

## INQUIRY INTO WAMBELONG FIRE

**Name:** Mr John Shobbrook

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Partially Confidential

**SUBMISSION TO NSW GOVERNMENT GENERAL PURPOSE STANDING  
COMMITTEE NO. 5 INQUIRING INTO THE WAMBELONG FIRE.**

My name is Douglas John Shobbrook, I am sixty-five years of age and my home, my lifestyle and virtually all that I owned was totally destroyed in the Wambelong bushfire on January 13<sup>th</sup> 2013.

On Thursday the 10<sup>th</sup> of January 2013 my wife Jan and I left our property 'Springbrook' at Timor Road, Coonabarabran to drive to Brisbane for me to attend an appointment with my cardiologist on Monday January 14<sup>th</sup>. This was simply a check-up following an angioplasty that he had performed on a blocked artery late in 2012. In mid-1995 I was the recipient of a triple-bypass following two heart attacks. I did not keep the appointment with my cardiologist and Jan and I never saw our home again.

On Sunday January 13<sup>th</sup>, at about 12:30 pm, our son-in-law sent an email to Jan and I in Brisbane to advise us that a bush fire was burning in the Warrumbungle National Park which adjoined our property. He said that the fire, which was believed to have started the previous day, was travelling to the south away from our property.

Three hours later 'phoned and told me that the residents living along, or in the vicinity of Timor Road, Coonabarabran - where our property was located - had been ordered by the Police and Rural Fire Authority staff to leave their properties and seek refuge in the township of Coonabarabran as the wind had changed direction and the fire was heading at speed towards Timor Road.

I telephoned Jan, who was visiting her mother, and suggested that we head back to Coonabarabran immediately. By 4:30 pm Jan and I had packed and were driving out of Brisbane. Even though the route was some eighty kilometres further, we chose to return home via the New England Highway rather than the Newell Highway as the mobile telephone reception was better along the New England. We were facing the most stressful twelve hour drive of our lives!

By the early hours of Monday morning the fire should have passed our property and we knew of no way of knowing whether our house survived or not. Then I had an idea – why not telephone our house? If we got our answering machine then the house was most likely not badly damaged. I dialled the number and heard a continuous tone, there appeared to be two options, at best the telephone line to the house was cut, at worst our home was gone.

I then dialled and home telephone number, they were our closest neighbours and good friends. To my relief I heard their pre-recorded answering machine message. Their house appeared to be still functioning which meant that there was hope for ours.

We spoke to several times during our drive south but he didn't pass any first hand information onto us. ABC radio broadcasts confirmed what we had already been told,

that an out of control bushfire had destroyed the Warrumbungle National Park and hour after hour as we drove south, ironically through rain storms, the number of homes destroyed rose with each subsequent news broadcast.

Not all houses had been destroyed. In vain we listened for any clue on the local ABC stations that our house might have been bypassed by the firestorm. by now had been told of our fate but wisely he didn't want to deliver crushing news to us as we drove on, tired and anxious, through rainstorms.

We arrived at our daughter house in Coonabarabran at about 3:30 am Monday morning to be greeted by , and our neighbour . answered the one question that we didn't need to ask – “Your house is gone, has driven into the property and saw that the roof has collapsed in.” “What about the garage?” I asked. “No report on the garage” replied. How did I feel? As though I had been hit in the chest with a sledge hammer.

“Where's ?” Jan asked. A very concerned and shaken answered “He's still out there with and . house is gone but saved his.” Twenty five kilometres out along Timor Road on the far side of the fire front was no place to be.

We sank into the couch in and lounge room and with controlling the Las Cumbres Observatory's remotely-controlled external pan and tilt security camera, watched the fire lick at the trees and observatories at Siding Spring. The sky lightened and through smoke and haze we saw a team of yellow safety clothing clad fire fighters arrive at Siding Spring by four wheel drive to be followed shortly after by a Rural Fire Authority helicopter.

Later that morning arrived at and and burst into tears as he hugged . They had not only lost their house but had lived through a night of terrifying sights and sounds.

Because we had been in Brisbane when the police evacuation order was issued, Jan and I were unable to save a single item, document or photograph from our house. Our free standing garage and everything in it was also lost – including every item that I had acquired for my retirement project to build an exact copy of the Morris Cooper S that had won the 1964 Monte Carlo Rally. Birthday and school photographs of our children, our wedding album, jewellery given to Jan by her grandmother, toys for the grandchildren that Jan had made by hand, my old Federal Bureau of Narcotics ID, diplomas, citations and other items from my law enforcement career, mementoes from the *Ellinis*, a ship that I had worked on in the 1960's, school projects that I had made whilst a primary school student at St. Josephs Convent School had all been destroyed. Photographs of my deceased parents were gone.

A prisoner upon release from jail, no matter how long the sentence, can return home and gain comfort from familiar and treasured items and surroundings from their past – Jan

and I, and so many other bush fire victims, can go back to nothing familiar, even the landscape has changed. It is an emotional life sentence.

I cannot speak too highly of our friends and fellow residents of Coonabarabran, former work colleagues and the charities who provided unquestioning support for Jan and me and the other fifty-two residents who lost their homes in the firestorm.

I would also like to acknowledge the sensitivity and support of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation who flew me by helicopter out to our property the morning after the fire whilst police road blocks were still limiting access to Timor Road to emergency vehicles. Upon seeing the destroyed house and blackened property I told ABC reporter Liv Casben that I couldn't imagine wishing to live here any longer.

