

027. Jeffe Aronson for the Bushfire Inquiry - 20 January 2021

Anne-Louise: And click that on now. And just to start off with, I've got a few kind of demographic questions at the beginning to ask you, if that's okay?

Jeffe: Yep.

Anne-Louise: They won't take too long. So firstly, with regards to the transcript becoming a submission, would you like your submission to be published or not? It doesn't matter either way.

Jeffe: Oh, sure. You can publish it if you want.

Anne-Louise: Yep. And are you happy to have your name on it? Or do you wish to be anonymous?

Jeffe: No, my name is fine.

Anne-Louise: Great. I'm going to make an assumption yes to this question, but were you in an area where the fires occurred?

Jeffe: Yes.

Anne-Louise: Were you involved in responding to the fires in any sort of emergency services capacity?

Jeffe: Yeah, it was sort of off and on because we are so remote. So there were times when I was responding as a CFA volunteer, and there were times when I was just at home protecting my own property and my life and my wife's life.

Anne-Louise: Great. Thank you. Do you still continue to be involved either supporting individuals or communities after the fires?

Jeffe: Yeah, you know, we've had a few meetings that were called by the local CFA or bushfire teams and stuff. But we haven't actually gone out and done anything ourselves.

Anne-Louise: That's okay. So your local government area is still East Gippsland Shire then?

Jeffe: Yep.

Anne-Louise: You told me the town would be Anglers Rest and the postcode then?

Jeffe: 3898. It's the same as Omeo.

Anne-Louise: You don't have to answer this question if you don't want to. Age group in decades?

Jeffe: I'm [REDACTED]

Anne-Louise: Thank you. Gender?

Jeffe: Yeah, male.

Anne-Louise: Would you like to receive updates about the inquiry going forward? We send them out via email or postal copies if required.

Jeffe: Email is great, thanks.

Anne-Louise: Thank you. And that email address that you gave me is – or we've got is the best one for you?

Jeffe: Yep.

Anne-Louise: And just lately, I like to remind people that obviously sharing your story and your experiences about the fires may bring up a range of emotions for you today. If at any point you want to stop, we can just pause the recording. I can also provide some information about support services that are available.

Jeffe: Okay, thanks.

Anne-Louise: Yeah, so essentially for the phase two of the inquiry, we're interested in understanding people's experience of the emergency relief and recovery. Particularly at this stage we're interested to understand how the recovery has progressed, how effective it's been. Where possible, if you can provide examples, that's the best information for the team to use. So things that went well, things that haven't gone so well, ideas for improvement. I'll essentially just let you talk and I will probably just ask you some more – like delve into something, depending on what issues you raise or what you want to talk about. I may ask you some further questions, but otherwise I'll just let you talk for as long as you want to do.

Jeffe: Okay. So this is specific to the recovery after the fires? Or does it include like during the fires too?

Anne-Louise: You're also welcome to – so phase one talked about preparedness and response and whilst that report has already been submitted, we're absolutely fine about hearing again, things that went well, things that didn't go so well in that preparedness and response phase. Because Tony, the Inspector-General, has said to people if you bring things up now that are different or we haven't heard before, or something like that, then he will include a bit of an addendum into this phase two report. So there are two parts, but yeah, you're welcome to talk about things that happened back at that time in that response phase as well.

Jeffe: Okay, cool. Well, so just as a little history, we were involved in the '03 fires as well. And we were completely engulfed by the two and a half – well, thousand kilometre firefront, went right through our place and over our heads and basically the only thing that saved our lives was that we had cleared the brush from our property. And actually there's a video of parts of it online on my YouTube channel for anybody that wants to see how intense it was. But basically it was normal. And our neighbours went through the exact same thing. We're extremely remote. We have maybe, you know, it's off and on but about 15 residents of the valley. And there's about two valleys that were private properties before Alpine National

Park was created in the late 90s, so you know, those are still in private hands. They're sort of little private islands in amongst the national park. It's the second largest to Kakadu in all of Australia really.

And so we chose our lifestyle and there we were, so we get that. In '03 we were essentially left on our own. And whilst we totally understand that firefighters have to be protected, in the runup to the fires it was extremely frustrating for some people, including ourselves, despite the fact that we figured we'd be on our own anyway. But it was extremely frustrating because we noticed that a lot of tankers and personnel got sent to for example to Mount Hotham and Dinner Plain where there's lots of expensive residences and you know, people with connections. And nobody was ever sent here. And occasionally what happened was – this is all '03. This is part of history.

