

INQUIRY INTO WAMBELONG FIRE

Name: Clr Peter Shinton

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The Hon. Robert Brown MLC
Chair
General Purpose Standing Committee No 5
NSW Parliament House,
Sydney NSW 2000

Dear Sir

**Inquiry into the Wambelong Fire – General Purpose Standing Committee
No.5**

Sunday January 13, 2013 will go down in Warrumbungle Shires history as its blackest day.

53 Houses burnt; hundreds of sheds and outbuildings destroyed; miles of fencing down; family heirlooms and memorabilia gone forever and the emotional and financial impacts seriously testing out strong country family relationships.

And on the positive side we saw the great efforts of the firefighters both in the air and on the ground; the volunteers producing food, manning the radios and generally keeping the firefighting effort focused; unbelievable generosity and concern for the victims – not only by locals but Australia wide; and of course the efforts of Essential Energy, the Shire, VRA and BlazeAid to try and get us back to some semblance of normality.

I have a difficult position in this whole catastrophe, I am the Mayor of the Warrumbungle community, I am the Chairman of the Bushfire Management Committee; I am a farmer/grazier and have suffered the scourge of burnt pastures; and I am a member of the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) Northern Plains Advisory Committee.

In my position as Chairman of the Bushfire Management Committee I see the plans and hear the details of planned Hazard Reduction (HR) burns from all of

the Land Managers in our Castlereagh Zone. On various occasions I have challenged the plans from the Australian Rail Track Corp, Roads & Maritime Services and Forestry NSW.

The HR Plans of the NPWS are usually well researched, well planned and well coordinated with ample resources, staff and equipment.

I see the HR plans for all of the new NPWS properties being added to their estate through being a member of the Northern Plains Regional Advisory Committee; at the Committee level we also have an opportunity to make comment on the plans.

The thing that needs to be realized here is that a planned HR burn may take months or perhaps years to occur. Stable weather conditions over several days are a must; trained staff must be available and it is best done out of the prime holiday periods to keep risk of injury or panic to a minimum.

Any criticism for lack of HR burns may well be ill targeted as they all rely on opportunity with all of the stars aligning for the best outcome.

As the Mayor one of my worries is that with this inquiry we are pitching the NPWS one of the Shires big employers, manager of our tourism icon, the Warrumbungle National Park and developer of around 20 other enviro tourism potential attractions; against a small part of our biggest employer and income earner for the Shire the Rural Sector.

Now if the fire had broken out on private property and then burnt through the park would we still be trying to find a scape goat? or should we be more worried about the future and what legal consequences could erupt if that scenario were to occur.

Already I have witnessed a lessening tolerance between our NPWS staff and conservationists with other citizens when we should all be helping one another in this recovery phase.

I have comforted people who lost everything in the fire but believe it or not that includes people on both sides of the fence. The NPWS staff who have worked their whole lives developing and building the amenities in the Park felt the same devastation and are on the same emotional roll-a-coaster; given that they have none of the financial burdens.

When these fires started in January we are usually in our high humidity, moderate to high temperatures regime leading to probably moderate fire danger. The rural community knows this is a time that you can have your annual holidays. Our danger period is November to December, low humidity high temperatures. So when this fire started we probably had our lowest concentration of firefighting and community volunteers and I think we saw a mighty effort and we did the best that we could before our RFS called the pre-emptive Section 44 declaration.

Whoever makes a judgment on this fire and the calls for compensation will need the “wisdom of Solomon”. A fire breaks out in reasonably benign conditions and is not blacked out, then reasonable techniques of fire fighting practice are employed the next day and then we have a period of catastrophic conditions that lead to this disaster. Human error? Poor judgment and planning? Or another part of a huge new learning curve as we enter this phase of climate change.

Whatever your decision; the rest of us in this community are struggling with looking after all of our mates, while in my opinion you are trying to cleave a division between us.

My advice to our community is keep asking “how’s it going?” and stop and talk or stop and listen and we will all get through this.

Peter Shinton
Mayor
Warrumbungle Shire Council

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