

REPORT OF PROCEEDINGS BEFORE

GENERAL PURPOSE STANDING COMMITTEE NO. 5

CORRECTED PROOF

INQUIRY INTO THE WAMBELONG FIRE

At Coonabarabran on 3 September 2014

The public forum commenced at 5.30 p.m.

PRESENT

The Hon. R. L. Brown (Chair)

The Hon. R. H. Colless (Deputy Chair)

The Hon. G. J. Donnelly

Dr M. Faruqi

Mr S. MacDonald

The Hon. Dr P. R. Phelps

The Hon. L. J. Voltz

CHAIR: My name is Robert Brown and I will be chairing this evening's meeting and tomorrow's inquiry. On behalf of General Purpose Standing Committee No. 5, I welcome you to today's public forum. We are pleased to see so many of you here today and we thank you for giving up your time to participate in the parliamentary process. The committee was established in November 2013 to examine issues of significance regarding the Wambelong Fire that broke out in January 2013. This forum is a very important part of our inquiry. We know there is a high level of concern in the community about the causes and management of the fire. With this in mind, this session is about hearing directly from the people in the local community who were affected by the fire about the impact on themselves and their families and the lessons to be learned.

We learned a great deal when we visited the national park today and various properties. I would like to thank the property owners for their hospitality. We will no doubt learn a great deal this evening. This evening is for you, not for us; we will not be asking questions. Before I commence I would like to acknowledge the Kamilaroi people who are the traditional custodians of this land. I would like to also pay respects to elders past and present of the Kamilaroi and extend that respect to other Aborigines present.

We do not have our speaker schedule filled; there are a couple of places left. Anybody who wishes to speak tonight in addition to those who have given their names to the secretariat, could they please register at the back of the hall with the secretariat so we can make sure that everybody is in order. I will go through some procedural matters now before we begin. Speakers were asked to register in advance for today's forum. Those of you who have been registered to speak will be called up to the lectern in turn. That microphone on the lectern is on all the time. You will have five minutes to address the committee and your fellow citizens, and a bell will be rung at four minutes to let you know that you are nearing the end of your time. A bell will ring at five minutes to inform you that your time has expired.

Because there are so many speakers and we have limited time, I would ask you when you hear that bell to say thank you and sit down. In order to be fair to other speakers, we will have to be very strict in enforcing that timeline. I will say in advance I am not being rude but I will make sure that this part of the forum runs to time. If you are unable to finish your speech you can request to incorporate any remaining notes you may have into the transcript of proceedings. The proceedings will be recorded by Hansard. What you say is being recorded and that will be used and transcribed and will form part of the public record of the inquiry. What you tell us here today will help us to understand the issues and your perception of them and will assist us to prepare our report and our recommendations. The transcript will be made publicly available and will be posted on the committee's website, as have most, if not all, of the submissions already.

One thing I will discuss briefly now is the question of adverse mention. I remind everybody here today that these committee hearings are not intended to provide a forum for people to make adverse comments about other persons under the protection of parliamentary privilege. You do have parliamentary privilege here today because it is part of an official parliamentary inquiry. I therefore request that speakers focus on the issues raised by the inquiry terms of reference and avoid naming individuals. Broadcasting guidelines: We have had a request to have one of the members of the audience do the broadcasting tonight, but unfortunately we were unable to do that. If there are any members of the press here I will ask you to remember that you must take responsibility for what you print. If there are any photographs from the press—and I do not think any press are here—please remember that whilst it is okay to film witnesses or speakers and the committee, it is not okay to film members of the audience.

Mobile phones play havoc with the Hansard recording equipment so I will ask everybody in the room to turn your phones off or turn them to silent. If you feel you absolutely have to take a call please do it outside. I will strictly adhere to the timekeeping and we will try and give all those speakers who have registered their full five minutes. It will obviously take a few seconds between speakers. When your name is called I would ask you to come directly to the microphone, introduce yourself—that is, give your name for the record—and away you go, the time is yours. The first speaker will be Mr Geoff Pike, followed by Mr Kim Noonan. Please proceed, Mr Pike.

GEOFF PIKE, before the Committee:

Mr PIKE: Members of the public and the committee, my name is Geoff Pike. I am Captain of the Tooraweenah Rural Fire Brigade, which was heavily involved in the efforts to contain the Wambelong fires in January 2013. I have concerns over the effectiveness of management's strategies used at this fire. The approach of the RFS control centre in their limited communication with the captains in the western and southern flanks for this fire was a major concern. The local knowledge and many years of experience of these captains was not sought and, if offered, was largely ignored. This often resulted in poor outcomes, including the escape back-burn that destroyed structures and killed livestock on properties south of the TV tower complex. On the other hand, when local crews did make control plans they were sometimes threatened with legal consequences by non-local divisional commanders if those plans involved fighting unauthorised back-burns.

Out-of-area crews came to Tooraweenah at one stage to protect the town. I told them about the graded firebreak around the town and the ploughed firebreak over the hills and explained our plan: that if the fire broke through the ploughed break we would look to back-burn from the graded break. I was told, "You do that and you will go to jail". I would point out that sometimes the window of opportunity for taking effective actions is small and time lost through getting plans authorised can be critical. In some other zones local knowledge and experience was more respected.

I am also very concerned about this role of out-of-area RFS appliances and their crews. Many of these crews were stationed at homesteads around the fire front and were not moved from there. Local crews had determined the best place to attack the fire and proceeded to request assistance and were often refused by non local crews. It resulted in stretched and frustrated locals. One team of three trucks was asked to support the back-burning effort to save Mount Terrace. The leader refused and they drove away. It seems that these teams had been directed to protect homesteads and nothing else. As a result, large numbers of appliances were left inactive for long periods of time while people's livelihoods burned.

There should be greater recognition of productive assets of properties in the rural area and the need to protect them. Stock and vegetation are extremely important to landowners. Out-of-area crews should be assigned to and directed by local brigades if less property damage is desired. The earlier response to the initial fire is also of great concern. I feel that not enough resources were committed at a stage when the fire covered a small area. Although it was difficult for ground crews to access, good use of aerial resources could have substantially reduced the chance of this fire growing to the size that it eventually did, even given the extreme conditions. There was some confusion, at least amongst the local RFS brigades, about who was in control of the firefighting response.

