

## **Interview with Don Ashby for the Bushfire Inquiry – 4 December 2020**

**ANNE-LOUISE:** And I have got just a couple of Questions at the start for the purposes of the inquiry around demographics and that type of thing. Are you all right if I just quickly run through them?

**DON:** No worries.

**ANNE-LOUISE:** Thank you. With the transcripts, I'll provide you with a copy of the transcript and that's used as evidence in the inquiry and it can also be a submission, from your perspective, if you would like it to be. Would you like that submission to be published or not?

**DON:** Yeah, I don't mind

**ANNE-LOUISE:** Right, yeah. You can either have your name on it or be anonymous.

**DON:** Don't mind - name's fine.

**ANNE-LOUISE:** Name, yeah. You were in the area where the fires occurred. Were you involved in responding to the fires, from an emergency services point of view?

**DON:** I wasn't a member of emergency services, no.

**ANNE-LOUISE:** But I think you still are involved in supporting individuals or communities since the fires?

**DON:** I managed the relief centre for about five weeks.

**ANNE-LOUISE:** Yeah, that's what I was aware of, yeah. East Gippsland, Mallacoota. You don't have to answer the question if you don't want to. Age group in decades?

**DON:** [REDACTED].

**ANNE-LOUISE:** Gender?

**DON:** Male, I think.

**ANNE-LOUISE:** Don, have you been receiving the community updates?

**DON:** Yes.

**ANNE-LOUISE:** Okay, I thought you may already be on that mailing list, down there, yeah. And just lastly, I like to just remind people that, obviously, sharing your story or experiences can bring up a range of emotions. If you want to stop at any point, we can just pause the recording, have a break. I can also provide information about support services if required, so I just like people to be aware of that. And otherwise, particularly today, the team is really interested to hear about the establishment of the relief centre in Mallacoota and your role that you played in that and also, I understand from [REDACTED] about the management, perhaps, and coordination of donations.

So they're two parts of the inquiry that we're really interested in and I'll basically let you chat. I've got a few questions from the team that I might ask at certain points, but otherwise just to get a picture of what happened, what you did, who you were working with, that kind of thing - things that went well, things that didn't go well, opportunities to do things differently next time. So, opportunities for improvement is what we're really interested in as well, so any examples that you can share would be fantastic.

**DON:** Okay, but where to start. Do you want it in the timeframes?

**ANNE-LOUISE:** Yeah, that's probably the best, I reckon.

**DON:** Well basically, I turned up probably just after the first front had gone through. I'd been helping to support some people with defending their place. My house had got burnt. I was helping some other people, came to the hall and basically there was a lot of tourists there, who were mostly organising the place. There was no resources at all. The paramedics had been through and they had been supplying emergency first aid, rehydration, both through catheters and through, obviously, drinking.

And one of the things I'd done before the fire came through was to load up my car, my 4-wheel drive, with things like generators and phone recharging systems and all the rest of it, because I knew we'd probably need those afterwards. Because I'm the president of the hall and rec committee in Mallacoota and we had been aware for a long time of how inadequate the facilities in the hall were - like non-existent and so I'd had a plan for years of what the response would be.

So basically I was kitted out with stuff, emergency lighting and all that kind of jazz, and when I hit the ground there was a bunch of tourists there who were really amazingly helpful and really amazingly clever. Within a few hours we'd established emergency power for my generator, put up some emergency lighting, because the hall itself is a great big cave and there was virtually no natural lighting, the power had gone out and we'd also set up a regime for cleaning the toilets. We'd started -

**ANNE-LOUISE:** And at this stage this was all just community - the Council didn't have any staff there, Red Cross, any of the other organisations?

**DON:** No, there was basically - sorry, the hall was used as a cinema and so there was a bit of stuff there from the - we had to convince the cinema that they weren't a cinema anymore and it was now an emergency service. That took a bit of a while. No, the Council representative was a lady called [REDACTED] who was amazingly helpful. She actually is a [REDACTED]. And she'd actually had a job with the Shire for the last - I think she started about two weeks before as a part-time events manager, so it was quite an event we were having, so she kind of fell into place really. And I've known [REDACTED] since God had the measles and her and I have managed the arts festivals and all sorts together, so she's a pretty competent person, so she filled in that role and she's still doing it now.