Anne-Louise: Yep.

Anne-Louise: Sorry, just to interrupt you, can you come a little bit closer to your microphone? It's a little bit hard for me to hear for -

Jeffe: Is this better?

Anne-Louise: Yeah, that's perfect. Thank you.

Jeffe: Okay. So they would send a crew out on occasion in the leadup, before it was even a matter of life and death for the crews and safety for the crews, when locals complained to – you know, about not having any resources. And quite often they were called out, called back, and even in the middle of the night with no communication to the locals that they were protecting and finally getting some sleep. But also just they were called away repeatedly. And so in the end, we were left with zero resources. No help at all. And it was extremely frustrating. And I wrote a letter about that a long time ago. This is obviously many years ago.

So the people, you know, we watched the Royal Commission on that fire and there were a number of remedies to some of the problems recommended. And we just watched and waited and some people were rather sceptical that anything would actually eventuate. But then we had the 2006 and 2009 fires and they were nowhere near as bad to us locally. You know, they were surrounding us and they were scary, but they didn't actually impact us directly. And then we had these last fires last January 2020, and they were indeed all around us once again. And in fact, our neighbours, our upstream neighbours in the valley were impacted on the 1st of January, their whole farm was burnt. And you can hear them on the UHF radios in a panic and driving around like maniacs with their hoses and trying to put sheds out and hay bales out and protect the cattle and the house.

And in the end they lost a bunch of fencing and a hay shed and fortunately no cattle and their house was intact. And so they were okay, but you know, they're just a couple of kilometres upstream of us in the same valley. And so in the ensuing days and ensuing week, we were threatened numerous times by those fires, which kept coming towards us. And occasionally I and some of my volunteer CFA neighbours would go and respond on some of the remote four wheel drive tracks, and occasionally we were told no, just go protect your own property. There was one day in there where it looked like we were going to get slammed again by an

extreme firefront, which ended up – you can look at the ridge now, it's probably – I'd say it's two kilometres roughly away from us, where it stopped at a fire break. Basically a track that was laid by – for a Telstra landline cable.

So the fire crews were great. It was really encouraging to myself because we noticed there was a lot of crews around, there was a lot of help around. In fact, one night we had crews that stayed on our border, on our property border all night long to help us out. And we really appreciated it. And if there was any emotion it's tears of thankfulness for having people there. You know, we brought them coffee and snacks all night long and stuff. In any case, so I have to say it was 100% better this time around.

Anne-Louise: Yeah, right.

Jeff: So any comments I have are not necessarily complaints. They're just trying to get what we see as the greatest issues to improvement in the area. And that would be communications. And as I stated in my letter, what we found was numerous failures in communications. As before, a lot of the ICs, the incident commanders, are elsewhere. They're far away. The closest were often in Swifts Creek, which is a 45-50 minute drive. And look, like I said, they're good people. They had the best interests of everybody at heart. I get that part. But the fact that they're far away means that they don't have local information on the ground. And so a possible solution to that is to listen better, which was part of the '03 Crown Commission or whatever you guys call it recommendations they use local knowledge and communicate with locals.

And whilst it was better, we found numerous instances like for one example, a CFA/DELWP crew came to a fire on the side of our valley and the farmer that had been highly impacted, our neighbour, who's been part of the CFA, paramedic, ambulance, she's been a local her whole life, knows the area like the back of her hand and was out there spraying water on the fire. And the local IC was arguing with her on which way the wind could blow and whether it would spread or not and stuff. And you know, no need to go into detail, but it's like, no, no, no. The locals know which way the wind can go. And it does blow in that direction and there shouldn't be a debate about it. You should just take on board the local information, use it or not use it, but at least not have a bit argument about it.

So that was one issue. And they ended up not talking to each other for the rest of the fire, and we had to sort of intercede. It was kind of funny in a way, but it wasn't in another way. So that was one issue. But so – and we locals made a couple of phone calls for requests. Maybe clear a track here, or take a downed tree there, or widen a fire break there, or informing them that there was a spot fire. Blah, blah, blah. Good information. And it was interesting, because sometimes we were told no, that's not true. No, that's not happening. And it would often be whoever was answering the phone. Like somebody who was a novice or somebody who was brought in from somewhere else and didn't know the area. Or somebody who was going by the book. Whatever. Whatever the rationale or reason was, we'd reach somebody who was sort of vetting our information. And that was very frustrating. And that did happen as well in '03.

