

**Supplementary  
Submission  
No 33a**

## **INQUIRY INTO WAMBELONG FIRE**

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## UPPER HOUSE INQUIRY INTO THE WAMBELONG FIRE

### SUPPLEMENTARY STATEMENT BY JOHN SHOBBROOK

I am a former Detective Inspector and senior investigator with the Federal Bureau of Narcotics and member of the Australia Federal Police. I must declare from the outset that from the people that I have spoken to, the documents that I have read and the enquiries that I have made over the past nineteen months, I have formed the opinion that the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service are principally responsible for the pain and losses that my family and I have suffered.

On Sunday, January the 13<sup>th</sup> 2013, my wife and I lost our home, our possessions and the retirement future that we had planned, as a result of the bushfire that came out of the Warrumbungle National Park on that dreadful day. I no longer reside on my former property 'Springbrook' located less than two kilometres from the park, my wife and I have given our property to our daughter and son-in-law who continue to reside in Coonabarabran.

Why haven't my wife and I rebuilt on our land? Because we are still brought to tears and haven't the emotional strength to face constant reminders of that experience. I can still identify small pieces of metal that I find burnt and crushed into the ground, my wife can do the same with small shards of glass or china. I know that there are competent and dedicated members of the National Parks and Wildlife Service in Coonabarabran, but I can't help feeling a pang of pain each time I see a vehicle bearing an NPWS logo drive by.

Our property 'Springbrook', which we shared with so many friends and colleagues, will never again in my lifetime, if ever, return to the little piece of paradise that nature and my wife and I had created, and where all but a few precious photographs or objects from our past, that aroused a fond memory, have gone. I hope that by expressing my feelings to your Committee the hurt, anger, guilt and bewilderment that I feel will be eased.

My wife and I were in Brisbane for an appointment with my cardiologist as the fire approached our property. Consequently we did not save from our home a single photograph or home video, document or treasured memento from my sixty four and her fifty-eight years of life, thirty-eight years of marriage, the thirty one years that we had spent with our children, my career in law enforcement or service as an officer with the Royal Australian Air Force Active Reserve, or the sentimental treasures that had been passed to me by my deceased father and mother. I am also conscious of the childhood treasures that my children have lost from their family home. My wife and I now have nothing of particular value, especially long-standing sentimental value, to pass onto our children.

Everything was taken from my wife and I yet we had committed no crime. The most vile criminal, upon release from jail, can still gain comfort from photographs from his youth or treasured items from his past, or some familiar object - that snug lounge chair, that comfortable old cardigan – no such comfort can be found for my wife and I, it has all gone. The fire not only destroyed all physical traces of our past, it also wiped out our preparations for the future. We had spent twenty years preparing our property for our retirement. My wife had built a wonderland for our grandchildren, she had her

gardens, fruit orchard, glade, bush walking tracks and animals. I had my workshop, a small personal astronomical observatory and in my garage a small collection of classic cars, motorcycles and automobile memorabilia.

As a retirement project I was about to build an identical copy of the car that won the 1964 Monte-Carlo Rally. I had spent five years searching the world for the rare and hard to acquire correct components for that vehicle with the support of the United Kingdom based eighty-year-old engineer who built the original car and the Deputy Competitions Manager of the British Motor Corporation. During the early hours of Monday morning January 14<sup>th</sup> when I was told that my house was gone, my first hopeful reaction was “What about the garage?” I was to learn later in the day that it too had gone.

I no longer have any retirement plans, I live from day to day. Prior to the Wambelong bushfire I had suffered two stress-related heart attacks, this experience could by no means be classified as a stress reducing contribution to my overall health. I don't sleep well and I have frequent horrible visions of my home and cherished possessions spontaneously igniting or melting from the heat of the approaching fire. These visions and the unanswered questions below haunt me.

Why do I feel ‘bewildered’? Because I can't understand why there were no National Parks Rangers patrolling the park, no lookouts manned, and no field staff positioned in rapid response locations when their own Fire Management Manual advises them to consider each of these responses during periods of Severe and Extreme Fire Danger Ratings. (3.0 Preparedness Table 11) The National Parks and Wildlife Services Warrumbungle Area Manager in his own words admitted that they were facing “*the worst weekend of the year with really terrible weather*”, (Mark Fosdick ABC ‘7:30’ 8<sup>th</sup> March 2013), yet apparently only two staff were on duty. One, a Ranger, who spent the lion's share of her time in the National Parks office in the township of Coonabarabran some 39 kilometres from where the fire started, and the other, a shop assistant, attending to the Visitor's Centre in the park.

This fire didn't start in some remote ravine, it was reported to have started at Camp Wambelong, a stone's throw and in plain sight from the main road running through the park. It was said to have been first noticed by a member of the public driving past in her car, at a spot where campers who were seen to be smokers, were sighted by a staff member from Siding Spring Observatory early the previous morning. Why were campers apparently able to stay at Camp Wambelong when the park was officially closed during a Total Fire Ban period? Searching for and failing to find any NPWS staff in the park to report the fire to, the woman who discovered the fire drove to the property ‘Echo’ at the eastern entrance to the park and reported the fire to the occupants of that property who initiated a ‘OOO’ call to report the fire.

