

INQUIRY INTO WAMBELONG FIRE

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Date received: 31/01/2014

Dear Committee Members

I am writing as a 40 year resident of the area impacted by the fire. Although I lost my hand-made house, sheds and possessions, I do not consider myself a victim. My property was once a much larger property that became a significant portion of the National Park. The property is no longer grazed by stock and is slowly reverting to bush. The landscape has always worn the marks of fire. On our boundary with the Park you can see the ruins of a house destroyed by bush fire in the 1920s. In the spring of 1976, the last big fire escaped into the Park from one of my burn-offs. It was a slow moving fire that took weeks to burn up to the tops of the mountains. I was in my 20s and thought it was the end of the world but in those days it was thought to be a good thing and no one tried to put it out. Since then the reverse has happened, with fires escaping from burn-offs in the Park. Local wisdom has always been that it's better to burn regularly and put up with occasional break-outs than not to burn at all. When the Park stopped fuel-reduction burning it was inevitable that there would be a big fire. We were expecting something major.

The argument that I would like to put to the Committee is that fuel reduction burning on private properties is now almost impossible. The reason for this assertion is that the conditions for lighting up fuel reduction burns are usually only apparent on the day when the decision to burn is made. Such conditions relate to wind speed and direction, dryness and forecast. Landholders have been dis-empowered by the permit system. Permits are now required at least a week in advance when none of these factors can be properly assessed.

The Wambelong Fire demonstrated that this is part of a deeper problem in that the non-inclusive attitude of the Rural Fire Service is to regard landholders as an impediment rather than an asset. Locals were evacuated from the fire ground and local knowledge was not accessed.

Poor communications between the Rural Fire Service and residents have not only created residual ill-feeling and mistrust but have left the pre-fire community along Timor Rd devastated. Many have chosen to leave. Many of those remaining have become disconnected, isolated individuals.

Nevertheless, it has been a privilege to witness the resilience of a fire ecology. It is a shame that the National Park has not seized the opportunity to learn more or to share knowledge about the complexities of this ecology. It could have been running weekly/monthly workshops that would not only have shifted the focus from a negative to a positive attitude towards the impact of the fire but would also have assisted the community to re-connect.