But basically there was nothing in place. It was just a, what do they call it? It was just a complete fiasco really. But we as the hall and rec committee had been onto the Shire for, I

don't know, years about it. After a lot of prompting over a long time they actually put a three-phase connector onto the hall and connected up, but there was no generator in Mallacoota that fitted that particular plug. So that was useless. And we started doing stuff like making soup.

And after about a week - you've got to understand that my chronology's a bit wobbly because it was just full-on flat-chat for weeks and weeks - so after about a week, I think, that the tourists left, they were flown out and boated out on that big ship and by then locals who'd - by then we'd established a team of local volunteers who had just turned up. They were friends of mine and just basically good people. So we established ourselves pretty much as a routine kind of thing. We were open pretty much 24 hours in the first couple of weeks.

The Red Cross showed up first and they were, on the whole, amazingly good. The biggest problem they had was changing over their shifts because they weren't allowed to be there for more than three days, I think. But often, because of the fire, because of the smoke and because of difficulty getting in and out, they weren't actually doing handovers often. They were actually one lot was flying out, the other lot flew in. So, basically, the handovers were being done by us, which meant a lot of weird things happened.

Like on two occasions we found cardboard boxes that ostensibly were full of rubbish and when we were checking them, the bottom half of them were full of Red Cross forms that should have been handed in as people who wanted assistance, stuff like that. So we were pretty much flat out trying to keep the place clean, keep the place tidy, keep the place organised.

After a certain point, the emergency services people, particularly the SES, had a bit more spare time to worry about than just people - they were trying to save lives and save assets and by the time, I think the second or third front, had gone through, things had quietened down a bit. And so there started to be a bit more coordination. And I got rung up by Andrew Forrest's mob who basically said, 'Do you have a list of things you need?' I sat down with the Red Cross people and we wrote a list and sent an email off to them.

At that point, we didn't have any internet capacity at all in the hall and I nagged and nagged and nagged and didn't get anywhere so I actually ended up getting a friend of mine, [REDACTED] and he actually sent a helicopter with a 4G cradle link which we then set up, which then gave us internet access in the hall, which was really necessary and really good, because in some cases not even the - at one point I don't think even the Red Cross didn't have internet access. We got that going, which was great, and we did that with assistance from my friend in Melbourne. I won't tell who he was because he shouldn't have done what he did. And with the help from the Army who'd arrived by then, they were able to get it connected and going.

I must say, the actual cradle link is still operating in Mallacoota because Bush Fire Recovery Victoria still haven't got their act together and the local hub still hasn't got internet access. So they're actually using my internet access from what, from-[REDACTED] internet access they're using because BRV have been so slack at getting things done. They've been fairly appalling, actually. They seem to be getting their act together now, but not very well, and the people on the ground have been left pretty much high and dry and I've been offering support as I can to them.

**ANNE-LOUISE:** Yeah, we heard a little bit of - I mean that's now nearly two months ago, so for you to say it's still not great, like when we talked to a group of people, who were in the focus group, we heard about the issues to do with the BRV and the hub and the renovations and the fact it's taking such a long time and not much support on the ground, but it's a bit of a concern that we're now at the start of December and it doesn't sound any different.

**DON:** You know, it's got better but it's still not good and we still - poor old [REDACTED]. [REDACTED] an old friend of mine who I've known since she was at high school, she's the [REDACTED] and she had to take time off last week because she just couldn't do anything. She couldn't handle any more. And it was mostly because all she was getting from upstairs was [REDACTED], excuse my French.

**ANNE-LOUISE:** We've been hearing this - a disconnect between the BRV, perhaps Melbourne or wherever, and the on-the-ground situation.

**DON:** The reason is that it's the same reason as we were so ill-prepared here for the initial response, is because it's all top down. And I'm sorry but the guy that's in charge of emergencies in East Gippsland Shire couldn't find his [REDACTED] with two hands and a big map. He's a nice guy but he just hasn't got what it takes and that's been a big problem. Anything that gets too hard ends up in his bottom drawer and forgotten about.

