

INQUIRY INTO WAMBELONG FIRE

Organisation: Warrumbungle Fire Action Group

Date received: 30/01/2014

Partially Confidential

General Purpose Standing Committee Enquiry No 5

I am a landowner in the Warrumbungle region and as such was involved with some of the RFS landowner fire fighters. My husband and son fought in two different Brigades in the fire. It was evident in the early stages that there were many concerns relevant to the management of the fire.

Although I was not actively involved in fighting the Wambelong Fire, I realized what a huge community concern it had become and decided to document the events for two reasons:

- 1 To use my Psychotherapy training to support and hopefully unburden some of the Captains of Brigades and their wives, by helping them to talk about their experiences and thereby have a true and honest account of their situations and
- 2 To make known to those in authority the many problems encountered during the fires.

In some ways I became a medium for the issues of the seven Captains I approached. They were exhausted, traumatized and incapable of putting together a movement for change. As other like- minded people came on board, we gradually created a small group and have been able, through the assistance of the Shooters and Fishers Party, to achieve an Enquiry into this catastrophic event.

To follow, under the headings of Management, Prevention, Chain of Command, Local Response and Communication, I have collated evidence that will, I hope, define and clarify our brief which is to aim for change in procedure and best practice in fire management.

The following seven transcripts, for which I have permission from each individual to send as submissions, are attached, together with the submission that I have coordinated and written on behalf of our Warrumbungle Fire Action Group.

I am happy to appear before the Enquiry.

Carolyn Lyons OAM
"Parmedman"
GULARGAMBONE NSW 2828

Carolyn: It's the 6th February 2013 and we are going to talk about the fires that have recently occurred in the Warrumbungles and the problems ensuing from those.

So I am just going to ask some of the questions that have been sent through to all the fire captains in this group and record your thoughts on what's happened.

Carolyn: So what is the National Parkes Fire Plan to your knowledge?

Speaker: Create the largest fire as they can

Carolyn: Really, that's how it has turned out?

Speaker: That's how it has turned out and that's how it turned out in 2001 when we actually had the Bull Mountain Fire out. They came in that night and lit up two and half miles of back burning and consequently got away and was consequently declared a section 44 and created a huge amount of expense for the Government, apart from the damage they did.

They ran the risk then of killing a lot of young boys because they lit the back burn up and they didn't have a fire break in on the northern side of it - the direction it was travelling - and they put a lot of young boys in on Mt. Exmouth and they were very lucky to come out alive.

Carolyn: And this was in 2001?

Speaker: 2001

Speaker: It was called the Bull Mountain Fire. It basically trebled (or was even greater) the size of the original fire that we had already put out.

Carolyn: So do you believe the National Parks had been maintained to a proper safety level?

Speaker: Definitely not. I have never seen it where I would consider it a proper safety level.

Carolyn: How many years have you been out here?

Speaker: Since 1978 so 34, 35 years.

Carolyn: So to your idea, the National Parkes are not maintaining the job at all. Albeit they have been paid to do so?

Speaker: No they're not maintaining it in a satisfactory condition: they are not putting decent fire breaks through and a lot of the time those fire breaks are not in a satisfactory condition.

Carolyn: So it's not an annual prevention?

Speaker: No.

Carolyn: Do you think they should be doing it annually?

Speaker: Yes. Every break should be done annually and they should be doing as much back burning during the winter as they can, but their organisational skills don't allow for that. Often I have told them that we have a neighbour here, in our brigade, that does a lot of back burning and he gets it right every year. I have suggested to the Park they do what he does but they just condemn him and say he's an idiot.

Carolyn: Do you think the breaks should be wider than 80 metres?

Speaker: 80 metres would be a great help, yes, on what they are - which is purely a bull dozer width. When I tried to get those breaks enlarged for back burning in this fire, I wasn't allowed. They were outright dangerous and that proved to be the case on the break between Tugrenong Spire and the TV tower where the fire people were stuck on the first Thursday.

Carolyn: So there could have been severe loss of life?

Speaker: Huge.

Carolyn: So that story has not come out yet?

