

INQUIRY INTO WAMBELONG FIRE

Organisation: Warrumbungle Fire Action Group

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General Purpose Standing Committee Enquiry No 5

I am a landowner in the Warrumbungle region and as such was involved with some of the RFS landowner fire fighters. My husband and son fought in two different Brigades in the fire. It was evident in the early stages that there were many concerns relevant to the management of the fire.

Although I was not actively involved in fighting the Wambelong Fire, I realized what a huge community concern it had become and decided to document the events for two reasons:

- 1 To use my Psychotherapy training to support and hopefully unburden some of the Captains of Brigades and their wives, by helping them to talk about their experiences and thereby have a true and honest account of their situations and
- 2 To make known to those in authority the many problems encountered during the fires.

In some ways I became a medium for the issues of the seven Captains I approached. They were exhausted, traumatized and incapable of putting together a movement for change. As other like- minded people came on board, we gradually created a small group and have been able, through the assistance of the Shooters and Fishers Party, to achieve an Enquiry into this catastrophic event.

To follow, under the headings of Management, Prevention, Chain of Command, Local Response and Communication, I have collated evidence that will, I hope, define and clarify our brief which is to aim for change in procedure and best practice in fire management.

The following seven transcripts, for which I have permission from each individual to send as submissions, are attached, together with the submission that I have coordinated and written on behalf of our Warrumbungle Fire Action Group.

I am happy to appear before the Enquiry.

Carolyn Lyons OAM
"Parmedman"
GULARGAMBONE NSW 2828

Carolyn: We are at ...this morning with... and it's 27th February. Could I ask you, how long have you lived here?

Male: I am 63 years of age and I have lived here all my life, but I was away at School and worked away for quite a few years after I left School. But Toorweenah or the base of the Warrumbungles has been home for all of my life.

Carolyn: So have you had experience with previous fires here?

Male: Yes, as a younger boy, I experienced the fires and played a minor role in them. But then I have experienced the fires. I have lived here for 31 years. I was the Secretary of the old Warrumbungle brigade for 16 years and Deputy Captain for quite a few years then the Captain for 2 years of the Gumin Brigade. So basically I've lived here all my life and have attended quite a few of the fires in this area.

Carolyn: And how did you fare in the Warrumbungle fires?

Male: We weren't affected as badly. The Gumin Brigade – one of our members lost about 70 acres of land and fencing, but we were not badly affected. The bad day of the fire was Sunday 13th and the fire was being blown by a south westerly wind and the stronger it got – it blew it away from us. So we didn't have a major problem with that. During that week, it was still very hot, but the gale force winds had abated and the fire came back to us and we had a few moments when it could have been a problem. We also had helicopters helping us. Of all the areas that were affected, obviously the sides on the north, east and south/east and near Exmouth were obviously far more affected than us on the straight western side.

Carolyn; So are you happy to answer some questions which have been previously emailed to you for consideration?

Male: Yeep, I will do my best.

Carolyn: And what do you think or hope will happen to this evidence?

Male: **Just hope that something positive can come out of it.** Obviously, out of any drama like this one that has just occurred, there are good points and bad points, and you just hope to improve on the bad points. Also, the good positive things that happened can be recorded and hopefully work on them for fires in the future – you do have a better idea how to handle them.

Carolyn: Procedures

Male: Absolutely, absolutely.

Carolyn: How are you feeling after all this? I mean I know it was pretty rough here for a little while.

Are you angry, are you exhausted, are frustrated or are you just ready to forget it all until the next time.

Male: Well I have been on a holiday – out of the country- since the fires, but I know, at the start of the holiday, I know I was physically and mentally drained. The weather had been extremely hot, and one thing... well, being Captain of a Brigade, you do have to make decisions and you do have to live with those decisions. Some of the decisions, I clashed with some other people who were also making the decisions, but you have to live with that and you have to live with your conscience. That stuff does take it out of you, but I have come back from the holidays, it's rained, there's green grass growing again, so you get on with your life. **But if there is anything, my contribution - if there is something positive I can do towards a future fire, well then, I am happy to help the cause.**

Carolyn: Could you tell me to the best of your knowledge, what is the fire plan for the National Park?

