

INQUIRY INTO WAMBELONG FIRE

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Submission to Inquiry into Wambelong Fire

I live on Timor Road, Coonabarabran and our property was significantly affected by the Wambelong Fire. At the time of the fire I worked for the Australian National University at Siding Spring Observatory. There had been a meeting on the Thursday by senior staff from the observatory – one outcome of which was to instigate a regular firewatch. I participated in this on the Thursday afternoon and into the early evening. This involved walking around the ridge line from the Trig Point of Mt Woorat to the area behind the ANU 40 inch telescope building with binoculars. This gave a wide view of the National Park to the North, North East, West and South West. I believe that the staff of the Anglo Australian Telescope were also doing look outs from the catwalk on their building

At this time there was a total fire ban in place and my understanding from the media was that all national parks in the state including the Warrumbungle National Park were closed to campers and the like.

On the Thursday, during my late lunch break I encountered two tourists in a hired Campervan in the parking lot of the Observatory near to the Visitor Centre/Exhibition area. As was my usual habit, I went and attempted to engage them in conversation. They were smoking and had thrown their unextinguished cigarette butts over the fence into the dry bush area on the other side and another threw his onto the ground in front of where they were. I spoke to them and extinguished the cigarette butt on the ground. I spoke to them about the dangers of bushfires and mentioned the total fire ban, of which they seemed to be ignorant as to the fact that there was one in place, what a total fire ban was and what the implications of their behaviour could have meant. After a while they left and I returned to my office at the top of the Mountain. Closer to sunset as I was up at the trig point with the binoculars I noted that there was a vehicle in the car park known to me as Split Rock. The vehicle was still there on my last walk around. Most staff of the Observatory were absent at this time at a function out of town. I do remember mentioning the incident with the tourists to the Site Manager or my Supervisor that afternoon. It concerns me that tourists renting vehicles meant for camping are not informed about the risks of bushfires and about total fire bans when they hire vehicles for such purposes in the summer season. Perhaps some sort of information should be supplied by the renters of such vehicles as to Total Fire Bans and the risk of bushfires as well as the importance of extinguishing fires appropriately.

I drove along Timor Road from town a number of times that week and do not recall seeing any signage in relation to the closure of the National Park. On a trip through the National park I failed to see any sign on the Observatory side entrance to the National Park – although I have been since informed that there was such a sign. On the western entrance to the Park from Tooraweenah/Coonamble Road I also did not see any evidence of a sign advising either a total fire ban or that the Park was closed.

I appreciate that it is difficult to police a Park Closure when a main thoroughfare roadway goes right through the Park, but as it is not patrolled there was no obvious way to prevent tourist from camping there. Even in the areas along Timor Road between town and the Park there are no camping signs and no fire signs but campers can often been seen in their vehicles camping and cooking.

The first we knew of the fire was late on the Saturday when we saw smoke plumes and saw a aircraft flying over. We checked the NSW RFS website and then proceeded to regularly check on twitter and the two apps FiresNearMe and FiresNSW on our mobile devices through until after we were evacuated the following day. I saw smoke and drove up to the National Park entrance early Friday evening – again I do not recall seeing any signage. I drop to White Gum lookout where I turned around and returned home having not seen very much other than smoke and little activity.

We were not concerned as from the website and apps we understood the fire was small and was being contained. We noted that it was under the authority of the NPWS. This actually added to my lower level of concern as I believed that if it had been a significant fire then RFS would have been involved. We saw a yellow crop duster/water bomber plane make a number of trips that afternoon. The weather was very hot, dry and blustery. Around dusk after sunset after feeding our ponies and cows we noted the smoke and fire colouring the western sky over the National Park.

Again, before we went to bed around midnight, we checked social media and the website and saw that around 20 ha were affected and that it was being controlled. There had not been an increase in traffic on the road or in the air to concern us. The next day was very hot and blustery. The smoke plume did not seem to have increased, we made basic preparations as we had already overgrazed one large paddock around our house and big shed area. The air traffic increased but again we noted on the website and apps that there was no upgrading of the fire.

