

Submission  
No 50

## INQUIRY INTO WAMBELONG FIRE

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*Partially Confidential*

Wow where do I start. We decided to move for a tree change and chose the property formerly known as The Warrumbungles Holiday Camp at Coonabarabran . It was not operational at the time but we thought we could get it going and turn it into something that Coonabarabran would be proud of as well as us.

My wife and daughter moved here in July of 2012 and my eldest daughter stayed in Newcastle to pursue her passion of hairdressing. I was working at Onesteel doing two 12hrs of day work and then two 12hr shifts of dogwatch. Sometimes then driving straight to Coonabarabran and getting out of the car and working for 4 days here trying to get the place up and running then driving back to Newcastle to start the 4 days of shift work again. I lost approximately 14kgs in 6 months doing this. I officially left my job in Newcastle and moved in Coonabarabran on the 9<sup>th</sup> of November 2012 to commence our new life.

I had a friend who is a carpenter and his wife help us with the rebuilding of the place every 4 days that I came up to get the place going. His wife stayed with my wife and daughter for the 1<sup>st</sup> 2 months that they were here for support and help. Well I opened the place on the 10<sup>th</sup> of November not really ready for it but we gave it a go. We had 2 vans pull in straight away and they stayed for several nights. We were away. My friend who lives at Kenebri continued to help out weekly whenever his crook back would allow him. I had several other friends who came and stayed and helped out along the way also. We didn't have any time to socialize and never really met anybody from Coonabarabran other than people we asked to come and fix things for us.

The day of January 2013 came. We had no campers in the place this day It was hot and windy and as usual I was working at the campground clearing trees, raking leaves and clearing the gutters out. Around lunch time I went up to have some lunch and a rest. My wifes sister, partner and 3 nephews left on this morning around 6am to go back to Newcastle and to try and avoid the heat of the day. My wife informed me that her sister had arrived home safe and said to her on Facebook that she thinks there's a fire in the National park. So we put on the T.V the radio and I started to search the internet for anything about a fire. We could not find a thing on the internet anywhere, seen nothing on the T.V. and heard nothing on the local radio station. We thought she was a drama queen that sister in law how wrong we were.

Around 3pm I went outside to look around and noticed it was very cloudy, windy and hot but in the distance there seemed to be a small looking, just not quite right pinkish cloud. I asked my wife to come out and take a look and give her opinion of it, she didn't know what it was either. So I asked my daughter and wife to jump in the car and go next door to the Neighbours to see them and ask if it was a fire happening out there somewhere and should we be alarmed. The wife of my neighbor was there putting out sprinklers on their house and said yes there is a fire but we should be right as her husband was there fighting it. As we stood there on their lawn the smoke cloud grew bigger and faster and said to my family no way lets go and pack and prepare

our property. We went home and straight away I blocked up our down pipes and filled up all the roof guttering around our house with water, the very 1<sup>st</sup> camper we had was a forestry worker and he told me whatever you do if a fire comes block your downpipes and fill your gutters with water as this will save your house more than anything else, our house survived, I wet around the house moved gas bottles away and anything I thought could cause our house to catch alight. I moved my 2 Harley Davidsons down to the campground sandstone bunkhouse accommodation and put them in a room as we were told this building was virtually fire proof and my daughter put her Quad down here too. By this stage the smoke cloud was huge and blocking out the sun. We could hear the fire bearing down on us. My wife was frantically packing clothes, photos and valuables into her car as was my daughter. I came back up from the campground and started to pack car with valuables and the dogs and budgie. My wife and daughter were frantic at this time and already in the car ready to go. I was running around just looking at anything that may cause our house to go up and was still watering around when my daughter screamed at me to come on lets go she was hysterical at this stage and my heart dropped seeing her so terrified. So I got in the car and we left for town. The police were going in to my next door neighbours to evacuate her when we were at the end of our driveway and several cars were heading to town. With nowhere to go but a hunting friend of mine, we headed to his place but they were away at Port Macquarie, their daughter was there so we dropped off my car and daughter on their front lawn with her and tried to return home to retrieve my Landcruiser Prado which had a trailer on it full of my tools, chainsaw, whipper snippers, blowers and 10ltrs of petrol. It survived even with the fuel on it. We only got back to Mini Land or across the road from this place The Mountain Motel on Timor Rd and the road was blocked by the VRA. We were then informed that we had to go back to town and our house was already gone. The tears flowed and around we turned.

