

**Submission  
No 14**

## **INQUIRY INTO WAMBELONG FIRE**

**Organisation:** Warrumbungle Fire Action Group

**Date received:** 30/01/2014

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**CAROLYN LYONS OAM**

**'PARMEDMAN' GULARGAMBONE NSW**

**TO: PARLIAMENTARY ENQUIRY NO 5 WAMBELONG FIRE**

I wish to state firstly that it is not the intention of the Warrumbungle Fire Action Group to create a witch-hunt or to mount a legal action against anyone connected with this fire. We are concerned with ensuring that best practices in fire management planning and effective fuel management strategies and outcomes are implemented.

The Wambelong Fire, as it has become known for the purpose of this Inquiry, started on Saturday 12<sup>th</sup> January after a day of severe bushfire weather and a forecast of about 45degrees and possible 70 kl or more winds for the following day. The Warrumbungle National Park was a tinderbox waiting to occur, with parts of the Park having no hazard reduction for the past 60 years or more, so fuel loads had built up to massive levels.

The Warrumbungle Fire Action Group (WFAG) was formed in the aftermath of the bushfire emergency by Carolyn Lyons OAM to include a Group of Brigade Captains and their wives to provide a representative and united voice concerning the way in which the fire was managed by the RFS and the NPWS.

*(Geoff Walker: Port Stephens ) "To examine the disastrous Wambelong fires in isolation would be to ignore the abysmal failures of the current Bushfire Act (1997) Native Vegetation legislation, localized bushfire management plans and the Rural Fire Service. These have not only failed to come to grips with the bushfire menace, their inadequacy actually guarantees bigger and more destructive wildfire events for the future."*

This was one of the worst fires in the local area for many years and the State Government, the RFS, NPWS and all individuals can learn valuable lessons from this event, which we hope, might reduce the risk of such destruction happening again.

The most serious consequence of the bushfire was the impact on local farming properties, the loss of valuable livestock, cropping land, loss of income and infrastructure that supports those properties, including sheds, tractors, fencing and housing. Of course other consequences are the substantial impact and damage to the environment, including flora and fauna and soils that will take years to return to their pre-fire state. This fire has also had a significant impact on the mental health of local farmers, which I believe has not been adequately addressed.

The Agenda Items to be covered are:

MANAGEMENT

LOCAL RESPONSE

PREVENTION:

COMMUNICATION

CHAIN OF COMMAND

## MANAGEMENT:

What is the rural community's role in fire management?

Many farmers are working multi-generational properties. There are decades of experience in surviving and thriving in the rural environment and a recognition that poor ecological practices will result in nett detriment to the property. Many farmers are members of local voluntary fire brigades - many with decades of experience and the use of fire to reduce fuel has been a long term practice on both private and public land. As wildfire does not respect boundaries, it is essential that risk management practices are conducted across all tenures. We are advised that management from a Victorian National Park area is currently attempting to sue a landowner outside the park because the fire entered the park from private property. Why is there one rule for the Bureaucracy and another for the private citizen??

As per the summary of themes from the 13 bush fire inquiries since 1939 as presented by Kanowski *et al*, "risk reduction is effected by:

1. Fuel reduction
2. Community education
3. Role of volunteer firefighters
4. Local knowledge; and
5. Adequate resources

*The Community at large and managers of large tracts of public land need exposure to experienced farmers in a co-operative environment. There needs to be genuine consultation with neighbours, to ensure that what needs to be done is done, effectively and responsibly.*" The Volunteer Firefighter's Association Magazine, "Winter 2013" poses some interesting questions:

What has been done to put the RURAL back in the Rural Fire Service?

Dear Commissioner, Why not use local knowledge?"

Attitudes to fire and the environment

Bushfire myths (about the supposed environmental perils of fuel reduction and burning)

### Management of assets and Recommendations:

RFS need to be educated regarding rural landholder's priorities (livestock, fences, infrastructure): these make up their business. The house does not take priority. On several occasions the visiting Brigade set up near the house and would not listen to pleas to save the stock or infrastructure on the property.

### Management of Aircraft and Recommendations:

It is strongly suggested that aircraft need to be operating from daylight and used for surveillance by RFS together with Brigade Captains and Landholders - a sensible, practical strategy, which should be introduced and acted upon.

### Management of Brigades and Recommendations:

Some visiting Brigades were described as 'aged - obese - unable to fight fires - only there to look' Brigade Members in general must be fit, trained and experienced enough to attend a fire.

