

# General Purpose Standing Committee No. 5

## Inquiry into Wambelong Fire

### Questions on notice from 15 Sept hearing

#### 1. Issue: Chief Executive's opening statement

##### Question from transcript (p.22)

**CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Bailey. As a point of procedure, we had extensive discussions with Mr Peacock and his team on the ground, but none of that has been taken into evidence. If there is anything you wish to repeat that you think should go into evidence, Mr Peacock, we are well prepared to take that. We will proceed with questions from around the table but before I do that, are you able to table your introductory statement and all of the detail that you have provided for Hansard?

**Mr BAILEY:** I am certainly happy to.

##### OEH response

See **Attachment A** - Chief Executive's Opening Statement.

## **2. Issue: Expressing hazard reduction numbers in percentage terms**

### **Question from transcript (p.22)**

**CHAIR:** Also as a matter of clarification, where it is not shown as a percentage of the total land under your fire control, can you put the hazard reduction numbers into percentage terms rather than just hectares. I do not think you did that in your evidence.

**Mr BAILEY:** I am certainly happy to and there are some other contexts that we can put that in in terms of the high-risk fire lands in New South Wales and the percentage of burns that we conduct on those.

**CHAIR:** That is great. We will consider all of those as questions on notice.

### **OEH response**

In 2013-14, NPWS completed 232 prescribed burns, covering 111,000 hectares, about 1.5 per cent of the 7.1 million hectares it manages. In the three years to June 2014, NPWS carried out hazard reduction operations covering over 360,000 hectares. The average annual area treated, which is approximately 120,000 hectares, was nearly doubled during this period when compared with the average for the three previous years.

In 2012-13 NPWS conducted hazard reduction burns across 206,116 hectares, about 2.9 per cent of the 7.1 million hectares it manages, and was 83 per cent of the total area treated via prescribed burning by all agencies in NSW.

NPWS currently manages 9 per cent of the state and delivers 80 per cent of the total hazard reduction burning efforts across NSW.

### 3. Issue: larger maps of NP and fire ground

#### Question from transcript (p.23)

**CHAIR:** Before we proceed, on another procedural matter, during our visit to the fireground you had some fairly large-scale maps that you showed us. We took some small-scale maps with us. Would you be able to provide the Committee with copies of those larger maps that showed the national park and the description on the ground where the fire was?

**Mr PEACOCK:** Certainly.

#### OEH response

Large copy of Warrumbungle Reserve Fire Management Strategy is enclosed. Copy also attached at **Attachment B**. Copy of fire history map is provided at **Attachment C**.

#### **4. Issue: Committee's request for time lines**

##### **Question from transcript (p.25)**

**CHAIR:** I notice that you are referring to what appear to be some timetables or roster notes in front of you.

**Mr PEACOCK:** They are just my notes in preparation for the questioning today.

**CHAIR:** Do they have a detailed chronology of the occurrences, the crews and who was there and who was not?

**Mr PEACOCK:** Not that I would call—

**CHAIR:** Mr Bailey, I will direct the question to you. I want to know what document the witness is referring to.

**Mr PEACOCK:** It is not what I would call a 100 per cent accurate chronology.

**CHAIR:** But you are prepared to use the documents to give evidence to this Committee?

**Mr PEACOCK:** I guess what I am prepared to do is talk about what I know.

**CHAIR:** Mr Bailey, would you consider whether you would be prepared to give us those time lines in evidence?

**Mr BAILEY:** I will give proper consideration to the completeness of the set of notes and come back to the Committee.

##### **OEH response**

Relevant excerpts are provided in answers to supplementary questions.



## 5. Issue: Legal obligation to communicate directly with the Rural Fire Service about a fire igniting in a national park

### Question from transcript (pp.25-26).

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** I draw your attention to the paragraph above the final two sentences on page two of your submission—the paragraph that commences "Additionally". Do you see that?

**Mr PEACOCK:** Yes.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** The last sentence reads:

"The principle mechanisms for coordinated and cooperative higher management arrangements—"

This is between the NSW Rural Fire Service and the National Parks and Wildlife Service—

"Operate through the Bush Fire Coordinating Committee (BFCC) and local Bush Fire Management Committees (BFMC)."

As opposed to what might be procedural practices, arrangements or obligations that may exist between the National Parks and Wildlife Service and the NSW Rural Fire Service, which requires you to inform them about a fire igniting in one of your parks, is there a specific legal obligation on the National Parks and Wildlife Service to communicate directly with the NSW Rural Fire Service about a fire igniting in a national park? I hope my question is clear. Is there a specific obligation in a piece of legislation that requires you to inform the NSW Rural Fire Service of a fire igniting in a national park or do we look for practices and procedures that are tidied up in the types of arrangements found in that paragraph on the bottom of page two? It is a very specific question.

