

Submission
No 15

INQUIRY INTO WAMBELONG FIRE

Name: Mr Peter Hellyer

Date received: 30/01/2014

Partially Confidential

Submission to the Wambelong Fire Parliamentary Enquiry

By Peter Hellyer

I thank you for the opportunity to lodge a submission into the Wambelong Fire Inquiry.

This submission covers the events and problems that occurred during the Wambelong Fire and subsequent backburns in particular the Mt Cenn Cruaich backburn on 16/1/2013.

My wife and I run a sheep, cattle and rural contracting enterprise on the southern side of the Warrumbungles 40 km south of Coonabarabran. The property is in the Gowang Fire Brigade which is part of The Mountain Group of brigades. This Group includes the Warrumbungle National Park and all brigades that adjoin it. Most of the Wambelong Fire occurred within this Group area.

Gowang Brigade consists of 17 properties covering 60 to 70 thousand acres split down the middle by the Newell Highway, a major north/south transport link. The terrain varies from densely timbered mountains to open grassland /cropping country. Major assets are 25 homesteads and infrastructure, and the Mt Cenn Cruaich Communication Complex. Membership of the brigade is approx 26. I have been a member since 1977 and I became Captain in 1992. I have continued in this position to the present time. I am qualified to Crew Leader level and have completed the Group Leader Course and am awaiting final assessment at this level. I have been involved in 14 Section 44 fires in both local and out of area including Taree, Glenn Innes, Tenterfield, Victoria and recently Muswellbrook, mostly at the Crew Leader level. It is from this level of experience that I make the following observations.

Fire conditions prior to the weekend of the 12 and 13th January were at extreme levels. After unprecedented 3 wet summers fuel loads were the highest on record. Hot conditions in January had fully cured these fuels and all brigade members were on high alert. High temperatures, low humidity and strong winds were predicted for this weekend. Our brigade considered conditions to be so extreme that we purchased our own handheld PMR to be held in the Captains office to give early warning and better communication with Fire Control Centre

I became aware of the fire on Saturday when I heard other brigades responding to the fire in the National Park . I monitored the radio throughout Saturday afternoon after notifying brigade members and land owners adjoining the park. At no point on Saturday was the brigade officially notified of this fire although it was in our group area. Late Saturday afternoon we observed the fire from the Mt Cenn Cruach tower site, to be 8 km north west of the tower. After considering the predicted weather forecast I again contacted landowners that may be at risk and placed the brigade on standby.

On Sunday Morning a fire watch was maintained from the Tower. Mid afternoon I heard a radio call for assistance at the Visitors Centre end of the backburn. At that stage the prevailing wind was heading towards our brigade and smoke forced our fire watch off the mountain. I immediately responded a Cat 7 to Balmerah and Cat 2 to Gowang Valley for property protection. With a change in the wind direction crews were withdrawn and sent to the Warkton Valley where we were joined by the Uargon and Tooraweenah Brigades under Deputy Group Leader . A southerly wind change took the fire out through to the Timor Area . At this point we still had had no official callout or warnings. Units re-located to the Coonabarabran Fire Control Centre (FCO) and were sent to Morrisseys Lane for property protection and then later to Bugaldie. On Monday Gowang Crews were sent to Timor area and Tuesday they were sent to the property Tannabah in the Warkton Valley.

Much of this submission concerns events which occurred on the Wednesday 16th, Thursday 17th, and Friday 18th January 2013 in the area of the Mt Cenn Cruaich Communication Complex. This site contains the main communication Tower for all TV, radio, and much of the mobile phone coverage for the Warrumbungle Area. Also on site is all emergency service communication including Police, ambulance, Rural Fire Service (RFS), Shire Council, in all approx 20 organisations have equipment on the mountain. The site is positioned on top of Mt Cenn Cruaich in dense timber overlooking the National Park approx 8 Km from the start of the fire. No fire breaks were in place to protect it and only minor hazard reduction had been undertaken since it was changed into private ownership. Access to site is limited to a one lane winding road.

On Wednesday January the 16th with the southern edge of the Wambelong fire approx 2 km north east of the Tower site a National Park planned and RFS implemented plan was hatched to protect the Tower complex on Wednesday night. The plan was to drop incendiaries around the Tower Site , and allow it to burn up to the Tower. The Tower was to be protected by NSW Fire and Rescue Units. Another backburn to be lit off containment lines at the base of the mountain by an Out of Area Taskforce of 5 trucks and 3 National Park units. This was to be on private property in the Gowang brigade area. At no time were local Landholders told by the RFS of their intention. No advise was sort by the RFS from the local Deputy Group Captain or me, the local Captain.

