

INQUIRY INTO WAMBELONG FIRE

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Partially Confidential

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In making this submission I state that I was not actively engaged in fighting the fire. However I have been involved in the Bushfire Brigade system for 50 years. I am currently a Deputy Group Captain in the Purlewaugh district east of Coonabarabran and a Group Officer.

I currently represent NSW Farmers Association on the Castlereagh Bushfire Management Committee (BFMC). I have been actively involved in the environmental debate on the public and private land management issues especially since the mid 90's.

As a result of what I have stated my submission will concentrate on the following issues.

1. Recognition of private enterprise assets
2. The system of training by RFS and its conduct of large fires
3. The Environmental Assessment Code by which RFS is expected to abide
4. The lack of management of public land by NPWS
5. The Castlereagh Zone BFMC and its future role

1 Recognition of private enterprise assets

Many productive farms were partly or entirely burnt out by the fire. Not only properties adjoining the Park but others further from the park boundary. In many cases livestock, fencing, farm buildings, stockyards, machinery, pasture feed and fodder were destroyed by the fire. Such losses cause a major loss of income for the property owners for a number of years to come. Our State Government and its bureaucracy of RFS and NPWS need to realise such losses put enormous strain on the economic situation of farming families and creates personal problems within families as they attempt to cope with the loss of income and personal possessions.

Whether the conduct and management of the salaried staff of RFS and NPWS prior to and during the fire was of a negative or positive nature as far as the outcome of the fire the fact remains their salaries continue unabated. Not so for farming families burnt out as a result of the fire.

I believe a lesson must be learnt from the fact that both RFS and NPWS knew that by 8PM on the Saturday evening the fire was not contained and not under control and they had detailed knowledge of the weather forecast for the following day. Putting the two factors together it was obvious there was a major potential threat to surrounding primary production properties.

Farmers and rural communities are very aware of "sheep weather alerts", which are often broadcast on communication networks when rain and snow are combined with cold weather which can cause major losses at lambing and shearing time.

I believe it is time Rural Fire Service Fire Control Centres in consultation with the local Captains and Group Captains be directed to constitute and put into motion a "LIVESTOCK AND PROPERTY FIRE ALERT".

Farmers could have been notified by such an alert by 8PM on the Saturday evening. This would have given them time to organise fire breaks around essential buildings and a bare or

fallowed small paddock to muster livestock into. They could have been in their high country by 5:30AM Sunday morning and mustered livestock out to their prepared paddock prior to the fire front. No doubt there would have been some losses, but many of the major losses of livestock and infrastructure that did occur could have been avoided.

I recommend the implementation of a system of “LIVESTOCK AND PROPERTY FIRE ALERT” to be an essential part of future actions by RFS and NPWS.

2 The system of training by RFS and its conduct of large fires

I attended a Group Officers Course in Coonabarabran several years ago. There were a large number of younger RFS volunteers on the course.

Over the four days of instruction we were required to advise as to how and where we would embark upon controlling a fire and protecting private property. The fire was super imposed on screen.

What amazed me was the strategic attitude of many of the number of these younger volunteers. Their training has obviously been recent through the RFS system. It is obvious they have been largely influenced to carry out “property protection” as a priority i.e. fire trucks and their crews to be stationed near homes and residential areas rather than being utilised to get out to a flank or fire front with the primary aim of containing and stopping the spread of the fire or at least reducing the width of the front of the fire.

I believe this practice probably originates from standard RFS procedure in such suburban areas as the Blue Mountains, Sydney and coastal residential centres. Streets full of houses are built on ridges adjacent in many cases to public land consisting of inaccessible gorges and valleys.

This practice of “property protection” was most evident from many reports on the Wambelong fire. Farmers have told me of numerous cases where “out of area” crews sat up all day next to a rural residence instead of getting out to the fire front with the local brigades and pulling the fire up. The local Fire Brigade Captains and their local knowledge of their crews know where the farm houses are and will always be keeping one eye on rural infrastructure.

There needs to be a change in RFS training for west of the Great Dividing Range. The emphasis needs to be on pulling up and containing the fire not waiting until the fire is threatening a dwelling.

In many cases during the Wambelong fire the local knowledge of Brigade Captains and Group Officers was ignored or not utilised. This led to unwarranted destruction of rural infrastructure and livestock. The most blatant example of this was the dropping of incendiaries around the communication towers on Mount Cenn Cruick.

By rights the local volunteer Captains should have had the job of organising and directing the defence of this essential infrastructure. Instead salaried officers with no knowledge of the local area and far removed from it directed what led to the destruction of fencing and pasture over a wide area of private land. As a result of their actions kilometres of fencing on steep

and rugged grazing country was destroyed as a result. One landowner in the area had a quote of \$18,000 per kilometre to clear the line, the cost of material and erection. An economic impossibility. If livestock stray onto the public land due to lack of fencing OEHL will prosecute the livestock owner. This entire debacle emphasises and demonstrates the complete lack of respect the bureaucracy of OEHL, NPWS and RFS have for private property its infrastructure and livestock.

Can someone please explain the difference between arson and incendiarism?

3 FIRES ACT & GOVERNMENT LAWS RESTRICT PROPERTY PROTECTION.

It is a requirement of the Rural Fires Act 1997 that the Commissioner has regard to sections of the Environment Planning & Assessment Act.

