**1. Why did outside area fire crews engaged in the fire fighting ignore the advice offered by local fire crews and indicate they did not want to work with them?**

During the Wambelong Fire, all out of area crews were briefed by Incident Management Team (IMT) personnel prior to being deployed either at the Fire Control Centre (FCC) or at base camp. These briefings include information on local command and control arrangements and the appointed Divisional Commander to report to on the fireground. Further, these briefings were based on strategies developed by the IMT with situational awareness of the whole of the Wambelong Fire. The IMT included local volunteers who provided local knowledge.

The After Action Reviews (AARs) of the fire identified that in some instances individuals on the fire ground were without any Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) or rank insignia and therefore their position in command and control arrangements was not distinguishable. Further, local firefighters who responded directly to the fireground may not necessarily have had the benefit of a strategic view of the overall fire.

It is extremely dangerous to have one part of the fire being run in a manner which is inconsistent with the overall strategy for management of that fire. It can adversely impact on the overall firefighting effort and also compromise the safety of crews on the ground.

Bush fire incidents in NSW are managed in accordance with the span of control and delegation principles outlined in the Australasian Inter-service Incident Management System (AIIMS) which was developed and is maintained by the Australasian Fire & Emergency Service Authorities Council (AFAC). This framework addresses tactical (fireground); operational and strategic roles; and responsibilities. This framework is supported by various policies issued by the Bush Fire Co-ordinating Committee (BFCC) including coordinated firefighting arrangements.

The NSW RFS internal operational doctrine (Service Standards, Incident Management Procedures; Operational Management Procedures and Standard Operating Procedures) reflects the AIIMS framework and reporting structures.

All NSW RFS members (volunteers and salaried), are trained in and are expected to adhere to the command and control protocols. This includes all volunteers working with properly identified, qualified and briefed Divisional Commanders and Sector Leaders to achieve the necessary outcomes.

Since the Wambelong Fire, the importance of working within the command and control protocols (such as control points during incidents, briefings, the role of the IMT and the use of tabards to identify commanders on the fire ground to assist with communications) has been reiterated at training sessions held in the Castlereagh Zone to both existing and new members.

**2. Why was there not a full alert to all Group Captains and Captains asking for their advice, as a result of their experience, about necessary operations to extinguish the fire?**

It is not standard procedure for all NSW RFS Group Captains and Captains to be alerted with respect to all incidents in their District/Team/Zone. It is the Group Captains and/or Captains of brigades situated closest to the fire that are usually alerted.

This practice was followed on 12 January 2013 (and prior to the Section 44 (S44) Declaration on 13 January 2013) when the Wambelong Fire was managed as a Class 1 fire by the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS). Resources were provided by the NSW RFS as requested by NPWS Incident Control. Five crews from NSW RFS rural fire brigades directly bordering the incident area (from both the Castlereagh Zone and North West Zone) were responded. NSW RFS personnel attending the fire included a Group Captain who was involved in firefighting operations.

As operations escalated on 13 January 2013 and the following days, other Group Captains and Deputy Group Captains were progressively notified and further NSW RFS brigades responded.

With a dynamic and fast moving situation such as the Wambelong Fire, maintaining situational awareness and predicting resource needs, is difficult and something that challenges every emergency service constantly. It is acknowledged that given the size and intensity of the Wambelong Fire, local NSW RFS Group and Brigade Captains should have been notified of an incident once the fire started escalating. During the Wambelong Fire, however, when the fire started escalating under challenging conditions, the local IMT was overwhelmed.

Local senior volunteer involvement in an IMT is dependent on volunteers being willing and able to take part and assume responsibility. In situations such as the Wambelong Fire, being involved in the IMT may require volunteers who are also land owners to be based at the FCC or locations other than their own or neighbouring properties as required by the strategies developed to manage the fire.

During the Wambelong Fire, while some volunteers either self presented to the FCC or responded positively to requests to take on roles in the IMT, there are also instances of some volunteers being reluctant to do so. As an example, a local Deputy Group Captain, despite repeated requests from IMT personnel, did not attend the FCC to provide input. This volunteer eventually attended the FCC but only for an hour and only after being personally approached by the local Operations Officer who drove to a location over 40kms from the FCC to do so. In contrast there are examples of local Captains stepping up and taking on Divisional Commander roles in order to provide more senior volunteers with required rest.