As a dedicated firefighting body, I believe the RFS should have had full control, not National Parks, especially given the forecast conditions. In summary, local captains and group leaders are frontline firefighters; they know their country and conditions and they should have authority to control operations within their brigade areas, including using aerial assets when conditions are extreme. The RFS structures should be there to support, not to dictate what can be done and when. Thank you.

KIM NOONAN, before the Committee:

Ms NOONAN: My name is Kim Noonan. Thank you for the opportunity to speak. The executed plan for saving the broadcast site at Mount Cen Cruaich involved dropping incendiaries on my land, burning 5,500 acres of property and another six at neighbouring properties. The Warrumbungle Shire's Local Environmental Plan zones this area as RU 1 Primary Production and fire-prone. My boundary joins the national park and the broadcasting site. I was stunned that without any kind of communication, the plan to save the tower at any cost went ahead. The outcome destroyed more than 15,000 acres of land, stock and rural infrastructure, including a wildlife refuge containing native animals and threatened species.

Broadcasting sites are usually located on accessible peaks surrounded by vegetation, exposing infrastructure to fire and radiant heat attack. Installed in 1965, numerous fires in the area could have impacted this site but a change in weather conditions reduced the danger. Site owner, Broadcast Australia Pty Limited, is a subsidiary company of the Canadian Pension Plan Infrastructure Board. In 1999 the Commonwealth Government privatised 580 broadcasting sites under the National Transmission Network sale, of which 140 sites are located in New South Wales.

Fifteen years later, under corporate ownership, no hazard reduction or asset protection zone has been prepared at Mount Cenn Cruaich. Six hundred feet of vertical real estate and buildings are leased out. Broadcast Australia's client list includes emergency services, ABC Radio, television and telecommunication providers, the Government Radio Network and the NBN Co. As of today's date, no safety measures have been carried out to reduce fire impact on site for their customers' equipment. Infrastructure owners need to establish broadcasting facilities as stand-alone sites if under bushfire attack.

Had this site been lost, an area from Mudgee to Walgett and Nyngan to Boggabri, inclusive, would have been silent—no digital, no wireless technology. Asset protection is the responsibility of the site owner; it is an obligation listed under part 4 26B of the 34A Crown land licence. Total reliance on property protection by defensive actions from NSW Fire and Rescue and RFS endangered the surrounding properties. Are responsibilities as site owners exempt from property protection measures for their asset and surrounding landscape? Where are the State environmental planning policies for a code of practice for broadcasting and radio infrastructure facilities? This deficiency in legislation for the vegetation control around broadcast sites should be addressed.

This facility is situated on an isolated peak. Access to this site is one way in, the same way out—lacking any pre-emptive fire strategies. The Castlereagh Bushfire Management Committee did not execute any of their 2006-2012 management plan actions for this emergency broadcast site. Can the Rural Fire commissioner explain why? The importance of this omission has resulted in huge losses to farmers—mentally, physically and financially—by no mandatory fire prevention management for over a decade by this public company. Damages sustained in the 2009 Victorian fires at Broadcast Australia's Mount Tassie site highlight the need for government involvement. Five years later a royal commission and multiple section 44s and still broadcast site safety has not been addressed. The Government needs to incorporate preventative bushfire recommendations for broadcasting sites as part of its critical infrastructure resilient strategies.

Mr SELMES, before the Committee:

They say telling your story helps you heal, so this is my story. Prior to the fire it got so dry and hot in the mountains. Rain was building up but would move elsewhere to fall. The dams were drying up, we were feeding some of our younger cows with calves. I hired a dozer driver, put in a couple of bigger dams and cleared some tracks that could be used for a fire break if needed. A few weeks before Christmas two National Parks workers knocked on the door to say they were going to walk part of echo boundary to check the fuel load as they may do a burn later in autumn.

We have owned our place for nine years, only living there for three, but in that time there was no hazard reduction that we know of in the park. We got an inch of rain on Christmas Day and decided to take off for a bit. A couple of days away and I was very anxious to get back. I had a bad feeling about the fire danger. We had relatives and friends wanting to come camping, shooting and bike riding for the holidays but we said no, it is just too dry. You just had the feeling an accident or poor judgement could start a fire. It was better to stay put and pray for a break in the weather, as everyone on the land knows.

On Saturday 12 January 2013 a lady knocked on our door about 3.00 p.m. and she told us the fire was in the national park towards the woolshed. She could not find anyone to report it to. I called 000 and reported the fire, and they said they would get the RFS to check it out. I went to investigate and found a fire raging up the hill from the creek on the woolshed side of Wambelong campground, with no-one in attendance. I returned to my family, driving 14 kilometres and not passing another vehicle, told them what I found and to contact our neighbour who was away at the time. That afternoon planes were flying over. I assumed they were water bombing. Around 7.00 p.m. things quietened and we kept watch on it through the night from a high point. It seemed to be just trickling along.

Come morning there was no early action and, being concerned about weather predictions, I drove back to Wambelong about 8.30 a.m., to find four National Parks workers just arriving after a briefing in town. They were preparing to do a back-burn. I was told I had nothing to worry about and they needed to get on with it. They had a helicopter for backup if needed. That afternoon our neighbour called and said it was out of control and we would have less than an hour. We were busy running sprinklers and packing a few essentials in the cars. We have no family in Cooma and asked to stay with friends. My wife's mother and our two boys left, then my wife. I stayed for a bit but I got the message on my mobile to evacuate. With the Victorian fires still fresh in our minds, we left alive but with nothing else.

As I have said, we are neighbours with the national park, often getting calls about baiting or aerial shooting, but there was no call to tell us of the fire getting out of control and the fact it had enough fuel in front of it to wipe us off the map. The Wambelong fire destroyed everything, our home, our livestock. We have 3,600 acres. The fire ripped through the entire property in a few hours. It was like the aftermath of an atomic bomb. I work in the mining industry and I have done contract work in the park. Everything you do has to have a risk assessment. I am sure that putting all resources into putting the fire out on the Saturday afternoon and night would have much less risk than doing a back-burn on Saturday the 13th in catastrophic conditions with strong winds and temperatures at 46 degrees.

