

INQUIRY INTO WAMBELONG FIRE

Name: Mr Warren Kimber

Date received: 31/01/2014

To: The Parliamentary Enquiry No 5 Wambelong Fire

Dear Sir/s

I have been in the Bombala Bush Fire Brigade for 30+ years, 10 Years as Captain and the past 3 years as a Group Captain in the Bombala RFS. Over that time I have attended many fires, both locally and away in other districts and states.

In that time I have been involved with many large Section 44 fires. Here, on the Monaro we generally get a large fire every 4 to 5 years. These are Campaign fires, involving an Incident Management Team (IMT).

The IMT's are set up to run large fires that can't be managed by a brigade or brigades in that area, the fire is simply too big.

The purpose of the RFS has been to SUPPORT VOLUNTEERS. This has changed in the past few years to an organization that runs the fire ground with no input from the Volunteers, be they the Captain or Group Captain, who is on the Fire Ground at the time of the fire and who knows the area.

There are 2 incidents that occurred in January 2013 that demonstrate what happens when Bureaucrats try to run a fire. The first incident is the Yarrabin Fire at Cooma and the second at the Warrumbungle Fire at Coonabarabran.

Having been at the Yarrabin Fire and talked extensively with Captains and Group Captains from Coonabarabran and Cooma, it is clear that both fires should have run NO more than a day. In fact it was stated, quite often at Coonabarabran, that the RFS wanted this fire, they needed a large campaign fire to justify their expenditure and to get more funds for next year. This was a point put to me many times when I was in Coonabarabran talking to the Captains and Group Captains.

What are the consequences of running a fire with no local input?

They are many. First - the fire gets away and out of control, re Yarrabin and Coonabarabran. Second - the cost, both these fires cost tens of millions of dollars to contain. Third - the lack of Community input into fighting the fire. Fourth - the danger of sending crews from out of an area into somewhere they are not comfortable. This is a very dangerous practice for example, sending crews from flat plains country into mountainous terrain.

The RFS has lost site of its role, it has become a reactive organization rather than proactive, this is evident in hazard reduction work, with less than 1% of lands under there control burnt.

So how do we fix the problem? May I be so bold to suggest what I think will greatly improve the RFS and put the Volunteers back where they should be, after all without the Volunteers the RFS would not exist.

1. Remove the position of Commissioner and replace it with a board made up of Volunteers and headed by a person from the defence forces (Fitzsimmons' appointment was only ever a political appointment).
2. Replace the current funding from a levy on insurance to a rates based levy. This would spread the risk far more evenly over the population.
3. Remove the RFS from a land management role. The use of State Mitigation crews to do hazard reduction work preparation is a vast waste of money when contractors could do the job for a 10th of the cost.
4. Remove the RFSA from the Rural Fire Service Act. The RFSA doesn't represent, and can't represent the Volunteers without conflict, due to salaried staff also being members of this organization.
5. Every IMT must have at least 2 Group Captains or Captains. They know the area and generally how and where the fire will behave and go.

Sir, it is imperative that the Volunteers be in charge of the fire ground, bureaucrats cannot put out fires, and Volunteers must also have their say in how the RFS is run.

I am more than happy to further discuss my comments, and would welcome the opportunity if presented.

Regards

Warren Kimber

Group Captain

Bombala