We've been on the case about the lack of preparedness in the main hall for ages. We had work done on the roof of the main hall several years ago now, which wasn't very adequate anyway, but at least it's better than it was before and at least it stopped leaking. But what it continued to do is, in the roof cap, there was debris coming through and during the fires, with people inside, there was embers coming through the roof cap onto the people inside the building. And I don't know how many emails I sent about that over the last few years, but we got no response from the Shire at all, except they kept sending this [REDACTED] plumber, down from Bairnsdale, who kept telling me he'd fixed it. I kept sending them photos of debris all over the floor of the basketball court.

**ANNE-LOUISE:** And Don, thinking about your Mallacoota community, they were always going to go to that hall? Is that what people were going to do? Did you always know that this is what was going to happen?

**DON:** Basically, the Shire again, for totally incompetent reasons, had said that the place for final resort refuge was in the foreshore of the caravan park, where they were surrounded by caravans full of gas bottles, boats gassed up, cars gassed up, blah blah blah. And that was the initial place where everybody joined and the only reason there wasn't thousands killed was because the fire changed direction. I was talking to the Navy personnel on the boat, the big boat that came in, and they were actually prepared for mass casualties. They loaded up thousands of body bags in Sydney. As it was, we lost nobody except one person who had the heart attack, but that was entirely good luck.

It was just lots and lots - we actually - I know that quite a number of people in Mallacoota emailed and rang the Shire days before and said, 'For heaven's sake, shut down the caravan park. Get everybody out of here. Hell is arriving'. We knew the fire was coming. We knew we were going to have it five days before. I was getting quite concerned about it and I

actually emailed the mayor and said, 'If anybody dies I'm not actually going to rest until you're in jail'. So fortunately no one died so I had some other things to say but that was good.

Basically, it was just [REDACTED] on the Shire's part because they just wanted to get the tourist dollars and it's just not good enough. I didn't think it was good enough and there was a lot of people in Mallacoota who are still angry about that. And the same thing's happened with the COVID thing. We're going to end up with a million bloody tourists here at Christmas and they're not practising social distancing. They've still booked it out. They haven't separated all the vans by a separate space or anything like that. So if we get an infection in Mallacoota over Christmas we're gone. Anyway, so that's got nothing to do with the bushfire probe, but that's kind of what we've been working with.

**ANNE-LOUISE:** You started to talk a little bit about you were getting the internet connection, you had contact from Andrew Forrest, so yeah like shifting donations

**DON:** Oh sorry, yeah.

**ANNE-LOUISE:** From the donations side of things?

**DON:** So Andrew Forrest, several days later we got this big fat helicopter arrived full of fabulous stuff, like more phone recharging stations, generators and all that kind of stuff. Because at the beginning we didn't have any masks. And the first lot of masks arrived from Andrew.

**ANNE-LOUISE:** They were the first ones you got, from Andrew?

**DON:** I think so. I'm pretty sure.

**ANNE-LOUISE:** It's a long time ago now, yeah.

**DON:** Long time ago and we started to get mask started to arrive. There were times during the earliest stages when there weren't Red Cross here and me and my team were dealing with quite distressed people, with no training and all that kind of stuff.

**ANNE-LOUISE:** Have you thought about that since then around, in a preparation point of view, what could help a community like Mallacoota in that regards, like what kind of sort or training you may need?

**DON:** Well, the basic problem we had here, of course, is we're a very small community and everybody's really busy all the time just keeping the community going and finding the time to do that training. But I think that some sort of emergency training would be really handy. Our SES group is brilliant. They get all that but their role is obviously out there in the field. When it came to managing the hall - sorry, I keep going back to the hall - the place where people were actually supposed to gather was down at the wharf and down at the caravan park.

Of course people were going to come to the hall. We kept saying to the Shire, 'Look, I don't care if you say the hall's not a refuge. People are going to come here'. And in fact what it says on the LIMP that was actually on the noticeboard at the post office dated 2009 was that that's

where it was. And there had been one that came out, I think last year, that said something else but I think that was in the bottom drawer of somebody's desk.

So we had people in there. We knew people were going to be in there. The Shire tried to deny there were people in there so they wouldn't have to do anything, but the practicality of it all was that, yes, there were going to be people there, and there were. And I've had various attempts at working out how many people were there at any one time. The best we can do is somewhere between five hundred and a thousand people were there at one point. That's really wide open. It's very hard to count people especially when it's dark and it's smoky. And until I got there with my lights, it was pretty much pitch dark in the main hall apart from a couple of lights that the cinema people had. As I say, Andrew's mob turned up with all these emergency battery lights which went out to the community - generators, leads, powerboards, phone recharging stations and all that kind of stuff. Great stuff. It was like Christmas.