**Mr BAILEY:** I will just give a couple of minor clarifications in terms of the question and setting the context. When we refer to the Bush Fire Coordinating Committee and the local Bush Fire Management Committees, they are much broader than Parks and Wildlife and the Rural Fire Service.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** That is taken for granted.

**Mr BAILEY:** The secondary component, certainly policies and procedures, is an absolute reference to National Parks and Wildlife Service having a legislative responsibility. I would not be aware if there is a general responsibility for land managers and others. It might be a question that we may have to take on notice and come back to you, apologies.

### OEH response

#### New interim arrangements for Class 1 and Class 2 fires

Since the Wambelong Fire, RFS has been working with NPWS to review fire management procedures. Both agencies agreed that notification protocols needed to be reviewed and strengthened. This requires a review of the *BFCC Policy 2/2006 Management of Bush Fire Operations*.

On 10 July 2014 the RFS Commissioner issued interim arrangements clarifying the command and control provisions and the notification requirements for Class 1 and Class 2 fires. These arrangements, supported by NPWS, mean that the Rural Fire Service or Fire and Rescue NSW has ultimate responsibility for all bushfires regardless of tenure, and is responsible for the appointment of incident controllers.

The interim arrangements explain the need to provide information to the RFS or Fire and Rescue NSW about:

- the location, size and behaviour of the fire;
- any known injuries or damage to property;
- the local weather conditions;
- the available land management agency's resources attending the fire; and
- the proposed strategy to contain or control the spread of the fire.

NPWS supports the interim arrangements, including the requirement to report fire outbreaks to the RFS or to Fire and Rescue NSW.



**6. Issue: Funding for hazard reduction when parks increased from 3.9 million ha to 7.1 million ha over 1994-2011**

**Question from transcript (p.31)**

**Mr SCOT MacDONALD:** Mr Bailey, the estate nearly doubled from 1995 to 2011 from 3.9 million hectares to about 7.1 million hectares. Have I got that right?

**Mr BAILEY:** My memory is that is right.

**Mr SCOT MacDONALD:** Can you tell me the commensurate resourcing funding for hazard reduction bushfire management in that time? If you want to take that on notice I am happy for you to do so.

**Mr BAILEY:** I would have to take that on notice because the most significant contribution to the hazard reduction program occurred in the last three years.

**OEH response**

The largest increase in funding for hazard reduction in national parks has been under the NSW Government's Enhanced Bushfire Management Program (EBMP), a \$62.5 million program over 2011-2016.

See response to Question 7 for additional information about the EBMP.

## 7. Issue: reliance on EBMP for hazard reduction

### Question from transcript (p.32)

**Mr SCOT MacDONALD:** That was my next question. If I have got the dates and figures right, the enhanced bushfire management program started in 2011. It is a five-year program that finishes in 2016.

**Mr BAILEY:** That is correct.

**Mr SCOT MacDONALD:** That took the figures from roughly 120,000 to more than 300,000 hectares, so we are running at nearly 5 per cent.

**Mr BAILEY:** I am just doing this from memory and I am sure Ms Stephens will correct me if I am wrong. Over the three years we have increased burning to about 360,000 hectares in the first three years with an average of 120,000. Those averages vary year on year. The highest year was about 220,000. The first year was a very wet year and we were only at about 75,000 or 80,000 from memory. Our annual aim is to average over that five-year period at about 130,000, which is a doubling of the hazard reduction burn prior to the commencement of the program and the commencement of the new resource.

**Mr SCOT MacDONALD:** What dollar figure is behind the enhanced bushfire management program?

**Mr BAILEY:** It is \$62.5 million over the five years.

**Mr SCOT MacDONALD:** By the time this Committee reports at the end of this year or early next year there will only be one year left of that program. If that funding or something like it did not continue what would happen to the figures on hazard reduction? To reach those sorts of figures are you reliant on that special program?

**Mr BAILEY:** There is no doubt that with an additional 94 firefighters full-time on the hazard reduction program we would not be able to maintain those rates of hazard reduction burning without consideration of the resource allocation.

**Mr SCOT MacDONALD:** When you answer my question on notice can you please flesh that out? It is very important to the inquiry. We can forensically go back and work out who should have been where at what time but if we are looking forward it is about resources. That is what I am certainly interested in. In your answer can you also comment on whether there are any regulatory burdens that we could consider to address hazard reduction burning in a timely manner? We have taken evidence that there are all sorts of time limits, barriers and complexities in putting prescribed burnings into action. Are there any regulatory burdens we should be looking at?

### OEH response

#### NPWS's commitment to hazard reduction across NSW

NPWS's hazard reduction activities are assisted by the NSW Government's Enhanced Bushfire Management Program (EBMP), a \$62.5 million program over 2011-2016.