Speaker: I wouldn't think so. I had boys on top of a hill up the valley watching and listening to what was going on and it was quite serious. That was caused from back burning.

Carolyn: Back burning organised by the Command Centre?

Speaker: Yes. Back burning they did on the Wednesday night .I was at Tannonbar with the Bellar Creek group at that stage. On Wednesday I got wind of the fact that they were back burning around the TV tower and all the way down to the Tuggeranong Spire: so I came home and took three trucks right along that back burn from the Tuggrenong Spire to the TV tower. We could not get out of there quickly enough it was so dangerous to be back burning on the way that track was. I went and saw the Divisional Commander and I told him that they had lit up quite a lot and I told him that that track was not fit to be backed-burned on. I asked him wether he had been along and had a look. His reply was no. I suggested to him then that he have a look before he burns any more and that we were leaving, because it was unsafe for us to be there.

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Carolyn: Did he go too?

Speaker: Did he leave?

Speaker: No they kept on doing what ever they were doing but I don't think they started any more back burns along that track. But they had already started it anyway on the south-west side of the TV Tower which meant it was going to come down and light all that up any way.

Carolyn: Did you have access to resourses during this fire when you needed them and what did you have to do to get those resources.

Male: We had access to some resources, never enough in my opinion. A lot of these allocated to this area were used extensively. But at times I was ringing up after more bulldozers or more graders, but rarely did we get a result from ringing up. Luckily we did have some here and we were using them. One of the big problems was that supposedly they had to get permission for anything they did. I had people with the graders or the bulldozers ringing me all the time saying 'we desperately need to get a track in on so and so a place' and they'd say, well the Div Comm, or whoever the outsiders who were there at the time would say 'no I have to go and get permission'. By the time they would go and get permission, it was too late to do that line anyway. I was taking it on my own shoulders to tell them to get that done immediately; to keep those graders and dozers going full time to get as much work done as we could. But it was a huge problem for other people getting permission for those graders or dozers to work.

Carolyn: And in fact some were returned from whence they came?

Male: I know of graders that came on a day that I was desperate for graders- they came from the West. There is a policy that they must go to Coonabarabran and report in, get whatever training they're meant to have and

Mrs. Speaker: Cups of tea...

Male: They were diverted where we had the Newell Highway closed at the time. There was no reason why those graders could not come through the Newell Highway with us but they were sent via Mendooran to get to Coonabarabran. The logical thing was to spear them straight into us. We were desperate for machinery at that time. Instead of that. they were sent via Mendooran to Coonabarabran and stood down when they got to Coonabarabran. I think the next day they were sent home; I don't think those graders did a thing. If we had staging areas, one at Toorweenah and one at Gummin, those problems would have all been resolved. We would have had that equipment working and doing a good job because the graders and bull dozers are most essential in this country, for trying to back burn and trying to stop this fire. We continually had problems trying to bring trucks from other brigades further west to help us because, for them to come and help us, they were suppose to have to go to Coonabarabran to register and probably been told to go and rest when they got there, instead of being able to ring up the brigades and saying "Get your gear here as quickly as you can"! That was not possible and they were not allowed to leave.

Carolyn; You have had a fair bit of experience as you previously told us with fire brigades and with your roll as Deputy in this area. Have you had experience with formal debriefings before?

Speaker: No, no, no. Normally we don't get asked.

Carolyn: Would you feel free to go to a formal debrief meeting?

Speaker: If I am allowed I will be going to the formal debriefing. I know that there are some debriefings going on that I will not be allowed to go to.

Carolyn: And who has the right to tell the landowner and a person in your roll, after a fire like this, that they don't have a right to attend?

Speaker: I don't know who had the right, but I have been told that.

Carolyn: By whom?

Speaker: By the fire control office

Carolyn: In Coonabarabran.

Speaker: In Coonabarabran.

Mrs Speaker: So that was the call last night.

Speaker: I had a phone call last night saying I would be allowed to contribute to my Group Captain, but I will not be going to the first debrief.

Carolyn: Mrs..... you were in the house. At what stage did you feel you had to pack up and might have to evacuate?