Male: I don't know. I can't answer that. I'm not sure. I know they have graded tracks through the park that are fire breaks, but I don't follow it closely enough to know how regularly they are upgraded. The north/west trail that I am associated with and is closest to me – I know sometimes it's not regularly graded. But as far as the tracks or firebreaks through the park, I really cannot give an honest answer.

Carolyn: So you are probably intimating that they are not done annually to your knowledge.

Male: I don't believe so but I do stand corrected. Depending on the seasons and how wet it was, sometimes you might need to do them more than annually, whereas in dryer years, you wouldn't need to do them as frequently.

Carolyn: **It has been said that it's not a sensible thought to do it annually. In fact it should only be done when there is evidence of a fire, because it is too expensive. Would you agree with that?**

Male: **No, you need to have some of your important firebreaks regularly maintained**, but some of the less important ones could be let go a little bit. But as I said earlier, depending on the seasons, after a wet year they probably need more money spent on them. But your strategic firebreaks, and that's not all the firebreaks in the park, **you do need to have a series of breaks that are high priority ones** that you really hope would stop the majority of the park being burnt.

Carolyn: The statement has been made that in fact the firebreaks are pushed up again in order to prevent erosion after a fire. Is that your knowledge too?

Male: No – I don't know. I can't answer that.

Carolyn: Were you satisfied with the chain of command. Were you comfortable and secure with those in charge and giving the orders? Were the orders clear, comprehensive and practical?

Male: I wasn't. There was virtually total confusion at the start of the fire. We weren't sure who was At the start, the total area being burnt was all in the National Park and we felt that the National Park people should have been calling the shots and directing us, but they weren't there. The first night, on Saturday night at 7pm, all the National Park people went home, so it was only landholders, RFS people left there. The chain of command? I am really not too sure who was in command, but I think this changed after it went to a Section 44, but I don't really know who was in command. On those first couple of days, the main fire problem was on the northern and eastern side and the problem areas were heading towards the town of Coonabarabran and Bugaldie, and maybe the people in command were concentrating on those areas and just leaving it to the RFS people on the western side. We basically did our own thing for the first few days. But then there were orders coming out and people coming – you really didn't know what their positions were. Then some of them were only there relieving short term and then they would be gone.

Carolyn: So no continuity.

Male: No continuity and eventually we just talked to the other Captains and other responsible people in RFS on the western side of the Warrumbungles.

Carolyn: They would have been landholders?

Male: All landholders. But also they were there at the start of the morning until late at night and they were still there, so you could talk to these people and you had continuity. Whereas a lot of the people employed in Government Service had to knock off after a few hours, so you lost that continuity and after a while when you were tired and worn out, you just didn't bother to go on with it. You treated them with respect, and you listened to what they had to say, but then you just basically did your own thing with your own people.

Carolyn: Well there was no alternative was there?

Male: Not really, that continuity...because you'd just start a dialogue with someone and then they were relieved or they had a day off or something, so when they came back, things had

moved ahead so much you just didn't bother to try and start on the dialogue you were on before.

Carolyn: Apart from which, you had been on the road and on the ground for how many hours?

Male: Well it varied. For the first few days – the shortest day, I would probably have been for about 14 or 15 hours and then, I can't remember. I had the Government fire truck, and then I reported in when I was leaving took the truck home, if I did take it home, I usually reported back that night. I really can't remember how long the days were.

Carolyn: What we are looking at though is this 'a nine to five mentality' with the people you were dealing with. You were saying earlier, that you have complete confidence in the RFS – the landowners – you know what to expect of one another and yet the same does not apply to those people who are put in there by the Government and who are often unable, physically or mentally, to cope with these situations. Would you like to talk on that?

Male: What I found, trying to organise things – many of the farmers in this area had recently been involved in their harvests and 16-18 hour days are not uncommon for these people. They also handle various crises during the day. There's always machinery breakdowns, trucks turning up late, so they're in a mind set of just handling a series of crises during the day. They also have to set an example – most of them have people working for them, whether they are truck drivers, header drivers, farm employees, so at the end of the day, often they want their employees to be working the hours that they are working. So there's no use complaining to your employee; you have to set an example and if you have done an 18 hour day and you have done that for a few previous days, you still have to be positive and be able to still make sound decisions. And that's what the people that I spoke to – they had been through this decision making exercise before the fire and also they are experienced. They run businesses – they are used to giving orders and inspire their men and keep them going as well – and they're the people you want to deal with.