On average, NPWS has treated about 102,000 hectares annually over the last five years (total 513,000 ha). This is more than double the previous five year average of 40,000 hectares (total 200,000 ha).

In the three years to June 2014, NPWS carried out hazard reduction operations covering over 360,000 hectares. The average annual area treated, approximately 120,000 hectares, was nearly double the average for the previous three-year period.

Funding of the Enhanced Bushfire Management Program (EBMP), which commenced in 2011-12, has significantly increased NPWS's hazard reduction performance by providing dedicated additional resources at a regional level to undertake hazard reduction over and above former levels.

For NPWS we have a key performance indicator that requires NPWS regions to have prescribed burn plans prepared in advance covering 150 per cent of the total annual



prescribed burning target for the region. This is to ensure maximum flexibility to match hazard reduction activities with weather windows. This advance preparation means that the need to meet regulatory requirements is no impediment to NPWS achieving hazard reduction outcomes.

## **8. Issue: Boundary Fencing Policy**

### **Question from transcript (p.33)**

**Mr SCOT MacDONALD:** Mr Peacock, you and I have talked about the fencing agreement. Is the fencing agreement in the submission the one that is being used now?

**Mr PEACOCK:** I am pretty sure the one that you have access to is the interim arrangement that we put in place when we received feedback from BlazeAid and the neighbours about concern with the length of the previous fencing agreement. But what I can say is that we used that interim model to revise our policy, which was published in February 2014, and it is all but identical to what you have there.

**Mr BAILEY:** We will provide that updated policy and the agreement as a single page to the Committee.

### **OEH response**

See **Attachment D** – NPWS Boundary Fencing Policy 2014, and **Attachment E** – Model Fencing Agreement.

## 9. Issue: Changes or improvements in communications equipment

### Question from transcript (p.37)

**CHAIR:** We will discuss this with the Rural Fire Service this afternoon but one of the comments we had while we were in Coonabarabran concerned the confusion surrounding the different communication modes in the fire vehicles themselves and for notification to residents et cetera. Do the National Parks and Wildlife Service appliances have the same three radio or communication systems in them as the RFS?

**Ms STEPHENS:** There is a series of radio systems used by different agencies but we put Rural Fire Service radios into our vehicles and we provide the RFS with National Parks and Wildlife Service radios. We also have CB radios in all our vehicles, as do the RFS, which are often used for small interactions on the fire ground.

**CHAIR:** So, Mr Peacock, given the wash-up of the fire and the fact that you are going to do a debrief, have you got any recommendations for your senior people as to whether you should make any changes or improvements in the communications equipment? Mr Bailey?

**Mr BAILEY:** Certainly one of the things that we have been working on and looking at for some time now is an improvement to our radio network system. We are investing significantly in that. I will take the question on notice in terms of how that will lead to improved communications between the two agencies.

### OEH response

NPWS is undertaking a major project to improve and upgrade its radio network which will enable better communications within the agency as well as with the Rural Fire Service. The Radio Replacement Project commenced in 2009 and is:

- replacing aging equipment such as radios and antennae
- repairing and replacing aging infrastructure such as towers, power systems, and huts
- facilitating better inter-operability with the RFS by moving to the 160 MHz band
- providing a network management system (e.g. fault fixing) to improve reliability
- providing a design which will allow for flexibility in use of new technologies.

The Radio Replacement Project is almost completed (due for finalisation in mid 2015) and has been designed in three stages:

1. upgrading of network infrastructure (towers, power systems, and huts) and providing a 160 MHz overlay across the radio network – this is 90 per cent complete and all NPWS regions can now use the new 160 MHz system.
2. rollout of new radio equipment to NPWS staff and installation of new equipment in vehicles, offices, workshops and fire control centres – this is 99 per cent complete, with 1200 portable radios, 1200 mobiles issued to staff and all offices, workshops and fire control centres fitted out. Over 1000 NPWS have also been trained in using the new equipment.
3. replacement of radio linking equipment from the old 400 MHz to the new 450 MHz band, installation of network management equipment (for fault fixing), installation of telephone interconnect equipment, and formal commissioning of the new system. This provides a digital backbone to enable remote management and reporting of the new network. This stage is about five per cent complete and is due for completion by July 2015.



**10.Issue: Date of fire debrief**

**Question from transcript (p.37)**

**CHAIR:** The second point is mainly for my clarification: You mentioned that you had a debrief after the fire and I assume that is standard protocol whenever your staff are fighting fires. How soon after the fire did that take place—a month, six months, a week?

**Mr PEACOCK:** To give an accurate answer I will have to take the question on notice but what I can say is that it was very soon after the fire.

**OEH response**

NPWS held the debrief for the fire on 18 February 2013 in Coonabarabran.