

**Submission  
No 48**

## **INQUIRY INTO WAMBELONG FIRE**

**Name:** Mr Tony Webb

**Date received:** 18/08/2014

---

SUBMISSION TO PARLIMENTARY INQUIRY- WAMBELONG FIRE  
BY ANTONY WEBB (CAPTAIN WARRUMBUNGLE BUSHFIRE BRIGADE)

I have been Captain of the Warrumbungle Bushfire Brigade since 1985 and in those years have fought numerous bushfires in and around the National Park. These fires include the 2001 Angel's Gap fire and the 2002 Bull Mountain fire which were significant events. My son and I were the third arrival and second crew to attend the Wambelong fire on Sat 12<sup>th</sup> January 2013 arriving at approx 4pm.

My wife and I run 2600ha of grazing properties on the western boundary of the National Park and were impacted by the Wambelong fire losing 500ha of grazing country and 3km of fencing.

In this submission I wish to address some issues relating to RFS procedure and practices. In brief these are:

1. Local brigade/Captain's Autonomy. As experienced in the Wambelong fire, timely and often quick decision making are absolutely necessary in many situations. For example in our case, on the afternoon of Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> January the situation on the eastern side of the National Park was catastrophic and our immediate requirements as requested through the RFS Control Centre would very unlikely to have been given any priority. Firstly there was an urgent need for a grader to grade existing fire breaks as soon as possible and this was organised directly by me with an operator from near Gilgandra to arrive and start that same evening, which did happen. Secondly, as the fire front was approaching from the East, back burning was absolutely necessary that Sunday evening initially to protect 'Gleneda' house and later to commence a north/south back burn in the early hours of Sunday morning when conditions were right. The local knowledge of Captains and brigade members, must be recognised and they must be trusted to make appropriate decisions and enact strategies in a more timely manner. On at least two occasions quick decisions were required to carry out backburns and procedure dictates that we request permission from RFS Control Centre. Conditions meant we could not wait for such authorization and they were carried out regardless.
2. RFS prepared to let us to burn. A member of our brigade while at the Fire Control centre during that first week, witnessed conversations and sighted a map, which showed The RFS's solution to controlling the Wambelong fire on the western side of the National Park was, a

proposal to 'let it burn' as far west as the John Renshaw Parkway from the Gumin Crossroads to Mt Terrace Road (or possibly even to Tooraweenah). If this proposed 'first line of defence' was enacted, a further 10 homes (at least) and numerous sheds and other buildings, livestock and hundreds of kilometres of fencing would have been sacrificed. An extra 7000-10000ha could have burnt unnecessarily. Fortunately for all the property owners in this area, common sense prevailed, with local decision making between the Fire Captains, Deputy Fire Captains and Group Captain and with the very capable assistance of local fire fighting crews who were prepared to actually attack the fire, the fire was extinguished with no loss of homes and livestock and just 2200ha of private property burnt. These decisions and actions were made on the ground by volunteers who have detailed knowledge of the properties and terrain with no assistance from RFS Control Centre who were prepared to let us burn.

3. Definition of property protection. Non rural brigades have a singular definition of 'property' being houses only. Livestock, sheds, machinery, fences and pastures are also very valuable assets. In attacking the fire where and when possible and protecting all these assets is of vital importance and in many cases is quite achievable. In our own circumstances when the Wambelong fire entered our property 5 or 6 out of area fire crews defended our house without the need to use a drop of water. Meanwhile about 10 local crews consisting of fire trucks and tanker trailers were prepared to take instruction from us as landowners and after a short 5 minute meeting, these brigades very capably and willingly defended our livestock, fences and pastures and in doing so, seized an opportunity to extinguish the fire on our property. Without their efforts the fire would most certainly have caused much more devastation on our and neighbouring properties with long lasting detriment to our livelihoods. This clearly illustrates the need for a change in the approach to fire fighting training and instruction in what property protection means in rural farming areas.
4. Nipping Fires in the Bud. Obviously getting on top of fires when still small results in a far more successful outcome and uses far fewer resources. For example in the January 2002 Bull Mountain Fire in the Warrumbungles lightning started the fire on a mountain top which was inaccessible by vehicle. The fire appeared not to do much in the first

afternoon. Earlier that day I requested a helicopter. I later learnt the helicopter eventually turned up at about 6pm at the Coonabarabran Airport. If this helicopter had gone for the short flight to immediately investigate the circumstances of the fire instead of going for the required 'de-brief' then maybe action could have been taken to control this fire that afternoon and evening in the benign conditions. The next day conditions worsened significantly and the fire turned into a 3 week, and eventually a Section 44 fire. RFS VOLUNTEERS, time is valuable, and top priority should be given to immediate and effective responses. RFS PAID staff need to cut the procedural red tape and give priority to immediate response.

5. Mosquito brigade. RFS must support the retention and use of tanker trailers and their ability for quick and effective response in grass land situations. They are numerous and very cost effective and are very useful in following a tanker to continually mop up in a direct attack on a fire. RFS could investigate the feasibility of designing a 1 or 2 person personnel compartment on the hitch frame of the tanker trailer to address the safety concerns.
6. RFS –Empire Building Bureaucracy? Ourselves and many other brigades are concerned the RFS is becoming a top heavy over manned government agency that is maybe wasting money in many ways it shouldn't be and that putting out fires as quickly as possible isn't their highest priority.