And so I think training resources a little bit better so that they are letting information that is updated and local and maybe not coming from official channels, but it is true. I mean, why

would we lie? So that was part of it, the frustration. Another part was, part of the reason we moved here in Victoria in the first place was because we couldn't be forced to evacuate. We want to make that choice ourselves. And so we've done that in the past and we've done pretty good and we have a very defensible – everybody that sees our property says it's great and it's very defensible. Despite being in the middle of a forest.

But so that – part of it is when we watched – I can't remember his first name, he was in charge of some emergency services. Mr Crisp.

Anne-Louise: Andrew.

Jeff: Yeah, Andrew Crisp. And I saw him on TV and he was saying, "This fire is not defensible. There's no such thing as defending in this fire." And I was like, "You don't know anything about personal properties or different areas or how defensible we've made it or what resources we have." I mean, to say that – I get that he wants to make sure that as many people that need to go away have done so, but you know, it's very disappointing when everybody's not in the same basket. And we who have done the right thing and done a great job to prepare are sort of ignored. So that was difficult.

And then we went to – we had to go for supplies after, oh, I'd say three weeks maybe. Four weeks, three weeks of the fire being in the area and surrounding different areas. And we have had three or four weeks of supplies which we considered pretty good backup and getting really well prepared. But at some point we needed to get more supplied. And so we drove into town, which is Bairnsdale, which is a little over two drive for us. As it turned out, when we were coming back, we were told that the Omeo highway, the Great Alpine Road, which is our road, was closed. And so we went to the local police station and we were told, "No, no, no. It's open. You're fine." So went for 15 or 20 minutes down the road and got stopped by, guess what? Police. And I guess the road was closed. And so we were very – obviously rather frustrated with that and made some phone calls back to the police station.

And I mean, look, again, these people were trying to give us information they thought was correct. We get that. It's not like they're bad people or they're stupid or anything. But the communications between the agencies and between agency heads and the people at the desk who were the face of the police for the public was not happening. And so we were assured that it was open and we said, "No, we're in a car and we're at the roadblock and your own police officers have stopped us. You've got to know what's going on." So then we found out from the police – local police, that there was going to be a convoy and it was going to be something like 8pm that – they didn't know what time actually. And so we spent the next two hours trying to find out when that convoy was going to go. And if we had trouble – and I'm, as you might observe in your phone – you know, in the Zoom conversation, I'm pretty communicative. And if we had trouble finding out, others would have found it impossible.

And so in the end, we ended up having to call the Omeo CFA chief, who's a friend of ours, and he's the one that told us, "Oh yeah, it's at 8.00. Be there at 8.00 and you'll be let go." And so another communication breakdown there. So my recommendation in my writing afterwards – my submission afterwards was that there be a central source where all this information went and there would be a designated person that the public would always go to. A liaison officer, if you will. And that person is always apprised of the latest information

from DELWP, CFA, SES, police, fire, everybody. And so everybody knew who to talk to and then from the agency end, and then the public would know who to talk to from their end and it would be a lot less confusing. So that was another part that that was difficult.

Another part that was difficult in that '03 fire for us was that we'd have crews and we'd talk to them and we'd see them and they'd ask us questions and some of them would ignore us and some of them would be, "Oh yeah, that's great information." In fact, one crew in a tanker told another CFA crew that there was no CFA shed in the valley and don't worry about going up there. When they were maybe a half a kilometre away from the CFA shed. So again, it's all communication, I think. But in any case, there was no official handover notes from one strike team to the next. There might be some verbal handover and there might not. And so every time there was a handover of crews, it turns out that we had to reinform them of all the information.

And in one instance, we border Callaghan's Road. That's a dirt road at the edge of our property. And it's the width of a regular dirt road, however wide that is. I'm going to guess 15 metres roughly. Whatever it is. And one incident commander had requested and gotten approval of widening that road and then, which would have made it a lot better fire break. And then also for a backburn on our mountain, which is called Mount Ned. And as it turned out, the backburn was supposed to occur the day before, as it turned out, the fire was going to hit us. But it didn't occur, because they were sent to the wrong coordinates. So again, misinformation and locals – you know, non-locals in charge not finding out exactly where things are from locals. And then – so the backburn never happened. Fortunately again, we got out of it, so we were okay. But it could have been a disaster.

