

Community Alliance For Positive Solutions Inc; Submission To
Waroona Fire Inquiry Re: Yarloop Fire 7 January 2016

12th February, 2016

The Community Alliance for Positive Solutions (CAPS) offers the following submission:

Many of the submissions to this Inquiry into the fire that devastated the town of Yarloop will focus on the management of the fire and preparedness of the town to withstand it. We support this focus. We are also keen to ensure that it also focusses on the limited and in some instances non-existent effort to warn the residents, the lack of availability of assets and water to fight the fire, and the complex and confounding follow through after the fire of government authorities. We submit that the question posed but not yet answered as to the future of Yarloop is indicative of a broader political context that sets the response to the fire at Yarloop in special circumstances. The circumstances of this fire are very different to any others before it and we seek to make the Inquiry aware of the issues which may have had some bearing on the subsequent fate of Yarloop.

First of all we wish to ask the Inquiry to look into the history of this fire, which we understand began in the Lane Pool Reserve some days earlier and was listed as a Watch and Act event so little or no action was taken to bring it under control at that time. By the time it entered open country it was so big it was impossible to control. It was kept away from the main parts of Waroona and the Alcoa refinery at Wagerup but little effort it seems was put into defending the town of Yarloop. Even the media referred to the 'Waroona Fire' before it struck Yarloop and afterwards as the 'Waroona /Harvey Fire'. Warnings were only general and were for the Shires of Waroona and Harvey. Some residents never received any direct warning, some got warnings just 25 minutes before Yarloop was engulfed, while some local residents were left to pass on warnings to others and more were contacted hours after it had destroyed the town.

There was no water or power, and other resources were limited and inadequate. A private contracted fire unit sat unused in nearby Collie, costing the State Government a reported \$100,000. While other offers of assistance were, we are told, refused by the WA State Government.

Now we need to explore the other factors which may have helped to create this disaster.

The town was not listed as a fire risk despite the amount of heritage wooden buildings, and was thus unprepared for this kind of event. Inter-relatedly we believe that Yarloop's proximity to the Alcoa Wagerup refinery posed a special heightened risk whereby a fire threatening the refinery or engulfing the refinery could result in catastrophic follow on effects related to toxic chemical eruptions or outflows from the refinery. We do not further address the risk of the refinery in the event of fire to the surrounding communities but think the locality should have an integrated industry/community fire strategy at the very least.

Many of the homes in the town were owned either by Alcoa, who had purchased them under their land management plan to create an informal buffer zone, or by the WA Government Department of Housing, and were low cost rental properties. Others bought by Alcoa were left empty, some for many years and many of these homes and the blocks on which they stood were poorly maintained, overgrown and had large fuel loads around them. Neither the owners nor the local Shire of Harvey enforced clearing of these tinder box blocks. The common open areas of the town were in a similar condition with little regular maintenance carried out by the Shire of Harvey. Both Alcoa and the WA Government say they will not replace properties lost, the latter advising they have relocated a number of tenants.

Unlike most other similar disasters, the State Government has been very quiet about Yarloop. The Premier talks about the fire being 'unavoidable' and 'unstoppable', blaming climate change and ignoring the history of them abolishing the GHG emissions target and ongoing support of large carbon polluters such as Alcoa, who continued to run their refinery when a Total Fire Ban was in place, even bussing their employees through the fire at great risk. When asked about the future of the town, the Premier said 'It was too early to make the call'. If the Alcoa refinery were not in the picture, we suggest there would have been no equivocating re the future of Yarloop and recovery work would already be underway.

In light of these circumstances some locals have begun to speculate that Yarloop was left to burn, after all the town's demise was a convenient event, as the town was seen by some as a political and corporate inconvenience, which this fire has helped to get rid of.

Since 1996 the residents of Yarloop and its surrounds have been in conflict with their neighbor Alcoa and the State Government over a range of environmental and health issues associated with the Wagerup Alumina Refinery. They have been demanding a formal Buffer Zone be established, with relocation and compensation for all affected, as at all other similar establishments in WA. Despite a Parliamentary Inquiry and any number of health studies, supporting the demand and even the WA Dept of Health and EPA being in favour of establishing a formal buffer. The Government left the decision in the hands of Alcoa, who introduced a Land Management Plan (LMP) in the early 2000s based they said, on noise contours, a claim which has since been widely discredited. This LMP left many residents who were affected by noise and pollution events, without the compensation they were entitled to and leaving them unable to escape these problems without considerable losses. Over time the demographic of the town has changed and approximately 90% of the original population have sold to Alcoa and moved from the area, often under duress, and these residents have been replaced, in the main, with tenants of rental properties.

Over time the community of Yarloop worked to boost the social capital and economy through a range of townscape improvement projects and tourism initiatives, all of which have been frustrated by State and Local Government. Authorities even rejected a suggested win-win initiative of building a new town as a regional centre to get more of the community out of harms way, as Alcoa's expansion has affected other areas. The plan included a land swap which would allow Alcoa to expand and Iluka to mine and then follow up with carbon credit producing tree plantation on the old Yarloop Town Site.

With all of this in mind, it is imperative that the Inquiry looks at how this fire has advantaged the commercial interests of Alcoa, the financial interests of the State Government and even the local Harvey Shire such that it is unlikely that the town will be rebuilt.

The next sections outline our concerns related to the three key stakeholders who can influence the future of Yarloop – Alcoa, the State Government and the Shire of Harvey.

Alcoa World Alumina (Wagerup)

The fire has created a de facto buffer zone without the compensation costs they have been avoiding for many years. Alcoa will no longer have to buy up properties under their LMP (the

properties are gone). They will no longer have the cost associated with the maintenance of so many properties they owned and will no doubt write off their losses against tax and have publicly stated they will not rebuild empty and rental homes lost.

Likely the Regulation 17 noise rules, they could not meet, will no longer apply, along with other requirements to protect the environment and community. So their expansion can now go ahead unhindered by public health concerns, objections and appeals. They will be able to buy up the few blocks of privately owned land in Yarloop and sell or lease the whole area to Iluka Resources, which for many years have shown an interest in mining the Yarloop Town site for the rich Ilmenite body it sits on.

The State Government

The State Government will continue to support Alcoa regardless and will benefit with increased revenue from an expanded refinery operation over the years, whilst they will hope to see an end to the continual complaints, submissions and appeals from the community which have tied up any number of Departments, Department of Environmental Regulation, Health, Water, Planning, EPA, and Appeals Conveners officials for many years. The old infrastructure i.e. School, Community Centre, Police & Fire Stations, which was expensive to maintain and service will not be replaced as the depleted population will not warrant the cost. The Department of Housing has lost a number of old sub standard homes to the fire and has already moved their tenants on, so now have no requirement to replace them. The Department of Health will not now conduct a new health study, as the population is scattered and any concentrations of health problems in Yarloop will be diluted through the state population and thus any findings will be meaningless. The Department of Planning will be able to finally complete the Bunbury Regional Plan, held up for years over disputes around the land use in the Yarloop area.

The Shire of Harvey

The cost of providing council maintenance services and rebuilding of infrastructure i.e. Town Hall, Public Amenities and the Steam Workshop Museum Complex, will be even more costly than before the fire and more than they can afford with the reduced rates revenue from a much smaller population. Any loss of revenue from rates will be offset by reduced maintenance costs.

It is likely that the terms of reference for this inquiry will not allow examination of these important facts; however, it is hoped that this submission will bring some matters to light and give food for thought, when examining those issues which do not seem to make sense until you take them into account.

End of Submission