

INQUIRY INTO WAMBELONG FIRE

Organisation: Rural Fire Service Association NSW Inc.

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Partially Confidential



RFSA

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Inquiry into the Wamberlong Fire

Organisational Background

The NSW Rural Fire Service Association Inc. was established in 1996 to effectively represent the views of volunteers and staff of the NSW Rural Fire Service in a non-partisan manner.

Shortly after its establishment, the Association was officially recognised in the Rural Fires Act, as the organisation which the Government and the NSW Rural Fire Service could seek advice from in addressing issues affecting the volunteers and staff of the NSW Rural Fire Service as well as statutory and other requirements.

The structure of the Association consists of 16 Divisions across NSW with a number of Branches within each Division. The Association's peak body is a State Council which consist of 32 elected members from the 16 Divisions (2 from each) plus a Board of 10 which includes 7 volunteers and 3 RFS staff members all elected by the State Council. The Association currently has over 32,000 registered Members. Membership increased considerably after the fires in January 2013.

As part of a project undertaken by the NSW Registry of Cooperatives and Associations, the continued incorporation of the Association under the then Associations Incorporations Act 1984, was considered by the Department of Fair Trading inappropriate due to the scale of the Association's operations. The Association was requested in the circumstances, to undertake voluntary action to establish a more suitable structure.

Alternate structures were considered and based on legal advice a new company called NSW RFSA was established on the 5th January 2012. The members of the company are the 42 members of State Council and the same Board as the Association. Both State Council and the Board are made up of approximately 70% volunteers.

Both the Association and company are endorsed charitable institutions and primarily funded through income from raffles conducted by NSW RFSA via a third party known as Contact Centres Australia.

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The principal activities of the company are to raise funds to assist in the development of the NSW Rural Fire Service Association Inc. in representing the views of Members and providing support and tangible benefits to Members. As an example, our annual grant scheme for 2014 will provide over \$ 1.7 million dollars worth of non fire fighting equipment to brigades and districts. These grants assist Members in carrying out their volunteer role in protecting the community. The company currently holds a charitable fundraising authority (CFN/22439) issued under the charitable fundraising act 1991 by the office of Liquor, Gaming and Racing.

Each year, both entities produce annual accounts which are externally audited and tabled at their respective AGMs with appropriate returns lodged with the Department of Fair Trading and ASIC.

Fire fighting Effort – Coonabarabran

Although the Wamberlong fire activity extended from 12th January 2013 to 21st February 2013, the Association on 13th January 2013 felt it was appropriate to publically acknowledge the fire fighting effort.

The following letter was published in many newspapers throughout New South Wales:

Thank You

As State President of the NSW Rural Fire Service Association it has been a privilege to witness the tremendous commitment of our people, both Volunteers and Staff, working together protecting our community with the support of the Government.

From the firefighting effort on the ground to the incident controllers and support staff of the RFS, the enthusiasm, loyalty and dedication of all involved is overwhelming.

The clear and concise advice including warnings provided by the Commissioner and others on a regular basis kept the public fully informed of developing situations and undoubtedly saved lives.

We are so fortunate to have our volunteers at the fire front, day after day, protecting our community in a highly professional manner together with the other Emergency Services.

The Association will continue its support as the authoritative voice in ensuring that the interests of the Membership are represented and act as a focal point to assist the RFS in the development of the Service.

Due to the generosity of the community in supporting the regular NSW RFSA Raffles etc, we have been able to continue the annual grants scheme for brigades and provide emergency support to Members and their families who have lost their homes and other personal possessions at Wagga Wagga, Cooma, Coonabarabran and Bellata and will continue to provide

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tangible benefits, wherever possible.

Although the current situation is far from over, the Association will remain the forum for the consultation and representation of all of the of the RFS including 22,000 that have chosen to formally register as members throughout 16 Divisions and 50 Branches of the RFSFA in New South Wales.

Yours sincerely,

Brian McKinlay, AFSM
President

In addition a cross-section of Members provided comment to the Association about the fire-fighting on the ground. A selection of these is attached.

Conclusion

The above information and attachments are provided in an effort to assist the Committee in its deliberations and this Association again places on record, its ongoing support for the co-operative fire fighting effort during the Wamberlong fire activity, which undoubtedly saved lives and assisted in the containment of erratic fire behaviour during extreme weather conditions.

Tim Arnott
President

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Summary of Comments

On Friday 23rd February this year it is alleged arcing power lines in high winds started a fire in scrubby country in the _____ area _____. The area was such that it took some time for crews to get to the scene and the fire crossed _____ in a number of locations further hampering access _____. _____ made a request for aircraft early in the fire but because of availability and other commitments no effective air support could be responded.