Following the Wambelong Fire there has been extensive review and consultation on the operations that had taken place. A number of formal After Action Reviews (AARs) were conducted:

- Castlereagh Bush Fire Management Committee (BFMC) Multi Agency AAR
- Castlereagh Senior Management Team AAR
- Brigade Captains South AAR; and
- Brigade Captains North AAR.

Resulting from these, a number of recommendations, actions and initiatives have been noted, particularly with regard to the improvement of operational communications and increase volunteer involvement in IMTs. This includes:

- review of the Castlereagh BFMC Operations Coordination Plan (Plan of Operations),
- reinforcement of the requirement for Senior NSW RFS members to undertake IMT roles, and
- promotion of command control and communication training opportunities available to NSW RFS members.

**3. Why did the NSW RFS Captain/Crew leader not take over the authority of the fire on arrival at the scene?**

On 12 January 2013, when the first NSW RFS unit responded to the Wambelong Fire, the incident was being managed as a Class 1 fire by NPWS. The NSW RFS is not aware of any objections or concerns raised by NSW RFS crews on the ground about the Incident Control arrangements or strategies being employed to manage the fire.

The above Incident Control arrangements for the Wambelong Fire followed the local Castlereagh Bush Fire Management Committee Plan of Operations. A Plan of Operations determines incident control arrangements for any given fire within a rural fire district. The Castlereagh Plan of Operations in place at the time outlined Incident Control arrangements for fires within the Castlereagh Zone as follows:

- Class 1 Fires: The Officer-in-Charge of the first suppression unit on scene, until relieved or replaced. If the first suppression unit on scene is not from the fire fighting authority responsible for the land, once a sufficiently qualified representative of the responsible authority arrives on scene that person may take over as Incident Controller. The decision whether or not to take over as Incident Controller is at the discretion of the representative of the responsible authority and must be made in consideration of the prevailing circumstances and in consultation with the Officer-in-Charge of the first suppression unit. For a Class 1 Fire, the Incident Controller should be qualified to at least Crew Leader level.
- Class 2 Fires: A suitably qualified person will be appointed to control fire fighting operations by the relevant fire service on the basis of a recommendation made by the BFMC Fire Classification Group.
- Class 3 Fires: Appointed by the NSW RFS Commissioner under S44 of the RF Act.

As the Committee has been advised, new operational protocols have been introduced which change and clarify the operational oversight of fires in rural fire districts and fire districts. In July 2014, shortly after the Bush Fire Coordinating Committee (BFCC) approved the new operational protocols, an Operational Brief (**Attachment 1**) was issued State-wide to inform all NSW RFS members (salaried and volunteers) of these new arrangements. NSW RFS volunteers are, therefore, aware of these new protocols and that, in any given fire situation, if volunteers have concerns about the strategies being employed by an Incident Controller of another agency, these concerns should be brought to the attention of the NSW RFS District Manager (Fire Control Officer), who can assume control of the fire where it is deemed necessary to do so.

**4. Were there Local Group Captains in the Incident Management Team in fire control, if not why not?**

There were senior local volunteers in the IMT for the Wambelong Fire.

It is a specific requirement under the Bush Fire Coordinating Committee (BFCC) Policy No2/2006 – Management of Bush Fire Operations that a S44 Incident Management Team (IMT) includes a person who has knowledge of the local area.

In compliance with this Policy, during the Wambelong Fire, one local Group Officer was present within the IMT on all days throughout the fire. Up to 12 senior NSW RFS volunteers were involved in the IMT (at the FCC and field command positions) at the height of the fire. Up to four local Group Captains were on the IMT at any one time.

Local Group Officers along with a number of Deputy Group Officers in field command positions interacted regularly and reported back to the IMT at the FCC at the end of each shift. In addition to radio and other communications, field information, provided by local volunteers, was therefore constantly relayed back via this avenue and informed operational decision making.

The s44 Incident Controller's Report into the Wambelong Fire noted that local knowledge both from fire fighters and IMT members was invaluable during the fire fighting operation. While there may have been instances where individual NSW RFS members on the ground did not feel listened to, local input was certainly received and used at the Incident Control level.

It has, however, been recognised that at local level in some areas there is a shortage of senior volunteers that are willing to take on roles in IMTs and this capacity needs to be strengthened. In order to address this, the NSW RFS continues to improve the Incident Management Training and exercises across NSW. Both volunteers and staff are able to access Command, Control and Communications training and Incident Management training.

Since the Wambelong Fire, in the Castlereagh Zone (in addition to measures outlined in response to question 2 above), Incident Management roles have been included into the roles of the Group Officers. An Incident Management Exercise (IMX) has been conducted at Narrabri by Region North.