On hearing of the plan late Wednesday and after discussions with DGC we decided to send units from Gowang and Uargon brigades to assist the strike team. We arrived at backburn at 6.30 pm for a 7.00 pm burn to find:

- 1 Incendiary drop in place ahead of time
- 2 A 7km containment line too narrow to safely burn off (one grader width wide). No turn around bays, interlocking timber over the trail. And too steep for Cat 1 to negotiate.
- 3 No Strike Team and no Divisional Commander (Div Comm) with plan

Out of area Strike team arrived on site after 10pm with their Div Comm showing no urgency to get backburn started. He would not work with our leaders and refused to take any locality advice from us. This indecision resulted in the backburn not commencing until 11.30pm, 5 hours after the incendiaries were dropped, although it did allow my crews some valuable rest. The burn was started on the eastern end and progress was slow due to difficult terrain and high fuel loads. The Strike Team did well to contain the backburn under extremely difficult conditions. Gowang and National Park units commenced burning off the TV tower Road towards the East to meet up with the Strike Team burn. Lighting of the burn west of the TV Tower Rd was considered unsafe until daylight due to dangerous containment line. The burn east of the Tower was in place when new crews took over at 8am. They endeavoured to complete western section of the backburn but the incendiary fire crossed the containment lines before it was completed. This fire went on to burn out the properties of Balmerah and Lumeah and portions of Spire View, Quongara, and Quandilla. Kms of fencing were destroyed, stock losses recorded and resulted in the Section 44 being extended for another week. If it had not been for a well eaten out property which slowed the fire, the fire would have crossed the Newell Highway impacting on grazing properties with high fuel loads, stock losses would have been huge. Police were evacuating people as far as New Mollyan. All the damage was caused by a poorly resourced and managed backburn not the Wambelong fire.

Problems highlighted by the fire

Prior to the fire

1. Since Broadcast Australia took over the Tower Site the level of fire protection has not been maintained to the level it was under the Federal Government ownership. Trees now encroach to the compound fence. In places over hanging transmitter buildings making it un-defendable in a wild fire. There is no fire trail in the area around the tower that can be used to stop fires entering or leaving the park on the south eastern side. The Tower was saved by two massive retardant drops and extensive back burning to the detriment of surrounding landholders. If the fire had continued on its original course south on Sunday it would have wiped the site off the map.

Recommendation : Hazard Reduction around the tower has to be to a level to withstand a major bushfire with aerial support e.g. like Siding Springs. This would mean moving the tree line back. It may be necessary to look at constructing a permanent fire trail. Regular mosaic back burning program should be maintained in this area.

2. The Castlereagh Area has a system of 4 groups. This limit's the number of Group Leader trained personal that are available use at FCC during Section 44's in Incident Management Team (IMT) positions and Div Comm positions. This limits local involvement and loss of local knowledge.

Recommendation: Train more Captains to Group Leader level. Train people for IMT positions.

3. There did not appear to be a pre-emptive plan in place to defend the tower. This resulted in a rushed and badly resourced backburn.

Recommendation An asset of this value needs a plan in place involving local landowners, brigades and site tenants.

During the fire

1. The chain of command was not implemented within the Warrumbungle Group and failed throughout the fire. Considering the forecast conditions, warnings should have issued on Saturday of a fire in the National Park to all Captains. This would have allowed Captains to notify landowners and place brigades on standby.

Recommendations: Early notifications allows landowners time to make and implement critical decisions.

2. The use of local knowledge was ignored throughout the fire. Many problems could have been avoided by combining local crews with strike teams. This is more critical in mountainous terrain .Out of area crews regularly had trouble locating sites in the maze of farm tracks and fire trails.

Recommendation: Local knowledge to be used at all levels from fire controller to fire fighter. During a section 44 control of the fire should remain with a local Fire Control Officer (FCO). Where possible planning positions on IMT should remain local. Where possible local Div Comms should be used and when not possible local Captains or Deputy Captains be embedded with out of area Div Comm. Local Brigade to be integrated with out of area taskforce. Using local Div Comms and local brigade with out of area taskforce worked really well in Muswellbrook Fires in October 2013. To get the best out of out of area Strike teams they need local knowledge.