Speaker Woman: When I took my husband for a drive at one o'clock on the Thursday and early Friday morning. We went for a drive up the TV tower road and it was just terrifying. I couldn't turn around fast enough and we realised we needed to do something. I think we always thought the house was safe. I think my husband realised that manpower was going to be a problem and that our boys would be with the stock. We had them (the stock) all in a few different spots, but if we had to save them ... and we thought that I might not have had enough people here at the house to help me. We came home here and called people at Dunedoo at 3 o'clock in the morning and they were here by half past four to take car loads of stuff out. Fortunately nothing happened. We sat around all day waiting for the fire to come that Friday.

Carolyn: What were your priorities in the house to take with you?

Woman: Before they came I packed a bag, a suitcase, so I had a change of clothes for all of us. My brother walked in and asked 'what do you want to take' and I said 'I don't know'. So he /they all just went round and took things:

they took paintings, jewellery all the photo albums anything little they could fit into cars; little bits of furniture.

Speaker: Things which were irreplaceable?

Speaker Woman: Our brothers and sister just went around and did it because we did not know what to take. They were gone by seven o'clock in the morning.

Speaker: One of the big fears at that stage, was that if it had got any worse, if it hadn't hit that bare country, then the highway was going to be blocked. Once the highway was blocked, I don't think we would have any fire trucks from Coonabarabran to come through to look after all the housing on this side, **because they seem to have a policy, that fire within so many kilometres you don't go there. So I have something like fifteen houses in this brigade to protect.** I would be very surprised if I' been able to supply one truck per house and the fact that they won't split up was a worry. It meant that maybe I could have protected a couple of houses, but all our own trucks I would have wanted with livestock. **So I had a great fear that most of our houses would have been unprotected due to the sheer fact that they would not have been able to get organised in Coonabarabran.** Number one to get a truck here and number two, I think the highway was blocked and I thought they won't even come thru because of it. So we just felt that we should have something put away.

Carolyn: Very, very frightening wasn't it.

Speaker Woman: A bit scary. It was lovely to have family here and I was not left here by myself at all, which was nice. We feed lots of people coming and going; like he said earlier, we had people coming and going all the time.

Speaker: That morning at about four o'clock I think I rang every brigade member in the Uargon Brigade (?) and said to them: "We don't know what's going to happen; we are expecting that the fire will hit the highway somewhere around the Hickys Falls; that would be about the area it would hit; and we won't know what's going to happen from there on." So I just gave them the warning, so it was up to them to do what ever fire protection they wanted to do; put stock in yards; what ever they wanted to do. **But I wanted everyone in this brigade to at least know that the danger was there that day.**

Speaker Woman: And I think most people did round their stock up. A lot of people did.

Speaker: I am not sure what they did. I did not call on any of them on that day to man the trucks, because we had enough outsiders here at the time to man the trucks and to take them up to Spire View and Morses Place. We had our trucks up there helping there and luckily with the lack of fuel there, we were able to contain it on those properties and prevent it from getting into Black Mountain which was going to spray all over the Newell Highway and started on the southern side.

Carolyn: Another question I have is that a statement was made that there was no north/ south access, only an east west access thru the mountains. . Is that correct?

Speaker: There's a north/ south access on the western end of the mountain which they call Berby Trail: that is right on the western end

Speaker Women: But not vary accessible.

Speaker: No and virtually wasn't used because it was all over before it started. On the eastern side from here you go up through private property to get to the TV Tower and that TV Tower road runs basically to the south. You're correct - apart from the Berby trail, right on the western end of the mountain there is no north south access.

Speaker Women: And certainly not maintained.

Carolyn: Would you think that there should be now, as a result of what you have experienced, a north south access through the mountains.

Speaker: Certainly, if possible there should be. Really, the whole mountain needs cutting up in some sort of a grid situation with decent fire trails - and I'm talking decent fire trails- at least wider than a tree falling over beside them would cut you off. If it could be cut up into sections it would help a huge amount.

Carolyn: There are management propositions that could be undertaken to make sure this does not happen again in the same way. You are also saying Mr..... that, if we have two good seasons we could have a lot of juvenile ground cover that could go up again.