**5. How many volunteers were on the Incident Management Team?**

Approximately 15 and 20 volunteers per day (including those holding communications roles) were involved either at the Fire Control Centre or in field command positions as part of the IMT.

**6. Why were the fire ground Boss/Captains advice and request ignored while Captains in other fires are given the resources they require to extinguish the fires?**

It is important to note that the provision of resources to the Wambelong Fire was prioritised over another fire in the area (in the Pilliga) due to the potential risk to property and life.

In any significant fire event, there are competing priorities and the IMT must necessarily prioritise and provide resources where these are most needed. The Wambelong Fire was a dynamic and fast moving fire with priorities and threats constantly changing and some requests may be seen to be ignored. However, significant resources were provided to the fire fighting operations for this fire. This included, during the peak response days (over approximately 10 days) the following:

- 300 firefighters
- 50 plant operators
- 40 aviation personnel and
- 27 IMT personnel.

As the Committee has been advised, the fire conditions and level of activity experienced, in particular, during the fortnight between the 7-21 January 2013, were at a level not witnessed for many years. Across NSW on:

- 12 January 2013 there were 259 incidents.
- 13 January 2013 there were 350 incidents.
- 14 January 2013 there were 261 incidents.

There was, therefore, a significant demand on fire fighting resources across the State at the time of the Wambelong Fire. Resourcing arrangements for the Wambelong Fire must be considered in the context of the level of activity across the State.

**7. Was there a Risk Management Plan in place for the area affected by the Wambelong fire, if not why not?**

The area affected by the Wambelong Fire was covered by the two local Bush Fire Risk Management Plans (BFRMP):

- Castlereagh Zone BFRMP approved by the BFCC on 6 June 2007 (an updated plan was approved by the BFCC on 16 January 2013); and
- North West Zone BFRMP approved by the BFCC on 22 September 2010.

Under s52 of the RF Act, each BFMC must prepare and submit to the BFCC a draft of each of the following kinds of bush fire management plans for the rural fire district or other part of the State for which it is constituted:

(a) a Plan of Operations; and
(b) a BFRMP.

Draft bush fire management plans of both kinds must be prepared and submitted to the BFCC within 12 months after the constitution of the BFMC and:

(a) in the case of a Plan of Operations – within each successive 2 year period following the constitution of the Committee, and
(b) in the case of a BFRMP – within each successive 5 year period following the constitution of the Committee.

## 8. When was the plan last audited?

Provisions were included in the RF Act in 2002 to allow for performance audits of the implementation of BFRMPs to be conducted at the discretion of the Commissioner of the NSW RFS.

The Coonamble-Walgett BFRMP (the area covered by this Plan now falls within the North West Zone) was audited in 2006/07. The current North West Zone and Castlereagh Zone BFRMPs have not been audited under the statewide audit progamme.

In addition to audits, there are a number of avenues of oversight in place regarding performance against BFRMP objectives for all such Plans across the State.

All BFRMPs are required to be reviewed and updated within each successive five-year period from the constitution of the BFMC or as necessary to account for any changes in the context, risk profile or treatments. This ensures that BFRMPs are kept up to date and reflect, as much as practicable, the current circumstances in the area of coverage and have treatments which are appropriate for the risk profile of the area.

Reviewed and updated draft BFRMPs are exhibited for a period of public consultation prior to being finalised and endorsed by the local BFMC and submitted to the BFCC for approval.

Members of the local BFMC also make regular reports to the Committee in relation to hazard reduction activities undertaken by each land manager.

Further, a monthly report is generated for the Executive Officer using Bushfire Risk Information Management System (BRIMS) data on planned and completed hazard reduction works. This report outlines the completion rate of planned hazard reduction works for each rural fire district. A report, using the same data, is also submitted to the BFCC for its quarterly meetings.

## 9. Why did the Risk Management Plan fail?

It is incorrect to state that the BFRMP in place covering the Warrumbungle National Park failed. In the Australian landscape, there will always be bush fires and damage associated with bush fires. The risk of bush fires will never be eliminated.

A BFRMP does not aim to remove all risk of a fire in an area. These Plans are strategic documents that identify community assets at risk and sets out a programme of coordinated multi-agency treatments to reduce the risk of bush fire to the assets. To achieve this, a suite of treatments is identified in a BFRMP and include such things as hazard reduction burning, grazing, community education, fire trail maintenance and establishing community fireguard groups.