On our way back to town we came across Keith who had done some work on our place grading our road and he was at our place on the Thursday before the fire doing some tree clearing around the camp buildings that I thought were dangerous and a fire risk. I stopped and talked to Keith and asked if he had seen anything like it before in his life and he said no way Jason. He then asked us what we were going to do and we told him that we didn't know so he kindly offered us his place, to go and sit and wait it out. We stayed at his place for 2 weeks after the fire and have become great friends all of us since. We still don't know what we would have done without their generosity. As we sat at his place the choppers and planes flew overhead furiously the commotion was like a war movie happening. I just tried to keep my daughter wife together and be strong for them but it was hard. I was angry, frustrated and in disbelief that we never got a warning from anyone until we picked up our phone on the back of our bed head that we had the warning to evacuate. Our mobile phones only work in about 6 inch square on the back of our bed head for messages. If you move it an inch away from this spot service is lost. No one let us know the day before the fire was happening or that the next day at all. We

had signs up in our campground informing people that the National Park was closed and there was a total fire ban in place all week.

Well the day arrived for us to come back home and my friends from Kenebri came over to once again to lend support. My wife cried as soon as she saw them. We expected to find our house in ashes but it was not to be, our house had survived. The landscape was a black apocalypse. There was a big dead Gumtree that had fallen against the back of the house and was still burning towards the house, luckily Keith had bought up his water tanker and fire fighting pump and proceeded to put it out along with several logs still burning around our garden beds. My next door neighbor was here and was surveying the damage. My shed was burnt, but not to the ground as the fire fighters came in and put it out, our poor chooks and ducks were burnt to death, pet rats burnt to death, the camp ground was a mess, we had lost 16 motel rooms, a laundry, an industrial kitchen, a big hall and all inside it, an amenities block, which had a disabled toilet and shower and mens and ladies showers and toilets all the electricity, plumbing, powered sites, 2 BBQ areas, septic systems and in ground pool all bugged. The sandstone bunkhouse survived along with our barn but were damaged with melted down pipes, rafters burnt out, the corner of the barn building burnt off, septic tanks melted in the ground, lights melted, windows smashed and smoke damaged rooms the list just got bigger as time went on. The wildlife that was dead or dying was astounding kangaroos, birds of all types, possums, sugar gliders, goannas, lizards you name it was on the ground dead. Keith and I buried a lot of animals. There was a kangaroo that was burnt very badly at the camp ground I won't detail the injuries but my daughter saw it trying to hop and falling over bumping into things it had no eyes left. I had to put it down and it scarred my daughter who was already traumatized. Looking around at the carnage and feeling hopeless I can't describe the feeling. Being thankful for my house still standing knowing so many others had lost it all.

We opened for only 8 weeks approximately had big plans for Coonabarabran and now The Warrumbungles Bushland Retreat was now destroyed, what a tree change. What had I done to my family bringing them here. The government tries to encourage people to move to the country to start a new life and we missed out on the relocation grant by a 1km suburb distance. I had plans of creating something special, growing the place, creating jobs for the Coonabarabran community, which work is hard to find here if you have no skills. Blazeaid were wonderful when they came here it sort of kick started me to have another go. We fell through the cracks in a lot of the financial assistance available not being a primary producer, not losing our house, not losing our shed, not having stock etc. The charity organizations were absolutely wonderful The Coona Jockey Club, Rotary, Lions, The Uniting church, with their cash donations to us, as this is what we lived on and paid our bills after the fire. I also had to sell my beloved Harley Davidson that I built myself as the cash reserves dwindled until our claim came through which took 6 months.

When the Insurance assessor came to have a look he said immediately that we were at least 50% under insured. Great. We used an insurance broker who filled out our insurance policy with us in a conference call at the time of taking out our policy thinking this was the best course of action to achieve a fully covered policy. The insurance payout was not enough to rebuild place to what it was prior to fire. Though I was still trying, I replaced the septic system and thought I could get it up and running again just basically and still get some sort of income. So I worked as much as I could by myself to get it up and running again on limited funds. My wife was too depressed to even think about opening it again and still cannot. I had mates come and help rebuild bits and pieces with me and lend a hand.

Insurance renewal time. When we tried to reinsure the place we asked insurance in town to find us someone else as I did not want to deal with the same broker again. insurance tried for over a week to get us insured again and her words were to me that she was sorry but no one wants a bar of us and again my mate from Kenebri was at the table with me and I asked her to repeat it and put my phone onto speaker so he could hear it also. That was it, I gave up. Since then I have been drinking heavily and not giving a damn about anything and I've put on 20kgs. My wife luckily got a job at which is how we get by. I am a stay at home Dad. This has been the only time that I have not worked since school. I do not get any financial assistance from the government as in unemployment benefits. We have been looking at moving back to Newcastle and to try and move on from the whole thing. Who will now buy our place that is now useless?

Mr Jason Lawrence

The Warrumbungles Bushland Retreat