Speaker: I think without any doubt two wet summers and we will have the same situation again. It won't be so much tree top fires but will be a huge amount of growth on the ground that would cause problems. Apart from cutting the park up into sections, they must do a huge amount more back burning during the winter months. They just seem unable to organise them selves to do it. We see it done on different properties joining the mountains very successfully and when they do it. But unfortunately the parks will not take any notice of these people. They have got to learn and listen to people who know what their doing and only do it when these people say.

Carolyn: Now Mr and Mrs.....unfortunately, every time a question is asked, you are reliving what you have been through and it's causing a great deal of angst and upset. I suppose most of the fellows and families that have been involved with this fire are suffering similarly. What do you think you can do to help yourselves to come through this?

Speaker Women: Talk - be there for each other - have your family around and support those poor people who have been burnt, I think. I think that is the biggest thing getting to us: it's the suffering; we've survived and we will be all right in the long run. I think those poor people..... If we are suffering as much as we are what are they suffering. I mean it's beyond comprehension what some of those people are going through.

Male: I also think that we experienced this 30 years ago and saw a long way down the track from the fire, of people suffering. So we are re-living that; and we know that these people will be suffering a long time.

Speaker Women: I guess it's not only emotional, it's financial. How do they get up emotionally and how do they get up financially too. They have still got to try and make ends meet. We all find that hard enough to make that happen in good situations let alone these sorts of situations.

Speaker: I think added to the fire, we have got an area that has just had a flood. In some cases it is bigger than the 2010 flood which was probably one of the biggest most people have experienced. I had one gentleman ring me the night of that flood, at ten o'clock. Before he even told me what happened, I knew it wasn't good. He went on to tell me he has had the biggest flood since then and he is now in a situation where he only had a few hundred acres that had not been burnt out, the fences he did not loose were virtually lost with flood water; he was in a situation where, the top of his well, which weighs about 500 kilos, had been washed off. His main source of water was full of black debris and unusable. Every dam on his place was unusable for stock water. So you can imagine how he felt after just about losing everything bar his home and a couple a hundred acres then turning around a few days latter and getting a flood like that. How do you pick those people up?

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Carolyn: Were you satisfied with the chain of command? Were you comfortable and secure with those in charge and giving orders? Were the orders comprehensive, clear and practical?

Speaker: No to basically everything there. I, as a Deputy Group Captain, was virtually totally eliminated - when I know all that country so well and I go up through all that country a lot so I am familiar with it. We had Divisional Commanders coming in that were trying to read maps. I don't think they could read them and some of the maps didn't have some of the tracks on them anyway, so they didn't know where they were. They would come in after dark. There is no way in the world you could come into that sort of country after dark and realise where you are and start lighting back burning or anything like that.

Carolyn: We are still on the chain of Command, just trying to ascertain why were you not made Divisional Commander of your area because in fact you were Group Captain?

Speaker: I was Deputy Group Captain of the Southern area of the Warrumbungles which means I was in control over Belar Creek, Gowang, Uargon, and Warrumbungle Brigades. Not until about the fifth day did any one say to me -would I become a Divisional Controller. Every time there seemed to be a different one. A Divisional Controller (from out of area) appointed one to control from the TV tower east, one to control from the TV tower and I think right around to the Warrumbungles. From then on I am not sure where the break ups were, but they split the whole Warrumbungles into divisions and each day they seem to appoint a different Divisional Commander.

Carolyn: Which left you out completely, because you did not know who to depend on and there was no follow through.

Speaker: Most of the time, if not all of the time, I did not know who the Divisional Commander around my area was.

Carolyn: So this goes back to the Command Centre at Coonabarabran?

Speaker: Yes! Apart from the fact of me ringing them they never communicated with me at all. I forced them to the fact. I did keep ringing them and I did spend time up there.

Carolyn: So you were ignored regardless of your roll?

Speaker: I don't say I was ignored - because I made it so they could not ignore me, but I don't feel that they wanted me.

Carolyn: Do you have any suggestions how to improve the communications between the volunteers and the organisation; such as those who are paid (such as the National Parks) and the white shirts of the RFS and the volunteers?

