

INQUIRY INTO THE WAMBELONG FIRE

Organisation: Warrumbungle Fire Action Group

Date received: 10/09/2014

Partially Confidential

WARRUMBUNGLA FIRE ACTION GROUP
Submission 9th September 2014

A BUREAUCRACY OUT OF CONTROL

Fires are put out by volunteers and firefighting equipment – not office workers

We wish to reiterate some points and recommendations that have been made in certain submissions to which questions were not addressed at the Parliamentary Inquiry at Coonabarabran on 4th September 2014 and we wish to clarify areas that need your further attention.

The RFS Bureaucracy has grown far too large and as a result – completely inefficient. There is far too many paid staff. Head Office should be moved to a regional area to reconnect with the RURAL areas they are meant to serve. To our knowledge 36% of the RFS Budget is spent on wages.

There are a number of problem areas –

Training.

- It appears there has been no up-grade of records. Many volunteers from Castlereagh Zone have done training at Lake Keepit and other training centers but the training records since 1992 have gone missing.
- Salaried staff will not allow recognition of prior learning (RPL) of experienced fire fighters in our zone. This has created a situation whereby these volunteers have not got the official qualifications to hold executive positions in their brigades. This has led to inexperienced people being placed into captain and vice-captain positions, often unacceptable to the majority of brigade members.

Property Protection.

- The salaried RFS and NPWS officers have no respect for private property assets such as livestock, farm infrastructure and machinery which create the future basic income for the farmer. Please refer to a late submission by Phil Henley for further explanation.
- It was stated by the Zone Superintendent at the time of the fire (after the RFS officers who created the mess of the Wambelong Fire were all gone) that these people are bought in so as he and other local staff are not involved in coronial proceedings and possible litigation.
- Another local farmer and volunteer with Phil Henley that Sunday night was _____, a local farmer whose property was under threat from the fire. The morning after the backburn described by Henley, _____ was called into the Coonabarabran FCC to explain. The following is his quote –
“In the Fire Control Office in Coonabarabran, the leaders, took me to and stood around the big map asking me about the western extremity of the fire and asked me about the neat containment lines around "Gleneda" and "Wambelong." So I asked them to remove their hats and I would explain, but it being off the record. I explained the Sunday evening, how the fire was bearing down traveling west but there was no communication channel to get permission to do a back-burn, which we deemed imperative, so we made the decision and went ahead. It was very successful in "Gleneda" with the exception of time and lack of men preventing us taking it further toward Mt. Exmouth, for we perceived an immediate threat on the northern side of the valley at daylight. We did a wet-burn there which was successful, even if later in the day it jumped but to be contained on the "Gleneda" flat and within "Wambelong." I explained that if the decision to back-burn had not been taken, the fire would have built greater momentum and continued on it's destructive path to the west to ... wherever!! Having no immediate communications overnight

made decisions weighty and the decisions we made were done with extreme calculation, knowing with certainty there was going to be great loss of property if we didn't back-burn, and fully aware of the cloud of judgement over our actions if our efforts failed." and the possible consequences. They all stood holding their hats listening and then said," We could not have made a better decision or imagined a better outcome." And that was the end of the matter, not referenced afterward in the confidence I had asked for. I believe it was me who raised the question that if our back-burn had gone sour the legal position we may have found ourselves in would not have been enviable, but there was no comment either way. However, someone privately said to me our position would have been "dire" had the back-burn got away.

I raised the question, I believe it was with the bosses standing around the large map that with RFS micro-management, when there is little or no channel of communication and with men being faced with no luxury of time, as was the case for us that Sunday night, there needed to be an amendment to such situations that commonsense on the ground, at the time, be allowed to prevail. I explained that was our case in having no fall back line without great loss of property, and that we were the actual men on the ground. I acknowledged recourses were stretched to the limit for them with the main thrust of the fire and the security of Coonabarabran a priority, but we had equal priorities also ... and where was Coonamble?"

Note that in Henley's submission the 3 crews from Coonamble were told by Coonabarabran Fire Control Centre they were not required.

Authority of Captains and their local knowledge on the fireground.

During the Wambelong fire this was constantly overruled by staff at the Fire Control Centre. It is obvious there is a widespread lack of organizational skills and common sense within the NPWS and paid staff of the RFS.

