

## **Amended Submission after NSW Bushfire Inquiry: Northern Rivers/Clarence Valley community meeting 4<sup>th</sup> May 2020**

### **Myall Creek Fire at Woombah November 2019**

#### **A Resident's Observations**

As a long time resident of the Woombah community and one impacted by this fire, I would like to make some observations around this unprecedented event.

As this catastrophic fire season unfolded Woombah was one of the very lucky communities, losing so very little, compared to other towns and villages on the east coast. Whether it was sheer good luck, the weather conditions, the grit and determination of our local RFS, the extraordinary available support, from land and air, or a combination of these factors, who knows...

I feel very little has been done at LGA and state levels to support Woombah, before and after the fires, in fact we seemed 'to have flown under the radar' in lots of instances. We weren't hit by a firestorm that arrived out of nowhere, we lost no homes...not so newsworthy...instead a fire that approached painfully slowly and unpredictably, impacting profoundly on our village and residents. I watched and recorded the slow march of those 'little red soldiers' morning and night on 'My Fire Watch'...from 15<sup>th</sup> November, (when the fire first crossed the highway into Bundjalung National Park at New Italy), to 26<sup>th</sup> November, when the fire was inevitably upon our doorstep. The constant updates from some far away RFS office, stating 'there is no danger to Woombah at this time' seemed highly unlikely, especially early on the morning of the 25<sup>th</sup> November, but that was all we had.

'Waiting to see if a fire arrives is a weird combination of constant thrumming anxiety and life-goes-on-as usual' Bronwyn Adcock

#### **Communication:**

- Though our RFS shed at Woombah was manned for over 3 weeks, very little information was made available to the local RFS and hence the community, as the fire approached. Our tireless Secretary, Cate Pawsey Field, was at the shed every day for 11 days before the fire, fielding queries, keeping the village updated with the latest RFS bulletins and calmly settling the rising fear of a community who knew they were under threat. Misinformation and rumours about evacuation were a big problem and spread like little wildfires.  
This lack of information and planning may have been the outcome of the fire being managed from the Richmond Fire Control Centre, rather than the Clarence Valley FCC. In fact, it seems the Woombah RFS was still 'in the dark' when the fire was imminent.
- On Saturday, 23<sup>rd</sup> Nov, I attended an Information Day at the RFS shed, with an RFS Liaison Officer from Byron Bay. She did an excellent job, instructing us on how to prepare our homes for the oncoming fire, and informed us of a planned backburn which would take place on Monday evening 25<sup>th</sup>, for added village protection. Though instructive, people had more immediate

questions about when to evacuate and where to go. The fire was approaching, they were justifiably fearful and became angry and in one instance, abusive.

- People were confused about the meaning of 'A Place of Last Resort', (Bimbimbi Caravan Park) thinking it was an evacuation centre. Unnecessary tensions were caused around this misunderstanding.
- The information about the evacuation centre being set up at Maclean Showground was only just filtering through by this time...the RFS had been given no official information on the arrangements there.
- Cate was hotspotting her phone to her laptop to receive the RFS updates and get them out to the community. At times, there was barely any reception. Modern communications!
- 'Fires Near Me', the RFS website and App, was slow to update and didn't give a true picture of what was happening on the ground...I am sure their mapping department had their own problems. The 'My FireWatch' website gave more regular updates, though it is not the official site.

#### **Support:**

- A large contingent of fire trucks arrived unexpectedly at the Woombah Fire Shed on Saturday 23<sup>rd</sup> Nov. There were no arrangements in place to supply food for these firefighters...we also had visiting crews from New Zealand with great appetites! A call out to the community rapidly solved this problem, but it was a failure of coordination (fire control from a distance, again?) and made for an added work load for our minimal support staff, to manage the large amounts of donated meals and food. It was not until some days after the fire had passed through Woombah, and we were at the end of the 'event', that food arrived through the appropriate channels to feed the crews mopping up.
- Community support at this time deserves recognition. People took it upon themselves to donate meals and snacks to the RFS teams, clean and mark forgotten fire hydrants, create makeshift firefighting vehicles to protect homes, assist neighbours in home preparations and more. It was a community working together.

#### **Planning:**

- In 2009, the 'Clarence Valley BFMC Bush Fire Risk Management Plan' identified Woombah as one of the 2 most 'at risk' villages in the Clarence Valley LGA. Despite this expensive and exhaustive study, it seems to have been largely ignored and/or forgotten.

There has been no significant recent improvement to the Woombah RFS vehicle and equipment pool. The Woombah Cat 7 is 20 years old with outdated equipment that is putting its crew at undue risk when in operation. The population in the village is ever increasing and the need for a replacement for this vehicle was very evident at the recent fire event.

Some crown roads that were identified in this Management Plan as fire trails for the protection of the village have since been sold off by Crown Roads despite lobbying for their status to remain.

There was extensive community consultation in this study relating to location of people in neighbourhoods, identifying the elderly and vulnerable, evacuation plans etc. Good planning at the time! Now our population has at least doubled and such a plan needs to be reviewed.

- During the winter of 2019, the Woombah East Fire Trail was upgraded significantly, extending from the Esk River, around the back of the village and out to the highway. It beggars belief to find that this facility was not utilised to its full potential during the fire. Once again, local knowledge is invaluable. When the local RFS personnel on the ground have no authority to make decisions, and the chain of command is confused, mistakes will inevitably be made.
- Clarence Valley Council need to address the shortcomings in evacuation plans for rural villages in its area.
- Woombah RFS have done an exceptional job in providing the community with information to help prepare survival plans and properties for such events. After the Angourie/Wooleweyah fire in September, 2019, the local RFS made itself available to the community to answer questions and discuss considerations for a Survival Plan. I found this information very valuable and the subsequent preparations I made at my home contributed, I believe, to saving it from the fire that roared through my property on the night of 26<sup>th</sup> November. It helped me make considered choices and act upon them when the time came. Open Days and stalls at the local markets gave residents, especially those new to the area, opportunities to discuss their preparations with the RFS members.

I would sincerely hope that debriefs have been held between the 2 relevant regional RFS Centres, NPWS and other associated agencies, to discuss the problems that arose from the Myall Creek Fire, the delegation of authority to make decisions on the ground, equipment and use of personnel. If we can address the shortcomings of this event, in a constructive and cooperative way, it will equip us to better deal with future events. The community of Woombah is stronger for the part it played in this event and a renewed interest in the local RFS will strengthen our defence and preparation into the future.

I very much appreciated the opportunity to participate in the Inquiry Community Meeting on Monday 4<sup>th</sup> May and found it most helpful to hear others' stories. There were certainly common threads. I wish the Bushfire Inquiry Leads and their team all the best with their work and I look forward to the findings.

Penny Stuart

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