And then the other thing that happened was the dozerdriver – there was a shift change of fire crew teams, strike crew teams locally when the dozer driver came up. And so instead of the dozer driver making a wider firebreak, they ended up basically dozing a whole new road 40 metres away from our existing Callaghan's Road. Which did nothing. It destroyed a horse trail is what it did. So those things were rather frustrating. And the crew was – you know, what I discovered was when I talked to people on the ground – and this happened again when [REDACTED] got killed by that tree, which is – you know, I helped the paramedics in that response to get to the site – was people on the ground are so reluctant to question authority or to contact authority with something out of left field. Especially if it's just from a 'local' quote unquote. They're terrified of either losing their jobs or getting reprimanded or chastised, which we've heard on the radio ourselves. So we know that that's a real concern. That they won't do the logical thing.

Like I went up and I said, "Hey, I'm a paramedic. I've heard there's an injury up the hill there. I know this road really well." And they were like – you know, they drove their car in front of me and blocked the road with their CFA vehicle and you know, it was like we're going to arrest you if you dare go past. And so I finally – I just said, "Look, just call on the radio and find out if they need help. That's all. I'm not asking for anything but find out if they need help. If they do, I'm a paramedic, okay? Or an ex-paramedic." And finally they did call and they said no help is needed and I went, "Okay, that's it." But just that little tête-à-tête was so unnecessary, I found.

And so a similar thing happened with these guys that were dozing this road. And later on they sent them to be 'revegetated' quote unquote. So what they did in the reveg, which is part of the recovery. Now I'm moving into recovery. What they did in the reveg was they just basically took miles of downed dead trees and dragged them onto that firebreak. That was their reveg. And so – you know, I drove up to it, I walked up to the guy and I said, "What are you doing? There was a horse trail here and now you're making a fire break into basically a fuse." And he said, "Sorry, you figure it our yourself. We're doing what we've been told to do." And so they wouldn't like double check. There was a reluctance to maybe go oh, hang on, maybe we should double check what we're doing. So that part of the communication I think is an issue, with people being heard from below and incident commanders being not only willing but actually keen to hear on the ground information and maybe adjust what they end up choosing to do.

Anne-Louise: Jeffe, how many weeks later would that have been, that reinstatement of the fire break? Or months later?

Jeffe: Yeah, no, I don't think it was months. I'm going to say it was a few weeks. But I'm guessing, okay. It was just weeks later.

Anne-Louise: And nothing came of your – you know, "This isn't reinstatement, what are you doing?" It did end up like that?

Jeffe: Yeah. Well, it did. In fact, the guys looked at me and said, "If she's any kind of horsewoman, she'll ger her own trail back together or she'll make a new trail." And I was like, never mind. Whatever. I'm not going to argue it. So she had to basically go back and recut a trail that had been there for 100 years so that she could get her horses down that trail. And then one of the private property owners, one of our neighbours, who's a great guy. He's an arborist and owns a cabin up here. He initially gave permission for the CFA and DELWP to go in and make fire breaks or do whatever they needed to do, because their cabin was threatened as well. I mean, he was happy to help. But as it was, they made an enormous windrow of piles of dead and downed, pushed over trees. And it's still there to this day. It was just left there. And so he said, "I'll never let them on my property again. Forget it."

Anne-Louise: Has he had any success with having any of that cleaned up or mulched or anything like that? Because we've heard this a little bit on roadsides. I haven't heard it as much on private property, but I'm familiar with this issue.

Jeffe: Yeah, well, he's not – no, he hasn't. And a lot of these guys, they're farmers, they're simple people. You know, nothing bad about that, it's just – and they just want to get into a big row over it. So they just go – they just throw up their hands and they're resigned and they just walk away and deal with it themselves. Me being from Chicago, I'm willing to write a few letters. But at some point you've sort of kind of got to go well, nothing's going to be done.

Anne-Louise: No, I've heard definitely a bit about people where there's been issues, when they've decided we're going to persist with this, it's not right. It's taken such a long time. They've finally got the outcome at the end, but for most people what they've said is people just said, "I'm not doing that. Stuff that. I'll just leave it as it is."

Jeffe: Yeah.

Anne-Louise: Or whatever. But yeah, I've got at least three examples of that something that took many, many months to resolve. An issue that shouldn't have been like that in the first place. So -

Jeffe: Yeah. And that does happen quite a bit. Too much, probably. And this guy, like I said, he's an arborist and he was out on the crews working on widening – oh god, I can't remember the name of the road, but it's a road that goes up to Gelantipy and Buchan. And that was hugely impacted, and they were doing what they knew worked. And the guy's been an arborist for 30-40 years, whatever it is. And they were doing a great job. But some guy came out of the blue who was in charge. Large and in charge, you know, from DELWP or CFA and he said, "No, you can't do that." And they kept changing where they were supposed to cut, you know, X number of metres from the edge of the road to X number of metres from the easement, to X number of metres from the centre line. And then they'd change it back again.

