

INQUIRY INTO WAMBELONG FIRE

Name: Name suppressed

Date received: 17/09/2014

Partially Confidential

- Location: Wambelong Camping Area, north of creek, 1km west of the Visitors Centre, north of John Renshaw Parkway, 40km west of Coonabarabran.

- Council Area: Coonamble
- Status: Being Controlled
- Type: Scrub Fire
- Fire: Yes
- Size: 25 ha
- Responsible Agency: National Parks and Wildlife Service
- Updated: 13th January 2013 10:55

It would appear that the communications from the National Parks and Wildlife Service during the initial onset of this fire were, at best, unsatisfactory. Warrumbungle National Park neighbours were not notified, nor were the management of Siding Springs Observatory. Personally, I thought this would have been common courtesy, regardless of National Parks and Wildlife Service procedure. However, the National Parks and Wildlife Service Coonabarabran office did communicate with the Rural Fire Service at around 10:55am, hence the 11am notification posted on the Rural Fire Service website. National Parks and Wildlife Service also signed off another report between 1pm and 2pm of the same day and yet the Rural Fire Service website was not updated. The status of the fire remained as 'CONTAINED'. The Rural Fire Service website remained unchanged from the 11am posting right up until approximately 3:55pm; the status of the fire went straight to Emergency Level. Who was communicating with whom? It was clear the chain of command was not communicating with key personnel from National Parks and Wildlife Service or Rural Fire Service Headquarters. How do either of these agencies expect to regain the trust and respect which they once had from their neighbours and the fire affected people of Coonabarabran?

Around 4:05pm, two members of the VRA hurriedly drove up our track to our home, slowed down and yelled out the open window 'Get out or die'. My husband and I were already preparing to leave. I had gathered some clothes and toiletries and searched for personal papers as well as locating some 45 years worth of photographs which still had not been unpacked from our Sydney move.

My husband moved our Bobcat, caravan, firefighting trailer and a bulldozer belong to a friend on to open ground, he also closed all our sheds. He then placed the belongings we had gathered up, along with our animals into our cars. During this time I closed all the doors in the house and we then left our property at approximately 4:40pm. We drove to a friend's home, and stayed there until 7pm that evening when they too began preparing to evacuate. We left their home, along with their boat and trailer and stayed overnight with another friend in town who was out fighting the fire in Warkton Valley; we slept on his lounge that night.

We returned to our home early on Monday morning to see absolute devastation, our access Rd (a No Through Rd) was littered with the burnt corpses of kangaroos and wallabies. The

trees and telegraph poles were still smouldering. We arrived at our property to find our garage (built from besser blocks) completely destroyed along with its entire contents. Our storage shed and its entire contents had also been destroyed. The generator shed was partially damaged.

Our home had been severely damaged by the fire, the residual heat, the soot and the stench in our home remains unforgettable. Outside it did not matter which direction we looked over our countryside, it was black and smouldering. Nothing was alive, it wasn't a haven anymore. No kangaroos, no wallabies, no emus or parrots. No eagles, finches or the resident magpie family or 'Mrs Fox', a wild fox vixen my husband and I had cared for. There weren't even any flies. The land appeared completely sterile and it was quiet.

Later in that same week a friend told us we should register with Centrelink, initially we were directed to Coonabarabran Bowling Club and spoke to Red Cross Volunteers, they in turn sent us across to the Community Centre where we were overwhelmed to see volunteers and representatives (from memory) Red Cross, St Vincent de Paul, The Salvation Army, Rotary, Centrelink and Legal Aid. It was a humbling experience for my husband and I, we had never sought nor received charity in our lives before this experience. We were always donating assistance, not on the receiving end of it.

During that first week we made contact with our insurance company, Commsure. They were most professional and arranged for their assessor to be on site as soon as was practical. He viewed the damage and organized cleaning contractors and rebuilding estimations to be onsite as soon as possible. The assessor was courteous and compassionate and continued to keep in contact with us throughout the whole ordeal.