Who should have control of the fire?

Local Captains and Deputy Captains should control the fighting of the fires including decision making regarding back burning, planning etc.. Paid RFS staff should handle logistics *as required by the Captain in charge of the fire ground* e.g. machinery, weather updates, aircraft, fuel, food water etc.. There is more access to these tools but the lack of organizational skills and common sense from our salaried RFS staff is sadly lacking.

Control is being taken away from the local Captains and Deputy Captains while their invaluable knowledge of the fire grounds and the districts in which they live and work is being ignored. Fire ground control must be handled by those with fire-ground knowledge, not from the Fire Control Centre (FCC) where no one has up to date knowledge; once this knowledge is acquired it is then relayed to the FCC.

NPWS should be on the fire front as volunteers and not in decision making positions. Their role as a fire authority should be terminated.

Welfare recipients should not receive benefits for joining the RFS as volunteers. People's lives are put in the hands of others who are not even capable of finding regular employment. This practice has caused a large number of very experienced and competent fire fighters to leave their local RFS Brigade.

Tooraweenah Debrief Questions Unanswered

These Questions and many others were put to Coonabarabran RFS Officers in After Action Reports and Debriefs after the fire with little or no feedback. While any one of these questions is not significant when viewed together they demonstrate the manner in which the Coonabarabran Fire Control Centre treated Group Officers, Captains and Landowners throughout the Wambelong fire

1. Why were Mountain Group Officers, not made aware of the fire in the Warrumbungle National Park (WNP) on Saturday 12 January considering the catastrophic fire conditions forecast for Sunday? WNP meet annually as part of the mountain Group.
2. Why were local brigades not notified and placed on standby?
3. Why were local brigades not kept up to date with events unfolding?
4. Why were local landholders not given any warning even late Sunday morning? This took away any opportunity to move livestock.
5. With the fire conditions forecast for Sunday why was a pre-emptive Section 44 not in place as it was in Coonamble Shire?
6. Why were Western Area crews, told their services were not required when crews on the western side of the fire were requesting help on Sunday and Monday?
7. Why on Monday were Deputy Group Captain and Local Captains refused information regarding maps of the fire and refused permission to put an aircraft into the air to locate active fire areas? We were told it had been done and we would receive information when they considered it necessary for us to have it.
8. Why were local brigade crews and Landholders ordered off their own land and brigade areas by a Helicopter Coordinator when the nearest fire was a kilometre away and crews were in a safe location with 2 safe exit routes?
9. Why were the local Group officers and Captains not involved in the planning process of the backburn on the Mt Cenn Craich site?
10. Why was control of a proposed backburn given to an Out of Area Taskforce Leader who had failed the previous night in preference to local Group Officers and Captains who had local knowledge? This resulted in the destruction of a further 15000 acres of private land on Thursday and Friday.
11. Why was a local Deputy Group Officer turned away from the Fire Control Centre (FCC) on Wednesday night when trying to report a problem with the incendiary burn around the tower site?
12. Why were local Captains, told that a Bulldozer dropped on site on Monday was not for trail construction but was to be used for property protection only?
13. Why was the Mount Cenn Craich Tower issue not acted on earlier in the week which would have allowed time to construct suitable containment lines for the incendiary drop on Wednesday? Where was the pre-planning for this site?
14. Why has Broadcast Australia (BA) been allowed to get away with no asset protection zone around such a critical infrastructure in violation of their licence?
15. Why were not enough resources allocated to carry out the backburn around the Tower? Why did incoming crews refuse to patrol the fire line?
16. Why were local Group Officers and Captains not used as sector leaders to utilize their local knowledge so critical in firefighting in mountainous terrain especially at night?
17. Why did it take until Sunday the 20th before local brigade Captains were issued with up to date information on-line from FCC including maps, plans and forecasts? This should have been available from Monday the 14th.
18. The need for tanker trailers to be retained in Castlereagh Zone

In conjunction with the above statements we would strongly suggest that the GPSC 5 Committee should read again the submissions listed below:

Kim Noonan: Submission No 20A and her two Supplementary Submissions

Peter Hellyer: Submission No 15

Mike Bowman Submission No 36

Rod Young: Supplementary Submission (marked Private and Confidential)

We look forward to your questions on the above