

**Submission
No 12**

INQUIRY INTO WAMBELONG FIRE

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Submission to GPSC5

Inquiry into Wambelong Bushfire within and adjacent to Warrumbungle National Park

Friday 3 January 2014

Today, as I start writing this, weather conditions are not unlike those of Sunday 13 January 2013 – soaring temperatures, strong gusty winds, minimal humidity and the country as dry as a bone. Fortunately there is no fire in the area this year. Yet.

I think it is important to give many sides of this story because this whole enquiry seems to be aimed at putting NPWS in the frame as being the blame for all that resulted from that catastrophic day. Perhaps there were those who bear more of the responsibility than others but it is easy to find fault in hindsight. The majority of NPWS were then, and are still, hard-working, responsible citizens who did what they could on a day when any fire, no matter how small, would have got out of control.

Sunday afternoon, 13 January 2013

My husband and I live in Coonabarabran, on the western side of town. At around 16:00 that afternoon we received a phone call from friends. They were on their way home from the coast, having received notification on their mobile phone that there was a bushfire in the area and their home was threatened. They asked us to drive to their house, on the western side of Blackburns Hill in the valley below Mopra to put their fire plan into action.

At this stage we were inside, with the air conditioning on, watching television. Our mobile phone was not switched on as we rarely use it and we were unaware of the enormity of the situation or of the evacuations. We had seen smoke but it did not appear to be threatening the town.

We headed out to our friends' place. At the top of Blackburns Hill, police and VRA suggested that we stop but, as experienced RFS fire fighters we kept going, arriving at the junction of Tibuc Road and Timor Road at 17:07.

The heat from the fire was intense, it towered above us and there was fire hundreds of feet in the sky with smoke rising kilometers. Everything was catching alight at the same time. The circumstances seem very similar to the 2003 Canberra fires – sheltered lee slopes generating a firestorm. There was no firefront. It was happening everywhere at once and was unstoppable. Fighting it at this stage was not an option.

We turned around and returned to town. Had there not been a wind change when there was, our house would have been one of the first in town to go.

Monday morning, 14 January 2013

The next morning we went in to Fire Control. We were already trained in communication so we worked many hours over the next fortnight, mainly at night, on the FIRECOM radio.

During that time many NPWS staff, both local and from other areas, were working just as hard as everyone else. All were well trained. All came back from work in the field just as dirty and exhausted as all the other fire fighters. Others worked in planning firefighting strategies in Fire Control and were well respected by all concerned.

NPWS staff lost as much as many of the landholders. They lost years of work on the tracks and on park infrastructure, years of planning and, for many, a lifetime of commitment. They were as devastated as the rest in the community. And added to this was a hostile element within the community who blamed them unfairly for the whole catastrophe.

Before the fire

I have been a member of NPWS Regional Advisory Committees since the early 1980s. I was on the State Advisory Council from 2003 to 2011 and the chair in 2010/11. While I have been in this privileged position I have become aware of how seriously NPWS takes its responsibilities with respect to hazard reduction and fire preparedness.

It is a fact that far more fires start off-park and burn on, than start on-park and burn off. In the majority of cases, fires starting on-park are extinguished on-park. In many cases, parks were established on terrain that noone else wanted because it was so difficult.

Staff who do the planning design pre-fire activities to give the best outcomes for people, taking into account their understanding of the environment and of fire behavior. Many are top of their field and respected internationally. They know that hazard reduction involves more than just burning off.

In areas set aside for conservation purposes, hazard reduction does not include grazing by domestic stock. Heavy grazing is not as effective as some claim as a means of controlling a fire like this. Properties along Warkton Road and Chadwick Downs were burnt out in spite of grazing.

I have also seen how rapidly NPWS staff responds to fire outbreaks. If they didn't put the source fire out on the Saturday afternoon, it was because the terrain made it impossible and firefighters would have been placed at risk. The decisions they made were not made in isolation but in consultation with experienced, local RFS personnel. The decisions were consistent with

established practice. Conditions on the Sunday deteriorated rapidly and the fire escaped.

In the future

There is an increasing rate of the occurrence of conditions similar to those of 13 January 2013 as an effect of Climate Change. The facts of the science speak for themselves. Governments and agencies can do their best but cannot prevent the unpreventable. People who live in this area have chosen to do so and need to accept that there are risks involved. Each property owner has individual responsibility to prepare for potential problems. Those that did seemed to suffer less damage than those that didn't.

The Coronial Enquiry will provide some answers so let's not hasten to exacerbate division and apportion blame where little may lie. NPWS and their reserves are important to our community, to the state and to the global environment.

Tuesday 28 January 2014

Conditions are still hot and dry. Since I started this we have had another fire albeit much smaller, only 2000 ha, but much closer to town on private land. As a result of the experiences of the previous January, everyone was on high alert and many appliances and planes were mobilized very rapidly. I want to stress that all have learnt from experience. For the second time the town had a narrow escape.

Yours faithfully

Jane Judd