The fire burnt that hot it destroyed all vegetation and wildlife. Then a week later we had very heavy rain. The flood conditions caused massive erosion, silting of dams, closing of springs, pollution of water, more damage to fencing and unparalleled germination of the livestock toxic plant darling pea. We are left to get on with our lives and jobs in the aftermath of total devastation. We look to get funding for clean-ups, only to be told we make more than 50 per cent of our income off farm. We need just compensation. That day, 13 January, changed our lives forever. One and a half years on, we are still homeless but trying to get on with life and clear the dark clouds from our minds.

I would sincerely like to thank friends, neighbours, St Lawrence Parish and Rotary. These uncontrolled fires are happening too often in national parks and State forests. The questions need to be asked and answered. Thank you. I have some photos here that I would like to give the Committee if that is all right.

Documents tabled.

Mr WEBB, before the Committee:

My name is Tony Webb. I have been captain of the Warrumbungle bush fire brigade since 1985. In the Wambelong fire we lost 500 hectares of grazing country and three kilometres of fencing but no livestock. In the submission I wish to address some issues relating to RFS procedure and practices. The first point is headed "Local bridge 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 January the situation on the eastern side of the national park was catastrophic, and our immediate requirements as requested through RFS control centre were 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 myself, with an operator from Gilgandra to arrive and start the same evening, which did happen. Secondly, as the fire front was approaching from the east, back-burning was absolutely necessary on that Sunday evening, initially to protect our house and later to commence a north-south back-burn in the early hours of Monday 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 back-burns, and procedures dictate that we request permission from the RFS control centre. Conditions meant we could not wait for such authorisation, and we had to proceed regardless. Point number two is headed "RFS prepared to let us burn". A member of our brigade, while at the fire control centre during that first week, witnessed conversations and sight of 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 Gunnar crossroads to Mount Terrace Road and possibly even as far as 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 7,000 to 10,000 hectares could have burnt unnecessarily. Fortunately for all property owners in this area, common sense prevailed, and with local decision making between the fire captains, deputy fire captains and the group captain, and with the very capable assistance of local firefighting crews that were prepared to attack the fire, the fire was extinguished with no loss of homes and livestock and just 2,200 hectares 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 the RFS control centre which was prepared to let us burn. The third point is headed "Definition of property protection". Nine 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 quite achievable. In our own circumstances when the Wambelong fire entered our property five or six out-of-area 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 instructions from us as landowners and these crews very capably and willingly defended our livestock, fences, 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 all our livelihoods. This clearly illustrates the need for a change in approach to firefighting training and instruction in what property protection means in rural farming areas. Thank you.

Mr LAMBELL, before the Committee:

My name is Keith Lambell. I am a member of the RFS and hold the position of captain in the Tonderburine RFS brigade, which is located 60 kilometres west of Coonabarabran. I attended the start of the fire on Saturday at about 5.00 p.m., and we were stood down by 7.00 p.m., although the fire was still burning on an inaccessible ridge. I questioned why the National Parks and Wildlife Service did not put more resources into the fire on that day based on the forecast for the following day. No smoke was visible when I left home, which is 15 kilometres from the national park on the western side. I was in charge of a fire truck at the visitors centre and responsible for two other firefighters on Sunday the 13th. Why did the NPWS start a back-burn when the forecast for the day was said to be catastrophic?

I asked the question: why did they not put more resources into the fire which had started on the Saturday and was under control but still burning? Why did they—the National Parks and Wildlife Service—start a back-burn when the forecast on the day was said to be catastrophic? I ask the question: Why did they not put more resources into the fire that had started on the Saturday and was under control, but still burning? They lost control of the fire when the wind changed at 11 a.m. Burnt kangaroos were sitting in a creek and birds were falling out of the sky like bombs. Their back-burning had become a raging inferno. They called us to evacuate back to the information centre where we were ordered to stay in our non-air-conditioned truck while a wall of fire went over the visitors centre and our truck. We survived through sheer fear.

When the smoke lifted the visitors centre was still standing. We could have saved that building. There were enough resources on hand to save it. We heard the comment, "Let it go—we cannot do anything about it." Why were we then sent down to the amenities site to put out the fire? Both exits were cut off by fire. However, one Rural Fire Service [RFS] fire truck was taken out under the escort of a front-end loader. We wanted to get out too, obviously, but we were ordered to go back to the amenities block. There was no communication to assist us to get out of that dangerous situation. The—the National Parks—did their communication by UHF. We have never been supplied with hand-held radios, even after many requests. Things could have been very different. Three men, managing two hoses and a pump, could not use the radio in the truck. We need to be fitted with hand-held radios.

We could hear the RFS command centre talking about airlifting us out, but those ideas seemed to fizzle when they began concentrating on the observatory. We had been fighting the fire since 7.00 a.m. on Sunday 13 January and we finally drove out, with the permission of National Parks personnel, at 10.30 that night. We have heard the quote, "It was a good fire." Well, you nearly had three RFS volunteer fatalities that day. It was sheer luck that we survived and all due to the fact that the National Parks and Wildlife Service would not listen to local input from volunteer landholders about the risk of back-burning in those conditions. Never again will I attend a national park fire, if that agency is in charge. Thank you.

CAROLYN LYONS, before the Committee:

If you want to change the world, live in it first. We do live here and things need changing. Members of the Committee, good evening: My name is Carolyn Lyons, OAM. I am a rural woman. I did not fight the fire, but I am passionate about seeing that justice is done. I have spent over 18 months investigating, collating, assessing and interviewing. The recorded transcripts you have received as submissions are verbatim and cannot be overlooked. They are 120 pages of firsthand experiences by seven brigade captains and their wives, which tell the story of the horrific events. Our purpose as a group, as we have consistently stated, is to create changes in procedure and better management. Surely after such a disaster we should all be looking to achieve the same results. The Rural Fire Service [RFS], the National Parks, the landholders must unite to create a better outcome, must seize the positives and try to break the mould of negativity, which is palpable in this area in particular.