## 10. Why had not the Bush Fire Risk Management Plan (BFRMP) as described in the Canobolas model been implemented in the Warrumbungle National Park?

Following the Goobang fire of December 2001, a map-based hazard reduction planning model, incorporating extensive community consultation was developed within the Canobolas Zone. This became known as the Canobolas Bush Fire Management Model.

The good practices and lessons incorporated into the Canobolas Model are now applied statewide including the Castelreagh Zone and North West Zone BFRMPs.

All local BFRMPs are formulated in accordance with the Bush Fire Risk Management Policy (2008). The Policy is the current Bush Fire Risk Management Planning Model across NSW. It incorporates and extends the features of the Canobolas Model and provides for a whole-of-landscape and tenure-blind approach to bush fire risk management to protect the community and its assets.

**11. Did the Fire RFS Commissioner & Deputy Commissioner attend the Castlereagh Fire Control Centre while the fire was running?**

The NSW RFS Commissioner attended the Castlereagh Fire Control Centre on two occasions during the Wambelong Fire. In addition, senior NSW RFS personnel, including an Assistant Commissioner, attended the Castlereagh Fire Control Centre and acted in a liaison capacity during the Wambelong Fire. Commissioner Fitzsimmons also participated in the local BFMC After Action Review on 20 February 2013.

There were up to 300 fires across the State during the height of the Wambelong Fire. The Deputy Commissioner was at the NSW RFS State Operations Centre coordinating the statewide firefighting effort.

**12. Were the Commissioners confident that the IMT was achieving the satisfactory results in the management of the fire?**

Following the s44 Declaration on 13 January 2013, given the difficult fire scenario faced by the IMT, the extreme conditions and the potential for significant loss of life, the Commissioner of the NSW RFS is confident the Wambelong Fire IMT satisfactorily managed the fire.

**13. Had adequate hazard reduction been completed around Siding Springs Observatory to protect fire fighters whilst performing property protection?**
**14. Had adequate hazard reduction work been completed around the Telecommunications and Media towers west of Coonabarabran?**
**15. Has adequate hazard reduction work been done around all telecommunications and media assets in NSW so that excessive amount of money are not spent on aircraft protecting these assets and not homes?**
**16. Who is responsible for providing asset protection zones around telecommunications sites?**

Hazard reduction in NSW

The NSW Government established the Independent Hazard Reduction Audit Panel (Panel) to review the hazard reduction arrangements in NSW and provide recommendations to the Minister for Police and Emergency Services. The Panel was supported by an advisory group made of key stakeholders and also conducted community and stakeholder consultation prior to issuing its report in March 2013 (**Attachment 2**). The Panel found that the hazard reduction programme in NSW is strategic and well administered. The recommendations outlined in the report were all endorsed by the NSW Government including the introduction of the recommended legislative amendments.

There are in excess of 20 million hectares of bush fire prone land in NSW with over 1.3 million properties considered to be at risk. The hazard reduction programme in NSW is tenure blind and addresses risk across the whole landscape and not just public lands. Further, hazard reduction targets in NSW have a holistic approach, focusing on outcomes expected in terms of protecting life, property and the environment, rather than merely on the number of hectares burned. Assets are identified and treated according to their risk from bush fire.

The key elements of BFRMPs which are formulated with local input (including public consultation) by local BFMCs across the State are:

- identification of assets at risk of bush fire,
- a tenure blind risk assessment that identifies and prioritises assets and assigns treatments to manage risks,
- treatments are assigned to a land manager or other responsible agency for completion.

The Annual Programme of Works focuses on the two highest risk categories in BFRMP's, Extreme and Very High risks. In addition a Contingency Works programme is also created comprising High and Medium risks.

Treatments are assigned to all identified assets based on risk priority. Hazard reduction works are categorised into one of four Bush Fire Management Zones:

- Asset Protection Zones (APZ) - to protect human life, property and highly valued public assets and values;
- Strategic Fire Advantage Zones (SFAZ) - to provide strategic areas of fire protection advantage which will reduce the speed and intensity of bush fires, and reduce the potential for spot fire development and to aid containment of wildfires to existing management boundaries;
- Land Management Zones (LMZ) - to meet relevant land management objectives in areas where APZs or SFAZs are not appropriate; and
- Fire Exclusion Zones (FEZ) - to exclude bush fires.

Strategically focusing hazard reduction resources in APZ's and SFAZ's provides the maximum level of protection to properties and other community assets in bush fire prone areas and the best return for investment.