And then they were telling them, "Okay, well go and put a K on the tree for killer tree and a white or a yellow dot, do this." Which nobody understood even what that meant. And when he was questioned by this friend of mine who's an arborist, he just was told, "Do it. Or your fired." Basically. So they didn't do it. They just walked away. And somebody else cut the trees. So that sort of, I mean if you will, arrogance and inexperience is hard to cope with. So again, it's communications but it's also systemic and training-wise. Hey, you guys have got to listen to people on the ground. If they've got 30 years' experience, and you've only got book learning, maybe you want to listen.

Anne-Louise: Yeah. And Jeffe, you're telling me things that we've heard across the board through the enquiry in both the phase one and phase two about this local knowledge issue. Lots of examples of things just not happening, as you've described them. And I know that in phase one that was picked up as one of the recommendations going forward. I'm not entirely sure exactly what it is, but Tony talked about this when he's been visiting communities saying, "Yeah, we heard a lot about it. And it needs to change. There are some real issues there."

Jeffe: Yeah, good. And it strikes me that whilst there are no fires at the moment -

Anne-Louise: Touch wood.

Jeffe: - setting up meetings between the locals and the people who end up being the ICs to hash these things about, because you'll find – and I think you've probably seen this and heard this yourself – that some people are ticking off boxes. Not all of them. Some of them are really great. But some are like, "Okay, I'm supposed to listen to the locals. Okay, let's tick that box. What's your input?" And then you get the glazed eye and you tell them your input and they go, "No, we can't do that." And do what they were going to do anyway. So I don't know how to address that. That may be some – maybe a psychologist could figure it out, but that does happen.

Anne-Louise: Yep. And did you have any issues with loss of power or telecommunications? Are you guys off the grid up there? Or things like that during this time?

Jeff: Well, look, we're off the grid and we're on a micro-hydro and a solar system. Most people up here are. Almost all people are. And we were fine with our electricity, but the electricity to the mobile towers was off and on. And then getting fuel to the generators for those mobile towers was fraught with difficulties. Getting cattle in and out was fraught with difficulties. And that's part of – I'm also on a CRC locally [Omeo District CRC]. And those are – the communications, those things were important and also communications came up. And so after the fires in '03, we had a bunch of friends from the States and also here donate money to us. Guess what? For communications. And we bought a number of UHF radios, CB radios and antennas. And we distributed them amongst everybody in the valley so we could communicate.

What happens remotely here is twofold. One is communicating with each other while we're running around like maniacs in our vehicles putting out spot fires or protecting our cattle or our home or what have you. And then the other thing is, it's better now because of mobile reception in some places, but we're at the very outer limit of mobile reception. And so, this is sort of adjacent to what we're talking about here, but there's been a black spot program for years. And nearby, Mount Wills got a black spot tower bid on and approved by – I think it was Vodafone or Optus, one of the two. And everybody in the area was like, why would they even have bid? There's no service for those two telecoms in this area. It's all Telstra. So of course, six years went by and they never built the tower. So now there's a new black spot submission request – I think it's 5A.

And apparently a number of the issues that were brought up in the first four rounds have been addressed. Instead of one tower, they're talking about putting in towers that cover a route instead of one spot. And we're 100 kilometres of no reception basically where we live. And they're allowing for things like ongoing maintenance, tree clearing, access. All these things that are super important for the black spot mobile towers. And Telstra, I know they're thinking about it. I don't know if they're actually going to bid on it or not, but hopefully that'll be helpful. There's another thing that's going on that we were informed of by the shire, and that is that I think there's 40 sites - and I'm not sure if it's nation-wide or Victoria-wide – where they're testing out emergency mobile satellite communication.

Anne-Louise: Yeah, okay.