To examine this fire in isolation would be to ignore the abysmal failures of the current Bushfire Act 1997, native vegetation legislation, localised bushfire management plans and the RFS. These are outdated and ineffective structures. We are not only presenting facts relating to the Wambelong fire but to other States, as evidenced by submissions from Victoria, Canberra, Cooma, Port Stephens, the Blue Mountains, Western Australia and Tasmania. Changes in legislation are required. We are laying our honesty and our integrity at your feet and ask that you take our statements, collate them and evaluate them, and present your findings to a higher level where such changes can be implemented. The lack of respect and the patronising manner shown by some paid staff of the National Parks and the RFS to our local landholders, questioning their experience, their knowledge and their ability both during and post the fire, is unacceptable. Incidences of threat, intimidation and bullying are unacceptable—and there have been quite a few.

There was evidence of significant ineptitude shown by staff of both those agencies, regardless of advice based on common sense and experience. As one volunteer stated, "We paid lip-service to imbeciles." That comment obviously did not apply to everybody. Zone management by the RFS during the fire requires accountability. Committee management and appointments require transparency. The pain, loss and suffering emanating from these experiences is a given, but believe me it is ongoing. I can see that we need a mental health team for this area, and I will organise one. "Our serious concern is that the RFS is slowly changing into a paid workforce, which is having a detrimental effect on the volunteer ethos and causing disenchantment and resignation by experienced volunteers"—and that is a quote from a high-ranking volunteer. And who pays for these wrong decisions? Not the paid staff. In fact, it is the landholders, the volunteers.

You already know the facts of our losses and not the least the precious livestock, our livelihood. This community did not lose a life. However, you can thank the landholders for that. There are very many disturbing personal accounts. In relation to hazard reduction, where does the responsibility lie for that in the future? "We must prevent fires rather than fight them"—that is a quote from members of the esteemed Stretton Group in Victoria. It is ironic that two years ago this almost identical upper House Committee conducted an inquiry into the management of our public land. The lock-up-and-leave mismanagement of our national park estate was a major issue in that inquiry. The fire here was not contained. Due to the extreme publicised weather conditions, coupled with the huge build-up of fuel in the park, it led to a catastrophic event. We must learn a lesson from this and other fires, and we rely on your Committee to propose procedural changes to reduce the risk of such destruction occurring again.

What do I hope from this inquiry? I hope that this community, which also represents many other damaged communities, will be heard: That you, as our representatives in this democracy, will listen, accept and use your positions to promote necessary change. I thank you.

CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Lyons. That was excellent.

JOHN SHOBBROOK, before the Committee:

Good evening. My name is John Shobbrook. I am a retired observatory manager from the Siding Spring Observatory, a former detective inspector and senior investigator with the Federal Bureau of Narcotics and the Australian Federal Police. On Sunday 13 January 2013, my wife and I lost our home, our possessions and the retirement future that we had planned. We were not in Coonabarabran—I was in Brisbane for an appointment with my cardiologist—when the fire came through, so we did not save a single photograph, document, memento or treasured anything from the house. As one of the property owners who has suffered considerably as a result of the fire, it is my hope that this Committee can provide answers to the allegations that have been raised from the people that I have spoken to, the documents that I have read, and the inquiries that I have made over the past 19 months.

Those disturbing allegations include that the National Parks and Wildlife Service failed to roster on adequate staff in response to the threat from the forecast extreme weather conditions; failed to adequately patrol the park prior to the outbreak of the fire; failed to erect clearly visible "Park Closed" signs at the park entrances; failed to erect "No Camping" signs at the Camp Wambelong campsite; failed to ensure that campers were not present in the park; failed to man the Woorut Trig Point lookout at Siding Spring Observatory overlooking the park; failed to prepare equipment and position field officers for a rapid response to the fire; failed to detect the original fire, or have staff in the park for discovery of the fire to be reported to; failed to aggressively attack the fire from the outset; failed to continue fighting the fire once night fell; failed to bring in the National Parks and Wildlife Service arduous remote area firefighting team [RAFT] of firefighters to continue with the fight during the night; failed to call in all Rural Fire Service assistance that was available; failed on the Sunday to bring aircraft back in to fight the fire until the afternoon, when it was too late for those aircraft to extinguish the fire; failed to advise the park neighbours of the fire outbreak and the growing danger to their lives and property; failed to heed Rural Fire Service and National Parks and Wildlife Service firefighter advice that a back-burn was ill-advised; failed to follow the National Parks and Wildlife Service Fire Management Manual guidelines regarding preparedness for a fire; and failed to follow the National Parks and Wildlife Service Fire Management Manual guidelines requiring them not to conduct a back-burn under extreme weather conditions.

Not one item on this list of failings was beyond the capability of the National Parks and Wildlife Service to carry out, nor was any failing due to a lack of resources or personnel available to the National Parks and Wildlife Service with a duty of care to the Warrumbungle National Park. Indeed, all of the failings are standard operating procedures that either were not performed or were actions performed in contravention of the procedure manual. The list of errors covers only the period immediately leading up to and during the weekend of 12 and 13 January 2013. I have not touched upon the alleged inadequacy of the National Parks and Wildlife Service, in the decades preceding the fire, to conduct fuel-reduction burns or to maintain fire trails throughout the park.

With regard to patrolling the park, manning lookouts and positioning field staff and equipment in rapid response locations, the National Parks and Wildlife Service Fire Management Manual 2012-13 advises that staff consider each of these responses during periods of severe and extreme fire danger ratings. The National Parks and Wildlife Services Warrumbungle area manager admitted in his own words that they were facing "the worst weekend of the year with really terrible weather", yet apparently only two staff were on duty—one, a ranger, who spent the lion's share of her time in the National Parks office in the township of Coonabarabran, some 39 kilometres from where the fire started, and the other, who was not a ranger, was working in the park's visitors centre.

In closing, I would like to thank all who fought that catastrophic fire, including the staff of the National Parks and Wildlife Service. But I ask them, in the light of the training and experience that they have had: How did it get to this? Thank you very much.