The annual completion rate of planned hazard reduction works has risen from 69.1% in 2009/10 to 82.9% in 2012/13. In 2013/14 the completion rate was 71.5%, however, this result should be measured against a background of adverse weather conditions with a 35% increase in wet days during March to May 2014, when the majority of works are undertaken.

Goal 28 of *NSW 2021: A Plan to Make NSW Number One* (NSW 2021) is to 'ensure NSW is ready to deal with major emergencies and natural disasters' and sets the following targets in relation to hazard reduction:

- increase the number of properties protected by hazard reduction works across all bush fire prone land tenures by 20,000 per year by 2016.

- increase the annual average level of area treated by hazard reduction activities by 45% by 2016.

The priority actions under this goal are to limit the severity of bush fires by:

- establishing annual bush fire hazard reduction works targets for land management agencies responsible for bush fire prone land consistent with the State target,

- increasing the number and area of hazard reduction activities undertaken on national parks and reserves.

Goal 28 targets have been consistently met or exceeded since these were introduced as reported in the NSW RFS Annual Report.

13. Hazard reduction around Siding Spring Observatory

The Castlereagh Zone BFRMP 2006 which was in effect at the time of the commencement of the Wambelong Fire identified the Siding Springs Observatory as an asset with level of risk 'Very High'. The risk treatment plan is outlined as follows:

| Economic Asset Name | Priority | Action | Agency |
|---|---|---|---|
| Siding Springs Observatory | 2B | In accordance with the Siding Springs Site Protection Plan conduct hazard reduction burns in identified Strategic Fire Advantage Zones in a mosaic manger when fuel loads exceed 12 tonnes per hectare and in accordance with fire regimes guidelines detailed in section 4.5 BFRMP. | Other |
| | | Maintain and update annually the Siding Springs Site Protection Plan. | Other |
| | | Undertake hazard reduction bruning and mechanical means in the identified APZ around the facility. | Other |
| | | Improve public awareness and knowledge of bush fires issues by ensuring people know what action to take if a bsuh fire occurs through yearly campaign of community education. | RFS<br>Other |
| | | Maintain building and infrastructure and prepare building protection plans. | Other |
| | | Plan and conduct annual fire preparedness exercises at Siding Springs with NPWS and RFS. | Other |
| | | Maintain facilities for a Divisional Command Post. | Other |
| | | Manage hazardous trees along Siding Springs road in conjunction with the planned hazard reduction burns scheduled by the Siding Springs Site Protection Plan. | LGA |
| | | Private property owners will be notified of their responsibilities under the BFRMP and assistance given in carrying out any prescribed burning require. | RFS |

Treatments identified in the BFRMP have been conducted around the Observatory including a hazard reduction burn conducted on the eastern side of the Observatory in 2011. While a burn was planned on the southern side in 2012, this was prevented by inclement weather.

It is noted that hazard reduction is only one method in a suite of measures that are employed to manage risk to assets. Even if all the planned hazard reduction had been completed the Observatory site is on steep terrain which presents a high fire risk. In recognition of this the land manager has worked with the NSW RFS to put in place specific property protection plan and undertakes activities such as tree and limb removal along the

site and special paint on the buildings to manage the bush fire risk to the asset. The Observatory also has some fire fighting capacity with a Category 2 Tanker which their employees who are NSW RFS volunteers from Timor Brigade can operate.

It is important to note that notwithstanding that some damage was sustained at this site, a considerable number of assets were protected.

14. & 15. Hazard reduction around Telecommunications and media towers west of Coonabarabran/in the State

Section 63 of the RF Act imposes specific responsibilities on land owners and occupiers. It is the responsibility of the land owner or occupier to provide for the protection of assets such as telecommunications and media towers.

The NSW RFS Community Resilience Practice Note – Telecommunication Towers in Bush Fire Prone Areas (**Attachment 3**) provides guidance to these land owners and occupiers on how to maintain and manage such sites to protect these from bush fires.

It is a feature of these assets that these are situated on slopes and steep terrain which increases the risk and makes fire fighting operations generally difficult.

Telecommunication and media assets are key assets considered when formulating operational and incident management plans for a given fire, notwithstanding the level of hazard reduction that has been conducted around such assets. These assets are infrastructure of significant value and are of vital importance to any bush fire fighting operation as emergency service communications and public notifications will depend on these sites being safe and functional.

