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<b>I am making this submission as</b>	Primary producer
<b>Submission type</b>	Personal
<b>Organisation making the submission (if applicable)</b>	
<b>Your position in the organisation (if applicable)</b>	
<b>Consent to make submission public</b>	Public
<b>Your story</b>	The pine plantation, "Warrah" has been in my family for 50 years. A month before the Palmer's Oakey fire, my wife bought it from my Mother. She did not yet have an abn so many of the programs to rebuild are not available to us. My report into the causes, response and future possibilities is attached. See "Warrah; The longest Day"
<b>1.1 Causes and contributing factors</b>	See attached
<b>1.2 Preparation and planning</b>	See attached
<b>1.3 Response to bushfires</b>	See attached

**1.4 Any other matters**

See attached

**Upload files**

Warrah-the-longest-day-SRedit-and-additions.docx - [Download File](#)

## Warrah. The longest day.

Warrah is a Radiata pine plantation at Running Stream. The elevation is 1100m down to 950m. It is steep, well drained, limestone soil with fossils of shellfish.

Around 1969, Dr John Roberts, ophthalmologist, began to develop a pine plantation. He was advised by Wal Gentle, former forestry commissioner, that this land had a good fire history, reliable rainfall, and satisfactory soil with the application of super phosphate.

In the early days, access was plagued by wet weather and vehicles becoming bogged.

The first 100 acres were cleared with two giant bulldozers connected by a cable. Flying possums (sugar gliders) leapt from the trees as they fell. The land was ripped and ploughed and planted with pine seedlings.

Then the land was subdivided. Of the original 850 acres, one hundred each were sold to Dr Schneider, Dr Runsey, and later to John's son, Dr Andrew Roberts. Hugh McCubbin, the surveyor, obtained 50 acres. Locals referred to the pines in the area as "the doctors' pines". With the subdivision, John recovered what he had out-laid up to that point.

A year after the first planting, a second hundred acres was cleared. The trees were pushed into windrows and burned, and later the land was planted. Over the years there were more plantings. Super phosphate was applied by aerial "crop-dusting" to fertilise.

The trees were planted a standard eight feet apart. (A little less than 3 metres). Some on the boundaries were pruned, but it was never economical to thin the forest.

There was a fire. It was started by lightning. The local fire brigade got it under control quickly. It stayed in the mulch at the foot of the trees, never crowning or getting up high. Mostly it was controlled by raking a path of bare earth around the fire. They used a Macleod; a combined rake and blade that scraped a thirty centimetre wide path. Then they watched it day and night till it burned itself out.

There was another fire. At the wishing well at Cherry Tree Hill there was a fireplace for travellers to make a barbeque. On a very windy day, somebody didn't put out their fire properly. It spread. John was driving back from Mudgee with his family. They jumped out of the car and joined locals with their Macleods, breaking branches from gum trees to swat out the flames. Every large fire starts as a small fire and this small fire was put out.

In about 2007, when they were about 37 years old, the first of the trees were harvested. Dr John Roberts died shortly after this. It was a comfort to him to know that his wife, Pam, would be alright financially because of the trees.

Several of the subdivided plantations changed hands. Gradually, most of the forest at Warrah was harvested. To avoid the expense of clearing and ripping and replanting, the decision was made to manage the regeneration. This included the descendants of Dr John Roberts moving through with hand tools to thin part of the forest. Later, prisoners were employed to thin the forest as part of their work program until one escaped.

The seasons became drier.

In September 2017 Scott Morrison took a lump of coal to parliament saying “this is coal, don’t be afraid”.

The number of bushfires per year increased. By November 2019 all previous records for bushfire numbers per year had been exceeded.

In the first few days of December 2019 a fire began at Palmer’s Oakey, which is about 10km south of Warrah, across the Turon River. The rumour is that a farmer was welding and a fire started. He kicked it out, but turned his back, and the fire flared up and escaped.

On 4 December the fire was 5 Hectares. A grass fire.

On the 5th of December the burned area on the Rural Fire Service “fires near me” app was still showing as “not applicable”.

On 7/12/19 the fire was 263 Ha. It was still south of the Turon River which put it under the control of a fire brigade in that area.

On 10/12/19 it crossed the Turon. It was 606 ha. North of the Turon it was in “The Black Scrub,” under the control of the Ilford-Running Stream rural fire service. The rumours were that there were not many people or machines fighting the fire. There was a massive Gosper’s Mountain Fire and others occupying resources.