Carolyn; And you said some of them are qualified; while they are farmers, they are also qualified in other realms.

Male: Well, it was different in the old days, but people in their 40's to 60's following the war years, these people are basically baby boomers, they had an opportunity to get a decent education. They are running a business and they are just people that are used to handling private enterprise, working long hours, knowing when to try and get a bit of a break, knowing when they are going to be beyond the decision making capacity. Working long hours is second nature to them and it's not a problem.

Carolyn: These are the people that you can depend on, as opposed to people who are brought in as volunteers, to terrain they have never seen before and who then set up and start giving orders. You rely on the man of the land – you all rely on one another and you know what you're doing.

Male: The people that came in – the strike forces – some of these were from the Blue Mountains, the Northern Rivers, out in the West, Brewarrina and they played a role. They supported the RFS local people and gave us quite good assistance. But they didn't know the area. Some of them probably had some training but as far as the decision making environment, I just felt it was better to deal with people who lived in the area and had been in the RFS for a while, who were also farmers and decision making was second nature to them and who weren't frightened of long hours.

Carolyn: Well, we will move on to this question about Command Centres. Do you believe that there should have been a Command Centre at Gumin Gumin? Would that have helped the situation as you saw it?

Male: While the north eastern and south eastern side were in the greater danger but, on the Western side, it would have been nice to have had someone. **But to be quite honest, if it's a 'nine to fiver', you are better off without them.** After a few days Mr.... was made divisional commander and that was OK. So he could go straight back to the chap who was in charge of the Section 44. But to give Mr...his due, he worked long hours and was available at all times on the mobile phone, so they are the sort of people I involved myself with. **Those ones, with all due respects to the people who came in working 9 – 5 jobs, well you paid them lip-service, but that was about all. You didn't take too much notice of what they had to say, because the fire doesn't tell us when it's going to flare up – you just have to be there. So people who were going to have to knock off at a certain hour, you are better off not letting them play a major role.** Responsible farmers are concerned about their land and all the people who hold office in the RFS –the Landholders, are usually older, more mature and in a better position to make decisions. I found they were the best people to talk to.

Carolyn: Did you experience problems with decisions being made off-site, in other words by the people in town, which were not relevant to the situation at hand?

Male: Yep. Yep, and to be quite honest, we didn't take an awful lot of notice of what they had to say. If they weren't on site, I talked to the other Captains of the RFS Brigades and we didn't pay a lot of attention to people who had authority. You weren't sure what their position was and some of them were only relieving for a short time. You did listen to their point of view, but you didn't take a lot of notice of what they had to say.

Carolyn: There appears to be an inability of town and city dwellers to understand our situations. I quote a story where someone came onto someone's place and wanted to know what they thought their 'asset' was. The response was their grass, their stock, their fences. This person, who was an RFS representative and who was quite rude, was trying to get the person to say that their asset was their main house. People just don't seem to understand that our assets, or the way we run our lives in fact is due to the grass, our stock, our fences. Our houses are where we live.

Male: There was a little bit of that, but as I said earlier, to a lot of these people who were working to hours, we really only paid them lip service and went ahead to do what we felt was correct. To give them their due, a lot of them agreed with what we were doing. It was our land, our stock, our buildings which were at risk and surely we must have some idea of how we wanted to protect them. The hours that some of the landholders put in were astronomical; people who hadn't been to bed for two days – and that was their dedication and they're the people that you really need to discuss your problems with; and I was quite happy to do that. But then some of the other 9 – 5'ers did come in, but we didn't take a lot of notice of them, although they did have a position. But at the back of your mind, you have to think legally where you stand and you need to protect your back. As a fire Captain you do have to do what is best for the landholders and minimise the damage to the land. Those are the decisions you have to take – weather they're good or bad –you can work that out with the benefit of hindsight.

Carolyn: We were talking earlier about the question: where are the goals between the Landholders and the National Park.

