

INQUIRY INTO WAMBELONG FIRE

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Partially Confidential

SUBMISSION TO THE NSW LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL INQUIRY –
“CAUSES AND MANAGEMENT OF THE WAMBELONG FIRE WITHIN
AND ADJACENT TO THE WARRUMBUNGLE NATIONAL PARK IN
JANUARY 2013

STATEMENT OF EVENTS AND OBSERVATIONS LEADING TO AND FOLLOWING THE
WAMBELONG FIRE SUNDAY 13 JANUARY 2013
BY PERRY WILKINSON

Conditions on the 12 January were hot, dry and sultry 38 - 43 degrees. A bush/scrub fire had been spotted in the Warrumbungle National Park, there was concern but no alarm. One yellow water bombing airplane made approximately 12 flights from the airport to the National Park fire and Timor Bush Fire Brigade were in attendance.

On Sunday the 13.1.13 it was sunny 35 – 43 degrees, dry with a north westerly wind. Fire obvious in National Park smoke plume appeared no bigger than Saturday 12.1.13. 8.00am aircraft activity had increased possibly 3 fixed wing and 3 helicopters working into the National Park. Ventured into Coonabarabran to grocery shop again was concerned but not alarmed. I was informed by a friend, that the Wambelong fire was contained. Returned to our property at approximately 2pm plume had enlarged despite increased aircraft activity. At this time valuables were loaded into the car to prepare for our evacuation, still not alarmed but concerned. Approximately 3.45pm an Iroquois helicopter was heard flying towards our home from the direction of the Coonabarabran airport, south/east.

I had been observing other aircraft with my binoculars, the Iroquois was grey blue in colour in what appeared to be in very good (shiny) condition. It flew over our home into the National Park to the fire. The Huey had closed sides (doors) fitted. 10-15 mins later the Huey returned out of the National Park and headed back towards Coonabarabran airport. It was at this time when the smoke plume in the Park grew to 4 times what it was. Had this aircraft which only made one flight, unlike others that made multiple flights dropped incendiaries for the purpose of back burn? We then proceeded to evacuate.

It was at this time that the Coonabarabran VRA vehicle driven by as passenger arrived advising us and neighbours to leave as the National Park fire was out of control. We had already loaded animals and valuables into the car and said we were leaving.

The flame of the fire was now visible to the west of Siding Spring 3.9mtr telescope on top of the ridge. We left our property in one vehicle and in an unrushed manner stopping in four places on Tibuc Road, recording images of the fire with my mobile phone. The fourth stop was adjacent to the Tibuc Road letter boxes where I recorded image of the fire, It had crossed Timor Road at the Kierle property and was now well into properties on the southern side of Timor Road. We evacuated at the same time as the family who also stopped to record images of the fire. One more stop was made at the top of Blackburn Hill to record images of the fire as it travelled

south/east along the valley driven by a 30-40km dry wind. Most of the flame was concealed by the smoke plume that preceded the fire.

At no time had we received warnings or evacuation instructions from any authorities (Police, Fire Brigade or NPWS). We had listened to ABC local radio for reports on the Wambelong fire which proved misleading as they directed evacuees into the path of the northern face of the fire and were 30-40 minutes late of events. We were told later by residents east of Coonabarabran that they had received phone messages warning of fire when the fire event was west of Coonabarabran.

our immediate neighbour rang 15 minutes before our departure asking of our intentions whereas I informed him that we were evacuating. He too immediately left before us and we met up with them at house on Timor Road closer to Coonabarabran.

At approximately 10pm on Sunday 13.1.13 night I attempted to return to our property accompanied by a property owner on Blackburn Hill, Timor Road. We were halted at the property Glen Eric by burnt fallen trees across Timor Road. We had driven over some but I feared damage to our car and was concerned about trees falling on the vehicle.

We made another attempt Monday 14.1.13 and were successful, some trees had been removed from Timor Road by authorities but still had to use a bow saw which is kept in the vehicle to cut and remove logs from our path.