Speaker: As far as controlling the fire, the local Deputy Group Captains along with the Captains of each their sections should be controlling that fire. They should have communications with head office telling them what is needed: not the other way around, where they seem to make these decisions of what they want to do in Coonabarabran having absolutely no knowledge of what's going on on the fire ground. Even if they do know what's going on on the fire ground they are so slow to react, that by the time they do anything the fire is far past where they think it is and that happened time and time again. And I told them up there on the first Tuesday morning: I said 'your wheels move so slowly' and I was proved to be right when I went out with the Divisional Commander to Belar Creek to where they were going to put a bull dozer line thru ,when in fact, the fire had already passed that line. So they can not just get any thing done quickly they dilly dally around they don't have people on the ground all the time because the night group leave first thing in the morning, the day group come in probably 8, 9, 10, 11 o'clock. So you spend a period of time there when there is nobody on the fire ground. That's when things go wrong.

Carolyn: Do you perceive a 9 to 5 mentality with regard to the operation of this fire?

Speaker: We had people working 22 hours a day.

Carolyn: As locals?

Speaker: As locals yes. As far as outsiders coming in - they should be overlapping in day light, not coming in after dark like a lot of them do: and they don't even know where they are they have to go, no idea, maps are not clear enough for them to understand in this country where they are; so the night crews must be on scene at least an hour before dark for them to get a feeling to where they are and what they have got to do.

Carolyn: The question has been asked before, that the RFS teams were not replaced immediately once they completed their hours. Is that correct?

Speaker: Correct.

Carolyn: So therefore the fire got away on several occasions because there was no one there to maintain it except the locals.

Speaker: That is correct. The locals, well as much as could be - were always on scene, but we never took locals out without having them replaced before they left the fire ground.

Carolyn: And of course what you are saying is, the same should apply to the organisations that are running the fire.

Speaker: Exactly there are incidents where the groups coming in and more practically the National Parks, when it was lunch time it was lunch time, and if the fire had just broken that did not matter.

Carolyn: Well, this was heard many times on UHF. Apparently there was a pool of machinery available such as graders and dozers but no game plan. Did you experience this?

Speaker: Yes I gave a lot of directions to the dozers and graders that I took off my own bat to do. Numerous times I had people in my area ringing me saying, "We desperately need a line done, we have three graders sitting here, but they're not allowed to do it because we have not got permission". When ever I had that put to me, I'd ask what they were going to do and if I thought it was OK, which I normally did, I would tell them to get going and get it done straight away. In some cases there, the people, the outsiders controlling it, would have to drive half a k or half an hour to get permission from the Div Com to do it -then drive back and give the OK. And when that happens, it's too late. I think what most of these people don't realise, is when they pull up the fire

does not pull up - it keeps going and that is one thing they have got to realise is that fire does not wait for anyone.

Carolyn: Particularly under the circumstances of the excessive heat and winds.

Speaker: That's correct.

Speaker: They don't seem to have any feeling for what's going to happen after the losses that are going to occur. They just work their hours they work their policies and that's it; whereas, the local fire fighters, they go flat out because they realise, if this gets away it's going to hurt a lot of us badly. They don't have that mentality at all it's just a 9 to 5 job to them and that's it. The urgency of it does not come into consideration.

Carolyn: Did you think there should have been a command centre at Gumin Gumin?

Speaker: I think there should have been three centres to work from: Coonabarabran, Gumin Gumin and Tooraweenah.

Carolyn: Why do you think that did not happen?

Speaker: Because I think the control office at Coonabarabran wanted to take it all on. They certainly do not have the ability to do it, but they want to do it. They want to be able to pat themselves on the back afterwards and tell themselves what a wonderful job they have done. They don't want anyone else to get the accolades.

Carolyn: So where does that leave another command centre that's ready and willing to go - if they are not invited to do so? Is it that one takes superiority over the other command centre even though it's on a different front?