It should be noted that when faced with fires of the intensity of the Wambelong Fire, while measures such as an APZ would provide a defendable space, it would not necessarily prevent the fire from impacting these asset. Further, notwithstanding the level of hazard reduction around these assets, given the intensity, severity and factors such as spotting distances experienced during a fire such as the Wambelong Fire, a fire fighting effort will likely be necessary.

16. Asset Protection Zones around telecommunication sites

The maintenance of APZs around telecommunication sites is the responsibility of the land manager or occupier. For example a 40 metre APZ is now in place around the towers in Coonabarabran which is the responsibility of the occupier of the site.

**17. What are the industrial agreements for paid staff during fire fighting activities, both prior to and post Section 44 declarations?**

Salaried Members (staff) of the NSW RFS are employed under the:

- *Government Sector Employment Act 2013.*

Staff employment conditions are covered under the:

- *Crown Employees (Public Service Conditions of Employment) Award 2009 (Crown Award),*
- *Crown Employees (Rural Fire Service) Award (RFS Award), and*
- *Crown Employees (Rural Fire Service Major Incident Condition 2011) Interim Award.*

Paid staff of other agencies involved fire fighting operations during a s44 Declaration are subject to the applicable awards for those agencies.

**18. How have the impacts of climate change, such as that fires will become more frequent and intense, been incorporated in bush fire management strategies in general?**

Bush fires have been occurring in this State for tens of thousands of years. NSW has experienced many severe fire seasons throughout its history, from the early days of settlement through to modern times. Fire history records document severe fires occurring throughout the past century including fires in 1938, 1951, 1968, 1974, 1976, 1979, 1984, 1991, 1994, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2006, 2009 and 2013. In light of this, the NSW RFS always has in place plans for the worst case scenario in terms of bush fires.

While there is research suggesting a possible increase in the number of significant fire danger days across NSW, the NSW RFS has a number of programs and initiatives which recognise this risk.

The NSW RFS has diversified its membership base to attract and retain members over the last decade and made significant improvements for instance the standard of vehicles and equipment used by our volunteers.

The NSW RFS has a practice of aggressively attacking fires in its early stages and on days with certain conditions will deploy aircraft (both rotary and fixed wing) at first instance in order to suppress the fire quickly. Preparedness also includes the Rapid Aerial Response Team program, where firefighters are placed on a heightened state of alert and strategically placed on days of increased fire danger, and deployed quickly to ignitions by helicopter. This has resulted in a number of fires being controlled quickly before they developed into potentially large and destructive fires.

As outlined above, the NSW Government has also committed to increasing the amount of effective hazard reduction in NSW 2021. To achieve this increase in targets, the NSW RFS has invested in the State Mitigation Crew program, where works crews assist local brigades in preparing areas for hazard reduction burning, meaning volunteer brigades can spend more time getting burns completed.

Over $22 million of grant funding is available at State level to enhance the ability of responsible agencies (both state and local government) to undertake fire trail maintenance and hazard reduction works. On average, in the last five years, the value of bids exceeds the amount of available funding by $20 million.

The NSW RFS has a comprehensive corporate planning framework which ensures that research is taken into consideration in organisational learning and decision making. Relevant research, be it climate change research and predictions or research into other strategic drivers such as demographic and population trends, land use planning and technology are all therefore factored into organisational decision making as appropriate.

**19. Could you please provide your view on the adequacy of fuel reduction, fire trails and fire breaks in the Warrumbungle National Park and surrounding areas prior to the fire?**

The aim should be to ideally achieve 100% of the planned annual works programme however, adverse weather conditions as experienced in 13/14 can significantly reduce the rate of completion.

The completion rate of hazard reduction works in the Castlereagh Zone where the majority of the Warrumbungle National Park is situated is as follows:

| Year | | Proposed | Completed | % |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2013/14 | Activities | 84 | 49 | 58.33% |
| | Hectares | 4590.32 | 3180.5 | 69.29% |
| | Properties Protected | 779 | 690 | 88.58% |
| 2012/13 | Activities | 82 | 67 | 81.71% |
| | Hectares | 12056.26 | 8645.2 | 71.71% |
| | Properties Protected | 858 | 832 | 96.97% |

There are 1,848km of fire trails in the Castlereagh Zone of which 135.7km of fire trails are within the Warrumbungle National Park.

Following the Wambelong Fire, the local BFMC formed a Fire Trail Working Party to review the fire trails, update the fire trail register and monitor ongoing treatment works.

**20. Could you please provide your view on the adequacy of fuel reduction, fire trails and fire breaks in the Warrumbungle National Park and surrounding areas prior to the fire?**

Please refer to the response to question 19.