Work Health and Safety applies to the landholder and should also be applied to other out-of-town, visiting, paid and unpaid volunteers.

**Fire Breaks: Recommendations:**

Discussion is required re current legislation – the Native Vegetation Act, the threatened species Conservation, just to name two and the interpretation of these Acts by individuals prevents establishment of adequate fire breaks in National Parks and prevents use of machinery following fire outbreaks. Prevention of fires is 60-100% more effective than reacting to them.

**Management of National Parks:**

State Forests have been downgraded and converted to National parks with no community consultation. This has resulted in widespread National Park and other fires, loss of life and enormous loss of property and business ie Canberra, Victoria, Tasmania, Southern Highlands, Central West, Warrumbungles and other areas.

Forestry used fire trails to facilitate logging, enabling quick response in time of fire.

National Parks are polluted with Green ideology - consequently the fuel content is out of control.

National Parks should be handed back to State Forests: a localized management system.

Alternatively, the American model of the Multi Land Use Policy, which requires a conversion from National Parks to State Forest, should be introduced.

Failing the above – introduction of the Canobalas Model should be considered.

There are no measures in place to stop the fire leaving or entering the Warrumbungle National Park on the southern side of the Park. It is now 12 months after the fire and there are still no measures in place to protect the Mt Cenn Cruaich communication complex. This site includes all emergency services such as police, ambulance, fire etc and all television, radio and much of the mobile phone network transmitters for the Warrumbungle Shire and other areas. It is impossible to fight a fire with no communication.

Environmental Code: Changes to be made to the Native Vegetation Act and the Bushfire Environmental Assessment Code: Again individual interpretation of these Acts and the Rural Fire Service's obligation to follow the Bushfire Environmental Assessment Code does not allow adequate protection for infrastructure and in a lot of cases, these infrastructures are a liability to Landowners ie the Communications Tower on Mount Cenn Cruaich.

As one volunteer coordinator stated during the aftermath of the fire in relation to the repair of fences and infrastructure damaged as a direct result of this fire: "I spent many hours with aggrieved owners as they expressed their anger and frustration at the high handed and impractical approach of NPWS staff to the issues causing concern". A letter was written to the head of the NPWS in April 2013 but the writer commented that he felt he had been 'snowed' and that very little would be done or changed. There is a high 'level of dissatisfaction with the conditions demanded' by the NPWS with regard to these repairs, only a few have signed up to those conditions 'and they did so in a desperate effort to stay financially viable'.

Who takes responsibility for loss of landholder's fences due to lack of fuel reduction burns?

**Recommendation:** That the policies and attitudes being adopted by the NWPS be addressed; that the NPWS accept liability for and meet the full cost of replacement boundary fencing destroyed by the Wambelong/Warrumbungle fires.

#### COMMUNICATION:

The Western side of the National park mobile service requires an urgent upgrade. The service north of the Newell highway in the Toorweenah area is very poor. We have been informed that previous representation to Telstra has been made by Toorweenah residents regarding this issue - but it fell on deaf ears.

**Hand held PMR:** All Group Captains, Deputy Group Captains and Brigade Captains should be provided with handheld portable PMR radios to enable better communication away from tankers. There are not enough crews on tankers to allow one person to stay in the truck to monitor the radio.

**Local Crew:** Fire Control Centre failed to communicate with local captains and brigades on the southern and western side of the fire. Local crews were not utilized therefore all local knowledge was wasted. Out of area crews (OA Crews) should be married with local crews to increase their effectiveness. Too much time is wasted with lost OA Crews with no local knowledge. The OA Crew should have a local crew member in their command vehicle to advise them.

In many of these big fires, Strike Forces are brought in from across the State only to find themselves sitting around on site with no direction and often being sent home without striking a blow. People are giving their time but not receiving communication or direction from the Command Centre.

#### LOCAL RESPONSE

*"Out of area groups 'bossed around the local volunteer Fire Captain".*

*The treatment of Landholders is not acceptable".*

*"The RFS has failed us - the system is not working".*

*One wife and mother, with a fire on three fronts of her property was 'scolded' for ringing 000 by an RFS paid member.*

*"We had to pay lip service to imbeciles" -*

All of the above are untitled landowner's quotes from Wambelong Fire.

#### Recommendation:

Landowners and Volunteer Captains, Group Captains and Deputy Group Captains must be treated with dignity by the paid NWPS and RFS and kept informed at all times. Local knowledge must be recognised and implemented.

