

Submission
No 54

INQUIRY INTO WAMBELONG FIRE

Name: Mr Adam Clarke

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Partially Confidential

UPPER HOUSE INQUIRY STATEMENT – ADAM CLARKE

My name is Adam Clarke, I live at [redacted] Timor Road, Coonabarabran. [redacted] is about 19 kilometres west of Coonabarabran and about four kilometres before the entrance to the Warrumbungle National Park. I am a local earthmoving contractor my business operates out of my home address.

I was born in Coonabarabran and have been involved in the fighting of several bushfires. I have operated hoses, I have had training in hover and exit activities, I have trained and been certified by the Rural Fire Service and I am now engaged in running heavy plant equipment for the Rural Fire Service in the control of bushfires.

On Saturday the 12th of January 2013, at about 2:00pm I was operating plant equipment at the property 'Glen Eric' which is on Timor Road closer to Coonabarabran when the local Timor Road RFS fire truck drove past with its lights flashing heading towards the Warrumbungle National Park.

This grabbed my attention and I shut down immediately and because I had no mobile phone coverage I got on the landline telephone at Glen Eric and rang my wife [redacted] at my home to see if she could see any smoke from where the fire truck might be going. She had seen the fire truck drive past but couldn't see any smoke.

About 45 minutes to an hour later, whilst I was still at Glen Eric, I saw a National Parks small fire truck and a number of Land Cruisers drive past heading in the direction of the park. I then drove home.

At about 7:00pm or shortly after that, whilst it was still daylight, what I would describe as a convoy of about eight National Parks and Wildlife Service vehicles drove past my property heading towards Coonabarabran. By this time I could see smoke in the direction of the park.

Seeing these vehicles head away from the park I thought to myself "Where they f**k are they going?" I could see smoke in the direction of the park, I couldn't imagine that the fire was out, I knew that the weather was going to be even worse than what we had had on Saturday and the National Parks staff appeared to be pulling the pin for the day.

During Saturday night I waited by my home phone expecting a phone call from my local RFS brigade asking for assistance, no such phone call was received.

On Sunday morning I got up at about 5:30 am, there was traffic movement on Timor Road that I could see. I could still see smoke; the plume was about the same size as I saw on Saturday. I had an elderly female neighbour who lived on her own and thought that it would be a good idea to clean her gutters and sweep the leaves off her roof.

By about 11:30am the smoke had increased by an incredible amount. By 1:00pm to 2:00pm helicopters with water buckets were passing overhead heading towards the park. and I decided that it would be wise to pack up the kids and some valuables and for to drive them into town and away from the park.

I stayed at my place and ran hoses and sprinklers out in readiness to defend my property. BY watching the direction and intensity of smoke I believed that the fire was heading my way. Within minutes, my guess the time would have been about 3:00pm to 4:00pm, I could see flames in the tree tops to the north-west of my place, I could hear the roar of the fire and a tremendous black cloud of smoke filling the sky. I could also feel the heat from the fire increasing by the second.

My immediate reaction then was self-preservation as the temperature was becoming unbearable. The wind was cyclonic the air was filled with embers but it was the temperature that I feared the most so I jumped into my in ground pool and covered my head with a wet towel.

I stayed in the pool for about fifteen minutes and had trouble breathing as the fire was sucking up the oxygen around me. All around me it was dark with flame, possibly caused by pockets of gas, passing above. Emergency breathing techniques that I had learnt at Lucas Mining I put into practice and I believe this helped me survive.

Keen to do whatever I could to save my house I got out of the pool as soon as I felt it was safe to do so. I found a hose that was working and went around the house putting out spot fires. I spent several hours defending the house whilst I was doing this my feet were suffering from being wet and continuously moving about the house. By this stage my feet were bleeding. It was a very long night.

At some time late in the night I saw the Coonabarabran town service fire truck come over Blackburn Hill making its way, as I later found out, towards Siding Spring Observatory. I flashed my trucks headlights at them and tried to call them on the UHF radio by got no reply. They drove past and I kept on putting out spot fires.

About twenty minutes later my Dad, and drove into my property. I hugged Dad and he hugged me. He then helped me put out the fire in one tree that was still threatening my house. It was still breezy and the wind direction was changing constantly.

My Dad and [redacted] left in their fire truck and drove further along Timor Road and up Tibuc Road to save any houses that still had a chance of being saved. To get to these homes they had to drive around fallen power lines and all kinds of debris on the road. They are unrecognised heroes in my eyes.

By dawn Monday morning, having obviously not slept during the night, I knew that there would be livestock dead in the process of dying and that's when the most unpleasant part of my job began. I spent most of the day shooting badly burnt and suffering animals. Animals that were burnt carcasses and that I thought were surely dead could be heard to be snorting and moved their eyes.

The sights of peeling flesh and the smells from those suffering animals I can never forget. To this day, some nineteen months after the fire, whenever I smell a dead animal, even something as minor as a dead mouse, causes me to vomit.

On the Monday and for two days following, I saw dead livestock, native animals and most sadly family pets that had been incinerated. At no time during these three days did I see any National Parks staff on hand to assist with putting down or burying these animals.

On Wednesday the 16th I was burying stock in mass graves on many properties along Timor Road; I had a backhoe and excavator operating full time to cope with the numbers of stock destroyed. My priority was to bury any animals that could be seen from the road first, this was to prevent people and especially children, who were returning to their properties from facing the extra trauma of seeing these piles of charred animals. I did this before I even buried my own. I carted burnt stock out of gullies and creeks that feed into Timor Dam which is Coonabarabran's main water supply. Nobody asked me to do this but being local and knowledgeable about local waterways it was common sense to remove the carcasses.

It was a terrible task; the vile smell caused me to vomit in the cab of my backhoe day after day. I was emotionally very knocked about by this and to this day talking about it, as I must for this statement, brings on feeling of revulsion and depression. Most people think that the damage from the fire ceased when the fire was extinguished, this wasn't the case for me, I was in the thick of it and suffered up until Tuesday the 22nd of January when the final mass graves were closed over. By this time the carcasses of the animals were liquefying and the smells which saturated my clothing were indescribable. Clothes were thrown out not washed.

The memory of these nine days are a nightmare that continually haunt me. This was the dirty unseen consequence of the fire and there certainly were no National Parks staff there to help me.

Like many, my family and I have suffered tremendous emotional and financial hardships. This sentence is just words and my respect for my family and their privacy prevents me from spelling out the reality behind those words. Let me leave it at that.

The effects of this fire will continue to the point that until the NPWS admit their mistakes and supply an apology and compensation to us burnt property owners who have lost infrastructure, farm animals, children's pets and cherished possessions. The cleanup costs are bigger than you could imagine as the jobs carry on still to this day. I'd hate for any other family to experience this trauma.