PHILIP HENLEY, before the Committee:

I would like to thank you for this opportunity to raise a few questions. From the start, was the Wambelong fire a combination of missed opportunities and poor deployment of resources? Why did the Coonabarabran Fire Control Centre on the Sunday night of the fire have a let-them-burn attitude to the western side of the fire? We fully understand the catastrophic conditions on the eastern side, with Coonabarabran under threat and resources stretched past the limit, but why write off the western side? The area, from the national park to Gumin, south to Dooroombah, had already been hatched in as land that was expected to burn. I quote, "No plan to save terrain within that hatched area, this (the John Renshaw Parkway road) was the first line of defence and no plan to fight the fire until those roads. All land was expected to burn."

This area contains approximately 10,000 hectares, livestock, fences, sheds, wildlife such as wallabies and koalas, and 14 occupied homes. The Coonabarabran control centre said, "We had no way of giving you any support", but at least three trucks with full crews in Coonamble were ready to come. They were told they were not required—"This is our fire." The area in question is fully within the Gilgandra shire. Where was the Gilgandra fire control centre? The westerly winds and cooler night temperatures were an opportunity to contain this fire. The forecast for strong south-easterly winds the next day meant that action was needed immediately, with no time to wait for an inspection from officials from Coonabarabran that were hours away. A small team of locals seized the opportunity for a back-burn. They were threatened with jail; some had to negotiate a manned roadblock and the threat of police charges. They seized an opportunity to limit this disaster, so why cannot fire control give more support to the ones on the ground who know the situation?

Asset protection should be more than just the house. The house may be worth more than the livestock on the property, and in some cases a single item of farm machinery may be worth twice the value of the house. A strike team of about 10 trucks were on property protection at Top Walga and Wokolena when the local brigades contained the fire on a very large front, with a combination of local brigade trucks and private tanker trailers. Why would not any of the strike teams on property protection assist the local fire-fighting even when the locals were in desperate need of help and the house threat was low; even when two local trucks ran out of water and in a desperate bid to stop the fire on a creek and begging for help? The strike teams stayed in formation around their designated houses. They were observed training and practising for competitions. As important as training is, does it now take precedence over fighting a fire? I have no doubt some of the firefighters on property protection that night were keen to get into the fire-fight, so why were they stopped?

These fire trailers were critical in stopping the Wambelong fire on the western side. They are cost-effective, quick-response units, so why does the RFS want to cut their funding and phase them out? We must thank the Gilgandra Shire for their continued support in the repairs and maintenance of these fire trailers. In conclusion, is it not a fundamental right for someone to protect their property and to come to their neighbours' aid when in need? We were denied these rights when our friends and neighbours from the Western Brigades were turned back and when we were threatened with jail if we attempted a back-burn to save property, when Gilgandra Fire Control had a number of brigades available but was silent. Where was Gilgandra in our time of need? We all knew this monster was going to exit the national park on many fronts and at various times, so why did fire control not use local knowledge of the people on the ground to control it? Thank you.

Mr SULLIVAN, before the Committee:

There have been so many stories here of harrowing experiences, that I will not keep you long. I would like to thank everybody that donated towards the Mayor's fund and the fund that was raised by the Coonabarabran Jockey Club. They did an excellent job and I am sure they were well received. Thank you.

MARGARET COOK, before the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak. My story is really very personal. I am Margaret Anne Cook. I live on Timor Road and back onto the national park. We were at home on Sunday and were not aware of a fire. We had no warning of the fire until it was coming down the mountain toward us. We finally got a phone message on the landline to tell us that the fire was there, and that was the very first inkling of a fire that we had. Warnings had been sent out many hours before on mobile phones, but everybody knows the mobile phones do not work along our section of the Timor Road. Why was the landline not resorted to much earlier?

I had just retired from 51 years of nursing. I am a mental health nurse, which put me in very good stead to care for my husband, who had Alzheimer's. We were doing very well, and then the fire came and destroyed the only familiar environment that he had to exist in. as many of us know, your familiar environment is a key factor in keeping someone with Alzheimer's well. Once our house was completely destroyed I had no familiar environment. Sometimes it was respite care; sometimes it was living in a little-bitty caravan. His condition deteriorated very, very rapidly. I believe it has led to his premature death, so in my mind the fire is responsible for his death far more prematurely than it need have been. That is really all I have to say. Thank you.

FIONA SELMES, before the Committee

I am Fiona Selmes and I am going to start with a letter from Charlie:

On the 13th of January there was a fire in the Warrumbungle National park and it was furious. It burnt everything!! The fire tore through houses like there was nothing there.

One afternoon a woman knocked on our back door and said that there was a fire in the National Park and none of the farmers knew about it. There were no rangers or workers at the Information Centre. A little piece of a four paper was placed on the side of the road stating that the park was closed. Mum rang the fire brigade but they didn't arrive until about half an hour later. When they got there the firemen just sat there and watched it burn.

That afternoon we packed as much as we could but we couldn't take everything. There were lots of possessions left behind. We got some clothes and our photos and our pillows. I also got the washing basket and put the puppies in it and we could only take two dogs, Butch and Jess. We had to leave behind B.J. and Holly. We left them down at the hut. Holly broke the chain but the fire was too fast and burnt her, B.J. stayed there but a battery blew up and killed him. Before the fire got really close we all wet the roof with hoses and put sprinklers on the verandah and parked dad's car in the backyard and put sprinklers on it to keep the ground nice and wet but the fire was too hot and burnt everything.

When we went back to the house when the fire was put out there was barely anything left. Our family lost everything. We lost lots of cows and calves and also our bull. We also lost all our Dorper ewes and their lambs. We lost two dogs, some chickens, our house, all of Jayden and my toys, our Xbox, Wii, our photos from when we travelled around Australia, our TV and many more things.

I miss how we used to step out our back door and catch a big bore. I miss getting home from school and going for swim in the dam and riding our bikes around the farm and playing tackle football in the back yard and also playing cricket. I miss having people over for sleepovers and birthday parties and going hunting with them.

The fire has ruined everything and burnt everything everyone owned. This fire has taken everything away from us and ruined our lives.

Charlie Selmes.

Charlie was nine at the time of the fire. The week before the fire was quite scary. You could feel that danger in the air. The national park was closed, with a piece of A4 paper swinging on a sign on the side of the road when you came over the ramp into the national park. As we lived right near the ramp, we could hear any traffic going to and from the park. There was traffic and campers going into the park all week. On the Saturday before the disaster a lady knocked on our door and told us there was a fire near the woolshed. She lived on the other side of the park and she could not get through. There were no national park workers at the information centre, the rangers house or the work shed to report the fire to. She had no service and asked us to call triple-0.

