rebuild part of the historical Lilydale to Healesville line, securing \$3.6 million from the Federal Government.

The original line opened in 1889 but stopped taking passengers in 1980, and ceased freight in the 1990s.

The tourist railway's president, Brett Whelan, said the recycled track and ballast covered about half of what the project needed.

Mr Whelan said during the past three years volunteers had rebuilt 16 rail bridges, some severely damaged in the

Black Saturday fires.

"Over the last 12 months, 500 individuals from a range of different community groups volunteered more than 60,000 hours, which makes it the largest volunteer infrastructure project in Australia," he said.

"When the community pulls together, there's not much they can't do."

The track is being built to heavy-rail standards and the group has also fully restored a steam locomotive and carriages that will run on the line when it's finished.

"We want people to experience what travel and service was like in the 1930s and 40s," he said.

One of the project's volunteers, Roly Deighton, is a former Australian Defence Force and Qantas pilot.

Mr Deighton, who has bone cancer, said he wants his grandchildren to be able to ride the train and have the same fun he had as a child.

"I do have a long-term illness and this has given me something to look forward to each day," he said.

"It's very satisfying at the end of the day to come home absolutely knackered but having had a very happy day out on the rail here."

Brett Whelan at the Yarra Glen tourist railway construction site in Coldstream.

Picture: JAMES ROSS