With the loss of our home Jan and I immediately moved in with our daughter , and their two children. After about three weeks we gave them a break by spending a few weeks with our son and his wife in Brisbane. Needing to spend some time alone, Jan and I gratefully accepted a most generous offer to spend some quiet time and discuss our future in a friend's holiday home.

The loss of our home and the retirement future that we had planned brought great sadness to Jan and me. I had retired from my work at Siding Spring Observatory and now my retirement projects and plans had all been taken from me. At our ages we didn't really look forward to going through the decisions, council requirements - which since the fire had been beefed up at increased costs to those who needed to rebuild - and the prolonged process of building a new house from the ground up. You couldn't turn you back on sad reminders, destruction was evident for 360 degrees.

On top of this, our 120 acre "little piece of paradise" which had previously created feelings of security and contentment, now led to feelings of insecurity and great sadness. The majority of the animals and birds along with the beautiful Australian bush and grand trees had gone, to be replaced by charred trunks that resembled blackened telegraph poles. At times as I drove out to our property along Timor Road from the township of Coonabarabran and passed through the transition from the unburnt countryside to the scarred countryside I cried.

I had planned to stay and protect our home should we ever experience a bush fire. We had two fire pumps at the property, one on a trailer. But this was a fire of exceptional heat and ferocity, the Coonabarabran Police told me that the radiant heat would have killed me before I got anywhere near any flames with a fire hose.

My wife and I received an insurance payout for the house but not for the contents of our house. Because of a situation that caused my wife and I extreme stress at the same time as our contents insurance policy arrived we had overlooked forwarding off our renewal payment. The text of the letter below that my wife sent to NRMA Insurance explains the situation ....

*Dear Shane*

*Further to our telephone conversation this afternoon, I confirm that our home was lost on 13 January in the catastrophic bushfires in Coonabarabran. We have lost everything. We have had our contents insured with NRMA for 12 years without making any claims. All our documents have been destroyed but I think our premium may have been due on the 4th of December 2012.*

*Unfortunately I inadvertently allowed our policy to lapse. I am writing to ask if NRMA would take into account our situation and if we could request an exceptional circumstances payment to help us recover from this devastating crisis in our lives.*

*We have experienced some extraordinary stresses over the last three months. Our daughter gave birth to her second child at Narrabri District Hospital on the 29th of November and during childbirth she suffered a major life-threatening hemorrhage and was urgently transferred to Tamworth Base Hospital by ambulance for treatment and recovery. During that time my husband and I had the care of her three year old daughter in Coonabarabran. This was a very stressful time for our family and my husband and I made several trips to and from Narrabri and Tamworth.*

*During this time my husband, the recipient of a triple bypass, was recovering from cardiac surgery which he had on the 3rd of October 2012 at St Andrew's Hospital in Brisbane. In early December we were contacted by his cardiologist as there was some confusion with my husband's medication as a result of which we were asked to make an appointment at St Andrew's Hospital Brisbane in December 2012.*

*We were in Brisbane again last week when the bushfires commenced. My husband was to see his cardiologist again on Monday the 14th of January 2013 when we were telephoned and advised of the imminent danger to our house. We immediately left Brisbane to return to our property. Upon our arrival in Coonabarabran in the early hours of Monday the 14th of January, we were advised by the Rural Fire Authority that our house, garage and workshed had been totally destroyed by the bushfire. I have attached photographs of our property.*

*My husband retired last year and is not in good health. We will experience major hardship and may never recover from this catastrophe.*

*In view of our continuous twelve years of insurance and our stress related lapse is there any assistance that NRMA can offer us? We are only seeking assistance with the contents insurance that we held with NRMA. If required I can obtain supporting letters from both my husband's cardiologist and my daughter's obstetrician.*

*Thank you*

*Yours sincerely*

*Mrs Jan Shobbrook*

*January 23 2013*

The one fact that hit me when I received the NRMA reply was that having been informed that we had lost everything that we possessed through no fault of our own, and after 12 years of loyalty to the NRMA during which time we had made no claims against our insurance policy, there isn't one word of condolence or support in the NRMA's reply to our letter.

What happened to "We are so sorry to hear of your loss"? Don't tell me that the NRMA treat their customers as anything more than a source of revenue.

The NRMA's web site's catchphrase is "Experience the difference" - it is true, they were the only organisation that we dealt with that didn't offer one word of sympathy to my wife and I, they were indeed different! Maybe I should admire the NRMA for being ruthlessly honest, if they don't feel any sympathy then they don't make any pretense that they do.

My wife and I have bought a house in Brisbane where she can be closer to her mother and family and I can be closer to my cardiologist. My wife and I are comfortable in our new house but we will never again have, nor be able to replace, that sense of contentment, peace and security that we experienced at 'Springbrook' prior to the fire.

Putting aside the material losses, we dearly miss the rolling paddocks, the birds, the animals, the trees as they swayed to the breezes, the stars, and lastly but by no means least - our close by friends. It is true that you don't know what you had until it is gone.

I believe that had the National Parks and Wildlife Service properly monitored the closure of the Warrumbungle National Park during the period of the total fire ban then the Wambelong fire would not have started.

I further believe that had the National Parks and Wildlife Service attacked that fire, once it had been reported to them by a member of the public, with a degree of urgency and using appropriate procedures with due consideration to the forecast weather conditions, then the localized Wambelong fire would not have developed into the catastrophic fire that eventuated. I still feel anger and I still cry.

John Shobbrook

Queensland.

