

INQUIRY INTO WAMBELONG FIRE

Organisation: Warrumbungle Fire Action Group

Date received: 30/01/2014

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: I am with _____ this morning 21st February 2013 we are on top of a hill. It is very windy, beautiful country. we are in the mist of the Warrumbungles and the speaker is one of the fire captains who wishes to share his experiences with us. So how long have you lived up in this neck of the woods?

Male: Fifty two years

Carolyn: So you have been here all your life and your parents before you?

Male: Fourth generation.

Carolyn: Are you?! You were telling me earlier that your father started up the brigade in forty five?

Male: He was one of the early members

Carolyn: The history goes back.

Male: They were at another place before moving up here; they became members of the brigade in 1950 and they have been members ever since.

Carolyn: And your position with the brigade?

Male: I am captain at the moment - over the last twenty one years

Carolyn: How did you fair with the Warrumbungles fires?

Male: Direct impact on our property was none. We had about eleven thousand acres of our brigade burnt out on the Fridays of the fires.

Carolyn: And I know of course, you have had quite an extensive experience with the previous fires, not just in your area here.

Male: There's been two multiple section 44's: Pilliga, Taree, Inverell, Tenterfield, Victoria, Gilgandra throughout my time.

Male: You're a very experienced man, are you happy to answer some of the questions which have been previously emailed to you?

Male: Yes

Carolyn: What are you hoping will happen to this evidence?

Male: Hopefully it could be used to bring about some change that's needed in the Rural Fire Service. In the direction their going regarding the use of local crews and out of area crews it's not working at the moment. It's the same both ways I have been away at section 44's taking crews away and we ran into the

same problems when we go away. From the captain's point of view, all we want is some local input. We can't get any of that. It was on the other foot this time; we were on the receiving end and had out of area crews here who had never been here before and basically were in command.

Carolyn: So obviously there's a problem with quite a few things and we are looking at changing procedure if possible. So do you know what the National Parkes fire plan is? Would you have any idea?

Male: I have a broad idea but the actual internal parts, no. We are a member of the mountain group which incorporates The National Park and all the surrounding brigades. We meet once a year normally and discuss fire trails, areas which are going to be burnt out basically - group material.

Carolyn: Do you think The National Park has maintained the Warrumbungle National Park to a proper safety level?

Male: On our side no. There are no fire trails in place that would actually stop a fire on the southern side of The National Park.

Carolyn: Apparently there is a group system that incorporates the Warrumbungle and The National Park and the land owners. Does this work?

Male: The mountain group is based around The National Park and all adjoining brigades. It is then split into two sub groups, being the southern brigades and the northern brigades. It's a totally unworkable proposition in that there's only east /west access through the park. If I want to, if Gowan Brigade wants to go and help the northern brigades, it's an hour and a half's drive around the park. All access is limited – it's all through highways. It's just a totally unworkable system and has been proven again to be unworkable.

Carolyn: So you have no north/ south accessibility?

Male: None what so ever from the southern side into the park, none what so ever, from either Gowan Brigade or Belah Creek to get into the park, you would have to go around and come in on the Renshaw Way.

Carolyn: Due to the fact that the group system does not work together with the fact that you don't have north/ south access, what do you want to see changed to allow a better procedure?

Male: To me the only we can change it is to increase the number of bBrigades in each area of the park. So, we need to go for two brigades deep,so we have a pool of resources that are available on each side of the fire to deal with that fire, rather than relying on brigades from the opposite side to come to our assistance. More depth would allow us extra crews. My idea is if we had four sub groups, keep the overall management of the group,then have it cut into North, South and West (at least four brigades per group)we would have enough crews then to double shift it, which is so critical early in the fire. We would have more trucks available for that initial response we would have

better chain of command. We would have responsibility down to guys down on the ground -rather than somebody sitting in an office in town, not only with fighting fires to do with the National Parks, but within our own brigade groups as it is.

Carolyn: So have you been able to discuss this with the brigade group?

Male: I did it last meeting; basically I told them the system as it was is unworkable. They wanted to keep it going because they did not have enough group captains to allow more groups; it would take time for people to get going and they still wanted to keep the connection with The National Park so they were kept in the loop, basically.

Carolyn: So if you were able to get agreement on your proposition, would you be able to approach the RFS at a higher level to get it through?

Male: I think it only needs to go local level. It is only a local level decision. The zone is cut up into four basically; it's a re-allocation of resources; it's only a paper trail, but it would allow resources to be deployed in a different system.