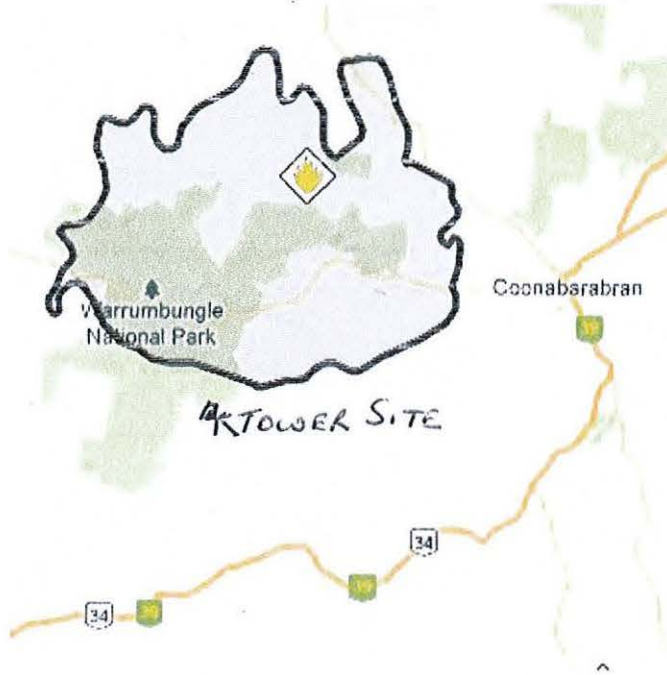
3. Communications from the FCC to local brigades in the southern area of the fire was non existent. Action was taken within our brigade area and we were not informed .Several phone calls were made to fire control centre seeking information but were told all was well, don't worry fire is under control. One such call was the request to have the uhf channel of the strike team operating in our brigade area only to be told 'don't bother them they are busy '

Recommendation : Information should flow freely to brigade captains of the group. Keeping them up to date of the progress of the fire and action being taken. This started to happen 8 days into the fire. This should have been available from the beginning.

4. The problems and damage caused by under resourced and poorly managed back burns could not be more evident than in the Wambelong fire. Twice in the one fire back burns escaped containment lines, for whatever reason, and then went on to become the main fire dwarfing the original fire they were meant to control. The plan to backburn around Mt Cenn Cruaich Communication Tower may have been feasible if implemented earlier in the week giving time to properly construct containment lines. Bulldozers were on site earlier in the week but we were informed they were for property protection only. As a RFS Captain I understand the value of being able to backburn but surely the guidelines that need to be followed should be such that these type of incidents are kept to a minimum. Recommendation : Strengthen and enforce rigid guidelines for the lighting of major back burns when conditions are extreme. Extra resources may be necessary, better to have too many trucks than allow the backburn to escape . The backburn should be managed by experienced local person who knows the risks involved.