Jeff: And I think there's one test tower in Omeo, but that really doesn't help us, because we're several mountains and valleys away from Omeo. So that's just a little – a real quick background information on the communications. So we just a GoFundMe after this last fire in January, last January, and we got about \$10,000. And we have been working really hard to put that towards communications. And so one of the solutions was getting a – it's called a cell fi booster. It's a mobile Wi-Fi telecom booster. And so we got one donated by Telstra. Very nicely. And the local "yagi" antennae it's called for these sorts of boosters. And so a 72 year old neighbour and me went up on the roof and installed the antennae at the CFA shed, and then installed this booster. And so now there's a hotspot around the CFA shed. And so we have a couple of those at homes and now one at the CFA shed. So now at least we can

communicate with the outside world, assuming that the tower at Omeo has power because of the generators and stuff. And plus, smoke will affect it, but that's usually only for minutes to hours.

The other thing we've been working on is a UHF repeater. And that's been taking – well, it's 10 or 12 months so far of working on it, but we finally got – I think it's the ACMA who approves repeaters. We have to get an emergency approval, because there's other repeaters in Omeo that are too close. And I think we've got the approval. And so now we have to make the application. And so what that does it give us a UHF repeater so we can talk to each other. And make sure we're all safe and we know where all the fires are and we know where to go and blah, blah, blah. Somebody's hurt whatever. So that's like the final piece of the puzzle. So we can talk to each other once that's done. And then we've got the mobile booster so we can talk to the rest of the world and get a chopper in or whatever.

So that's in progress. The shire may be able to help us a little bit if we need some money. The difficulty there is going to be pumping up the antennae and the battery and the solar panels by hand up to the summit of the mountain nearby. But that's sort of in progress as well. But communications both human based and also technology based have been the issues I think that need to be resolved.

Anne-Louise: And did these projects come through the – you said the community recovery committee you're involved in, or is this more locally the Anglers Rest community members have been thinking about this and just progressed with this? Interested to understand more about that.

Jeffe: Well, a lot of it's coming from our very active CFA people in Omeo. A lot of it's coming from locals in Angers Rest. And the BRV and the CRC, it's been extremely frustrating and difficult. The BRV has basically unfortunately moved the goalposts a lot there as they so eloquently put it, they're sort of building the plane as they fly it.

Anne-Louise: We've heard this.

Jeffe: Yep. And so we've gotten a lot of information changed over these months and a lot of our members were ready to quit. So we've taken a long break until the end of February because of how difficult and frustrating it's been. We haven't broken up yet.

Anne-Louise: Can you tell me a little bit about some of those challenges? Because we are really interested in that role of the community recovery committees and that role that BRV has played. Like any particular examples of things that have been frustrations and challenging?

Jeffe: Well, I could name a few off the top of my head. One is that there's multiple very long-winded legalese bits of information coming from huge, multiple sources. And we get thrown -

Anne-Louise: So not just BRV?

Jeff: Yeah, not – well, often it comes through either the Shire place manager or the BRV. But coming from BRV, from CFA, from bushfire recovery, from the State of Victoria, wherever. There's we got this pile of money, we've got that pile of money, we've got this pile of money. And each one of them has separate application forms and separate approvals and separate timelines. And look, we're just volunteers. And a lot of us are in our 60s. And it's like, it gets to the point where you just go, I can't even cope with this anymore. Thanks for the offer of money, but we can't do this. We just can't cope. And so that is one problem as there's not one ring to rule them all, you know. There's not one place to go to which consolidates the information. The pots of money are there, but they can't be used because people are so – finding it so difficult and so frustrating and so scattered. Okay, so that's one thing.

The other thing has been our role has changed. The description of what our role is supposed to be has changed. First we thought we were supposed to be approving projects. Local projects. And that would be that people who wanted a project done for bushfire recovery should go to us and we would approve it and then they'd get another tick in the box when they were assessed for whether they would get these monies or grants. Then it was like, "No, you can't approve this. We have to have liability insurance." And, "Oh no, you're not supposed to approve it, because it doesn't matter whether you approve it or not." And then another week or two later it was, "Oh yeah, other projects have applied directly around you without going through you." And we were like, "Well, why would we exist then if they can just apply directly?" And so that was extremely frustrating.

We had two weeks' worth of workshops by a really great – I mean, I'm not into workshops myself. I'm not into kumbaya type stuff. But this lady was really good. For our CRC and basically at the end of that it was – it looked to us like no, we shouldn't be in the business of approvals. We should be in the business of economic recovery, tourism recovery, fire recovery, but just as a clearing house. We should maybe just get it so that all these scattered resources and scattered requests knew where to go to find where the applications are, find where the pots of money are, find who the people to talk to were if they have an issue. And then just say, "Okay, here's the information. See you later." And so we left with that and we're sort of on a hiatus now.