Speaker: Maybe there had to be one main one, but it is stupid sending equipment and people and everything else - to have to drive from the western side of the fire 50, 100, 150ks - to report in at Coonabarabran, when we were desperately needing them south western, western and north western sides. They would get to Coonabarabran and they would be told to rest and should be ready to do big hours and they were literally not allowed to do it. If they were allowed to come to Tooraweenah or Gumin Gumin we could have had them straight on the fire ground and we could have had valuable work done.

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Carolyn: Mrs....you were involved in the fire as well and looking after things at home. Did you have any incident where you weren't treated with dignity and understanding?

Speaker Women: Probably not. Although, when I took up to the fire in the middle of the night to the control office, they treated us appallingly.

Carolyn: Did they?

Mrs.....: I mean we went in there and my husband was trying to explain to them about the fire breaks and the fellow up there just rolled his eyes at us - he was not interested at all. We may as well not of gone.

Speaker: That incident was on the first Wednesday night when I had taken three trucks plus my self and a utility through what was going to be back-burned that night from the Tuggeranong Spire to the TV tower. That was when I got to the TV tower and I said to the three trucks "Nose towards the highway - we are getting out of here as fast as we can. I want to go see the Div Com I want to talk to him about what is happening". I went and spoke to the Div Com and as soon and as I finished with him, I took the three trucks out onto the highway and home as quickly as I could. It was totally unsafe to be there.

I went to bed for a couple of hours and I could not sleep so I asked my wife to drive me to Coonabarabran to the Fire Control Centre. Because I was so unhappy about that fire trail that they were back burning along that night, because I knew all that southern area below the brigade was going to go up if the fire broke that line - which proved to be correct.

My wife drove me to Coonabarabran. We went in and spoke to a couple there who were in control and I told them my concer: that the fire trail was only one bull dozer width wide and it was dangerous to travel along, with the trees touching the top and plenty of undergrowth on both sides; basically only 8 or 9 feet from one side to the other. I expressed my concern to the two gentlemen there and one of them told us straight out, that I did not know what I was talking about; he had fought fires in America he said. They knew what they were doing. I asked him if he had seen the trail and the answer was no. With that we left, it was a waste of time. It proved what I said, I was totally right and that's what burnt a huge area from the Belar Creek area and also down into the Gowang Brigade right down virtually to the Newell Highway. The only thing that saved us on that Friday was the fact it struck a long place along the highway where they'd run sheep and had been pretty heavily grazed: if it had not been for that, the fire may of ended up anywhere.

Carolyn: Did you experience complaints about discussions being made off-site by people in town which were not relevant to the situation at hand?

Mrs.....: We did cover this, a wee bit, but I think it is a pertinent question.

Speaker: Probably for the whole time I was having phone calls with people - people going on about the fact that people were not allowed to do this - were not allowed to do that -

about our back burning - that I had brigades doing north of us under the Tuggeranong Spire ,the fact that the helicopters were putting out the back

burning as they started it - I was continually fighting bureaucracy trying to get things done.

Mrs....: Any one I saw that came here like tanker truck drivers or grader drivers, private people, they just said it was the worst organized fire they have ever been to and I heard that numerous times.

Speaker: And that door there, sitting beside us, was like a revolving door. There were here just because we are on the road. We were handling all of the southern area; every one came in past this house. Even a lot of the fire commander blokes were coming to here and going from here up the valley. It was like a revolving door here and you were hearing a lot of things being said by people coming through.

Mrs.....: All the volunteers complained about the organisation and any private people with their gear.

Carolyn: I heard also that there was no fuel for the aircraft at Coonabarabran.

Speaker: To my knowledge, on the Sunday morning when it was so critical to have the aircraft there they had to fly to Scone to refuel and on the way back from Scone, there was another break out of fire some where else and they went and attended to it and it was in that time, that this fire got away.

Carolyn: So why didn't they refuel at some other site which is nearer than Scone or Gunnedah? Because I believe there were five in the air and two were diverted and that's why the fire got away.

Speaker: I'm not sure why they went to Scone: maybe it was the closest fuel they could get.

Carolyn: So, more bad organisation?

Speaker: There should have been fuel.

Mrs....: complete lack of organisation

Speaker: They have got the plans sitting at the Coonabarabran strip why couldn't they send fuel there for them?. There is no point spending a fortune having them sitting there all summer if the don't have fuel for them.

