

Submission
No 8

INQUIRY INTO WAMBELONG FIRE

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Partially Confidential

Wambelong Fires January 2013

My partner and I have been living on our property for thirty one years and we are approximately one kilometre from the border of the Warrumbungle National park. I worked for twenty two years at Siding Spring Observatory owned and operated by the Australian National University. I started as a member of the SSO fire team in 1984 to 1997. I became the Site Officer and the Deputy Captain of the fire team in 1997 to 2004, later becoming the fire captain from 2004/2005. One aspect of the fire team duties were regular fire watches. Being on the top of a mountain, butting onto the National Park we were able to observe a radius of 360 degrees. This enabled us to spot many fires and report them; this service ceased before the Wambelong fire. I took an active interest in the Warrumbungle National Park environment, as this was our nearest neighbour, being a leader/member of the SSO fire team and also an active member of the local Timor Road Bush Fire Brigade, I very was competent in understandings of my surroundings.

Over a number of years, I noticed a surge in the growth of cypress pine and other fire prone plants. This was directly due to the lack of controlled burns in and around the Warrumbungle National Park. On a number of occasions I mentioned this to the park officers and their rebuff answers were "the Warrumbungle is a slow burn park, the trees will not support crown fires, natural decay will control the bush litter, the budget only allows for asset management". This lack of controlled burning was most Evident from Wedding Cake Mountain though to Guineama Road and beyond to the Baradine Road - this impacted on a number of properties in the area.

The National parks duty of care to the natural environment and its neighbours has been compromised by its preceding and handling of the Wambelong fire from the beginning. My understanding is that the park was unmanned at the time leading up to the fire, consequently leading to a poor response during early stages of the fire.

On the Sunday, by instigating a back burn with a serve heatwave of 40 + temperatures amid a howling northwest wind, accompanied by a server southwest change is a gross act of negligence. This lead to a massive loss of infrastructure, property and stock and in our case costing us in excess of two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. This fire destroyed years of work, such as sheds, car ports, established fences, gardens and trees.

On this particular Sunday, the local Timor Road Bush Fire Brigade was on duty in the Warrumbungle National park at the fire front. I'm of the understanding they were cut off from Timor Road and unable to save any of the members properties along Timor Road. I recommend the inquiry look into why the Warrumbungle National Park was so ineffectual at fighting their own fire and why they need to put extra burden on local community fire brigades. Were these poor resources, lack of man power or not enough in the budget?

Maybe these issues need to be addressed. The Warrumbungle National Park needs to manage their areas and the extra areas that have acquired. Do they have a sustainable fuel reduction quota?

The outcome of this fire, which is not widely publicised by the Warrumbungle National Park, has been the destruction to the flora and fauna. My own observations and experienced opinion would suggest that approximately 95% of the animals in the Warrumbungle National Park were been incinerated. Some even near to extinction. A number of of these animals were already vulnerable such as the brush tail wallaby, koala, quail, glider possum, bandicoot, bats, various small birds, turquoise parrot and the Warrumbungle skink. This should also be addressed by the inquiry as the Warrumbungle National Park needs to be held accountable and should tell the true status of the Warrumbungle habitat not the current propaganda that all is well with the fauna and flora in the park.

Another area that should be addressed which has not been made public or documented is the destruction of the human history in this area. Starting with the aboriginal heritage that has been lost such as marked tree's, rock artefacts', camp sites, and most of the 200 year plus trees that have been special to the aborigine people. Then there are the first settlers to the area, their history left behind in time e.g. old farm structures, stock yards, hand cut fence lines that went over the mountains, spring fed wooden stock troughs, old hand cut tree stumps with their own story to tell for future generations. Then came the new settlers and their dreams of new life style, building their unconventional hand crafted homes made from timber, stone and mud - many of these homes have been desecrated. This fire was grossly mishandled in its early stages.

I accept fires are a natural part of the Australian landscape, but the Wambelong fire, had been left to run its own course, may have been less destructive than the fire that was caused by the mixture of weather, dryness and high fuel loads and suggestively the inappropriate back burn along with the slow response at the very beginning of the point of ignition.

The NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service is a government body, funded by tax payers and should be more accountable for their vast area of land which needs to be managed using fire as a tool to prevent future catastrophic fires like this Wambelong fire.

In summery I would like the inquiry to address the following questions:

- Was the Warrumbungle National Park adequately staffed in the period leading up to the fire?
- Was the back burning strategies appropriate when the temperature was over 40 degrees and howling north westerly winds?
- Why was Timor Road fire brigade fighting fire for the Warrumbungle National Park?

- What scientific survey has been prepared since the destruction, on the flora and fauna?
Who is responsible?
- What heritage survey has there been on the destruction of Aboriginal and Settlers heritage?
Who is responsible?
- If the fire broke out in the Warrumbungle National Park who is responsible?

Trevor Houghton