

INQUIRY INTO WAMBELONG FIRE

Name: Mr Phil Henley

Date received: 14/08/2014

Phil Henley

I am 52 years of age and have been a member of the Warrumbungle Brigade since I started farming in the area over 30 years ago.

I originally owned "Gumin" and then moved to "Macanbar", the original family farm 20 years ago.

Warrumbungle Brigade consists of a number of properties on the western side of the national park.

On the Sunday afternoon of the fire I discussed the situation with my brigade captain, and he asked if I could go down the road into the national park to see how far the fire had advanced.

By about 7PM I spoke again with our brigade captain telling him that we were unable to get into the national park due to the fire being at the park boundary. Since I last spoke to our brigade captain his opinion and attitude had changed dramatically. He told me he had been in contact with the fire control center and to do nothing until the next morning. We could see the property on the park boundary was under threat and it was necessary that our brigade needed to go to the neighbours assistance.

Our brigade captain had had a number of phone conversations with the control center and was totally opposed to putting in a backburn, he was very concerned that brigade members could go to jail for doing so.

At that time on Sunday evening Coonabarabran Fire Control Centers priority had to be to protect the town of Coonabarabran from the fire advancing down Timor Road. Several weeks later the operations Officer admitted that on that Sunday evening, The Fire Control Center had actually hatched in on their mapping the area of land out to the Gumin crossroads as written off, burnt out.

Why then, on the Sunday evening, didn't the Fire Control Center give the local brigade Captain on that western side the authority and control to conduct the local fire fight in whichever way he considered necessary? And the authority to call in brigades from the Coonamble, Gulargambone, tooraweenah areas to assist instead of just writing the area off. I later learnt that Coonabarabran and Coonamble fire control centers had a very cool relationship which seem to have added to the problem.

The westerly wind provided an ideal opportunity for brigade members to carry out a successful backburn through Sunday night. This action saved a number of houses and farm infrastructure. We could have done with more local support. 3 trucks and crews from the Coonamble district were ready to come and assist us, but Coonabarabran Fire Control Center told them they were not required!

On the Monday a dozer and grader then put in a firebreak from where the backburn had progressed to the previous night, heading south to the national park boundary and linking up with a firetrail.

The wind increased from the east on Monday afternoon and just on dark the fire jumped the firebreak and was heading for "Top Walga" homestead. This was a desperate and possibly very dangerous situation as at this point we only had three crews on the fire side of the break. There was a national

parks officer there at that point but his hours were up and he was ordered off the fire ground, he tried to explain the situation to his superior over the radio and that he was needed and willing to stay as the fire had just jumped the break but was told if he didn't leave immediately he could lose his job. This is yet another case of the fire being controlled by someone miles away with no idea of the situation on the ground.

Some livestock on the property had been mustered into a set of timber cattle yards a hundred meters from the house, plus mobs in nearby paddocks.

A strike force of firetrucks had been ordered to take up property protection at "Top Walga" and "Wokolena" homesteads, approximately 10 trucks in total under the control of an out of area command.

The local Deputy Group Captain took control of local trucks and fire trailers, and proceeded to extinguish the fire and protect the livestock at the same time. This was a desperate operation. We stopped the fire before it got to the cattle yards and 200 meters from the house.

At no stage did the trucks on "property protection" venture up the paddock to help the locals pull up the fire, even when requested to do so.

This is a blatant example of RFS training policy dictating "property protection" from a Fire Control Center situated 70K's away and on the other side of the fire. It was obvious the Fire Control Centre was not consulting with the Brigade Captain and Deputy Group Captain on the local fire ground. If it had been, the strike force of trucks could have been utilized to pull up the fire and support the local crews.

In summary, if Coonabarabran Fire Control Center had consulted with the local fire Captains on the ground the fire could have been controlled much more easily and safely.

If it had not been for us locals ignoring the commands coming from the Fire Control Center, a number of houses and a considerable amount of livestock and property infrastructure would have been lost.

As more of these large fires occur it is becoming blatantly obvious that the appointed salaried staff in fire control centers miles removed from the fire ground, and with no local knowledge are ignoring the advice of local Captains and are becoming most dictatorial.

Rather, the salaried staff need to heed the advice of the local Captains and concentrate on supplying logistical support.

An additional issue throughout this fire was the job done by the fire trailers supporting brigade trucks. Due to the enormity of the fire, without the use of fire trailers the fire could not have been brought under control in our area. They are a very quick response unit and are often responsible for containing a fire at an early stage.

I wish to appear before the parliamentary Inquiry in Coonabarabran