Carolyn: Particularly when the conditions of that fire had been reported quite a long way before.

Speaker: By that time we knew that Sunday was going to be a shocking day. The fire started on Saturday. If any one had any organisation at all, they would have had a heap of fuel come in over night.

Mrs....: We knew for days that Sunday was going to be bad.

Carolyn: We have heard this, a couple of times; can you give me an answer to it. Do you understand why the RFS would not allow a burn back in some cases because there was a total fire ban?

Speaker: Number one -there should have been a total fire ban across New South Wales for virtually the duration of that fire regardless. Number two, I could not in my life - I could not understand, why a total fire ban would stand on a fire ground where back burning was going to be so necessary.

Carolyn: Do you have remaining concerns about the situation today and if you do what are they?

Speaker: I think my biggest concern today, looking into the future, I see the RFS becoming an organisation or bureaucracy that's going to be bigger than the Federal Government. They will want more and more money; they will be spending it on people who are unemployable. The organisational skills are just not there and they will continue to take all the control out of the local people that know the area so well and who are elected by the people of that area to do the job and can do it a lot better than any of the fire control officers. Some of the experience I have of people here – well I have been a captain for 25 years, this is the fourth major fire I have dealt with in the Warrumbungles or surrounding area. I was involved in a huge fire at Dunedoo thirty odd years ag, so I would suggest there are a lot of people in a similar situation to me that have far more practical experience than any one in the organisation.

Speaker Woman: Sitting behind a desk

Speaker: Sitting behind a desk yeah.

Mrs... : How many years since there was only one fire control officer for this area? We can't count how many we have got now and they're all paid people.

Speaker: Some of them are totally unemployable. I'll name them too - if it comes to that. You talk about obese fire fighters in that truck, well, we have the same situation with our fire control officers.

Carolyn; So do you think that as we have to live under the banner of OH&S as landowners, that the rules for OH&S should apply within the ranks of the RFS and the National Parkes?

Speaker: Totally

Speaker Woman: Definitely.

Carolyn: Do you think that people who were described as morbidly obese and who were not able to get in and out of the vehicle, and of others, that they were so elderly and shaky to the degree that they couldn't read the maps. Do you think there should be some sort of regulations because they are volunteers?

Speaker Woman: Definitely.

Speaker: **Yes there should be and that applies to all of us too.** Unfortunately our volunteers ages are getting far too high, but in our brigade, when they get to that stage, they get different jobs. They get organisational jobs and those sorts of things and they are not taken onto the fire ground, they're left at home organising fuel, trucks, people and any thing else so as to give them a job that suites their age and mobility.

Speaker Woman: Or you definitely send some young ones with them so the older person can train the younger ones. You feel safe sending your young kids with some one with experience.

Carolyn: **Do you think this fire could have been avoided?**

Speaker: Avoided to a certain extent. I also think they if they threw everything at it right at the beginning - it could have been totally avoided ...yes.

Carolyn: **Do you think there is some thought that maybe - 'it *should* be a fire and let it take it's course'?**

Speaker: I have no hesitation in saying yes to that question.

Speaker Woman: Even though it could have got out of hand - which it did, due to the weather and the wind gusts and the heat. It got out of control even though they knew that .

Speaker: It probably got out of control to a greater extent than they could ever imagine it was going to. I have had experience with fire travelling 70 and 80 kilometres in one afternoon, so I know how a fire can move. I never in my wildest imagination thought this fire would go into the mountains like it did. So they were probably thinking it would burn, but not in the way it did.

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Carolyn: Mrs.... You have had a lot to do with some of the wives and families and the men who fought this fire, how do you feel they are faring?

Speaker Woman: I think a lot of them are struggling, I fear a lot of the wives fear for their husbands and children and older children. What else can I say? A lot of frustration a lot of unnecessary things happened. There are a lot of cranky people around. **It would be nice if something came out and solved some of these problems. I think we are very lucky we did not loose lives.** Even our boys realised there could have been lives lost. One of them sat up the hill and I think there were 25 people stuck. My son said on the 2 Way you could hear the panic in their voices. It was only by good luck, not by good management, that they escaped.

