



The Honourable David Elliott MP

Minister for Corrections
Minister for Emergency Services
Minister for Veterans Affairs



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Mr David Blunt
Clerk of the Parliaments
Legislative Council
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
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*Received by me
on behalf of the Clerk of
the Parliaments at 2.30pm on
Friday 11 September 2015*

[Signature]
Deputy Clerk

Dear Mr Blunt,

On 20 February 2015 General Purpose Standing Committee No 5 released its report into the Wambelong fire. The report has made 29 recommendations spanning a range of matters to improve bushfire management and our response to natural disasters.

The NSW Government appreciates the Committee's efforts to engage with the local community and the NSW emergency management sector at all levels to canvas these important issues.

The NSW Government has provided the Committee's recommendations to all affected agencies to help determine what measures can be taken to strengthen the framework for responding to bush fires in NSW.

As the Committee would be aware, the Coroner is still to hand down findings arising from the Coronial inquiry into the Wambelong fire. The NSW Government will finalise its position on all of the Committee's recommendations once the findings and any recommendations that may be made by the Coroner are released and considered.

The NSW Government will prepare a combined response to the recommendations of the Committee and any recommendations of the Coroner, once they are handed down. This will ensure that the NSW Government does not pre-empt the findings of the independent Coronial process.

NSW has a comprehensive framework to manage and respond to bush fire risk. However, since the Wambelong fire key initiatives have been introduced or are being progressed by the NSW Government to further enhance this framework.

Hazard reduction, which is a key issue canvassed in the Inquiry's recommendations, is being carried out through a range of initiatives. The NSW Government has recently committed to targeting the protection of almost 600,000 homes over the next four years through hazard reduction works, and almost 750,000 hectares of hazard reduction activities.

These commitments are supported by the 2015-16 Budget with \$35 million allocated to the NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS) to continue targeted hazard reduction works. In addition, the National Parks and Wildlife Service has achieved significant increases in its hazard reduction programme, and I am pleased to note that this success is reflected in the extension of the Enhanced Bushfire Management Programme to 2017.

In regard to hazard reduction in the Warrumbungle National Park, NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) has in the past, and will into the future, achieve fuel reduction that has a mosaic distribution throughout Warrumbungle National Park, as recommended by the Inquiry. In addition to this, the NSW Office of Environment and Heritage has established a three year \$1.3 million research and restoration program to guide recovery and future management of natural and cultural assets in the park. A key research area is to improve the understanding of fuel loads and their effects on fire behaviour in the park, and more broadly in the reserve system.

The NSW RFS will also replace the current Bush Fire Risk Information Management System (BRIMS) with a multi-agency platform known as Guardian. This will significantly enhance the management of bush fire risk through various capabilities to prioritise risk including internal management, risk communication, and community engagement capability.

Fire trails are also a key issue referred to in the recommendations. The NSW Government recognises there is a need to improve the fire trail network across the State, particularly to link trails across private lands between public lands and the road network. In addition, there are instances where fire trails have either been closed or are in poor repair, impeding firefighting access or restricting hazard reduction activities. The ability for firefighters to quickly access remote areas is critical to effective firefighting.

The NSW Government has recently committed to deliver an enhanced fire trail network. The Government is also committed to enhancing powers for the NSW RFS to ensure strategic fire trail networks across all tenures can be maintained in a way that provides for the safe and effective suppression of fires, and ensures essential hazard reduction work can be carried out.

The implementation of an enhanced fire trail network will require legislative amendments to the *Rural Fires Act 1997*. The NSW Government has requested that a detailed proposal for the required amendments is developed in close consultation with the relevant agencies and be submitted for consideration before the end of the year. The recommendations of this Inquiry and of the Coronial inquiry will be carefully considered in preparing these amendments.