But it sounded to us like because we have a unique issue in the Omeo region, because it's not Mallacoota, one town. It's not Buchan one town. It's the Omeo region. And there's – depending on who you talk to, there's 12 to 34 little micro-towns to full-blown towns. And not even counting all the farms and stuff in between. And you know, it's all small town politics and there's above the gap and below the gap and all this crazy crap, you know. And like I'm not interested in all that stuff. I just want to get something done. And the people on our committees seem to be in the same boat as me. So it's more complicated because it's more political and fractured.

And so we thought maybe the best thing we can do is just be that clearing house. Collect all the information. Where are the assets? What are the funds available? Where do you go for to talk to about problems or to apply for grants? Where do you go for help writing a grant? That sort of stuff. And that's kind of where I think we're headed. But again, we're on hiatus, so that's kind of where we're at.

Anne-Louise: So not so much about determining your region's priorities for recovery. Because that's kind of like what I hear about – you know, community recovery committees are about community-led, communities making their own decisions about what they want to see happen and that kind of stuff. And their priorities. And therefore some of those projects, yes, do they meet the priorities, yes. We can go through this funding, et cetera. So it sounds like a little bit different to that?

Jeff: Yeah, well you know, part of the other problem with the CRC we had was we kept being told, “Oh my god, there's a pot of money and the expiration date for applying is XXX and you've got to apply really quickly.” Like, “Oh, so you mean we have to write an application? Oh.” And then that was really frustrating. And then all of a sudden we were competing with others who were going direct to the funding agency and not through us. And they're applying for things like improving the toilets or the showers of the rodeo grounds or something. And I'm like, “What? Why? What does that have to do with fire recovery?” But it's in a big sort of amorphous wordsmith area of the economic recovery sort of thing.

Anne-Louise: So when you say others that's like other community organisations within the region?

Jeff: Right. Exactly. And then you get what I was talking about before, like well we don't want to butt heads with Joe Blow because he wants to fix the toilets at the rodeo grounds. I mean, we want to be seen as the go-to for the community, not yet another competing interest. So it got really sort of confusing and difficult in that regards. You know, the workshop lady was – I could look it up who she was, but mind – anyway, she was really good at helping people think about how to do this better. And her community was really successful. It was out somewhere near Maffra or something I think. But again, we have limited resources. We're a bunch of volunteers. We're trying to do the right thing. We need a little bit of help with direction. And we need a lot of help with – like most of us are not going to write a grant. You know, somebody to do that for us.

Anne-Louise: Yes. And I've heard this in other communities as well. And just that you've described it the same – you're all volunteers and some of these places, you're almost working full-time on these CRCs. And it's a huge, huge burden as well as being fire affected. So there's a bit of a disconnect there I think.

Jeff: Yeah. You know, look, it's typical – look, I was a bureaucrat myself for a time, so I get it. It's not like a universal thing for me. But it's just typical red tape, log jams, nonsensical cover your behind, you know, like what does the insurance guy say? What does the attorney say? And then there's competing interests on the council and they've got jobs to keep as politicians. I mean, it's just so crazy that everybody just goes, “Look, oh well, we tried again and nothing came out of it, so whatever.”

Anne-Louise: And how do you think – have you been able to access the services that you might have wanted to access in that recovery space? Have you been able to find out information about – you mentioned before, I liked your analogy like you're pretty savvy and knew where to get the info from, but so what does that mean for the people who aren't so savvy? Because we're very interested in understanding that communication around the

recovery services and programs that are available to people and whether people have been able to find it out if they don't know about it. Have you got any comments about that?

Jeffe: Well, look, we don't have miles of fencing to fix like a lot of people. So they were a hay shed to replace or whatever. And we were not burnt out directly either. So I would defer to those people in general. Having said that, we did ask for some help. I'm trying to think. It was like – I think it was NECMA, North East Catchment Management Authority project where they were going out to help people build fences or whatever. And we border DELWP land. We border forest land. And it's thick with brush and very dangerous. And that's the direction the wind comes from, so it is what it is. So we asked him for help and they came out with pruners and a crew of three and they were willing to help.

And I'm real thankful for all the help I can get. It's like hey, it's all a bonus. It's something I've – the less I have to do myself. But it was like frustrating even for the crew, because we didn't know how close to the road they could get and never did get a straight answer. They were diverted to – on the day they were going to come out, they were diverted to do some – I don't know, testing or getting a ticket for whatever it was. Chainsawing or whatever. And so they came out for a lesser amount of time than they could. And then they were told no, you can't use brushcutters because those are dangerous. So they had to prune by hand. Like hours and hours wasted. And even they were frustrated like who is making these decisions? And why are they afraid to make a decision? Why don't we just do what's right?