The fire could have and should have been put out on Saturday afternoon or first thing Sunday. I dread to think what would have happened if that lady had not come across that fire. With the park closed and no workers in there, it could have burnt us out through the night. My biggest anger is the national park is our neighbour and to this day they have not informed us of the fire. If the fire had started on our place the first thing we would have done is let our neighbours know. Because of where our house was we could not see smoke until it was pretty much on top of us. In the end we could hear it before we could see or smell the smoke.

The police did not get to our place to evacuate us. I did not get the message on my phone until I got to town and the national park did not ring us. Thank God for that lady and our own sensible judgement. It is hard to put into words what this avoidable catastrophe has done to our lives. To tell our 9- and 10-year-old sons that they had absolutely nothing left was the hardest thing I have had to do. To not receive compensation would end our dreams. We would have to sell up and leave Coonabarabran, the place we love. I could go on and on about my anger, frustration and disappointment, but now I just want it all over. I want to be able to move forward. Thank you.

CHAIR: I call a halt to proceedings for a moment. It is probably an understatement that we realise that the issues being discussed are very sensitive. CentreCare Bathurst has generously agreed to send two counsellors along tonight. They are in the hall and are available to any of you who would like to talk to them. If this gets too much, the counsellors are here and we thank them very much for coming.

PROCTER MORRIS, before the Committee:

My name is Procter Morris and this is about how the Wambelong fire has affected me. During the week preceding the fire, across the country people were preparing for fire due to the exceptional hot weather. I was making preparations on our property for a fire, just in case, as I do every year. However, I had a gut feeling that I needed to be just that bit better prepared, and I have always trusted my gut feeling. My involvement with the fire initially was as an RFS volunteer firefighter with Timor Brigade responding early on Sunday morning to the fire in the Warrumbungle National Park.

On Sunday morning there were initially in attendance, I think, four national park crews and two RFS crews—you have already heard from one of those. A couple of national park crews came in later, as did the other Timor Brigade tanker. Having gone to the Victorian fires twice as a firefighter and seen what happened there and how that was dealt with, with the numbers of crews and tankers to prevent the fire crossing containment lines, was very different to what happened here under national parks. The approach with this fire by national parks was very different and was in no way suitable, especially with the knowledge that there was, with the weather that was forecast and generally known about for the Sunday.

In my opinion, National Parks did not understand the gravity of the situation with a small fire on Saturday and the weather that was forecast to occur on the Sunday. Saturday there was a statewide total fire ban with a temperature at my place, in the shade at 3.00 p.m., of 45 degrees. At 4.33 p.m. Saturday, while people were responding to the fire, the Bureau of Meteorology put out a weather forecast for the remainder of Saturday and for Sunday with a fire weather warning for a hot north-westerly wind and an extreme fire danger rating. That is one level under catastrophic, the worst condition possible.

National Parks failed to follow their own procedures in the lead-up to and during the fire. National Parks did not access the information from the Bureau of Meteorology about the weather until after midnight on Saturday night. So they went home Saturday night not knowing what the weather was going to do. National Parks failed to resource the fire appropriately for the forecast conditions and they totally underestimated what was going to happen on Sunday, even though their incident action plan stated that from 1.00 p.m. there were likely to be winds 30 to 45 kilometres per hour. Anybody who knows anything to do with fire knows that anything over 25 kilometres per hour is a problem.

National Parks did not take all possible steps to extinguish the original fire, knowing that the RFS raft team that was helicoptered in to the fire on Saturday afternoon worked on the fire for a short time while their helicopter water-bombed the fire before having to return to Tamworth before sundown. I spoke to a member of that raft team since the fire and asked him was it safe to work there overnight. He said with their training, yes. He also said he believed that a few raft crews could have contained the fire overnight. National Parks did not bring in their raft teams, and we heard last week in the Coroner's Court from one of the National Parks and Wildlife Service raft team members that it was policy that they do not work overnight on a fire, but under questioning he could not substantiate that policy.

My returning home to our property on Sunday evening, finding and seeing everything burning, except for our home and nearby workshop/garage/shed, seeing the destruction of our own property. Seeing the destruction of the surrounding countryside—everything was alight; where you were this afternoon was all on fire. Knowing that what we had spent 20 years developing had gone up in flames. Going to my neighbour's property in the early hours of Monday morning and seeing it all lost. Heading down to the business side of their camp ground and extinguishing a fire in the function area and seeing their business burning and lost—they cannot reopen that business. The financial burden of having to replace so much has been lost and is not covered by insurance. Having the insurance company say, "You are way under-insured". Looking for something today, or just after the fire actually, and realising that no, that was lost in the fire.

Having the knowledge, due to my fire fighting experience, that the fire should not have been allowed to grow from a small fire on the Saturday to an out-of-control monster on the Sunday. The knowledge of the broad impact on the wider community due to my past role over 19½ years as a community development officer for Warrumbungle Shire Council. Due to me helping people for nearly 20 years in the community and having people contact me, then asking me what to do and knowing that they were suffering so much. My 23 years as an RFS firefighter and seeing what took place, knowing that could have been so easily prevented but was not. Seeing the suffering that people are going through. Realising that many people react differently to trauma, stress, loss and financial impact and that difficulty affects people in different ways. The knowledge that the recovery process is going to take many years for the community and especially those directly affected to come

to grips with what has happened to them, to work through the healing process, to put in place what needs to be done to plan, repair, replace, change and redo a vast number of items that have impacted on their existence and their life and to continue down the road to recovery.

Due to my involvement with the Coonabarabran Property Owners Alliance and seeing what people are going through with talking to many of them, brings home the suffering and the loss that they are going through. Seeing the stress that people are under. Seeing the fact that so many are suffering depression from what they have been through. With the assistance of another Rotarian, organised through my Coonabarabran Rotary Club, the one-year-on celebration to assist people who were involved with the fire—those who had suffered from the fire, and firefighters and lots of other people as well—to come together 12 months on as part of that recovery process.