**21. What accountability mechanisms exist for Local Bushfire Management Plans that aren't fully implemented?**

Please refer to the response to question 25.

**22. (a) What was the RFS's rationale for calling the section 44 at the time that it did?**
**(b) With the benefit of hindsight, do you believe this timing was optimal?**

(a) Rationale for a s44 Declaration

On the morning of 13 January 2013, the NSW RFS District Office personnel contacted the State Operations Centre to discuss the conditions on the fire ground of the Wambelong

Fire including the back burning strategy and the amount of fire on the ground. State level discussions were then held in relation to the potential for this fire to rapidly escalate given the deteriorating weather conditions and the potential impact of an uncontrolled fire. Representatives of the local BFMC in the area were then consulted and supported the declaration.

A s44 declaration may be made by the Commissioner based on his/her concerns of what is or may occur, or based on a recommendation from the local Bush Fire Management Committee.

b) Timing of s44 declaration

Given the severity of the fire and the resulting damage, with the benefit of hindsight, it is reasonable to conclude there would have been benefits to an earlier s44 declaration as this would have increased visibility of risk and potential for the fire to escalate as well increase resource availability. It may have also allowed for less reactive planning and communications arrangements to be put in place.

However, on the day, decisions are made based on the information available at the time. Typically, the first 24 hours of a large, fast moving, aggressive bush fire under extreme weather conditions are always challenging. Operational responses are very reactive and situational awareness is very difficult to maintain given rapidly changing conditions.

It is noted that the new operational protocols will provide greater visibility and oversight of the management of all fires and can enhance the Commissioner's ability to make a s44 declaration.

**23. Please provide further detail on:**
**(a) the hierarchy of community notifications that RFS is responsible for making during bushfires.**
**(b) The notification and communication procedures between firefighting authorities during class 1 and class 2 fires that were revised following the Wambelong fire.**

a) Notification Hierarchy

The NSW RFS uses nationally consistent 'alert levels' to indicate the threat posed by a fire. These are:

- Advice - A fire has started. There is no immediate danger. Stay up to date in case the situation changes.
- Watch And Act - There is a heightened level of threat. Conditions are changing and you need to start taking action now to protect you and your family.
- Emergency Warning - An Emergency Warning is the highest level of Bush Fire Alert. You may be in danger and need to take action immediately. Any delay now puts your life at risk.

Alert levels may occur in any order. For example, a fire which starts close to properties and is expected to immediately pose a risk to life or property may be initially referred to as an Emergency Warning, while an Advice fire may escalate to an Emergency Warning as it intensifies or spreads.

The NSW RFS uses a range of channels and mediums to deliver notifications to the community, depending on the community. These include websites, social media, the

1800 NSW RFS Bush Fire Information Line, local media, doorknocks and smartphone applications. As an incident escalates, the NSW RFS may use tools such as the Emergency Alert telephone warning system.

b) Revised notification and communication procedures between fire fighting authorities

A summary of the revised arrangements are contained in **Attachment 1**. The new protocol has been communicated to all NSW RFS District/Team/Zone Managers (**Attachment 4**) as well as the NPWS and Forestry Corporation (**Attachment 5**) and local BFMCs (**Attachment 6**).

**24. Inquiry participants have suggested that the RFS chain of command during the fire did not utilise sufficient local brigade expertise, and that responses on the ground were disorganised. How do you respond to these criticisms?**

All bush firefighting operations in this state are locally managed and the role of state and regional level resources is to provide support and supplement local resources where necessary.

In addition to the information provided with respect to local knowledge in response to question 4 (above), it should be noted that local resources were augmented by the use of out of area resources at times during the Wambelong Fire. This was due to both the scale of the incident and to ensure adherence to NSW RFS fatigue management guidelines.

At all times, however, fireground operations during the Wambelong Fire were monitored and managed by an incident management structure that necessarily incorporated local expertise.

It must be recognised that fast moving aggressive fires in extreme conditions are challenging. Operational responses are reactive while the appropriate situational awareness, intelligence and organisational arrangements are put in place. It needs to reiterated that the Wambelong Fire was a fast moving, dynamic fire which was burning under extreme conditions which presented extremely challenging conditions for fire fighting operations.

**25. The committee has heard that the Local Bushfire Management Plans were not fully implemented, especially in relation to hazard reduction. What accountability mechanisms exist for these plans, and how might accountability be improved?**

As outlined above, significant improvement has been made in the completion rates for planned hazard reduction works across the State.