**ANNE-LOUISE:** Were you looking after that distribution or the coordination of that?

**DON:** Yeah. We coordinated distribution of all that. Yeah, it was great. They even sent us down some chainsaws because there was a shortage of chainsaws in the community too. They were brilliant. They kept coming back with more stuff as we went through that month, that five or six weeks. They turned up, I think, three times.

**ANNE-LOUISE:** And were they checking in with you about what your needs were?

**DON:** They were checking in and everything. Say what you like about Andrew Forrest being a billionaire, but his organisation were just brilliant, you know. So when the Red Cross started to turn up and they started to coordinate people and all that kind of jazz, that was really fantastic and the Red Cross were really really good. They were mucked around by circumstances but they were a really good bunch of people and they did a really good, epic job, I thought. Then we started to get food boxes coming in from Foodbank. They were highly problematical.

**ANNE-LOUISE:** I heard a little bit about this. Can you tell me a bit about that?

**DON:** Because what we thought we were getting to start off with were boxes of food that we'd say, 'Okay, here's a box of food, go away and cook yourself dinner or several dinners'. But it wasn't like that at all. The boxes just had all sorts of crap in them, like randomised food. There was ridiculous things. We got a whole pallet load of chocolate bullets -

**ANNE-LOUISE:** Yes, I heard about that.

**DON:** - which the army loved. They thought it was great. We got half a pallet of time-expired pepper. A lot of the stuff was time-expired but a lot of it was dried goods, so that didn't matter really, because it was - because as far as I can tell, I don't know this for sure but as far as I can tell - Foodbank gets their stuff from supermarkets and what they're getting rid of is stuff that's either time-expired or about to be time-expired, which means a lot of the stuff is unpopular lines and it's stuff that's going out of date. Now, this is not a way to treat people who are having trauma. Nobody wants jellybean-flavoured spaghetti. What they want is food

that they can actually eat and their kids are going to eat. And they don't want to be handed out time-expired milk and they don't want to be -

What we need to do is have a state-coordinated warehouse somewhere that's got stuff to go that's actually food packs, like they have in the Army, for people to be given and they can go away with this box and they can make dinner for three or four days and then come back for some more. Giving people a box with six tetrapaks of Béarnaise sauce is not doing anybody any favours. And so what we ended up doing was we ended up grabbing some more volunteers, who were people who were using the site really, and we had to pull all the boxes down, sort them out. We gathered tables from everywhere we could and set up a kind of a supermarket and we ended up with dozens of wheelie bins full of rubbish, of this food.

**ANNE-LOUISE:** Were you then speaking to the Shire about getting rid of those unwanted rubbishy foods?

**DON:** No, that stuff was basically - the Shire at that point weren't that useful. No, SES were our main to go to for that kind of thing and also just people like the Lions Club and just volunteers. Within two weeks, I guess, the Shire was on board and they ended up deploying the rubbish trailers from the caravan park, which was useful. But they didn't come online for a while. We started getting lots and lots of water coming in, which was great. It was really lucky that I'd actually made a mistake some months before and double-ordered toilet paper for the main hall because by the time we started getting supplies in I think we were down to about three rolls. That was really lucky.

The other thing was, of course, over at the mudbrick which is the other side of the oval, that had been set up as a wildlife triage hospital refuge, so we were backwards and forwards across there because they kept plugging things in and blowing fuses and all that. So we were back and forwards doing that. Also supplying them with food and stuff and water and all that kind of jazz.

As time progressed, we started getting other supplies. For some reason, we got half a truck full of fresh vegetables, which is a great idea except we didn't have refrigeration and so we were making lots of soup and we gave them to people but they didn't have refrigeration either. In fact, we ended up actually creating - well, it created itself really - but we ended up semi-coordinating a strike team that was going round to people who'd evacuated and breaking into their houses and emptying their fridges, so that when they came back in they wouldn't end up with a fridge full of rotting food. A lot of these things were happening but they were very much happening on an ad hoc way - people who had a good idea. People in the country tend to be resourceful, that's what it amounts to, isn't it, that's basically it.

