

INQUIRY INTO WAMBELONG FIRE

Organisation: Gilgandra Shire Council

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GilgandraShireCouncil
meeting community needs

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31 January 2014

The Secretary
General Purpose Standing Committee #5
Wambelong Fire
NSW Legislative Council
Parliament House
SYDNEY NSW 2000

WAMBELONG FIRE ENQUIRY

As General Manager of Gilgandra Shire Council, I would like to offer some comment to the Enquiry on the Wambelong Fire in January 2013.

I became aware of the fire on the Sunday afternoon and soon noted the extent of same. At the request of Warrumbungle Shire, I authorised Council assistance by the way of heavy plant and operators and know that Council then provided assistance throughout the fire.

Council is the road authority for Jack Renshaw Parkway and was responsible for controlling access to the Park from the West and then assessing the road condition and working to open the road over the next couple of months.

Early in the week I inspected the Jack Renshaw Parkway with the Mayor and the Director Works & Technical Services and met with volunteer supporters at Tooraweenah, and arranged for them to collect supplies for Gilgandra rather than travel to Coonabarabran.

At the request of the District Emergency Management Officer, I also initiated planning to support any evacuation from Coonabarabran which, thankfully, was unnecessary.

During the fire, I was made aware of some difficulties in managing the huge event – generally second hand – in relation to contact with the Fire Control; allocation of duties; support for volunteers and accommodation for staff. I appreciated the scale of the operation and simply noted these concerns and did my best to address where possible.

Following the fire, I was contacted by both senior and ordinary volunteer brigade members who raised concern with the various aspects of managing the fire – organisation of out-of-area crews; a lack of communication with local Officers; planning and use of local knowledge. Of great concern was the failure to use senior local brigade members to manage the fire fronts.

Over the years, I have supported fire fighting efforts within Gilgandra Shire and adjacent to the National Park (never a Section 44), and can attest to the commonsense approach taken by the local volunteers. Although limited direct involvement, I have had been involved in previous Section 44 fires in and around the Pilliga Forest – authorising plant and operators and assisting to man HQ and similar issues to those noted above, have arisen on each occasion.

From my discussion with senior volunteers', issues of concern with this fire included:

- Delay in mobilising support for fire fighting on both the Saturday and Sunday.
- Delay in advising/involving local brigades particularly in light of the prevailing conditions. One senior group officer adjoining the Park – as I understand it – initiated contact with HQ.
- Failure to use local volunteers and their planning knowledge and management skills on the southern boundary/front of the fire.
- Lack of 'local' knowledge of RFS personnel appointed to manage fire fronts.

Over the past 12 months I have participated in the Castlereagh Bush Fire Management Committee and discussions to involve the National Park and RFS staff with neighbouring land owners/volunteer RFS members to identify and assess fire trails adjoining the National Park and was pleased to note the success of these inspections at the beginning of the current fire season.

I firmly believe that RFS Officers should engage volunteers in a similar manner - ie meeting with Group and Brigade Captains on "their territory" on a regular basis to ensure their involvement and participation in any emergency. This would allow a better utilisation of local knowledge and appreciation of managing such emergencies.

Yours faithfully

Paul Mann
General Manager