And then they were told, "Oh, these are native plants. We can only prune native plants. We can't cut them down." I'm like, "Woah, wait a minute. Teatree and melaleuca and kunzia they're like a two metre bush burns 15 metres high and burns all the trees dead and then threatens us. They're the dangerous things. That's what kills us. Of course you want to be able to cut them down." But no, it's just layer after layer after layer of micromanagement I guess, made it very difficult for these guys who came out to help. And look, they helped. They did a little bit. But they could have done five times more if they'd have been set free so to speak.

Anne-Louise: Yeah, right. And what about access to mental health support services, financial support, any of those sort of things? Have you had to access them? Were you aware of their availability, et cetera?

Jeffe: Yeah, we were aware of it and I think – I'm going to be mister tough guy Chicago here and I was like, "We are aware of it. We don't need to hear it like every other day. And go over and over and over. And like, we know. Okay, thank you." But I guess for me, my mental health was a shot of scotch every couple of days. But my wife is here and we have a great relationship so we help each other and we've been lucky.

Anne-Louise: Yeah, that's good. And are you hearing from anyone in the community about whether they haven't been able to get the support services that they might have wanted to? Or it's generally been relatively positive about that?

Jeffe: No, I think relatively positive. I think anecdotally I've heard from several farmer friends that the crews that came out to fix the fences, they were really good at tearing fences

down, but they were so novice at putting fences up that they finally went, “Look, thanks anyway. We’ll take it from here.”

Anne-Louise: Is that with Blaze Aid? The voluntary group Blaze Aid?

Jeffe: Yeah.

Anne-Louise: Yep.

Jeffe: Yeah, that was it. You know, they were thankful for all the help that they could get, but there was a point where it was like, “Yeah, okay, take a step back. Thank you.” And I don’t know about our neighbours, but in terms of their hay shed, yeah, not real sure. So again, that’s for somebody else to address. We weren’t directly burnt.

Anne-Louise: Yeah, no sure. Absolutely. And listen, we are actually coming up your way hopefully. I’m waiting to hear back. I know it’s a little bit further down, but waiting to hear back from someone at Tambo Crossing who wanted to have a bit of a – like get some people together. We’re looking to come up the week of the 22nd of February. So I’m just working – I’ll give [REDACTED] a call from the Council. So I think he’s your CRC sort of Council person, isn’t he? And we did – late November, we did some focus groups in Benambra. But we have certainly the capacity to meet with some small groups of people again during that time of that week, the 22nd. We’re going to be down in Sarsfield and Clifton Creek as well potentially Bruthen Buchan whatever, but yeah, committed to getting up towards your way.

Jeffe: Yeah. Well, that’d be good. I think actually that reminds me of another little issue. There’s the mayor and the CEO came up here to talk to people in the community, oh, it’d be a couple of months ago now at least. And I don’t know how they advertised it. Maybe on their shire website or something or the Omeo news sheet. And a lot of people don’t access those. And I recognise that some people don’t ever read their emails. So my recommendation has consistently been to broadcast the information to the community to as many – through as many venues as possible. Maybe the news sheet, maybe the website, but also emails, also Facebook et cetera. And if you don’t reach people after that, well then kind of tough. But that’s been kind of a hard slog, convincing the powers that be to just use every resource available because there’s all these different random ways that people choose to talk, to communicate. And so we didn’t hear about the mayor and the CEO coming up until after it was already done.

Anne-Louise: Yeah, right. Yeah, and look you don’t – we’re taking that approach of use as many methods as possible. So you know, paid advertising in the papers, Facebook, the direct emails, flyers, et cetera. So the radio I think they’ll end up doing some proactive work in that space as well. Yeah, but Jeffe, do you know when your CRC was meeting again next? You said you’re having a bit of a break now?

Jeffe: Yeah. It’s on the end of February, let’s see if I can dig out the email here. I don’t know if it’s the date has been set yet, but let’s see. Date to be confirmed. Okay.

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Jeffe: Sweet. Great. Thanks very much. It was really good talking to you. Thanks.

Anne-Louise: It was good to talk to you. Thanks, Jeffe. See you then.

Jeffe: Bye.