This was a particularly fast moving and aggressive fire burning in scrub country that crews could not directly attack due to safety concerns. The lack of aircraft meant that crews had to allow the fire to run in thick scrub and only attack directly when it moved into grassland. This also meant that the fire threatened _____ (eventually being controlled in grassland 200 metres from outbuildings). _____ is the home of _____, both of whom are in their 80s, and a decision was made upon advice that aircraft may not be available for them, to evacuate to _____ property.

Both _____ and I are familiar with working with aircraft and also realize that they are not always available. That said tactics at this fire were in stark contrast to those employed by us at the _____ fire during the Coonabarabran Section 44 event when multiple aircraft were present and the fire quickly controlled.

Without aircraft we were forced to abandon direct attack firefighting and resort to defensive and property protection strategies for the safety of our crews and the _____

Whilst a good outcome was achieved through good teamwork, some welcome rain later that night and backed up by excellent support from FCC in getting heavy plant to the fire in good time (thanks also to Gilgandra Shire!) we had to work very hard to control this fire and if air support had been available we would have had an easier time and the _____ would not have had the worry of leaving their home of many years, especially so shortly after 53 homes were lost at Coonabarabran.

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I had been working with aircraft whilst in the SACFS long before any wide spread use by the NSW RFS. In fact when attending a GL course at Lake Keepit in 1999 I was questioned on my early use of aircraft in a whiteboard exercise, the instructor citing the cost of my strategy. My answer although somewhat flippant was "I'm a firefighter, not an accountant and I'm not prepared to tell these people I lost their home because of cost issues". I am happy to still stand by this statement today. When we start firefighting to a budget we will lose properties and then LIVES! I will leave this service in shame before I participate in such things.

I will continue to support the use of aircraft and the invaluable benefits it gives to volunteer's safety and time.

Statement A

Over the years I have been in charge of several large fires within the Liverpool Range Zone and never once have I had any interference from the Fire Control Centre. I have had nothing but full cooperation from them, whenever I requested additional resources they would endeavour to get them, and as most would know, it is not always possible for them to supply all that you request due to work commitments of the volunteers.

As far as the use of aircraft is concerned, the fires would have been much larger and placed more life and property in danger, the use of these firefighting machines is valuable especially in the hills and they also slow down the running of fires in the grass lands, so yes I encourage the use of aircraft where necessary.

I find it very disconcerting that a minority of fire-fighters are bringing the good work of many top line people into question by bringing the service into disrepute.

Statement B

My name is _____ and my brigade is _____. I have been a member of the RFS for 19 years.

I was fighting the fire out at Coonabarabran this year and the one back in 1998(I think).

The use of helicopters was a very valuable tool, if it wasn't for them I feel we would have had firefighters killed. There were a couple of times where we had the fire bore down at us and if it wasn't for those great pilots and their aircrafts we wouldn't have been able to fight the fire.

Also that was one of the best well run fires I have ever been to. We were all really well fed and great sleeping quarters. It just saddens me when we have to defend our service. No one



will ever know what we went through for the five days we were there.

Thank you to you and to all the staff who go into battle for all of us volunteers. You don't know how much we appreciate all the work you do.

Statement C

I'm a 'newby' in the RFS and what I saw during January impressed me greatly. We didn't lose a life – that was the most important thing. I understand the tragedy of stock, fences and dwellings but you can never put a cost to saving a life. From my observations, the captains and the people in control on the fire ground are very capable and the teamwork is exemplary. We don't need disunity in this service from people with an axe to grind. It's simply people with a vested interest.

Statement D

The recent rather negative comments by certain members of the Rural Fire Service in regards to the so-called waste of public money in the use of aircraft and local knowledge being ignored is in my own experience very far from true facts.

In my experience as a front line fire fighter, and as an on the ground commander at several Section 44 fires, water bombing air craft, either fixed wing or rotary wing, have been a very valuable addition to the fire ground. These methods utilised along with the valuable source of knowledge which comes from locals, has in the past saved a multitude of dwellings along with the lives of fire fighters. Water bombing or cooling the fire well in front of fire fighters has indeed helped rapidly slow the progress of the fire so that those on the ground can gain control.

It is disappointing that the comments of a minority with an agenda to push can gain so much publicity in regards to the use of aircraft, especially in mountainous and inaccessible terrain. More emphasis should be placed on gathering the thoughts of the majority of the hard working genuine fire fighters and what their thoughts are, rather than the noisy minority.

Statement E

It is sad that the media chose to create major publicity to an ill and uninformed, isolated complainant. Without aircraft and the many sorties they flew in Coonabarabran in January 2013 it would have been calamitous in comparison to what actually occurred. Many more homes and cattle, sheep, horses etc would have been lost.

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We, the RFS, are judicious and careful with all resources we use. We definitely do not squander or waste such valuable resources as aircraft sorties!

Statement F

Having worked at the 'Coona' Section 44 I found working on the fireground alongside aircraft and locals both rewarding and educational.