Speaker: That incident that my wife talks about; there were quite a few trucks caught on that line from the Tuggeranong Spire to the TV tower. That was the reason- that actual break - we drove to Coonabarabran to tell them it was not

adequate. What I went to Coonabarabran to tell them was justified the next day, there were trucks caught in there.

Speaker Woman: I bet they have not reported that in Coonabarabran! That there were five trucks caught there and these panicky voices over the 2 Way.

Speaker: They actually had a tree across, stopping them from getting out. Now if those fire breaks had been the width of what they should be - the height of the trees plus some - that wouldn't have happened, they would have been able to go around the tree. When you have a fire break which is only 8 or 9 feet wide, you can't go around them.

Speaker Woman: And no where to turn around and get out.

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Carolyn: So what priorities do you put on assets as a Landowner

Male: Our livestock come first, human life before livestock naturally. But our livestock first, our feed is very important to us because it keeps our stock alive and makes us money and basically and houses and machinery sheds come third. When it all wraps up we have still got to be able to make money and we make money out of our livestock.

Carolyn: Do you think that the way you as a land owner and the way all other landowners think, is accepted by people in the metropolitan area and by people in the towns.

Speaker: Definitely not by the metropolitan brigades that were coming in because their whole policy on fighting fires is to protect the asset - the asset being the house and sheds; no real idea of wanting to put the fire out, not wanting to protect the livestock. It is purely - they come and they sit on your house and sit on your sheds and things like that. They're not interested in having a go at the flames and trying to put the fire out and they are not interested in the livestock.

Speaker Woman: And they would come in groups of five trucks and all stick together, you could not have divided them up.

Speaker: One of the problems is they come in fours or fives or what ever and there would be one leader and those four, five or six trucks would be under that leader. So you can't sort of say to them "We want two over there, two there, two there and two somewhere else", because they only have one leader. They stick together and that's one of the problems: you'd have five trucks sitting on a house, five trucks sitting off sheds and really, you would want to split them up. A couple of trucks per house was usually plenty, but you can't do that with them because they don't seem to have a second in control that could take two trucks and split them all up. They want to be together

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Carolyn: So the fire is all but out. We are three weeks into this tragedy. Do you think the people in the National Parks and the RFS and the Command Centres will be over this and gone and probably on stress relief? What's good for them? What's good for you Mr.....?

Tape stopped.

Carolyn: Would you like to say just how you feel right now, three weeks after the fire started, with regard to the role you played in this disaster? How has it left you?

Tape stopped

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Carolyn: So did you have access to air support in the form of helicopters

Speaker: No No! I was never offered a look around or anything. The only access I had was to a private plane where we went and had a look at the fire on the first Monday.

Carolyn: Right. Do you know any of the rules and regulations for the helicopter pilots?

Speaker: The helicopter pilots in my past experience in the 2001 fires, their hours are very stringent. If they are allowed fly six hours a day that's it. They cannot go a minute over and I think they have to be very careful if they are flying late in the evening one day, as to what time they can start the following morning.

Carolyn: Right. Did you have need or the use of a helicopter and was it available to you at any point.

Speaker: In this fire? No, look they were not available; that would have been handy to be able to use a helicopter this time. In the 2001 fires there were two 2001 fires in the western end of the mountain. The Angels Gap fire, which was the first fire, I had a lot of access to the helicopters. At times I would try to save those hours up for fear of a break out mid afternoon - when things were at their worst. On one day I was saving up hours, (the pilot had two hours left). I saved it up because I was terribly worried that late in the afternoon we would get an outbreak which had the potential to sweep to the north -westerly winds sweep right thru to the Newell highway. So I arranged with the pilot he wasn't to do anything until I asked. In the mean time, he was asked to go to Gilgandra to pick up lunch. So that was going to waste half of my two hours left. The reason he went to Gilgandra was that the fire control officer at the time had too big a night the night before. He would have been booked DUI the next morning. So, he ordered the plane in there to pick him up and plus the lunch for the men.

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