We finished lunch about 2pm and went outside and noted that the smoke cloud was more significant in spite of the many helicopters and fixed wing aircraft involved. During the day, I called a colleague up at Siding Spring to get an update. I was told they were watching the fire. I was later told that when they knew they were to evacuate – this colleague had been told not to tell us anything as it was not their responsibility. We went outside and worked around the house area getting things ready. At around 4:26 I received a text message advising those on Timor Road to evacuate. This was the first official information we received of the danger and the fire being so far out of control. We had not planned to evacuate but rather stay and defend our property. We turned on the ABC local radio station to get the emergency warning and information. We also received calls to our landline. The fire was now very obvious by the smoke and billowing clouds. We were next visited by the VRA who told us to evacuate and then by the Police. Although we had contained our cats and tied up our dogs – and had taken the precautions in our fire plan – we decided that we would need to evacuate. We grabbed what we could as well as our pets. I was moving our ponies and cows to the overgrazed paddock and filling water containers for them as my husband left. We agreed to meet further down Timor Road at our friends place. I left about 6 minutes after him and fire was already starting on our property as we left ahead of the front which was by now quite evident. The vehicles at the start of Tibuc Road less than 250metres from my front gate were almost invisible in the smoke – only their flashing lights were able to be seen. I then proceeded to meet up with my husband. The firefront was evident along with spot fires on Mopra as I was driving away.

We went to our friends place and by then they too, were preparing to evacuate as it was evident the fire was coming a lot faster than we had expected and on a far larger front.

Our house and large shed were saved thanks to the amazing work of the RFS ground crews and helicopter water bombing pilots to whom we are so thankful and to our friend and local fire fighter who saw our place recatch in the early hours of the Monday morning and went and put it out. We lost our fences, chickens, barn, workshed and other outbuildings. Our land was burnt and still has not recovered but thanks to the work of the RFS guys – we are still so much more fortunate than many others in that our house, ponies and cows were saved.

After we evacuated, we found the worse thing was the lack of official information. By now we knew that a Section 44 had been declared around 11am that day and were left like others wondering why more information was not available via the RFS website, the apps etc. We

knew that the Observatory staff knew they were planning to evacuate at 4pm – why couldn't the same information have been made available to the rest of us. For so many people an extra hour or more warning could have meant saving a lot more of their belongings rather than just the clothes on their backs. Better and earlier communications would have made a significant difference to many people. If people had known earlier – those who had stock in outer areas could have been out bringing it closer to home etc. Perhaps, my error was in putting so much faith in the social media (I was also following the RFS on twitter as well as monitoring the Apps and their website) as it did not keep up with the actual timeline of the events.

The NPWS could have also been more pro-active in the years before the fire in hazard reduction burns in the wetter seasons. One key reason most of the infrastructure at the Observatory was safe (as well as the amazing work of the firefighters) has to be credited with the hazard reduction work undertaken after the 2003 Canberra fires where Mount Stromlo Observatory was lost.

From the Monday morning at the Bowling Club official information was difficult to get – we wanted like many others to return home to deal with our animals etc. We were prevented from doing so – although we were aware of others who were getting through including staff from the Observatory – unofficial information filtered back through these sources. People who wanted to return to their property and who were capable of doing so should have been allowed to do so a lot earlier than we were. This for us was the hardest thing. The other really hard thing was watching the media coverage which was showing the devastation and taking people in and out – but seeing my best friends kids learn their home was gone from a TV news coverage before anyone was officially told anything. The system worked well in so many ways afterwards but in many ways turned people into victims that otherwise would not have been. BlazeAid and other community groups were so supportive and helpful after we were able to return home – without them we would have been at a loss as to where to start and what to do – getting fences up to keep the stock off the road was the first priority and neighbours and BlazeAid helped us to do that. To all who helped in anyway we are so thankful.