

INQUIRY INTO WAMBELONG FIRE

Name: Mrs Lois Wilkinson

Date received: 7/01/2014

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 LOIS WILKINSON

On Sunday 13.1.13 morning my husband Perry and I went to Coonabarabran to conduct shopping and stopped and visited a friend on the way back. During this visit I was told about the Wambelong fire that was located west of the Visitors Centre and that it had been reported that had been contained. Prior to this I had no knowledge that the fire existed, although I had observed occasional planes going over on the Saturday. On arriving home at 2pm we were very concerned on hearing about the fire as the conditions at the time were extreme, a second day of 44 degrees and blustery north westerly winds. After high temperatures and no significant rain falls for the previous four months the area had been recognised as extreme fire danger and as a result of this the Warrumbungle National Park had been closed to visitors since the previous Tuesday 8.1.13.

Around 3pm on 13.1.13 distinct columns of smoke were obvious behind a ridgeline that ran west of our property. I checked my ipad for any further news with regard the Wambelong fire and tuned into ABC local radio to listen for reports. I located an aerial photo that had been taken at 2pm and it showed an area west of the Visitor Centre ablaze and an even larger area to the south of the visitor centre. My husband stated that we should start packing some things as it looked like the fire was going to reach our property. We contacted our neighbour and checked that they were aware of the smoke and discussed what we were going to do. We packed some clothes, photos, papers and a few other items. Then prepared what could be prepared around our dwelling and moved a number of motor vehicles down to a cleared area near the road. During this time I continued to check my ipad and at one point after I posted photos of the smoke the NSW Fire Brigade contacted me to ask what other information I could give them. I passed on what I could but the immensity of the fire was not clear to me at that time. We had been watching a number of planes and helicopters periodically going over and at about 3.45pm an Iroquois went over, travelling north/west and a short period afterward the entire sky blackened with billowing smoke. My husband believed at the time that there had been incendiaries dropped in attempt to slow the fire and a member of the fire response team at the command centre later told us that an explosion like that occurs when two fires come together. Once this occurred we readied the animals and were about to leave when a member of the Coonabarabran VRA arrived with assisting and asked what we were doing, we advised we were about to leave. At no other time did we receive any notification about the fire either by phone or by vehicular advice and we questioned why neighbouring properties had not been notified of the impending emergency.

We proceeded down Tibuc Road at which point we could see flames running up the hillside below Siding Springs Observatory, we were joined by our neighbours the

in their two vehicles and we stopped at the junction of Timor Road and took photos of what was approaching us. Looking west up Timor Road there was a horizon glowing red, smothered in a sky of black smoke. It looked like a furnace moving across the landscape. Coonabarabran police were parked at the junction and waited for us to move off. We retreated to the top of Blackburn Hill and again stopped to look back. I observed [redacted] had stopped to talk to a fire truck that was exiting the National Park on their way to Blackburn Hill.

We then drove on into town to look for the evacuation centre and in not locating it we returned to [redacted] place on Timor Road and assisted them in preparing for the fire if it continued on its way to their property. The wind direction changed to the south which checked the fire approach approximately 2 kms away as the crow flies. We then stayed at [redacted] for the next few days but travelled back to our property each day and started our clean up so we could return. During those first few days we observed immediate activity by Essential Energy and other parties and by Tuesday afternoon the road was clear and services were returned by Thursday of that week. Timor Road was closed to residents until Wednesday 12pm.

It became clear in the following days that given the high risk conditions not enough action was taken to secure the outbreak on the Saturday particularly when another 44 degree day with north westerly winds was predicted for the Sunday. There was rumour about inappropriate back burning on Sunday which escalated the fire to the inferno it became. There were two reports I received from direct witnesses that supported this rumour. Firstly [redacted] stated that when they had talked to the fire vehicle on Timor Road as we were evacuating, they told him that they had been directed to conduct a back burn which was disputed as the conditions weren't right but were directed to proceed anyway. Also another neighbour who is a member of the Timor bushfire brigade who was present when they were fighting the fire on the Saturday stated that when it was initially being attended to it was a small fire that should have been dealt with quickly and that when [redacted] saw them back burning on the Sunday [redacted] was concerned because it was being done out of normal procedure as there was no water trucks available.

I also heard a very detailed account by the owner of the property, [redacted] Timor Road that neighboured the National Park, [redacted] and followed the response by conducting a number of visits to the fire site on the Saturday. [redacted] raised a good observation in that when the Park had been closed to visitors on the Tuesday the only action that was taken was to place a very small closed sign on the Park entry sign and that the road remained open for people to pass in and through the Park at will and that [redacted] had heard a number of vehicles regularly entering. I also observed what I considered to be an inadequate sign on the Warrumbungle National Park sign at the start of Timor Road as people were leaving Coonabarabran. The sign simply said CLOSED and was about 250mm wide and about 125mm high and covered about 5% of the sign. I remember looking at it and thinking that no-one will notice it. It was also stated that the only people who stopped going to the National Park were the National Park staff as the Visitor Centre was closed and there were no obvious patrols in place. This appeared to me be a gross act of negligence on the part of National Parks as custodians of the Park, there was little done to ensure its safeguard. There must surely be a procedure in place for Park

closures in such situations, which would require a higher level of control than what was exhibited. The irony was that when the disaster had occurred the entry to the Park was blocked off due to unsafe conditions for two and half months while clean up took place but left clear when the Park and the property owners were at risk due to unsafe environmental conditions.