Evidence will show that weather is the main factor for non completion of hazard reduction works.

In 2013/14 due to adverse weather the completion rate of planned hazard reduction was 71.5%, down from 82.9% in 2012/13 and the first time since 2009/10 that the completion rate has declined from the previous year.

The impact of unfavourable weather is also evident in the Castlereagh Zone within which the majority of the Warrumbungle National Park is located with the completion of its works program declining from 81.7% in 2012/13 to 58.33% in 2013/14. This illustrates the impact unfavourable weather can have on hazard reduction programs and constitutes one of the major constraints on effective implementation of works.

The Commissioner of NSW RFS and the BFCC are committed to developing and improving performance reporting schemes for bush fire risk management treatments across all land tenures in particular to improve visibility in relation to performance.

Currently BFMCs are provided with progressive monthly summaries of hazard reduction activities proposed and completed by all agencies. The BFCC has a standard hazard reduction report presented to each meeting outlining the hazard reduction performance at State level by agency, and a summary of the performance of each BFMC. An annual report is provided for the BFCC in this standard format.

The RFS Annual Report provides a comprehensive report on the State wide hazard reduction performance of agencies relative to targets, established under the State Plan 'NSW 2021 Goal 28 and reports the performance of hazard reduction activities, bush fire hazard complaints, private land hazard reduction certificates, development control assessments and community education programs including proposed v's completed performance and the number of properties afforded protection by these activities.

While agencies are working hard to provide the community and stakeholders with up-to-date and accurate information on the hazard reduction programme, there is still work to be done to make the hazard reduction programme more transparent and accessible for the community.

Technology is a tool that can greatly assist governments engage with the community and stakeholders. The Bushfire Risk Information Management System (BRIMS) is used to record planned works and completed works. BRIM is a multi-agency web-based reporting system provided by the NSW Rural Fire Service. Land management agencies, councils and utilities use the system, in addition to the NSWRFS. BRIMS also tracks the planning and progress of activities such as whether an environmental assessment has been obtained, a burn plan has been completed and whether the site has been prepared.

It has been recognised that BRIMS needs to be updated be updated to contain the functionality that is required for a modern interactive system. In particular, BRIMS or its replacement should have a component that allows the community and stakeholders to easily access information about hazard reduction. Ideally, members of the community should be able to interrogate the system to find out about hazard reduction works carried out in their local area.

The NSW RFS is currently engaging contractors to develop the specification for a replacement system and will be seeking support from Treasury to fund the implementation of a replacement system.

**26. What local and centralised debriefing occurred after the Wambelong fire, and what lessons were identified for the future?**

The Castlereagh Zone BFMC held a multi agency AAR on 20 February 2013 at the Coonabarabran Shire Hall (**Attachment 7**). Nine AARs or debriefs were also conducted with NSW RFS Brigades. Meetings were also held with the NSW RFS Captains in the following areas within the Castlereagh Zone – Coolah, Coona and Gilgandra.

The Incident Controller's Report identified a number of recommendations to sustain and improve actions primarily relating to incident management (**Attachment 8**).

Following the January 2013 bush fires, an Interagency After Action Review was conducted involving members of the State Emergency Management Committee. This review identified various actions to sustain or improve primarily relating to NSW RFS State Operations.

NSW RFS State Operations also conducted an end of season debrief to consider issues, including those stemming from the Wambelong Fire.

The NSW RFS engaged the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre (Bushfire CRC) to conduct research into the community response to the January 2013 bush fires, including those in the Coonabarabran area.

**Annexures**

1. NSW Rural Fire Service Operational Briefing – July 2014
2. NSW Independent Hazard Reduction Audit Plan – Enhancing Hazard Reduction in NSW (March 2013)
3. NSW Rural Fire Service – Community Resilience Practice Note – Telecommunications Towers in Bush Fire Prone Areas (February 2012)
4. Memorandum to DTZ Manager from the NSW Deputy Commissioner – Protocol for management of response to bush fires (22 July 2014)
5. Letters from Commissioner of the NSW RFS to A/Chief Executive Parks and Wildlife (Office of Environment and Heritage) and Forestry Corporation – dated 10 July 2014.
6. Letter from the Executive Officer of the Bush Fire Coordinating Committee to local BFMCs – dated 7 August 2014.
7. Castlereagh Bush Fire Management Committee – After Action Review – Coonabarabran/Gilgandra/Coonamble s44, January 2013 (20 February 2013).
8. Section 44 Incident Controller's Report