

Submission
No 9

INQUIRY INTO WAMBELONG FIRE

Name: Name suppressed

Date received: 27/01/2014

Partially Confidential

Dear Sir,

This letter, that I am writing to you is all about my knowledge, that I have concerning National Parks and State Forestry Commission bushfires around Coonabarabran.

On the 27th of Nov. 1997, lightning strike caused a bushfire in the Timmalalee Creek Area to the west of Newell Highway, 40km north of Coonabarabran, which happened on a Wednesday night. On Thursday, Forestry commission and National Parkes people attended the Fire, trying to control it throughout the day and by Friday morning, after putting containment lines around it, they packed up and left.

Now, this is where we come in. We live on a property 18km south of that area. During that particular Friday afternoon, we saw this smoke cloud billowing from the Pilliga Pottery, where . After work, shortly before 8pm we took to the truck and travelled up to the No1 Break Road, to check out the fire, because it seemed a much bigger area by then and we were worried.

We drove slowly, to make sure we could survey the bush properly. We passed the no1 Break, a bush road that leads to Baradine township. After travelling further along the Newell Highway, we noticed the smoke to our left. Quite a large area was burning. We stopped our truck at the "Narrabri Shire Sign" and got out. There was nobody around us, no Police cars, no bushfire fighting personnel, no bushfire trucks, absolutely nobody, only passing traffic.

After observing the fire for a view minutes, I noticed a change in the behaviour of the Fire and I urged my husband to get away from it quickly. We jumped into the truck, started the engine, had to wait for a passing car and turned around in a hurry and drove off and then I asked my husband to stop on the side of the road, about 200 to 300m away from where we had stopped before.

To our horror the fire had catapulted into a huge fire ball behind us and had already jumped the highway and was burning on both sides of the highway.--- A few days later, just to remind me, I drove up to that spot and found the gumtrees all charred, everything black and the fire had even destroyed the Narrabri Shire sign, (all metal).---

We were so fortunate, that I had watched fires on my on property (730acres), when I was doing control burning in winter and knew the behaviour and climate of a bushfire. This saved our lives that evening. (29th of November, 1997)

Later through a reliable source we found out, that National Parks had sent the fire fighting crew home early Friday morning, because of concern of extra overtime payments.

All this about savings, had led to a 240 000ha major Bushfire, which cost a lot more in the end then some measly overtime.

January 2013

This is about the Wambelong Fire now.

I had been quite busy, checking on NSW bushfires on the RFS websites, since Christmas 2012, right up to the middle of the week, even prior to Saturday, 12th Jan. 13.

On Thursday, the RFS website displayed the first time on the map in our area, a grassfire southeast of Wee Waa, and another grassfire southeast of Narrabri. But nothing in our Mountains.

On Friday, the 11th, both Wee Waa and Narrabri popped up again, along with Wambelong Camping Area Fire. I did not feel worried in any way about it, because I was sure, that they had learned by now, at what had happened in 1997.

On Saturday morning, both Wee Waa and Narrabri had vanished, but the Wambelong Fire showed up again. I still was not worried about it, because I trusted their capability in handling it this time. Saturday afternoon, some Thunderstorms moved in and caused some lightning strikes through the Pilliga Forest and in the Warrumbungle Mountains.

We ended up with a fire to the north of us on SUNDAY morning and we started to prepare for it. I packed things into our car that morning and was going to take them to our shed on our property on Timor Road, just past the Castlereagh bridge, 9km west of Coonabarabran. By checking the RFS website again, the Wambelong fire displayed a yellow Flag and after ringing up a parks ranger, I was told the fire had taking off.

Then everybody knows what happened afterwards on that Sunday. Total destruction of the Mountains, (basically mostly firewood now) and all the property loss on top of it. It even burned through our lovely 25acre bushblock. The shed survived. But hundreds of trees dead.

The official version of the start of the fire is a lightning strike on Saturday afternoon, which most of the locals don't believe really happened. From late Saturday afternoon to Sunday evening, the Fire had burned out according to us checking it, by driving the distance of 32km, from the western side, where it started, all the way to our property and all this supposed to have happened in 28 hours. Unbelievable.

Later on somebody mentioned, that National Parks decided on Friday to let the undergrowth burn out a bit, where the fire had started. This time again, the fire fighting team was told to leave, because of overtime payment concerns. Also, we met a lady on the northern side of the fire, who saw the smoke all that FRIDAY.

A few weeks later I wanted to check up on my browsing history of those days prior the big fire, but all that RFS information had vanished of my browser. I wonder why. Every other click that I have ever made was still there.

This is my account. I was encouraged by others to let you know about it.

Yours sincerely,