Knowledge of the financial impact that the fire has had on the community. Knowing how the fire has impacted on tourism and local businesses. The list goes on and on. I am probably privy to many things, due to my past role within the community and my involvement with the fires, both as a firefighter who was there on the day and through my involvement since the fire in assisting the community. Suffice to say that a little fire should not have been allowed to escalate into a wild fire that destroyed this community. Thank you.

RICHARD STRINGER, before the Committee:

Mr STRINGER: My name is Richard Stringer. I am the captain of a local brigade just to the east of Coonabarabran. On that same Sunday there were additional fires, we assumed by lightning. We were not notified. It was just adjoining the national park, what they call sandstone caves, and we were not notified by the RFS to respond to the fire; we were not even notified that the fire existed. There was no preparation, no forward planning, no notification of a catastrophic day, no communication at all. All of the local brigades in the region, not just to the east and so forth, no-one was utilised anywhere near effectively. So this was a huge mistake, to say the least.

The cause of this is for the committee to investigate. The process of the fire itself: when we attended the fire to the north it was already out of control, it had already breached the containment line, and National Parks did not call for any instance. When we arrived there, only for the fact that we insisted that we investigate where it had breached, they were not even going to deal with it. So under the conditions that we had it would have headed to our east—a huge amount of vegetation, bushland and so on. Fortunately, we were able to contain the fire—that is normal brigade activity—but there was no communication or planning or otherwise. That was crucial.

The other problem we ran into throughout the whole fire event was radio communications. On our fire trucks we have a UHF radio, and that is from truck to truck—very, very local; it does not have a very good range—then we have the PMR, which is from the fire truck to our fire control. That system was completely inundated—it was overwhelmed—to the point where the fire trucks were not even allowed to communicate with fire control because they could not even deal with it. We were told, "Get off the air". It did not matter what we were reporting, they just did not have any capacity to handle it. There was supposed to be another system in the middle called fireground. That does not exist; we do not have it. That meant that the fire trucks were not even going to be able to communicate with their control. So if you have a sector commander taking care of an area and then you have all these brigades and so forth under them, whether they are local or out-of-area brigades, they cannot communicate; they have to go through the PMR, through fire control, which was inundated.

This fire got to be massive; there were fires to the north, the west, the south and so on, and without this communication it was bedlam. So that was a huge problem. Earlier in the day we did not have any stand-by and no-one was notified—I think that was a major problem. With fires, any fires—it has been mentioned here tonight over and over—a small fire is what we can deal with, not a large catastrophic one. When we have so many brigades that were available doing absolutely nothing, local brigades, not out-of-area—they do not have to be brought in; just a phone call and they would be there—they were not utilised, and this is a huge error.

The chain of command in the brigades themselves completely broke down; earlier in the piece it was non-existent. In our local brigade area we have residents that received a text message to evacuate—this is to the east, not to the west—to evacuate their homes and leave, when there was no fire within our brigade area; it was right on the boundary and we had contained that, but they were receiving evacuation orders. This put panic into the local residents, confusion; the telephones were completely jammed up with people inquiring "What is this all about?"—just terror. This is another major problem that needs to be addressed.

I would like to think that there is proper cooperation between RFS and National Parks. There should be but there does not seem to be. I think after this fire it certainly has improved dramatically. In 2013-2014 there has been a lot of awakening in that regard, but there is also a serious problem within the RFS—I cannot speak for National Parks but within the RFS itself. If you have a problem they have a system called grievances and service standards are the rules we work under. This grievance system means that if you have a complaint, a problem, it has a process to go through, but if you have a grievance against a public servant in the RFS—that is the management—it goes nowhere. It is not investigated. It is not responded to because the RFS is the judge, jury and executioner of its own organisation. There needs to be an outside entity to deal with these matters.

I think any public servants in any department that follows this process, it just leads straight to corruption and nepotism, straight to protection, cronyism. The whole lot just turns up and it shouldn't. It is crucial that the RFS and the National Parks work together, absolutely. I will not hold any grudges against the National Parks. I will work with them, and I guarantee I will do this in the future because it is absolutely vital. I hope your inquiry is successful. I hope you get to the truth of the process that got to this catastrophe because a lot of political, bureaucratic public servant self-interest that has got it to this. This is the effect, not the cause. The cause is almost invisible, and I hope you can dig that out. Thank you.

CHAIR: Two things now. The Committee has decided to extend the period for public submissions by 14 days from tomorrow, once we finish the Coonabarabran hearing. The idea behind that is if people here tonight or people you talk to over the next couple of days—these comments will be on the internet—if something jogs your memory or something you would like to add, you have the opportunity now to do it, whether or not you put in a submission previously. If you have already made a submission and you wish to make a supplementary submission then we will hold it for 14 days. If you have not made a submission please do. I thank the people who stood up here tonight. It is difficult to talk in front of a group of people. So I thank you, and I encourage those of you who want to have your say, if you did not feel you could stand up here tonight, please put pen to paper, get on the keyboard or we will get someone to help you do it if necessary.

STEVEN McCOY, before the Committee:

My name is Steven McCoy. I am a retired captain of the Yammambar rural fire brigade. I have made complaints to the RFS since 2004 relating to simply not being notified of fires in our brigade area. It was an ongoing thing. To this date, none of the complaints, grievances has been attended to by the RFS. In 2010 I wrote to Kristina Keneally. Kristina Keneally sent the IAB in and the local superintendent at the time was convicted of 22 breaches of the Public Service Act. Still the RFS tells me that there is no need to process the grievances that were put in, which relate to not notifying local brigades of fire in their brigade area. There is a lot more I could say which would back up Mr Stringer in what he said, but I will not take the time.

CHAIR: No, that is okay. So you endorse Mr Stringer's comments that the local brigades were not involved early enough.

Mr McCoy: Local brigades were not involved early enough, and some were not rung at all. Some were not notified at all. I was retired at the time of the Wambelong fire. I was still getting calls from the local residents who had been given evacuation orders, and the brigade had not been notified of a fire in the brigade area. Thank you.