Shortly after the fire came the customary predicated storm that always follows a wildfire, it dropped approximately 150mm of rain over the mountains in little more than a few hours. The mountains were awash with storm water, the topsoil, ash, boulders and debris washed straight down, leaving our top dam resembling a beach. Our creek crossing on our access road widened and parts of it were washed away. Our fences were damaged more by this deluge than by the actual fire itself.

During the following weeks and months we received assistance from Centrelink, the Mayors Fund, St Vincent de Paul, Red Cross, The Salvation Army, Rotary, Blaze Aid, The Coonabarabran Jockey Club, and the Lions Club and were given handmade quilts by The Women's Clubs. We were and will forever be truly grateful to them all. I might also add here, that due to privacy laws, these charities were only able to find us by word of mouth. It was left up to the charities to compile and compare their own lists and because of this some fire affected people did receive some of these donations.

The next months passed by and we heard many stories of hardship and loss from people who had suffered far worse than ourselves. The fire had become so divisive that it had created

division between those who were fire affected, The National Parks and Wildlife Service and the townspeople of Coonabarabran. If it was not for a timely southerly wind change the township of Coonabarabran could have been destroyed by the fire.

We were told by many of their experiences, the insured, the underinsured and the uninsured. We were told of companies who were brilliant and of those that were not. We were also told of bullying tactics used by National Parks and Wildlife Service towards their immediate neighbours regarding fence lines. They offered fencing materials only, no labour assistance with replacing the fences and some of these neighbours are in their eighties. Where is the fairness in this attitude?

One of the many reasons myself and my husband attended a town meeting of predominantly fire affected people was that I had heard previously that a senior National Parks and Wildlife Service staff member say 'we followed protocol, and did our best'. During the initial public meeting the first member from the audience to take the microphone (an alleged conservationist) said, and I quote 'If you live near a national park you can expect to get burnt'. Why?

We held a couple of less public meetings and a committee was formed in order to seek fair compensation for fire affected landholders. Due to our retirement status we were able to commit our time along with others to represent the people of the CPOA. Over the following months I read numerous Police and personal statements. I have noted in the Police statements a format which asks the landholder questions with regard to having firefighting equipment, their preparedness for the bushfire season, a plan in the case of a bushfire and insurance coverage. Does this same format apply to the National Parks and Wildlife Service? Allegedly a lot of time and money has been invested in National Parks and Wildlife Service plan preparation, plans for bushfire management, plans for hazard reduction and incident action plans. What use are these plans and policies if they not implemented or followed?

I believe that on this particular occasion, National Parks and Wildlife Service members were complacent, ill-prepared and under resourced. They failed to communicate with their neighbours, failed to initiate a pre-emptive Section 44 in the Coonamble district and they simply failed to follow their own procedures.

Some nineteen months after the fire we look out over our scarred landscape, once magnificent gums now resemble blackened hedges, they continue to become unstable and fall. We now struggle to keep up in the battle with the spread of weeds, weeds we have never seen before. Our hills this last spring and summer were coloured mauve, covered completely by the dreaded Darling Pea. The wildlife in our access road is almost completely nonexistent, the birdlife is only slowly returning now.

NSW, ACT and VIC has developed the unenviable reputation of Wild Fires. The attitude and internal culture of National Parks and Wildlife Service that has developed over many years in the belief that this is 'their fire' or 'our fire' and debate over who has control and jurisdiction have failed, repeatedly National Parks and Wildlife Service have shared 'their fires with great generosity'. It is my opinion that National Parks Rangers are employed primarily to be caretakers of the park environment, the wildlife and flora and fauna. The role of The Rural Fire Service, as their name implies, whether it be volunteer or professional, is to fight fires and extinguish the fire as soon as possible.

Once again a bushfire has cost many millions of dollars, not only to the directly affected people, but to the people of NSW by funding yet another Senate Inquiry and another Coronial Inquiry. I can only hope and trust in the belief that when both the Coroner and the GPSC No.5 Senators release their findings and list their recommendations that the NSW Government will implement those recommendations. Commonsense must prevail sooner rather than later.

10th September 2014