The Bushfire Environment Assessment Code is the result of this deliberation. The influence of the Native Vegetation Act and the Threatened Species Conservation Act is most obvious throughout the Code. To quote the code, Asset Protection Zones are to provide fuel reduced areas around assets. The maximum extent of work for residential and other major buildings must be no greater than 20 metres, as measured in the horizontal plane from the edge of the building.

The maximum width of work along a boundary fence must be no greater than six metres cleared of “trees with hollows”. Volunteer fire fighters well know a tree with hollow in it quickly catch alight and is virtually impossible to put out. Often the only alternative is to fall the tree with a chainsaw. This is often why such trees are referred to as “widow makers”. To quote further in selecting trees for removal;

- Species that are listed by local authority as noxious or environmental weeds should be removed in preference to other species.
- Non-native woody plants should be removed in preference to native species.
- Species with rough, flaky or stringy bark should be removed on preference to those with smooth or tightly held bark.
- Locally common species should be removed in preference to species listed by the local authority as regionally significant or valuable for habitat or food source.
- Trees that have been determined to be dangerous by the local authority should be removed in preference to other trees.

The Environment Assessment Code is all about protecting flora and fauna while ever the local environment is not threatened by major fire event. What it does not take into account is;

- The potential danger volunteer fire fighters have to contend with when attempting to protect certain assets surrounded by inadequate asset protection zones.
- The wholesale destruction of flora and fauna by fire on public lands due to its mismanagement.
- The destruction of livestock fencing and farm infrastructure on neighbouring private land due to the inadequate management and liability created by the code, the

environmental legislation & the attitude of the office of Environment and Heritage (OEH).

The Environment Minister is responsible for the carriage of the Threatened Species Conservation Act. Again to quote the Code:

5.4 Standards for the protection of biodiversity - threatened species.

5.4.1 Determining presences of threatened species, populations on/or ecological communities.

5.4.2 Determining management conditions from the Threatened Species Hazard Reduction list.

This extreme Green nonsense is the primary cause for the loss of hundreds of homes in NSW in the last 12 months.

I am aware of recent changes by government whereby house owners are allowed to clear certain vegetation without requesting permission. However I believe these current changes go nowhere near far enough. The lack of clearance of vegetation surrounding the communication towers on Mount Cenn Cruick is a stark example.

4 The lack of management of public land by NPWS

As the committee would be aware retired senior policeman _____ has been directed to carry out an independent audit of the Warrumbungle national Park. As a result he has recommended management includes grazing the lower reaches of the National Park to reduce the fire load.

This lines up with the previous management of that land prior to it becoming a National Park in the 1950's.

The _____ family have been grazing in the Warkton valley to the south east of the park for five generations. I was fortunate to be able to discuss with _____ (4th generation) the management of the area prior to it being gazetted. _____ was born in 1926. He recalled how his Dad would often take cattle through what is now National Park to agistment out in the Coonamble area. _____ as a young boy on a pony would go ahead of the mob and lop a kurrajong tree. The sound of the tomahawk would keep the cattle together and keep them moving.

As he described it the managers of the land at the time would carry out regrowth control, digging seedlings and conducting small hazard reductions. He maintains a lot of the Park which burnt so savagely 12 months ago had not been burnt or grazed for 60years.

5 The Castlereagh Zone Bushfire Management Committee and its future role

As I have already stated I am NSW Farmers Association representative on the local BFMC. It is a bit like shutting the stable door after the horse has bolted. I realise only too well that our BFMC failed in its duty of care.

At no time did the BFMC in its official capacity inspect the state of the Park as far as fuel load, the amount of hazard reduction being conducted, or the state of the various fire trails within the Park.

Since the fire a subcommittee of the BFMC has liaised with groups of farmers surrounding the Park to establish various tracks and fire trails that were already in use or were established during the fire. This is a step in the right direction but there is a lot more work to be done.

The BFMC must be able to inspect public land in the zone and ensure that appropriate hazard reduction is implemented by various means e.g. burning, grazing, slashing and various forms of regrowth control.

The BFMC along with the Senior Management Team (SMT) needs to foster a good working relationship between the park management and the neighbouring brigades. A fire outbreak in the Park with sensible fire trail development should be able to turn a lightening strike or a neglected camp fire into a controlled burn. In such a way a mosaic pattern should be established across the public and neighbouring private land.

There will still be fires but they should not develop into the catastrophic event which has recently occurred and caused huge damage and loss of income.

IN SUMMARY

The outcome of the Wambelong fire has demonstrated a number of issues that need to be addressed by this Parliamentary Inquiry.

The Warrumbungle National Park was an example of many National Parks throughout western NSW and the State which are currently carrying a huge fuel load. This needs to be addressed before more rural communities suffer huge loss and line up for compensation from Government.

The system of training by RFS needs to change emphasis for western areas of the State needs to be on pulling up and containing fires at an early stage.

Common sense needs to be paramount when clearing fire hazard from around rural infrastructure and key assets. Current environmental legislation must be over ruled in such circumstances.

Local volunteers on their BFMC must play a major role in dictating hazard reduction on all lands both public and private

I wish to appear at the Enquiry when in Coonabarabran.

Rod Young