

INQUIRY INTO WAMBELONG FIRE

Name: Name Suppressed

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Partially Confidential

Thank you for the opportunity to present this supplementary submission to the Committee. Please also refer to my previous submission No. 30 to the Wambelong Inquiry. This submission is a direct response to the NSW Government Submission No. 44 of which I have read carefully.

I would like to point out glaring omissions in the explanation of the NPWS in their pre-fire and fire fighting activities of the Wambelong Fire. I would like to expand on the actual weather conditions on Sunday 13th Jan 2013 in the Warrumbungles when the backburn was being lit and why the backburn failed to achieve its objectives and escaped on two separate fronts. I would also like to explain why a direct attack was by far the best and safest option to contain and extinguish the Wambelong Fire.

On page 16 of their submission they state:

“As a safety precaution in response to the forecast fire danger on Tuesday 8 January no NPWS staff worked in the park that day. NPWS staff resumed park management duties in the park from Wednesday 9 January until the outbreak of the fire on the afternoon of Saturday 12 January.”

They make no mention of staffing levels or their roles in the WNP. They are not stating that there were any rapid response fire fighters on duty in the WNP. I feel this omission is deliberate and misleading. The NPWS Incident Procedure Manual clearly states that the higher the fire danger rating, the higher the rapid response staffing levels.

The NPWS put their backburn in on the basis of a projected fire run sheet for the original fire showing it to run to the NE. They omitted to state in their submission that this projected fire run did not occur and did not run to the NE. The whole basis of putting in the backburn was on the projected fire run. The only fire front that they were keeping in front of whilst they were putting in the backburn was their own backburn. It would have been prudent to contact their Regional Specialist Fire Management Officer and seek his knowledge and expertise relating to the strategy to be implemented to see if it was appropriate.

I believe that an aggressive direct attack on the fire was the best option because the weather conditions were predicted to be and proven to be volatile from 1:00 pm onwards, with very high temperatures of 43 degrees, high winds from 6:00am to 1:00pm from the NNW (wind speed 33kph, gusting to 57kph), from 1:00pm to 4:50pm from the NW shifting to the SW by 5:15pm, then shifting to the SSE at 7:30pm (wind speed 35kph, gusting to 77kph as recorded at SSO on 13/1/13 - Refer Attachment 1) and extremely low humidity of 17%.

Backburn operations are put in place when the wind speed is under 15kph. Crew Leaders are warned that when the wind speed exceeds 15 kph fire intensity and the rate of spread of forest fires become dangerous. With these prevailing weather conditions the correct procedure would be to aggressively attack and actively contain the fire that you are faced with. It was unreasonable to put NPWS staff in the

position to have to carry out these orders of putting in a backburn under such unstable weather conditions. With the projected fire run sheet for the Wambelong Fire to run to the NE, this would signal even more urgency to concentrate and carry out an aggressive direct attack on the original fire on the Saturday afternoon and night and the Sunday morning using all available resources to stop this fire run from actually occurring. The correct procedure is not to wait and fight the fire on what may occur, but to be proactive not reactive and put the existing fire out.

I notice in the Government submission that they fail to mention that the backburn breached and escaped its containment line on two separate occasions and was not brought under control. This omission was like Basil Fawlty in the episode of Fawlty Towers, "The Germans", telling his staff...whatever you say don't mention the war! I can only conclude that they are not being fully open and transparent by not mentioning the backburn breaches.

The first backburn breach occurred at approximately 2:00pm (grid reference 894-380 on Warrumbungle National Park Tourist Map 2nd Edition) at approximately the 1km point of the backburn. It progressed and burned in a SSE direction impacting on and destroying the WNP Visitors Centre, continuing on its path, exiting the WNP and destroying neighbouring properties.

The second backburn breach occurred at 15:45pm (grid reference 904-381 on Warrumbungle National Park Tourist Map 2nd Edition) at approximately the 2 km point of the backburn. This breach travelled to the SE for a short period of time impacting on Camp Blackman, then with a change in wind direction it travelled to the east, exited the WNP and impacted on SSO and down the Timor valley impacting on private property

Why the backburn breached its containment line

The timing of the backburn had a major impact on its outcome. It was being lit leading up to the hottest time of the day when the temperature was increasing and the humidity was dropping, promoting the curing of the fuel loading, resulting in a more aggressive fire run to the top of the ridge. It could not have been put in at a worse time of day.

The backburn was lit by NPWS staff and burned up a 30 degree slope up a south facing ridge with an accumulation of 23 years of ladder fuel. For every 10 degrees of slope the rate of spread of fire is doubled. Taking into account the ladder fuel promoting the fire to run and the 30 degree slope, the fire would have run up the ridge at 8 times the normal rate of spread.

NP staff involved in the backburn operation testified at the Coronial Inquiry that they could not see the end result of their backburn because of the smoke and the topography. When the backburn fire reached the top of the ridge from the southern side it met up with a hot NNW wind gusting to 55kph. As the fire and wind

converged at the top of the ridge it created turbulence and long distance spotting occurred to the SSE of the backburn, resulting in the backburn breaches. (Refer Attachment 1)

Recommendations

1. The formulation of fire management incident procedures must include the knowledge, experience and expertise of the Regional Specialist Fire Management Officer. The RSFMO should be fully involved in the decision-making and the strategies to be taken.
2. To appoint a support person to travel with the Divisional Commander to assist in the management and co-ordination, possessing minimum Crew Leader qualifications and good local knowledge.
3. NPWS need to notify their neighbours immediately by phone or in person of fire on their estates and direct them to the relevant website to monitor fire behaviour and warnings issued.
4. The Incident Action Plan needs to be scrutinised and signed off by both NPWS and RFS representatives prior to implementation, and never a single signature.

Conclusion

The backburn that the NPWS lit breached and escaped its containment line on two separate fronts and destroyed WNP infrastructure and impacted on neighbouring landholders destroying their homes, their livestock, their incomes, their fences, their environment, their lifestyle, their physical wellbeing and their emotional security. The original fire also breached and escaped its containment line and destroyed WNP park infrastructure and impacted on neighbouring landholders. These uncontained fires resulted in total devastation of the natural environment and cultural heritage values of the Warrumbungles.

I conclude that there will only be closure to this tragedy when the NPWS openly admit that their strategy to control the Wambelong Fire failed, apologise to the fire affected property owners and the community, and award just compensation to fire affected victims.

Attachment 1 – Wind Data recorded at SSO on 13/1/13