Male: As I said, I was the secretary of the Bush Fire Brigade for 16 years and a few years ago the RFS would come to our annual meetings and said they were happy to come out and help us with our fires and our farmland, but they said, unless we were invited, they would prefer if we didn't go into the National Park. The reasons given were OH & S and potential legalities. We were happy to live with this for quite a few years and when I was asked to go to the fire on 12th January 2013, the person who rang was the Captain of the Warrumbungle Brigade. I said I was happy to go, but I said "Were the National Park happy and did they want us in there." He assured me they did. At 7pm that night, all the National Park people left and it was left to the RFS members. So things have changed and so if there is another fire in the Park at some stage, what is the understanding? What originally was on, seemed to change and the Captains and the RFS need to be notified of exactly what the situation is because there will be fires in the future. If we know where we stand then we are better equipped to help the National Park.

Carolyn: So you need clarification of the rules addressing Section 44s:

Male: Before it becomes a Section 44 we need clarification for small fires as well. If there is a fire in the Park, do we go into it? Do they want us to go into it? I believe there was a fire in 2001 near Mt Exmouth where a section 44 was called and they asked all RFS to take their gear and leave. But this fire in January 13, there was a section 44 called and they still wanted the RFS people to be there.

Carolyn: No continuity.

Male: Tell us where we stand. We are quite happy to help them as they were happy to help us. For legal reasons as well, if somebody was to get hurt it's important to know exactly where we stand.

Carolyn: Apparently, on a few occasions and on different sites of this fire, such as north, south, east and west, there was a pool of machinery available such as graders and dozers, but no game plan. Did you experience anything of this?

Male: Yep. There was a bulldozer from soil Conservation, sitting just out from the fire, about 6 days after it all started and died down a bit and we could put a containment line further towards the fire. But I had trouble finding somebody. The dozer driver couldn't start the dozer until he had authority. I rang RFS Coonamble and eventually was given authority to use him as long as we liked. There was no easy way of getting through. Communications were a bit of a problem. No problem with Coonamble, because I could talk with them on the VHF, but sometimes it would take an hour or two to reply; but the control HQ was in Coonabarabran and there was a problem there. It would have been handy to have a direct line.

Carolyn: I cannot understand why there wasn't a direct line. That is again the lack of management in the chain of command. You had people on site needing authorization.

Male: Yes, that is correct. The Captain of the Toorweenah Brigade rang me trying to get an overall view of the fire in the park. I explained to him that our priority ranking in this fire had been 4th or 5th. The Bugaldie people, Timor Road Warkton Valley had a greater priority and I agreed to ring back if we needed more assistance. I was thinking of the fire on the eastern side of Mt Bullaway that was coming back towards us. If the wind had got up it would have presented a few problems. That area towards Toorweenah became a greater risk than we were. The first day of the fire blew away from us so we were the lucky ones on the western side in the Warrumbungle fire.

Carolyn: Do have problems with mobile access.

Male: Yes. Where the fire started near Split Rock there was no mobile access at all. You learn to live with it out here and might have to get a truck drive to a hill make you call and return to the fire.

Carolyn: Do you think we should address Telstra with this problem, because it is a Warrunbungle problem. It is the 21st century.

Male:You hope to hell that it will improve.

Carolyn: It's been suggested that we could ask Telstra put something on top of the Tower that's already up there. It's got everything else and it was saved!

Male: I am a member of the Toorweenah Management committee which has put in various proposals for better reception - because reception there is non existent, but nothing ever seems to happen.

Carolyn: Do you think we could use this fire as a vehicle for that proposal.

Male: I believe so, but I know it's fallen on deaf ears – you eventually give up.

Carolyn: Should the RFS be in control of the National Park?

Male: They need to work out a plan. If they are not going to be able to maintain the present parks and the new parks which have recently been created, when there's a fire, then maybe they should be sold to private enterprise. The classic example is the Pilliga Scrub that's going to burn at some stage. A lot of that was a viable milling industry for many years and could have continued for another 500 years. The other one is Touralle at Bourke, bought for the water rights. The area was 200,000 acres of property, 5000 acres of water. The other 500000 acres is a fire risk. How do they spread their dollars to maintain all these National Parks? They can put covenants on them, but they must accept the fact that if they are not going to control the body of feed, then.. Also the Macquarie Marsh blocks, where some of the local graziers just run cattle to keep the fuel load down. If the National Parks are not going to keep the fuel load down, surely they have to let these areas go back to private enterprise and let the people in there who want to run a few stock. The Snowy Mountains is a similar situation.