Put local Captain/Deputy Captain or Landholder in Division Vehicle to provide local knowledge to Sector Leaders. Put local Brigade members with taskforce/strike teams. Use their muscle with local brains. This has worked well at other section 44 fires.

#### PREVENTION:

The lack of hazard reduction carried out in the National Park in the last decade – due to Green’s influence – has been disastrous in the areas surrounding Mt Cenn Cruaich TV Tower/Emergency Services Communication Centre. Areas such as this should be cleared for at least 500 metres.

In 2001 Deputy Group Captains and Brigade Captains advised the RFS that the fire trails were not good, could not be used as they were and would inevitably cause danger.

The need for fuel reduction burning to minimize fire risk has consistently been the subject of recommendations arising from many bushfire inquiries in Australia. See for example Kanowski,

Whelan & Ellis in Australian Forestry 2005 Vol.68 No 2 @ 76:

*“The inquiries which followed the 2002-2003 bushfire season explored many of the common themes which had emerged from the preceding 13 inquiries into significant bushfire events in Australia since 1939. These include the importance of risk reduction, particularly through fuel reduction; of community education; of the role of volunteer firefighters; of local knowledge and of access for fire fighting; and of the adequacy of resources for bushfire mitigation and management”.*

In 2005 the COAG Inquiry on Bushfire Mitigation and Management stated (6.4.4):

*“There is compelling evidence to show that a reduction in fuel loads in bushland environments will reduce fire intensity and modify fire behaviour. This is the only cost-effective way to achieve fuel reduction in large areas of the landscape.”*

See review: Forestry Commission technical bulletin No 11 (1993) Silvicultural Use and Effects of Fire

*“If the question is asked “Why is fuel reduction restricted in practice”, it seems that priority in day to day management of much public land is given to the protection of native species, both flora and fauna. Fuel reduction is not carried out, apparently through a (genuine, but misguided) desire to better preserve threatened species. The point is that fire is necessary for regeneration of most forest communities. To attempt to exclude fire is ultimately to risk the destruction of those communities.”*

From the report by Jurskis and Underwood: Human Fires, Wildfires Fires: Ecology Volume 9 Issue 3 (2013)

*“Other studies of fuel accumulation (Birk and Bridges 1989), fire risk (Boer et al 2009) nutrient cycling, and tree health (Turner et al. 2008) in dry eucalypt systems have shown that burning at three to six year intervals can maintain dynamic stability and ecological resilience in these systems (Jurskis 2011 b).”*

**Bill Gammage: Inquiry into Management of Public Land in NSW 18.09.12**

*“In 1788...thick forest was deliberate and confined, and there was significantly less of it than now....In National Parks and nature reserves forests thicken and spread. This inevitably means hot fires and advantages some plant and animals and disadvantages others.... We need to burn more...After Victoria's 2009 fires people (were) delighted at the bush coming back green. Such regeneration simply begins another cycle, ending in another killer fire 40-50 years on. In 1788 people would never have let that happen... instead as soon as possible after the fire, as autumn and winter permitted, they would have lit small patch fires to clear seedlings, saplings and regenerating scrub. .. Unfortunately we lack 1788 baselines, but 1788 has given us a great gift: controlled fire can manage country successfully. I see five purposes of 1788 fire:*

- 1 control fuel
- 2 maintain diversity
- 3 balance species
- 4 ensure abundance
- 5 locate resources conveniently and predictably

*Making fire an ally works”*

**Recommendation: Brian Williams. VFFA Vice President**

*“The RFS need to become more fire preventative than fire reactionary. The Government focuses it's energies and funding on bushfire response rather than on bushfire preparedness and damage mitigation.*

*Prevention offers far superior outcomes such as -*

- safer working environment for fire fighters
- superior environmental outcomes
- enhanced protection of the community, their assets and infrastructure
- superior financial outcomes (various studies conclude that preventative strategies are 60 to 100 times more cost effective).”