Mr STARR, before the Committee:

My name is Peter Starr. I live out on Timor Road. I lost a house that day, and four sheds and a few pets. On the Saturday I never knew there was a fire. It would have been good to know. I have been able to replace lots of things because I have insurance, but you cannot replace all the personal items you lose that you have accumulated over your whole life. If I had known on the Saturday there was a fire I could have prepared much more. I did not know until the Sunday afternoon; I never bothered to go outside. I would have seen the smoke obviously, but it was just too hot. On Saturday I think it was 44 degrees, the hottest day ever recorded for Coonabarabran. On the Sunday morning I remember getting up and thinking, "This will be a bad fire day."

The humidity was low and a breeze was building up. That is the last thing I heard of it, but if I knew on the Saturday that there was a fire I could have saved some animals and got some personal things together and got out. The previous 12 months before that the home phone line—it happened to a lot of people along the road—did not work for several days. It eventually got fixed. Luckily it was working on the Sunday and that is the first I knew when the automated phone call saying get out and evacuate. I walked outside, I could see the flames, so I fled. Luckily I saw that. I just wish I knew on the Saturday that there was a fire. I could have saved a lot more things.

CHAIR: Do you have any mobile coverage where you are?

Mr STARR: You ring up the people at Telstra and Optus and they say you do have mobile phone coverage out there but I have noticed you don't. If we did have mobile phone coverage we would have known before because I heard people in town actually knew because they have coverage. It is a pity. We have mobile phone towers in town but they just happen to be at almost the lowest point in town, not up big hills with power up them. Why can't they just put them on a hill? You would get so much more coverage. I talked to the local Federal member after the fire—this is before the election—and he was saying they promised that for bushfire prone areas, including our area, there would be some service put up on the hill so that there would be coverage. But we are still waiting for that promise to come to fruition.

CHAIR: And you have big communications towers—we noticed two of them up on the southern side. They are the ones that were mentioned earlier, the communications towers. They are not part of your local mobile network, are they?

Mr STARR: No. The only ones I know of are the two at the post office in town. We get absolutely no signal.

TONY MORSE, before the Committee:

My name is Tony Morse. I live west of Coonabarabran on the Newell Highway. I just want to touch on one thing that I think is so important and it is all to do with communication. When a fire like that comes and you are told to get out of your house, a lot of people will not do it and you don't blame them because their heart and soul is there. But what frightens me is when the man of the house goes away to sit on a fire truck and fight a fire somewhere else, they seem to forget about the poor girl, a loved one left behind, still in the house with no communication. Nobody thinks they are so important that they must be communicated. The one fighting the fire, fine, he might be delayed. He might be 10 hours away. Somebody should be responsible in a situation like that to get hold of numbers of people on farms who are prepared to stay there.

Captains are not meant to jump off first and run away. They are meant to stay on the ship until it goes down. Bushfires are a situation where somebody has to make a judgement. It is pretty easy to forget about that person who is prepared to stay behind, maybe not even threatened with fire but would like to know how their loved ones are getting on. I live below the tower where Tim Lambert was talking before. One road in, no road out, and that is a disaster. You can see it. Why hasn't the government department responsible looked at that situation? You can get in there fine. You cannot turn the truck around. There should be a way out to Tooraweenah and another way out to the valley. It is quite simple but why won't they communicate on those situations? That is all I have to say.

CHAIR: Thank you. We are almost out of time. Once again I remind you that CentreCare has tea and coffee. Please feel free to have a cup of tea or coffee and a chat to them. We will be back here in the same place tomorrow at 9.00 a.m. We will be hearing from the local council, Gilgandra shire council, the Coonabarabran property owners alliance, the Warrumbungle fire action group, and the facilities and services division of Australian National University. We will also hear from a couple of individuals and at the end of the day we may be hearing one piece of evidence in camera. That means that I ask the public to clear the room so we can hear what somebody has to say to us in private. Some of these submitters have asked that they be kept confidential. The rule is that with all this sort of stuff we do not publish anything that has any adverse mention of individuals in it, as I mentioned before, but I assure you all that every submission that is made is considered, as well as your verbal statements. In fact, I noticed a couple of Committee members writing furiously so there could be some sneaky questions tomorrow.

I can assure you that this upper House will do its job, and do its job properly. I know there is a Coroner's inquiry running. We do not want to interfere with the Coroner's inquiry. We have agreed with the Coroner that we will be given his transcripts and we will take those into account. Obviously we will cooperate with the Coroner. The difference between a Coroner's inquiry and an upper House inquiry probably is the fact that an upper House inquiry is not like a court of law, as is a Coroner's court. Here you have the opportunity to get things off your chest. I suppose that is the easiest way to say it. Say things the way you want to say them with no pressure. You are protected by parliamentary privilege when you are speaking into the microphone and the witnesses tomorrow are protected by parliamentary privilege, which means that you can pretty much say what you like, provided I do not stop you from scragging off at someone.

It all goes into the record. It all goes up on the internet so you can see what other people say. You can see what the agencies say about their side of the story. It gives everybody the opportunity to test evidence that is given. Evidence is given under oath at these inquiries—not tonight, but evidence will be taken under oath tomorrow—and I give to you all my personal assurance and the assurance of all the members here tonight that, despite some comments that perhaps this inquiry is not important or may not be as incisive as a Coroner's inquiry, we do our jobs and we do them properly. We will thoroughly investigate the matter. With the recommendations we put forward, although it is a collegiate report that goes in at the end, we try not to be partisan if we can help it.

Although governments do not necessarily always take into consideration the recommendations of either the Coroner or an upper House inquiry like this, given the seriousness of an event like this I think you could have an expectation that the Government will listen to all those points of view. I thank you very much for coming here tonight, especially to the speakers who had some difficult things to say. Thank you very much for telling us your story. For those of you who wish to attend tomorrow, the inquiry will be open to anybody who wants to listen to the evidence that is given. I will call the meeting to a close. Thank you very much.

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: Chair, just briefly, to clarify some evidence that they gave tonight, can I see—and it will be very briefly—Mr Lambell, Mr Henley and Mr Stringer, if they are still here. I just need to clarify some things that that they said in their evidence tonight.

CHAIR: Ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much to those speakers who will talk to Dr Phelps, and thank you very much for attending. I close the meeting.

The Committee adjourned at 7.02 p.m.
