

INQUIRY INTO WAMBELONG FIRE

Name: Name suppressed

Date received: 30/01/2014

Partially Confidential

I joined the National Parks & Wildlife Service (NPWS) in 1977 and have been involved in NPWS fire management in the Warrumbungle National Park (WNP), the Pilliga and throughout NSW. My active roles in fire management have been Crew Member, Crew Leader, Sector Commander and Divisional Commander, ranging from local fire management through to, and including, Section 44 fires. I have accrued good knowledge of fire management and fire behaviour.

I know and am familiar with the WNP topography. I am extremely familiar with the area that the Wambelong fire originated in, having walked in and flown over that area while carrying out vertebrate pest programs (feral goat programs) for NPWS.

On the afternoon of Saturday 12th January 2013 the Wambelong fire started in Wambelong Creek adjacent to Camp Wambelong. On arrival of NPWS fire crew and Rural Fire Service (RFS) crews, the fire was small and had burnt across Wambelong Creek with the head of the fire travelling north up a south facing rocky ridge. At that point in time it was considered by the NPWS Crew Leader that the fire was too active for a ground-based flank attack which allowed the fire to increase in size. Aerial suppression was commenced and proceeded with at the head and flanks.

It progressed to form a typical triangular fire pattern. From the point of origin to approximately 300 metres north to the top of the ridge, 300 metres east into a northwest to southeast orientated gully draining into Wambelong Creek, and 300 metres west to a northeast to southwest orientated gully draining into Wambelong Creek. On Saturday night the fire was not actively controlled and with the benign conditions of lower temperature, increased humidity and low wind, the fire increased marginally and by Sunday morning it had increased only 200 metres in a westerly direction to opposite Burbie Canyon gorge.

In my experience, knowing both the topography and fire management, Saturday night was the key, an extremely important window of opportunity which should not have been neglected, for a direct

ground-based attack. The east, west and south flanks were safe and achievable goals for Remote Area Firefighting Teams (RAFT).

On Sunday 13th January 2013, the weather conditions up until midday continued to be suitable for direct fire suppression duties utilizing aerial support and ground based RAFT crews. NPWS had full access to forecast weather conditions to conduct their planning operations and yet failed to take advantage of this 18 hour window of suitable conditions for fire containment. The projected weather forecast for Sunday was increasing to extreme temperatures, low humidity and northwest winds progressing in intensity and then high winds from the west and switching to the southeast in the late afternoon.

It was decided by NPWS on Saturday night in the Incident Control Centre to conduct a backburn operation on the southeast flank of the Wambelong fire on Sunday morning. The backburn operation was conducted in an easterly direction following the base of the ridge line and continuing for approx 2 kms. During the course of the backburn operation the wind intensity lifted and became extreme from the northwest.

The first report of a containment breach was on the extreme southwest edge of the Wambelong fire and reported to the Divisional Commander by the RFS crew patrolling that sector. This breach in the containment line burned south up Burbie Canyon gorge. Shortly after this, a second breach occurred emanating from the backburn operation approx 1km east of the Wambelong fire perimeter. The two mentioned breaches were approximately 3 km apart and were separated by Belougery Split Rock and Blackmans Mountain, a large area of mountainous rocky terrain. Both breaches continued to burn in a south-easterly direction, with the Wambelong Fire breach effectively blocked from travelling further east by numerous rocky escarpments. As both breaches progressed, the distance between the two fire heads increased.

The backburn breach continued in the direction of the WNP Visitors Centre and impacted on that structure, it also expanded on its east flank and impacted on Camp Blackman. The terrain is open grassland, thus not restricting the fire expansion and travel. There were two unsuccessful attempts to suppress the backburn breach prior to reaching the Visitors Centre. When the backburn fire reached the Visitors Centre all crews on the fire ground were instructed to assemble at the Visitors Centre Car Park for safety as both breaches were out of control.

The backburn breach proceeded in a northeast direction for a short period under high wind conditions. Shortly afterward, a westerly took over and under extreme conditions pushed the backburn breach east toward Siding Spring Observatory. In its progression it expanded into a typical triangular fire pattern to the east, exited the WNP and impacted on Siding Spring Observatory and continued on in an easterly direction down the Timor valley towards Coonabarabran.

Meanwhile, the Wambelong fire breach continued on a path to the southeast, impacting on the Grand High Tops and towards the TV tower on the southern boundary of the WNP.

Sometime after 4pm on Sunday, an extreme wind shift coming from the southeast changed the direction of the fire front. The northern flank of the fire now became the head of the fire, approximately 16 kms in length and proceeded to burn northwest toward the village of Bugaldie, consuming all the natural landscape, wildlife, domestic stock, rural infrastructure, houses and sheds and also endangering people's lives.