Carolyn: Is it also based on man power?

Male: It would be if we got it in the other way. We would have resources there and man power available. They don't seem to want to call in outside areas. We need brigade assistance within our own zones as it is. You can't rely on National Parkes, they don't come and fight our fires and there is no way stopping the fires getting out of the National Parks, so I don't see the point of having a National Park group, unless they make it workable.

Carolyn: Do you have, as a result of your experiences, and you have had many, any concerns about the chain of command on site? Do you think it should be a triangle system?

Male: Where out of area crews are used, in combination with other brigades, my recommendation is that Captains ride with Div Coms. That allows the Divisional Commander the use of local knowledge. He then has access through the captain to the land owner, who can then provide the exact particulars of where they are. That would stop all the delays all the miss-placement of the truck, all the problems we have. **Very simply and as far as I am concerned, a task force shouldn't be a fire control centre unless it has a local brigade member with that task force to bring them on site - on time - every time.Simple.**

Carolyn: Were you satisfied with the lines of communication between the different organisations and the Volunteer Brigades? I know you are not, but what suggestions do you have to improve communications?

Male: **Communications need to be with the guys on the ground, not some bloke sitting in a ute driving around telling everybody what to do. There was no local knowlege being used, no information coming out of Fire Comm as to**

what the fire was doing - what their plan was. Basically we were responding to what was happening around us. We were chasing our tails the whole time.

Carolyn: So you weren't getting any direction as to the fire situation – you weren't given any information. Is this correct?

Male: No, nothing came from Fire Comms at all. No planning, no updates. Nothing. We didn't have access to their de-briefs – they were all held in town. We weren't part of any de-brief or any pre-brief. We were excluded from all information basically.

Carolyn: So what were you doing – fighting a fire.....

Male: We were responding to the threat we had in front of us.

Carolyn: That hasn't been recognised in any way, or communicated back to you?

Male: Haven't spoken to any body from the Rural Fire Service after the fire at any time.

Carolyn: And you are a member of the RFS and you are Captain of the Brigade..

Male: Yeah – been a member for 35 years and a Captain for 21.

Carolyn: So, where do you see your role as the Captain and a member, after this experience?

Male: In a situation like we had at the Warrumbungle fire – basically we were ignored. Where do we go from here, probably back to normal. We get a report of a truck fire we respond to the truck fire. We are there to protect our own country – our properties first. That is the main concern of the Brigade.

Carolyn; But there will be another fire in the Warrumbungles.

Male: Yes

Carolyn: And you children will be fighting alongside you as they did this time.

Male: As they did this time. All the children - the younger generation came back from Sydney to help their parents on their properties. Most of them – or mine are – members of the RFS. Yeah

Carolyn: And so they need to know that what you and they went through on this occasion is not going to be repeated.

Male: Hopefully. But it just seems to be there's no change since the last big Pillaga fire. Every fire we go it seems to be the same problem. It's just repeated everywhere. It's not a restriction on the equipment, its utilizing the

equipment with the local knowledge. It's trying to get the two of them together. It's not that difficult a problem to solve.

Carolyn: Well, It's based on communication?

Male: Respect. Using the local knowledge that's there, that's been built up over many years of farming the country – having the fires there. It just comes down to local knowledge.

Carolyn: Local knowledge and communication.

Male: Yes

Carolyn: And respect as you say. Just taking another tac, were you aware when the shifts changed, did the RFS replace their teams once they had completed their hours, and how long, do you remember was it between the onsite presence of the RFS between shifts.?

Male: Yes I am aware of the shifts system works because I've been away to Section 44's. I know exactly how it works. It's always been a problem, getting people off-site then de-briefed then back on site, has always been a problem. We, as Gowang Brigade didn't work at all with their system. The shift is normally a 12 hour shift, 8-8 something within that range. We basically went until we were needed weather it was 12 hours, 22 hours, 37 hours – whatever it was, we just worked that. The biggest problem with the out of area crews is coming in after dark. Locals can go in because they know the area, out of area crews are totally lost, whether it's getting there in the first place, getting on site, knowing where to put the break in, knowing which side the fire is on- all stuff that should have been done in daylight, not in dark. It happened time and time again.

Carolyn: Did they replace their crews?