In addition to this, the Castlereagh Bush Fire Management Committee's Fire Trail and Mitigation Sub-Committee has completed its review of the existing fire trail network, and has agreed to an upgrade to the fire trail around the Mt Cenn Cruiach facility. The Sub-Committee will continue to monitor the existing fire trail network and consider upgrades to existing fire trails or the need for new trails. This occurs on an ongoing basis as part of its bush fire risk management and operational management programmes.

The Inquiry also outlines recommendations into media and telecommunication towers around NSW. The Bush Fire Management Committee (BFMC), through its Sub-Committee assessed an increase in the Asset Protection Zone at Mt Cenn Cruiach telecommunications tower to 40 metres which was carried out in December 2014. The

NSW RFS will reinforce with each Bush Fire Risk Management Plans and Plans of Operations the need to identify and develop treatments to protect these critical infrastructure assets within BFRMPs and Plans of Operations.

The Bush Fire Risk Management Plan framework and toolset is currently being reviewed by the NSW RFS for continuous improvement to further strengthen the management and planning of bush fire risk.

The protection of pastoral assets during bush fires is also addressed in the recommendations. I would like to draw the Committee's attention to the NSW Government's commitment to protect a broader range of assets which are important to landowners and the general rural economy.

The need to broaden the range of assets protected was highlighted by the Hazard Reduction Audit Panel Report. This led to amendments being made to the *Rural Fires Act 1997* in November 2013 to include specific reference to '*...the protection of infrastructure and environmental, economic, cultural, agricultural and community assets from destruction or damage arising from fires..*'.

Following the Wambelong fire, I can also advise that the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service updated its boundary fencing policy to significantly streamline procedures supporting the re-establishment of boundary fencing following bush fires.

The revised policy, published in February 2014, provides that when a fence is damaged by fire, the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service will consider and approve, if appropriate, requests for assistance to repair or replace the fence through a simple, streamlined process.

The NSW Government understands that the impact of the Wambelong fire was immense, and effective support services are important in assisting communities recover after natural disasters.

Support services were provided to residents following the fire through the Warrumbungle Bushfire Support Co-ordination Service. This service aimed to assist bush fire affected households with their recovery with a range of services including crisis support, short term counselling, referral to health and other community services, and assistance linking with to other funding and subsidy sources. The service was jointly funded by the NSW Government and the Commonwealth Government.

This service was evaluated by the University of Newcastle Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health. These findings have influenced the strategic planning and service development of future psycho-social recovery interventions. These lessons, and those from support models established after other recent natural disasters, have been incorporated into the development of a guideline for establishing support service interventions. It is envisaged that this will be included in the NSW Disaster Assistance Guidelines. This higher level policy document will outline the trigger points, rationale and potential service models and other elements of service development.

The NSW Government is also considering changes to the way in which fire and emergency services are funded. Most of the funding is currently provided by a levy added to insurance, and the Government has acknowledged that this has an impact on insurance premiums.

I am pleased to note that the NSW Government has undertaken significant public consultation on this issue, and has commissioned Victorian Fire Services Levy Monitor, Allan Fels AO, to report on lessons from Victoria's transition to a Fire Service Levy on properties. As the Government has made clear, it will carefully consider Mr Fels' report before any decisions are made about changes to the fire and emergency services levy.

These are just some examples of the work that is ongoing that will build upon an already strong framework for the management of bush fires in NSW. The Government proposes to provide a full response to each of the Committee's recommendations, and any findings and recommendations made by the Coroner, once the Coroner's report has been handed down.

Finally, I would also like to take the opportunity to commend the efforts of our frontline fire fighters and all of those who supported them through the Wambelong fire and the recovery efforts that followed. These efforts are recognised in the Committee's report, and I would like to assure all those involved that this Government remains committed to ensuring that we learn from the events of the fire.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'D. Elliott', written in a cursive style.

David Elliott MP
MINISTER FOR CORRECTIONS
MINISTER FOR EMERGENCY SERVICES
MINISTER FOR VETERANS AFFAIRS