On the weekend of 14, and 15 December there were many more resources working on the fire. It was still spreading north through the Black Scrub. There were two bulldozers, at least one a D9, developing fire breaks. Berwick’s Road, to the west of Warrah, was said to be wide as a highway.

Also, back burning on Bell’s line of road aimed at containing the Gosper’s Mountain fire went badly. It was started in the daytime instead of the cool calm night. The fire crossed Bell’s Line of Road. Media commentary confused back-burning, a measure to contain active bush-fires, with winter controlled burns; a measure for prevention.

Some Ilford-Running Stream volunteers expressed concern that there was little or no back burning being done in the cool calm nights of the Tablelands to control the Palmer’s Oakey fire before the predicted heatwave.

By Monday 16 December, the Southern-most pines were burning. This crop, 100 acres, had been ready for harvest for years and harvest had been about to get under way.

A new fire break was bulldozed linking existing roads that had been used in harvests. The south winds eased and the breaks seemed to hold for some time.

On Friday 20/12/19 a state of emergency was declared in NSW. The Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, was revealed to have been on holiday in Hawaii and agreed to return.

Saturday 21 December was forecast to be extremely hot, dry and windy. For Greater Sydney the forecast was for catastrophic fire weather. This was the second time in NSW such a forecast had

occurred. The fire spread East and North taking the last of the pines. An Emergency Warning was issued. With a Southerly change at the end of the day, embers flew north towards Clandulla.

By midnight on the longest day of 2019 the fire was 3377Ha (8344 acres) and out of control. Pretty much all the pines in the region were burned.

23/12/19 10294 Ha

On 24/12/19 a NSW Hazard ID notice was placed on the front door of the little house at Warrah, saying this property had been inspected after the fire. The house was still standing but the shed and important infrastructure were destroyed.

On 27/12/19 inspection revealed the shed and septic tank gone, generator wiring burned away, most of the pines just charcoal, but a small area on a spur at the head of the creek above the dam seemed to have mostly survived.

### **What could have been done differently?**

#### *Local.*

1. The farmer welding could have had water with him. There are spray-pump back packs that could live in every ute. This could be a state rule that would save lives and property , like helmets on bicycle riders or lock-up of guns.
2. At the start of any fire, locals could be notified as well as the Rural Fire Service. Social media or text messages might allow enough people to put the fire out while it was small.

#### *State.*

1. The role of paid firemen could be re-organised. The system of urban fire brigades evolved during the time of kerosene heaters, gas lights, candles, and no smoke detectors. It could be routine to deploy paid firemen beyond the cities.
2. There is scope for massive investment in trucks and earth moving equipment, water storage, aircraft and other high tech equipment. It is plausible that there could be video surveillance and fire recognition like facial recognition and number plate recognition to defend against arson.

#### *Federal.*

1. The federal government could acknowledge its role especially when there are emergencies in multiple states or when one state is overwhelmed. There is a federal minister for natural disasters, and Home Affairs lists its functions as including Emergency Management (“we co-ordinate efforts to respond to and recover from disasters and emergencies”). Defence has a role in protecting the nation from any kind of attack. If Defence was able to help but did not, then this is shameful. If Defence cannot help, then our enemies could defeat Australia with two soldiers and a box of matches.
2. The Federal scale is required to develop driverless fire trucks, drone water bombers, massive increase in jet water bombing capacity, and remotely activated sprinkler systems. Also troops to patrol fire containment lines.

3. The reserve system that applies to Defence could apply to volunteer fire brigades. Members could be trained, then kept in reserve until called up for active service. Employers would have an obligation to release them and they would be paid when called up. If we have so many catastrophic fire seasons that we need this, it would be a grave error not to have it. If it turns out we don't need it then it is almost free of cost.
4. Pumped Hydro using Sydney sewerage has the potential to divert all the water in Warragamba dam west of the divide with an associated energy storage rather than cost.

### **Should Warrah be replanted?**

For fifty years, forestry produced employment, tax revenue, carbon stored in soil and sawn logs, slowed water runoff, and recreation for some trail riders and shooters. But these fires have occurred and the trend is not favourable for forestry. Nor is the political environment favourable at any level for gaining control of fires.

Any replantation plan would need a credible fire prevention and control plan, possibly including much wider fire breaks, winter controlled burns, and use of new technology as it emerges.

Options for the land include grazing, tourism, forestry, Christmas tree farming, energy storage and mixed use.

Peter Roberts

January 2020