**ANNE-LOUISE:** Were you managing other donations, like clothing or goods or furniture, apart from food?

**DON:** Once they opened the roads up, which was several weeks, we started getting inundated with other stuff. The foodstuff came in off boats, mostly, I think, and flown in by those big choppers and all that kind of jazz, I think. And it was flown into an airport. There was a huge bunch of people out there who desperately wanted to donate things, which was just

ridiculous. I mean, sorry, I mean it was - again, people that want to donate, it's a very generous response, but most of the stuff that came wasn't that useful.

And again, it is not respectful to expect people who have just suffered a massive amount of trauma to be given somebody's second-hand underwear. And it's not nice for this person from [REDACTED] to turn up with this great big trailer full of stuff. A lot of the clothes hadn't even been washed. And thank you very much for all of the gardening equipment - it was broken. And all that kind of jazz. And a lot of us were dealing with that and sorting that out and all that sort of stuff.

One of the major parts of our response was going through the church op shop because we actually shovelled a lot of stuff in their direction. There was about three or four volunteers there who worked night and day trying to sort stuff, trying to get it to the right people and they were just totally amazing. And also the church's response - the [REDACTED] - she was one of the main people - civilians, if you like - dealing with proper response to people who were in trauma and who needed assistance. Because the church is like about 10 feet away from the main hall, so in the days directly after the fire she'd opened it up as a bit of a family centre and naturally there were lots of kids and they were showing movies and all that kind of jazz, which was just so good for the kids who were left. What else?

**ANNE-LOUISE:** Just a question about the donations, the clothing etc. Is your thought similar to like the food in that it just needs to be in a much more coordinated way or is money better for people? Have you thought about that? Because I think generally people don't think about what the outcome of it all is, that it's people like yourselves who are there who then have to deal with all this rubbish, often for weeks and months later.

**DON:** Oh yeah, we were still dealing with stuff. We only just got rid of some of the food. The State Government and everybody said it: 'Don't send stuff, send money.' And again there should be a warehouse in Melbourne or somewhere, or Bairnsdale, which has got lots and lots of underwear, lots and lots of T-shirts, lots and lots of pairs of trousers, lots and lots of blankets. So you go 'okay, bango, here you are' and it's on you, it's all clean, it's all packed and it's all ready to go and they can chopper it in or whatever, whatever. People donate things for weird reasons. A lot of the donation tone I got from people was: 'Aren't I good giving you this.'

**ANNE-LOUISE:** Yeah, right. Were they saying that directly to you?

**DON:** Yeah, more or less, yeah. 'You don't appreciate that I've just given you this broken thing.' And that's hard. It just increases that level of trauma on the people who have gone through it all. And there's people in our town who are still suffering from those kinds of responses. What else? I've run out.

**ANNE-LOUISE:** No, that's good. That's provided lots of information, particularly some of the clarifying points about the relief centre and how it was set up, who was there, that type of thing and also a bit more about the donations. We'd heard a little bit and [REDACTED] was like 'definitely talk to Don'. And for us, what we're really interested in is, if it happened again, what would you want to see done differently, what are the key things that the inquiry team



should be thinking about and potentially considering as improvements, if this was to happen to your community or another community in the future?

**DON:** The first thing is there needs to be responsible attitudes to tourists. It is just insane that Mallacoota gets inundated by tourists every summer. The point is we are dependent on the tourist economy. That should never have been allowed to happen in an unrestrained way. There should not be a capacity to have that many people in Mallacoota when you can't deal with them in an emergency. And if there that many people, obviously there should be protocols in place to get them out of there and in a really fast and efficient way.

And as we know, particularly in Mallacoota, is we're on the end of a very long piece of string. The power can go out anywhere for 200 Ks and we've got no power. We've got roads coming from west and east, both of which can be cut any time, anywhere, by bushfires, going to New South Wales for nearly 100 K and going the other way nearly for 200 K. And because the fire was so bad, a lot of the road bed was destabilised and we were very much left on our own.

We just need to have some sort of tourist response where they say, 'Okay look, the prognosis for the summer is it's going to be a bad summer, it's going to be highly likely we'll have major bushfires, let's cut the tourist summers, let's compensate the tourist operators for the money they're going to lose'. You can't do one without the other if you want to have tourist operators in Mallacoota at all.