**Fire prevention strategies and hazard reduction must be undertaken on an annual basis in a time frame dictated by the District Risk Management Plan. Risk Management Plans should incorporate the recommendation made by the Victorian Royal Commission of hazard reducing a minimum of 5% of bush fire prone lands on an annual basis. This figure is supported by many leading Australian bush fire experts.**

**Assets like the Cenn Cruaich Communications Complex need an appropriate hazard reduction plan in place including a suitably cleared protection zone around the site to allow it to stand alone with aircraft support in major fire events.**

**Broadcast Australia failed to ensure that their communications complex would survive a bushfire without extensive outside assistance. Hazard reduction which was undertaken while the site was in Government hands has now been neglected. The site now has timber right up to the base of the tower making it difficult to protect. It was saved at the expense of neighbouring landholders.**

WIT.135.001.0099

#### **PRESCRIBED BURNING: HOW EFFECTIVE IS IT IN THE CONTROL OF LARGE FOREST FIRES**

**Rick Sneeuwjagt**

**Department of Environment & Conservation, Perth WA, Australia**

*“Forest fire managers who are directly involved in fire control operations have no doubt about the value of fuel reduced areas in reducing the intensity of bushfires and in providing safe conditions to apply effective fire suppression tactics.*

*There has been several published case studies in eastern States that have clearly demonstrated the contribution to fire control made by prescribed burning for fuel reduction. These include Billings (1981), Rawson (1983) and Rawson et al (1985), CSIRO (1987).*

*The statistical analysis shows that the contribution that prescribed burning programs make to the reduction in the area of unplanned fires is very strong and can persist for at least 8 years. The burning achieved over 5 years is compared with the average area of unplanned fires in the following 5 years. The WA data indicates the strongest correlation exists where the average area of prescribed burning achieved over 5 years is compared with the average area of unplanned fires in the following 5 years. The current level of annual burning that applied to restrict unplanned fires to present levels in south-west WA presents about 8 % DEC-managed estate, and if this is maintained over time, the area of unplanned fire is likely to remain at low levels of between 0.5 and 1.5% of the estate”.*



Athol Hodgson AM formerly Commissioner for Forests Vic.  
Chief Fire Officer, Department of Conservation Vic

*“Knowledge expressed in this literature overwhelmingly supports the view that in areas south of the tropics where dry sclerophyll forests grow<sup>i</sup>, the natural terrestrial ecosystems evolved in response to climate change and changes in fire regimes over millennia, and that the forests are dependent on episodic fire for their health and biodiversity. Prior to Aboriginal occupation of the land, lightning caused the fires. The Aborigines changed the oldest fire regimes when they added their cultural and accidental fires to the landscape. European settlement caused further changes when it extinguished Aboriginal burning and replaced it with fires lit deliberately to clear land, reduce vegetation perceived to be hazardous, and promote a “green pick” for domestic animals. European settlement also shrunk the ecosystems that existed prior to 1788. Farms, houses, hamlets, towns, water storages, mines, and infrastructures replaced what went before on large chunks of the landscape. These assets and the values associated with them are not compatible with uncontrolled and/or unplanned fires.”*

### **1.1 Rationale for prescribed burning for fire control**

*“Prescribed burning does not prevent bushfires starting, nor does it stop them burning. It modifies the vegetation and, in doing so, changes the behaviour of subsequent fires in ways that give suppression forces a better chance of controlling them. It does this by:*

- (a) reducing the total amount of fine fuel. This reduces the rate of spread and fireline intensity (rate of heat output) of the flame front of a subsequent fire. Firefighters are able to work closer to the fire and work with greater safety;*
- (b) reducing the height of the shrub layer. This reduces the height of flames and increases visibility through the vegetation for firefighters; and*
- (c) removing elevated fine fuel including fibrous and flaky bark on the trunks and branches of standing shrubs and trees. This material is the ladder of flammable vegetation that allows flames to climb high into the trees. Removing the ladder reduces the potential for the fire to become extremely dangerous for firefighters to approach and it also reduces the potential for multiple and long distance spotting. (6), (28)”*

Lewis Review of Forest Management in Western Australia, 1994, (6), that said:

*“The theory of prescribed fuel-reduction burning has a sound basis in research which has been conducted into the relationship between fuel load and fire behaviour. As a consequence, fuel reduction has assisted fire*

*control operations under a wide range of conditions. The lowered incidence and intensity of wildfires in areas that have been subject to prescribed burning for fuel reduction is incontrovertible. Therefore, the use of ecologically-conscious prescribed burning as an effective and relatively cheap method of reducing fuel levels should continue to play a major role in modifying the natural events system in the future".*

## CHAIN OF COMMAND

No communication was received from the Command Centre to certain active Brigades, therefore no direction as to the fire, therefore no information and consequently a complete breakdown in the chain of command. Information was withheld by the Control Centre. Why wasn't every Brigade notified?