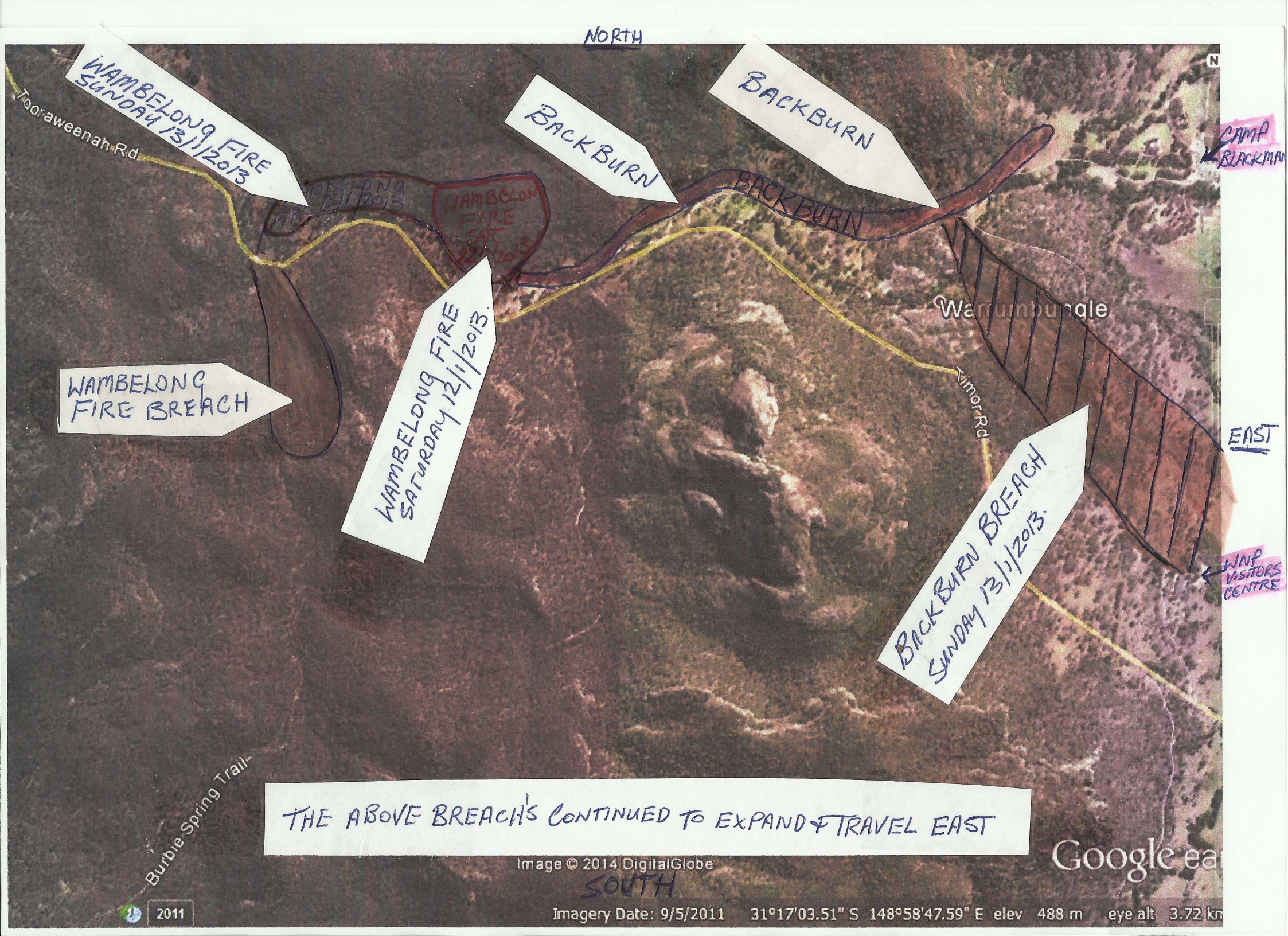
With the information that the NPWS would have obtained from the Bureau of Meteorology on the Saturday afternoon regarding the forecast weather conditions not being conducive to backburn operations and with their fire management knowledge they really should have cancelled their planned backburn and concentrated all their efforts and resources into containing the Wambelong Fire with RAFT crews on the Saturday night and RAFT crews with aerial support on Sunday morning shift.

By putting in the backburn operation under predicted weather conditions that were not suitable to the success of the operation I can only conclude that the planning and the management of the Wambelong Fire were, at best, very poor and the outcomes of their failings are obvious.

The above details and conclusions are the result of my own personal inquiries. The information was gathered from both NPWS & RFS fire fighters who were in attendance on the fire ground on both Saturday 12th & Sunday 13th January 2013. I have attached 2 images with the Wambelong Fire & breach and the backburn operation & breach clearly indicated.

In addition, I have serious concerns about the NPWS failure in their duty of care to ensure that no members of the public had access into the WNP campgrounds whilst the park was closed to all members of the public from Tuesday 8th January 2013 due to the High Fire Danger rating. There was no visible "Park Closed" signage at the entrance to the Wambelong Campground, which has direct access from the public road, adjacent to where the Wambelong fire originated. I have been reliably informed that the RFS Investigators concluded that the source of the Wambelong Fire was lit by the hands of a person or persons unknown.

Thank you for the opportunity to voice my concerns. I trust this statement is of benefit to the Committee.



NORTH

WAMBELONG FIRE
SUNDAY 13/1/2013

BACKBURN

BACKBURN

CAMP
BLACKMAN

Tooraweenah Rd

WAMBELONG FIRE
SAT 12/1/2013

BACKBURN

Warrumbungle

WAMBELONG
FIRE BREACH

WAMBELONG FIRE
SATURDAY 12/1/2013

Simor Rd

BACKBURN BREACH
SUNDAY 13/1/2013

EAST

WNP
VISITORS
CENTRE

Burbie Spring Trail

THE ABOVE BREACH'S CONTINUED TO EXPAND & TRAVEL EAST

Image © 2014 DigitalGlobe

SOUTH

Google ea

2011

Imagery Date: 9/5/2011 31°17'03.51" S 148°58'47.59" E elev 488 m eye alt 3.72 km

NORTH

BACKBURN BREACH

SIDING SPRING
OBSERVATORY

Warrumbungle

Timor Rd

BACKBURN BREACH
SUNDAY AFTERNOON

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Google ea



2011

Imagery Date: 9/5/2011 31°17'04.26" S 149°01'35.32" E elev 706 m eye alt 11.34 km