And as I said, we need depots of stuff. It's taken 12 months, but we've now got people going, 'Oh dear, we should do something about the main hall now'. The thing is, if we had a bushfire event now, we'd still be in the same position we were this time last year, because nothing's happened yet. And I'd still be rushing down there with my generator and I'd still be rushing down there with my stuff. It's all getting clogged down because everything has to be done by grants, so some bureaucrat sits in his office and writes out a grant which then goes to some other bureaucrat who either ticks it or chucks it out. What needs to happen is: go the community, talk to people, talk to the SES, talk to the CFA, talk to me, whatever whatever: 'What do you need? Okay, here's the money. Go do it.' Competitive grant systems for emergency services is ridiculous.

**ANNE-LOUISE:** You're saying very similar things to what we've heard in a number of communities. Communities know what they need, they absolutely know that, they just need the money to do it, in a timely fashion, so very similar to some other areas we chatted with last week.

**DON:** I'm sure. It's not rocket science is it. There were federal funds put out for the drought, which were never paid out because they never got round to it. There were federal funds put out for the fires, probably the same money, which they never got round to. And now there's federal funds put out for COVID which they may have used but I'm sure it's the same money they originally put out for the drought. They just keep re-budgeting, and it's just not an inadequate response.

There's good people in places in the Shire. There's good people who really want to help but they're stymied by stuff happening further up the line and just the lack of coordination. One of the things that was really bizarre that happened in the early days was Cann River was

almost entirely abandoned, which is our closet community. And we got a call - and they were only an hour away from Orbost, at which the roads were substantially open - I mean, they weren't open-open but they were trafficable by emergency vehicles - we got a word from them that they had no food, no water, no nothing.

And so we ended up deploying three tankers and couple of Army vehicles across the Drummer, which was on fire, in order to send relief to Cann River, when they were only an hour away from the incident headquarters who didn't seem to be capable of doing that. One of the Bushmasters got stuck. It takes a lot to get a Bushmaster stuck and if they hadn't had the other Bushmaster to pull it out they would have been in deep trouble you know.

Another thing I want to say is what a fantastic job the ABC did. Without the ABC, we would have been stuffed. It was the only way we could find out what was going on. They were the only people giving us reliable information. And also, we have a local station called 3MGB which was doing emergency broadcasts but, again, because of our small community, most of the people that are generally doing the radio were off doing other things like the SES and CFA. There was one woman and one man who were pretty much there for a whole week doing nothing but deliver and they both suffered enormous trauma. They'll never be the same again those two people. And it's hard to know what could be done about that, other than send in some - other than to have - I don't understand why they didn't send in some radio operators do to that. I don't understand that.

**ANNE-LOUISE:** Just slightly shifting across to recovery, how do you think people have generally been going in their community with their recovery? How effective has it been with regards to the services that are provided, if people know what is provided, and so forth? How have you been going?

**DON:** Well, we talked about BRV, there's been an enormous amount of frustration from the local community about just the stuff been coming down so slowly and so ineffectually. There's been a lot of grief around the Grocon response, about the contracts for cleaning up the sites.

**ANNE-LOUISE:** What have been the main issues with that?

**DON:** Okay, one main issue was a lot of the clear-up groups are [REDACTED] and their response. And because they were subcontractors and contractors, they were trying to maximise their bang for their bucks and there was a lot of weird stuff going on. And also the job, in a lot of ways, was only half done. They cleared the sites, they sent them off, hundreds of truckloads went out of town full of all this contaminated rubbish, came back empty.

They left behind enormous holes in the ground that proceeded to fill up with water and if they bought back fill with them when they come back, then a lot of people - for instance, I can speak pretty much for myself here, because I know what happened on my site and I've talked to other people. This is probably fairly typical is they came onto my site and I asked them to come in through the back way, which they'd already cleared, which they said they couldn't, they had to come in through the front. They said if they came in the back way their truck would be bogged. I asked them to come through not the front because the only part of my

garden that wasn't wrecked the front, which they then proceeded to wreck, but that's neither here nor there.

But anyway, they came through the front, they bogged their truck, they had to bring in several truckloads of rubble in order to get the truck out, to drive it out. It was one of those great big B-double tip truck things. They dug all the rubble out and left a great big hole and I was going 'excuse me'. There was me and a lot of other people. We could not move on because our blocks were so badly damaged that we could not do anything with them.

