

## Bushfire Enquiry

My name is Trevor Wilson.

I am Deputy Captain of the Sextonville Rural Fire Service Brigade with over 25 years experience. I am the NSW Farmers Association representative on the Northern Rivers Bushfire Management Committee as well as being a Board member of the North Coast Local Land Services.

In my role as Deputy Captain I spent more than 70 days on the fire front. A normal day was 12-15 hours. I was part of the field leadership team. On most days I was a Sector leader or a Divisional Commander (Div Com) with up to 30 crews under my control. At other times I was fighting fires and/or evacuating people from danger.

I responded to many of the major fires, within about 150 km radius of Casino, in the early hours of the fire. All the fires that I attended were under the control of the Northern Rivers Fire Control Centre and my comments are restricted to that Regions response. I understand that the handling of the fires in other Regions may have been different with different issues.

These fires were unprecedented both in intensity and extent. They occurred during the worst drought in living memory, humidity levels were extremely low and winds were strong and unpredictable. I witnessed first hand and up close flame heights of over 30 meters. I saw fire race across paddocks with negligible fuel load. At one property I saw a ball of fire, over 6 meters in diameter, roll across a bare paddock and over a man on an open cab tractor. Houses which should have burnt stayed untouched while others which were well prepared burnt. The situation was changing very rapidly. It was very dangerous, fast moving and unpredictable. Fire fighters with up to 50 year's experience had not seen anything like it before. A common saying was "This is ridiculous. It is not following any rules". It was scary. I was scared. I believe many volunteers contacted their families and said their 'goodbyes'.

First let me warn that any enquiry should be aware of the "Dunning- Kruger syndrome". This is where people with little actual knowledge make what they consider to be knowledgeable conclusions. I have heard them and there has certainly been many in the media. It must always be remembered that there were multiple major fires happening at the one time in unprecedented conditions.

Now on to the various issues: -

- 1) **Equipment.** The equipment supplied to volunteers in the Northern Rivers is very good. The only time I was not able to access equipment was when it was being deployed at a more important location.
- 2) **Food.** I cannot complain about the food supplied to the volunteers. It was not always to my liking (I am a fussy eater) but I was thankful for it. Sometimes it was not possible to get it to the crews at an appropriate time because of accessibility, safety or we had moved to a different location on short notice. This was a very dynamic situation.
- 3) **Safety.** The **culture** within the Northern Rivers team is to aggressively fight the fires but to **put safety as the number one priority**. I believe that this resulted in very few injuries even though we were working in horrendously dangerous conditions at times. I worked with over 500 volunteers and agency staff and there were only 2 that I had concerns with. I believe that this also significantly contributed to the loss of life of only 2 people – it had the potential to have been much worse, particularly the day that the village of Rappville burnt.

- 4) **Communication equipment.** In the area west of Casino, where I was mostly located, despite having good equipment in the vehicles that communication was often poor to non-existent. Many times, we could not contact the Fire Control Centre for advice, instructions, share information, etc. This was a real concern if there had of been an emergency or predicted weather change. There were also many locations where communication from vehicle to vehicle had the same issues. This made in-field coordination very difficult. I am not a technical person but it appears that this is an issue with towers and repeater stations. Also, there were several fires being controlled using the one channel. This is a high priority issue.
- 5) **Communication between agencies.** With several agencies working together on-ground communication between agencies was crucial. Each agency seems to have different radio systems. This is a high priority.
- 6) **Access to properties.** The access to many properties was too dangerous for fire trucks to enter safely in the volatile fire situation, due to the heavy vegetation encroaching on the track. On other properties it was not possible for the larger fire trucks to turn around. Also, many properties were completely surrounded by 'junk'. Local Government planning laws may need reviewing
- 7) **Fire preparedness.** A major multi-million-dollar tourist resort in the path of a fire was assessed as being 'undefendable'. It was located close to the bush. There was no access around the perimeter of the facility. Gas cylinders were located near the bush with the garbage bins stored beside them. There was leaf litter on the roof and under the buildings. Local Government planning laws may need reviewing.
- 8) **Role of various Agencies.** There were over 15 different agencies involved as either primary responders, secondary responders or in supporting roles. The role of each agency and how they fitted into the bigger picture was very unclear. At times agencies worked solo without coordination with other agencies. The Local Land Services (of which I am a Board member) is an example. There were things which were expected of them that were not their role. On the other hand, there were instances where, because they had not coordinated with the RFS, their actual role was not being carried out. To be fair they were not prepared for the enormity of the event and they did have a major life-threatening injury on the first day in the field. It is a high priority to map out which agency is responsible for what action and how it is coordinated.
- 9) **Public warnings.** With some fire's things were moving so rapidly and unpredictable that warnings were not possible. As an example, I personally advised one house occupant that the fire was about 10 km to the west and going south so he had no worries but should just monitor it. 2 hours later there had been a wind change and the fire had gone past him while we were preparing to fight the fire to the south. Where we had evacuated people the fire never came. At other times volunteers put their lives at risk to advise people to evacuate. I suggest that there is a need to train crew leaders in dealing with people in stressful situations such as when evacuating them.
- 10) **Preparedness.** Many agencies are good at responding but were not prepared. This included Local Land Services at the initial major fire at Busby's Flat which destroyed 40,000 ha in a day. As the season went on they were more prepared and did an outstanding job with over 90% of their staff involved in some way. I suggest that Local Land Services, as an agency dealing with landholders, has a role to work with RFS to advise landholders on planning and preparedness for fire.
- 11) **Roadsides.** Many believe that the RMS and Local Government should maintain their roadsides to form firebreaks.

12) **State Forests and National Parks.** Excessive undergrowth caused considerable problems with heavy fuel loads. It is suggested that livestock grazing should be reintroduced. There is also a need to maintain fire trails in operational condition. It is also suggested that water supply points should be established for ready access to water for fire fighting.

In my view the response of the Norther Rivers team, both the staff and the volunteers, was exceptional given the circumstances that they faced. On the day that the village of Rappville burnt it was actively considered that the fire would stop at the beach or that we could have been fighting it on the outskirts of Casino. Mistakes were made, but most were correct decisions at the time of making the decision. Things were happening rapidly and were unpredictable.

The role of our families who stayed at home while we were out day after day in dangerous conditions should be recognised. Without their support we could not have done what we did.

As bad as this disaster was it had the potential to be much worse with a bigger loss of life and property. I suggest that the work of so many dedicated volunteers needs to be recognised in some way.