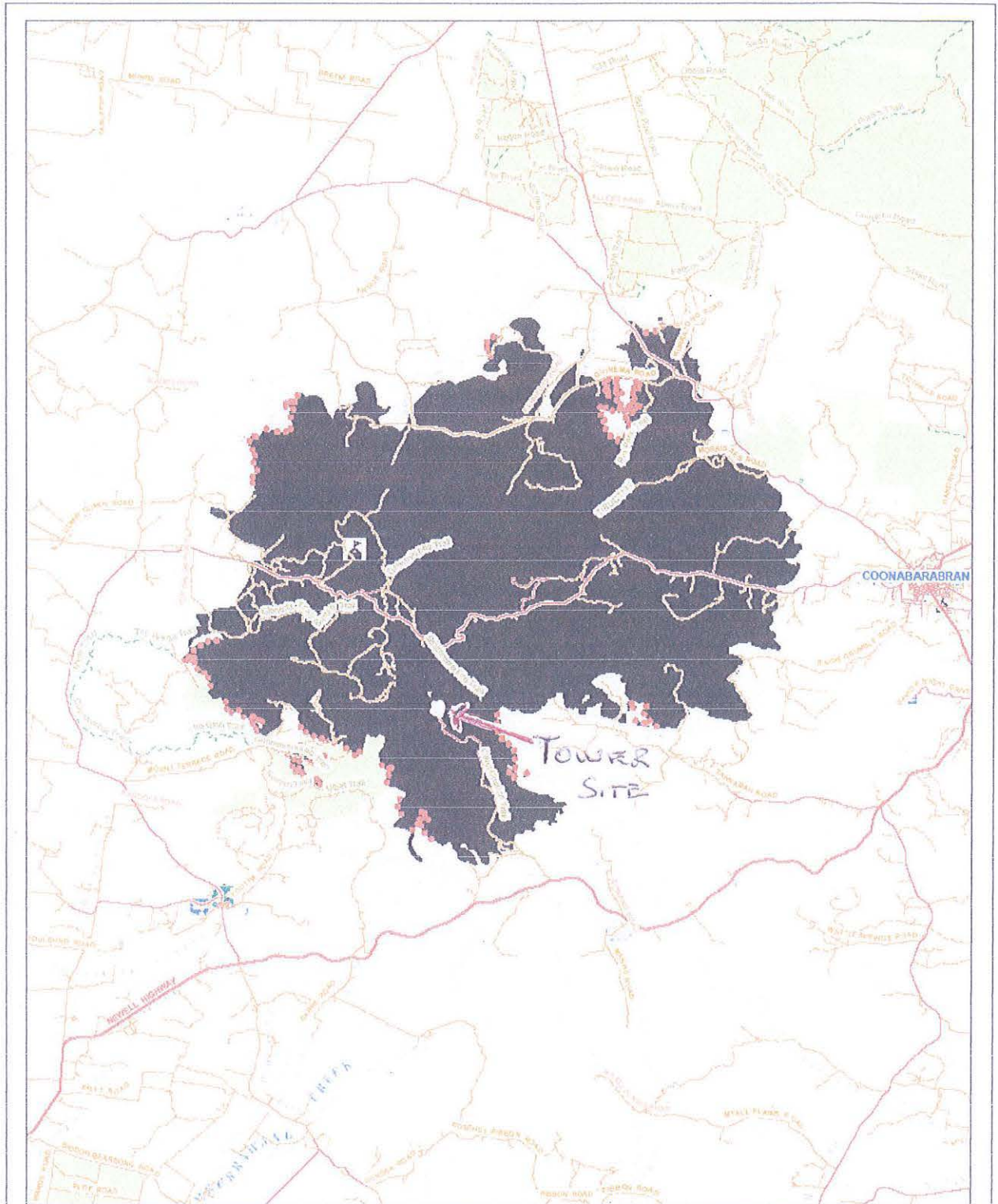
After the fire

1. Since January 2013 I and others have sort to raise these issues through After Actions Reports, Captains Meetings, and meetings with local FCO's, Fire Commissioner and the State Minister for Emergency Services with nil response. This is not good enough the victims of these back burns need answers. Why should their property's be destroyed and their lives changed forever, for the greater good of the community for little or no compensation.



Map of the Wambelong Fire provided by RFS 1.25 15/1/2013

Map of the Wambelong Fire provided by RFS 1am 20/1/2013



PRODUCTION INFORMATION		LEGEND		WARNING INFORMATION	
<p>WARRUMBUNGLE</p> <p>Wambelong WNP Public Liaison Map</p>	<p>Plot Information:</p> <p>Date: 20/1/2013 Time: 01:05:40</p> <p>Fire Statistics:</p> <p>Burnt Area: 54162 Ha Burnt Perimeter: 370 Km</p> <p>Map Details:</p> <p>Base Data: © LPI, SPOT, AAM, SKM, OEH, Sordis, Katron Map Projection: GCS GDA 1994 Print Date / Time: 20/1/2013 11:43:45 AM Produced by: Stephen O'Callaghan</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Active Fire Emergency Alert Burnt Area Backburn Neighbourhood Safe Place Evacuation Centre Information Point Road Closure Health Facility Aged Care Medical Centre Rural PHU Holding Tank 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Education Facility St Mark's Centre NSW Justice NSW Police NSW Fire NSW Fire School College TAFE Community Accommodation Aged Care Caravans National Park Camp Tour 	<p>WARNING INFORMATION</p> <p>1. This map has been prepared by the RFS for the purpose of providing information to the public. It is not intended to be used as a legal document.</p> <p>2. The RFS does not accept any liability for any loss or damage, whether direct or indirect, arising from the use of this map.</p> <p>3. The RFS does not accept any liability for any loss or damage, whether direct or indirect, arising from the use of this map.</p> <p>4. The RFS does not accept any liability for any loss or damage, whether direct or indirect, arising from the use of this map.</p>	<p>SCALE</p> <p>Scale: 1:200,000</p> <p>0 2.5 5 Km</p>
	<p>NSW RFS INFORMATION LINE 1800 NSW RFS 1800 67 9737</p> <p>PREPARE. ACT. SURVIVE.</p>				