After the fire was reported and the National Parks and Wildlife Service staff attended, why didn't they “*aggressively attack the fire*”, again as recommended in the Fire Management Manual (Response 4.2.6 Item 669) when, if left unchecked, there was a risk of a large fire event. After “fighting” the fire for only three hours, the National Parks and Wildlife Service staff left the park and went home for the night - why? The National Parks and Wildlife Service have their own Remote Area Fire-fighting Teams (RAFT) who are trained to fight fires in arduous locations without access to fire tenders – why weren't they called in to use every precious moment during the cooler weather of the night to bring this fire under control? Consequently a small fire grew into a catastrophic fire.



I am aware that the Incident Controllers of the National Parks and Wildlife Service, allegedly against advice from some of their own staff and Rural Fire Service fire-fighters, decided to light a back-burn on the Sunday morning when procedure manuals stated that back-burn operations are not to be undertaken if there are forecasts of extreme temperature, low humidity or high winds! All of which were forecast for Sunday the 13<sup>th</sup> of January 2013.

The National Parks and Wildlife Service's Fire Management Manual specifically states that "*A back-burn should be conducted only when both fuel and weather conditions are suitable for the containment of the burn.*" (Response 4.11.1 Item 878) and should not be lit if "*long-distance spotting is occurring or likely to occur*", "*control lines are inadequate for containing the burn*" and "*there is insufficient time and resources available.*" (Response 4.11.3 Item 884) The escape of the fire from the Warrumbungle National Park and the destruction of the western end of Timor Valley on Sunday afternoon the 13<sup>th</sup> of January, in my judgment, hardly supports a belief that long-distance spotting did not occur, that the control lines were adequate and that sufficient resources were on hand to control the back-burn. Again, Warrumbungle Area Manager Mark Fosdick conceded "*the weather beat us.*"

Mr. Fosdick, when interviewed on ABC television stated that "*our intent was to do the best we possibly could*" (ABC '7:30' 8<sup>th</sup> March 2013). I would submit to this Committee that ...

- failing to roster on adequate field staff in response to the forecast extreme weather conditions
- failing to patrol the park
- failing to erect clearly visible 'Park Closed' signs at the park entrances
- failing to erect a 'No Camping' sign at Camp Wambelong
- failing to ensure that campers were not present in the park
- failing to man the Woorut Trig Point watchtower at Siding Spring overlooking the park
- failing to prepare field officers for a rapid response to a fire outbreak
- failing to detect the original fire or have staff in the park for the fire to be reported to
- failing to aggressively attack the fire from the outset
- failing to continue fighting the fire once night fell
- failing to bring in the NPWS Arduous RAFT team of fire-fighters to assist with the fight
- failing to call in all Rural Fire Service assistance available
- failing on the Sunday to bring aircraft back in to fight the fire until the afternoon
- failing to advise the park neighbours of the growing danger to their lives and property
- failing to heed RFS and NPWS fire-fighter advice that a back-burn was ill-advised
- failing to follow the Fire Management Manual guidelines regarding Preparedness for a fire
- failing to follow the Fire Management Manual guidelines regarding not conducting a back-burn under extreme weather conditions

... fell far short of being "*the best*" that the National Parks and Wildlife Service "*possibly could*" do!

My above criticism only covers the failings of the National Parks and Wildlife Service during, and immediately leading up to, the weekend of the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> of January 2013, and does not include the alleged inadequacy by the National Parks and Wildlife Service in the years preceding the fire including a lack of systematic fuel reduction and management of fire trails throughout the park.

My guilt arises when I say to myself “What right have I got to feel depressed? Many Australians have suffered the ultimate pain by losing loved ones in bushfires.” But wish as I might not to – I still feel a sense of hurt and anger for the emotional and economic losses that have been forced upon my wife and I together with so many of my fellow Coonabarabran residents and for the loss of the wildlife and beautiful environment in and around the park. These losses could have been avoided, during the Total Fire Ban and park closure period leading up to the fire, if the National Parks and Wildlife Service had been less than casual with their duty of care and perhaps a little more vigilant. There is a saying “to prepare for the worst and hope for the best” the National Parks and Wildlife Service appears to have hoped for the best - but prepared for nothing in particular.

The opinion that I have reached with regard to the accountability of the National Parks and Wildlife Service for failing to prevent and then put out the fire before it grew to catastrophic proportions has been reached without access to “the other side of the story”. For the National Parks and Wildlife Service have remained mute and have not offered any evidence to those whose lives have been thrown into turmoil that the actions taken by them were indeed the best that anyone, and in particular the highly trained and experienced National Parks and Wildlife Service, could possibly do.

In closing I would like to publicly thank all who attempted to fight that catastrophic fire and those individuals and agencies who supported my wife and I following the fire. I now look around my old property and say “Sorry”. I still await a simple “Sorry” from those responsible for the management of the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service.

John Shobbrook

September 2014