There was no cohesion between groups. The RFS did not advise landholders that they were going to use incendiaries before the break was put in. Landowners were up in the hills fighting the fire when the incendiaries were dropped.

The RFS refused to take local input in regard to firebreaks; no common sense employed.

An RFS paid fire fighter 'made' a Deputy Group Captain burn back to a fire, which had already been put out - where is the logic or common sense in such an act?

Local crews were told to leave the fireground in their own brigade areas: where is the Chain of Command here - where is the common sense?

"At one stage, helicopters were dumping on the containment lines",  
Untitled Deputy Group Captain Wambelong Fire

"Complete lack of Management, Communication and Chain of Command,"  
Untitled comment by Brigade Captain Wambelong fire.

There were situations where one crew would go off shift and not be replaced for up to 3 hours or more and replacement crews becoming lost and late on to the fireground - only arriving after dark.

In many cases the leaders of the teams were also replaced, so that no one was debriefed from either end and the same leader did not return to the site for several days, if ever. No conformity, no knowledge of the situation or of the site, caused significant problems on a daily basis.

### Recommendations:

Fire fighting crews need to overlap and be responsible for first response at all times. Night shifts need to be on fireground in daylight.

**A triage made up of local landowners, Divisional Commanders and Brigade Captains needs to be implemented as a common sense procedure, especially when creating large back-burns.**

**Local Group Captains must be at the Headquarters during a fire.**

**The RFS should be in control of all fires in State forests and National Parks**

**The National Parks should not be responsible or in charge of directing fire fighting efforts when RFS Group Captains or Deputy Group Captains are available.**

**More Captains should be Group Leader trained to provide local input in large Section 44 fires. Out of area personnel should not be used in local fire planning position during Section 44. Our group system of only 4 groups restricts the number of suitably trained people available for positions in FCC.**

## **COMMENTS**

**Training systems need to be re-vamped - they need to be more flexible**

**The Pillaga Scrub will be next. With the change of land management from Forestry to National Park, the possibility of a large to catastrophic fire is imminent. Forestry had a resource to protect and had the equipment to do so.**

**Funding: Our insurance policies are funding the RFS and after the events of the last couple of years, our premiums have doubled if not tripled. Victoria has stopped this. NSW needs to stop this too. Can the Shooters Party stop the RFS budget going through Parliament?**

**Shires are expending 11.4% per annum per shire to fund the RFS**

**What are the rules to a Section 44 fire?**

**Excerpts from 2005 Report on the Goobang Fire;**

**Athol Hodgson AM President Forest Fire Victoria.**

## **1.2**

### **Responsibility for response to the fire**

*“The NPWS is a fire authority under the provisions of the Rural Fires Act 1997 (NSW) (**Rural Fires Act**) and is responsible for the prevention and suppression of fires on land it manages (36). Section 44 of the Rural Fires Act requires the Commissioner of the Rural Fire Service (**RFS**), to take charge of bushfire fighting operations, and to take such measures as he considers necessary to control or suppress any bush fire, when he is of the opinion that a bushfire has assumed or is likely to assume such proportions as to be incapable of control or suppression by the authority in whose area it is burning. Section 44 also provides that in exercising these functions the Commissioner is not*

*subject to the direction or control of the Bush Fire Coordinating Committee and, if the fire is burning on a National Park, the Commissioner must take into consideration any bush fire management plan for the Park. Section 44 ensures that at all times during a bushfire incident a single controller is in charge of the response and the controller is not constrained when taking actions he considers practical to control the bushfire."*

**What was the operational cost incurred by the RFS in controlling the fire?**

**What were the costs associated with the aftermath and the recovery?**

**It has been alleged that some RFS staff and volunteers connected with the Warrumbungle fires are loath to speak, as they fear retaliation – this is on going.**

**Public land management is the real time bomb in regards to catastrophic fire events. Huge build up of flammable material over time poses significant risk to the Community.**

**Public servants have broken down landowner's rights through the political system, without consultation or consideration of consequences for farmers, community and other landholders.**

**To care for our land we have to manage it – not lock it up.**

## **TO FINISH**

Roger Underwood :

2008 NW Jolly Medalist, IFA's highest honour for outstanding contribution to the profession of forestry in Australia ;

Retired General Manager, Department of Conservation and Land Management Western Australia

Chairman of The Bushfire Front

**"What have we learnt over the past 200 years?**

**Are uncontrollable, killer bushfires here forever?**

**What is the influence of zealous environmentalists on fire and land management?"**

**Enough said.**

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