

**Submission
No 39**

INQUIRY INTO WAMBELONG FIRE

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I have lived in the area for the past 30 years and being involved in a number of community organisations, have got to know many of the residents.

We all knew the National Park was closed as were all National Parks throughout the State due to the extreme weather conditions that were occurring at the time. The Sunday January 13 was the extreme weather alert day.

I had spoken to friends living near the Park on the Coonabarabran side. They had gone to Dubbo that week when the Park was closed. They drove through the Park to Dubbo and returned the same way. The signs were up but were not noticeable as they did not see them on their way to Dubbo or the return trip. Another person told me that the signs were on the side of the road and were an A4 size and the writing was about 2 cm in size. The road is a public road with traffic travelling east west through the Park so no barricades were placed across the road.

A number of people had seen vehicles in the picnic ground when the Park was closed.

Many residents were unaware there was a fire in the Park as the smoke could not be seen by all. That afternoon there were thunderstorms building and I think those who could see thought it was just a thunderstorms building at first. I believe a section 44 had been declared on the Sunday morning but none of the adjoining neighbours had been notified let alone the wider community that there was a fire in the Park. If you have a fire on your land you notify your neighbours.

If there had been some sort of notification given to the residents that there was a fire in the Warrumbungle National Park on the Saturday. Knowing of the extreme weather conditions forecast for the Sunday people could have been better prepared. Some would not have gone out on the Sunday and in other incidents family members would have been able to retrieve personal belongings. By the time the text messages from the RFS were received it was too late.

People living east of Coonabarabran were being instructed to evacuate east to Coonabarabran. The message did not say where the fire was and with all the cloud around was difficult for those living a distance from the Park to distinguish thunderheads from the fire storm.

One lot of friends were given 30 minutes notice to evacuate and by the time they left the fire was already on their property. They knew there was a fire in the Park on the Saturday and had put a fire plan in place. They had been constantly monitoring the RFS site and up until they got the message to evacuate thought all was under control. The RFS site did not indicate otherwise. If warnings had been put in place on the Saturday night a lot more could have been done to protect property and livestock.

Those that were burnt out received payouts from insurance companies fairly quickly so were able to purchase elsewhere if they so desired. Those trying to rebuild on their land now have all the red tape to deal with. Building codes have changed meaning you can no longer build what you had in a lot of cases. The Warrumbungle Shire has just put out its new Local

Environmental Plan again more red tape because the Plan does not allow for some development or structures to be build where existing one before January 13 stood.

Residents are being informed they have to put in a DA for a garden shed and for sheds on rural land. Instead of the Council cooperating with the affected residents they seem to be putting up road blocks at all turns. Another bureaucratic nightmare with some residents only just receiving approval to rebuild.

Residents that had damage done to their property seem to be the ones having trouble with their insurance companies.

Insurance premiums have risen dramaticly 2 ½ to 3 times. Our Farm Pack insurance for the first time we have had to take photos of all the farm buildings including the house and fill out forms on each building we have insured. These question include the age construction materials of walls and floors, when it was rewired, when it was reroofed for building build prior to 1953. This all before they will send out a renewal. We are still waiting for the renewal with only a few days before it is due.

Because of the area we live in are we going to be penalised for living near a National Park or any other type of public land?

The Native Vegetation Act and the Threatened Species Conservation Act have had a big impact on this area.

I know of people who wanted to clear around their homes and infrastructure but because of these acts were not allowed to do so. You also have a green element living along the Timor Road who would put anyone in for anything. The green bureaucracy within OEH seem to take forever to approve any permission to remove vegetation.

Common sense is needed to provide hazard reduction work to be done to protect these rural communities. Before the Warrumbungle National Park was gazetted it was managed by the landowners who grazed it and did cool burns during the cooler months. The fuel loads were kept down. I believe some areas of the Park had not been burnt for 60 years or more.

Hazard reduction does not have to be a fire. If some of these areas were grazed on a regular basis according to the weather conditions maybe we could stop a lot of these section 44.

Hazard reductions areas need to be ground truthed as to the exact area that was hazard reduced and not just lines on maps by a bureaucrat sitting in an office. I know of an incident when a hazard reduction was planned, it rain through the night but the incendiaries were still dropped burning out about 2 – 5 hectares. The question needs to be asked was the hazard reduction recorded as the original area listed or the 2 – 5 hectares. The need for ground truthing to be carried out. When the agencies plan a hazard reduction the window of opportunity is too narrow and in some cases does not go ahead because of the weather conditions at the time. Hazard reduction work set down for a 12 month period, is it recorded as the amount reduced or is only the amount actually hazard reduced recorded again I emphasise the need for ground truthing to be carried out and probably by an independent person.

I find it amazing that certain people say you should not be doing hazard reduction burns because you are destroying the biodiversity and wildlife. Well I say to those people these

wild fires are the ones responsible for destroying the biodiversity and the wildlife. These fires burnt so hot that in some areas it will never recover. Yes the Park will come back eventually but it will never be what it was before the fire.

In the case of public infrastructure, there needs to be a major hazard reduction program put in place to protect such infrastructure so as they do not become a liability to the adjoining landowners. Siding Springs had done a lot of work after the Canberra fires but more needs to be done so they are not a liability to their neighbours. The TV tower on Mount Cenn Cruick, when originally constructed had a clear view 360 degrees but over the years the vegetation has increased dramatically with visibility now limited. Broadcast Australia who now own the tower I believe have failed in their duty of care to protect the site and have now become a major liability to their neighbours. Incendiaries were dropped to protect the tower and resulted in burning out a large area of private land and infrastructure. This has placed enormous economic burden on affected landowners.

Juleen Young