

INQUIRY INTO WAMBELONG FIRE

Name: Mr Darren and Mrs Lisa De Costa

Date received: 30/01/2014

Partially Confidential

The Director
General Purpose Standing Committee No.5
Legislative Council
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23 January 2014

RE: Inquiry into the Wambelong Fire Submission.

To Whom It May Concern

In reference to the call for submissions for the Inquiry into the Wambelong Fire, Warrumbungle National Park, Coonabarabran, we would like to offer the following information:

In addressing reference #2:-

We noted that in the week preceding the fire the NPWS officers had closed the National Park to the Public due to the extreme heat temperatures and expected high winds.

In addressing reference #5:-

We noted that 95% of the Warrumbungle National Park was destroyed by the fire which was started at Wambelong. Fifty three (53) homes were totally destroyed and as many as one hundred and twenty (120) other properties were partially fire affected. Our own private loss equates to 78.27 hectares of land on which stood our five (5) bedroom split level brick veneer family home, the only thing on the property at the time of the fire that was insured. As well as 6.4 kilometres of fencing, a large shed, cattle yards, implements, cars, truck and a large quantity of items that were not insured. Approximately 4.5 kilometres of our boundary was adjacent to the National Park. An abundance of wildlife was also destroyed by the fire, including rare Rock Wallabies found and protected in the Warrumbungle National Park.

In addressing reference #6:-

Having sustained total loss to our property and to our belongings as a result of the Wambelong fire, we were at a loss in relation to starting the restoration process. We approached the NPWS first on the 5th February 2013, nearly one month after the fire. They had not up to this point contacted us. We spoke to NPWS officer _____ and asked him whether the NPWS would be contributing to fencing destroyed by the fire. _____ agreed that NPWS would contribute by way of supplying materials. He told us that a contract would be offered to us, however we could have whatever fence we liked, so long as it was not 'gold lined'. This turned out to be as far from the truth as was possible. We were eventually driven to accept exactly what NPWS were prepared to supply and only for boundary fencing, not for any internal fencing.

The contract we were offered by NPWS was decades' old and many parts of it were not relative to the current situation. After many weeks of disputes with the NPWS officer _____, who was assigned to liaise with the private property owners, we eventually felt obliged to sign the contract under duress, accepting conditions we definitely did not feel secure or happy about. We did this because the NPWS would not allow contractors to start clearing the land to make way for the new fencing until the contract was signed. They had us and the contractors at an impasse.

Tensions were high, private property owners are still being pushed to the mental limit. It was and still is very difficult to trust the NPWS to make careful and considerate decisions when you feel you are an imposition rather than a victim of circumstances created by them. Many times we were chasing NPWS officers for answers or assistance only to find the officer you needed was away or not contactable.

In addressing reference #7:-

We were offered absolutely no assistance in restoring any other damaged infrastructure on our property except for boundary fencing materials and that was the materials the NPWS was prepared to offer, NOT the materials we wanted. Dispute resolution was categorically one sided.

We tried to get the NPWS to agree to a clearing of 10 metres on their side of the boundary fence line. Our main concern was that very old, tall, burnt out trees would eventually fall and systematically destroy our new fence. NPWS would have none of it, even though it is a very common and legal practice between neighbouring rural fences, to have 10 metres cleared on either side of the fence. Eventually, after much debate they told us they would allow a maximum of 6 metres cleared, but they would prefer four (4) metres. We had no choice but to accept their decision. As predicted however, no less than three (3) large trees have already fallen from their side onto our fence. The clean-up and restoration of the fence each time this happens is expensive, dangerous and time consuming.

In addressing reference #8:-

As expected, NPWS is restoring all of their infrastructure damaged by the Wambelong fire. It has come to light they are even tabling plans to increase their infrastructure in the park. At the very least, all that was old and burnt will be brand new again. As taxpayers we ask this question - Who is paying for the restoration of said infrastructure, the taxpayer or the insurance company paid for by the taxpayer? If it is the latter, how does that happen if the NPWS is under investigation for the catastrophic result of such horrendous circumstances? Oddly enough we are the owners of a small hospitality business and rely on a percentage of our customers to stay with us whilst they are visiting the National Park. It is with mixed emotions we now view the National Park as a vessel that helps to keep us afloat, all the while tearing us apart.