Male: Yes, the crews were rotating over, but all the incoming crews had been re-tasked and continually they said "No that's not my sector. We've been given a job to do somewhere else. This is our job and this is what we are going to do." So patrolling was not carried out by incoming crews. Gowan doesn't have the ability to put multiple shifts on the ground, the way the Park group works doesn't allow that to work, so we were relying on incoming fresh crews to patrol burns that we had put in overnight. Basically they ignored them. That's what cost the fire on the Friday and the burning out of a percentage of our Brigade.

Carolyn. So that's again lack of communication and procedure – we are back to these two words again. Had they come during the day, you would have been more supported as local landowners and RFS members and Fire Captains. But they came at night, when there wasn't much to do, where the fire and the wind had settled a bit, where the heat had gone and then they didn't even patrol.

Male: But the patrolling should have been done during the day because the burns were done during the night. So, without having the crews on the ground early enough, people don't know where they are putting the breaks, the burns.

Carolyn: So that's why your children had to go up and show them?

Male: Basically Yeah, but even when they got on sight they wouldn't acknowledge that we knew where the trails were, even though we put the trails in all the previous day with bulldozers. No body had come out from Fire Comms and said- this is where the trails actually goes. They'd just drawn it on a map and handed it to the incoming crews who found out that what was there on the map did not meet up with what was on the ground. And then they would not take information from local Brigades. They just ignored us – they would not allow us any say on the fire ground whatsoever.

Carolyn: And so the fire got away.

Male: Most of the night was spent arguing over where the fire was supposed to go, but the incendiaries had already been dropped and the fire lines weren't put in. So it just delayed action. It ended up with our having to patrol next day, that fire lines were breached and we were back to square one again, looking for our next line to put a break in. Then, it got to the stage where it got too far out of control and Friday was the result. If it hadn't have been for some well grazed country and lack of fuel, it would have crossed the highway and done untold damage to the rest of our Brigade. It was just luck – nothing to do with anybody, it was just luck.

Carolyn: And lack, a great lack on behalf of the RFS and the Command Centre.

Male: Well they would not even acknowledge that it got across the fire line that it got away. Initially they said 'No – it can't, no it can't possibly.' Well we said "we're looking at it coming down the hillside.'

So, they failed to respond Thursday night, they failed to respond early Friday morning. It wasn't until crews started arriving Friday daylight, that we had enough crews on the ground to do anything with it – and then it just hit us everywhere.

Carolyn: You told me that for many years you have been advising National Parks to do something about the Communications Tower to prevent it being taken by fire.

Male: The TV tower is the hub of all communications in Central West of New South Wales. It has all our telephones, digital TV all the radios for RFS all Emergency services. There are about 15 -16 residents up near the Tower. If we'd lost that, we would have been blind in our effort to manage the fire. Ever since I have been Captain, I have been trying to get sufficient fire protection

for that Tower. Even up until Tuesday, there was no plan to protect the Tower.

Carolyn: And the fire started on Saturday.

Male: Yes it did. Saturday

Male: But there was no inbuilt plan of protection. The Tower is owned by private enterprise. No hazard reduction has taken place there for the last 20 years as far as I know – around the Tower itself. I inspected it Saturday afternoon, found it totally indefensible from a RFS point of view. It backs onto the National Park. There was nothing to stop the fire from the Tower to the point of ignition, which was about 9 ks north of the Tower. It was timber all the way - right up to the base of the Tower – and we were supposed to try and protect that. At no time have the people involved with the Tower made any effort to work with us to protect it. In the end it came down to bringing in NSW Fire and Rescue to baby-sit it, because we didn't have the resources to stay up there, because it's a one way in, totally inaccessible top of the mountain. But the importance of it seemed to have been forgotten throughout the fire until Tuesday, when all of a sudden, things went pear-shaped. They decided to aerial bomb the Tower with retardant on the Tuesday, repeated again on the Wednesday. They rang me Wednesday afternoon saying they were considering burning around the fire at 8 o'clock that night. Instead of that... it was incendiaries - they proposed we put a fire line at the base of the Tower and let it burn up to the Tower. But they dropped the incendiaries before the fire line was actually in place. They didn't even warn crews that were actually on the fire ground that they were dropping incendiaries. The people putting the trail in with the dozers – my daughter was one of them – PAUSE.....had incendiaries dropped in their area – without them being told. The landowners weren't told, the Brigade wasn't informed that it was going ahead, and they went in ahead of the fire line being put on to prevent it. There was total disregard to the Landowners, because it actually was on private property – it wasn't National Parks – it was private property. They burnt out all that property, all the next one -some of the next one, because the fire line wasn't in place. Simple as that!