In reference to NPWS officer _____ indicating to us we could have whatever fence we liked (paragraph 4), I would just like to add that we had set our minds on replacing our original fence line after the fire with a vermin-proof fence. Thus ensuring our crops would not be eaten out by wildlife coming from the National Park. The offer was soon detracted when the full extent of the damage done to neighbouring properties was revealed. Again, it is little comfort to us when we hear that the NPWS is rebuilding their infrastructure in the Warrumbungle National Park better than ever. Having our internal fencing restored at their expense would have been a huge financial weight lifted from our shoulders. Remember, WE DID NOT start the fire but we are now using the insurance money we received for the house and contents to replace items lost that were not insured such as cattle yards, implements, shed, trailers, boundary and internal fencing. Understandably this will leave us with very little to rebuild our home with.

We also now have to contend with massive washouts and mud slides, destroying fencing and land trying to rejuvenate every time it rains because there is simply nothing in the National Park to hold the soil together. We feel more control burning through the cooler months in National

Park areas would be more beneficial to the sustainability of the flora and fauna and also reduce the risk of catastrophic bushfires.

We were not offered any help in the way of resources or funding to clear our block, however we understand places such as the Blue Mountains and Tasmania were given State Government funding to assist in the removal of rubbish and debris. After a local Council representative made an estimation on how much waste needed to be removed from our property we were offered 'Tip Vouchers' to use. Transport, physical labour and/or other costs associated were ours to meet. Little help when you've lost everything i.e. truck, trailer, Hiab, etc and have limited cash flow.

The way in which the Mayors Trust was also handled was questionable in our opinion. For instance the distribution of funds to several charities was made, then those charities were NOT given a list of victims of the bushfire, apparently because of the 'Privacy Act'. This meant it became a 'first in, first served' scenario. We learned mostly through bush telegraph about these charities and often too late. The monies were unevenly distributed and always ran out way too soon. Council did appoint Support Coordinators and Council were the only ones apparently who had a full list of the bushfire victims, so perhaps a personal phone call to each household eligible for support through the Trust fund may have been reasonable. That way everybody would have been given an even opportunity. Also dispersing the funds equally would have been better, we all had needs to accommodate and we did not need bureaucrats to decide for us where the money donated for the victims should go.

Council put measures in place so that they benefited from the Mayors Trust also. An example being we were told that we would be eligible to receive \$1000.00 of the Trust money when bushfire victims lodged a Development Application to rebuild a shed or \$5000.00 for a DA to rebuild your home. When you lodged your DA, Council then slogged you with a very hefty application fee, thus the majority of the money went back to them. The Mayors Trust committee then decided any victims of the fire would be eligible for money from the Mayors Trust to rebuild 'road frontage fences', at a rate of \$1000.00 per kilometre. Some people had many kilometres of road frontage, others had only metres. Now some of the people that benefited from this deal had either very poor or no road frontage fencing to speak of pre-fire, but were able to get a donation of fencing materials and of labour as well as the money from the Trust. The Council however were the real winners in this situation as there is now many kilometres of new fencing along Council roads paid for by donations. Again, perhaps some equally dispersed money from the 'fencing grant' could have helped with internal fencing if victims did not have very much or any 'road frontage'.

My understanding of the money held in Trust by the Mayors Trust was that it was money donated to the bushfire victims by the communities. However, the Mayors Trust committee and the local Council distributed the money in many ways that did not benefit many of the victims directly. For example, paying for a celebrity high profile psychologist to give a talk on grief and stress, or for BBQ's and get togethers, the money would have served the victims better if we had been given the opportunity to choose ourselves where the money went. Many victims were paying both rent and mortgages as well as trying to re-establish themselves and keep our heads above water, being told that a BBQ would be held and paid for with money that could have paid a bill was a slap in the face. Council and the Mayors Trust Committee allocated an additional \$50,000.00 from the Trust for Community Renewal and Rejuvenation Program, supporting Arts, Cultural and Community based events. Isn't it Councils' responsibility to seek funding for these types of events or to fundraise, not to use the money from the Trust? In other words, where would Council get the money from for these events etc. if there had been no money donated?

Thank you for your time.

Yours sincerely

Darren & Lisa De Costa