I'd actually bought a tiny house from a guy up the road, a friend of mine further up the line had found it and I'd bought it from him. I kept putting him off and putting him off from sending it down, but in the end he said, 'I've got to send it down. I can't wait anymore, so anyway. So it ended up being marooned in the middle of my block, so it couldn't go anywhere else. So it was just sitting there like a shag on a rock not being able to do anything with it.

And because BRV refused to get involved, because it wasn't their problem for some reason, all we wanted in town was some dirt. We're surrounded by national park for hundreds of kilometres and all people needed was stuff to fill up their stuff and there wasn't any. No one could find us any. [REDACTED] in BRV who's just a brilliant person, just about killed herself just trying to get somebody from up the line who would make a decision that would say, 'Okay, let's go and dig a hole somewhere and let's move some dirt'. And in the end a lot of people have just given up. A lot of given up and the way they gave up was they walked off their blocks and bought another house.

Now, I'm a pretty determined sort of person and I wasn't going to give up, so I kept on and on and on and on and on, with the help of [REDACTED], and a few weeks ago they finally - I was saying, you know. They said, 'Oh no, a truck never got bogged. A truck never - '. I said, 'I was there when it happened'.

'Oh no no.'

And then I ended up, after carrying on like a porkchop for ages, I met on a videoconference with somebody in Melbourne who said, 'I was there when the truck got bogged'. And I said, 'Okay, fine', and then I gave them a cook's tour with the phone camera about what I was talking about.

'We'll come and fix it.'

So I'm the only person in Mallacoota that got their site fixed and that happened about two weeks ago, because I wasn't going to shut up.

**ANNE-LOUISE:** Because you were persistent about it.

**DON:** I was persistent about it. And not only that, for the amount of dirt available the local contractors are charging us 80 bucks a metre.

**ANNE-LOUISE:** Are you having to pay for that or are they paying for it?

**DON:** No, that's if we buy it from them. But this is what happened this time was I didn't have to do that. It all came in and it was amazing, I couldn't believe actually what happened, because they actually turned up and without me even asking they replaced my driveway. I could not believe it. They obviously wanted to shut me up permanently and said, 'For heaven's sake, get this guy out of our hair'. But the one thing I had to do, because of the stuff-up, is I had to buy another block of land, which backs onto my block, which gave me somewhere to put my tiny house because I couldn't put it on my original block of land, so I did that. So I bought this.

And now I've still got a problem with that because I've still got a hole there which needs filling in and I still can't get fill for it, but I think that's going to be fixed in the next few weeks, I think. Because the problem at the moment is, it's not so much I can't get fill, it's we can't get contractors because all the Anchor homes are coming in and everybody and their dog's working getting these Anchor homes in, which is great. But I've got a supply of some dirt now with my name on it and all I've got to do is get Ash or somebody to get their truck in and get it in there. That's going to cost me money. That's going to be at my cost, but I don't care, I just want it done.

**ANNE-LOUISE:** A few people have had issues with the clean-up in Mallacoota?

**DON:** Lots of people. Yeah, lots of people, because it was only half done and I'm sure the reason it was only half done was because they didn't think it through at the beginning.

**ANNE-LOUISE:** And I suspect, because we've had some actually really quite good feedback about the Grocon clean-up in some other areas and particularly the subcontractors that were working in those areas, so I'm presuming that's the difference, who was working in particular towns or whatever it is, [REDACTED] potentially were.

**DON:** Yeah, I don't know. As I said, I just speak for what happened here. Again, I've kept out of the way of the Shire pretty much because I know them from - I've been working with the Shire - in inverted commas - for 20 years through the hall and rec committee and so I try to keep out of there as much as I can, unless I really want them to do something for the community. So I haven't actually had any contact with the Shire - I've actually done everything under the radar on my block. But other people I know just had the most enormous trouble with permits and negotiations with the Shire to just try and get things moving. And that's also caused people to walk away from their blocks because it's just too hard.

And I understand that one of the issues that's currently going on is the CFA, for whatever reason, decided that everybody with more a thousand square metres of land has got to have a 50,000-litre tank block with a turnaround for a fire tanker on it. On my particular block, if I had to do that I couldn't build anyway because the place would be full up with water tanks and a turnaround, because my block's a really weird shape. But I'm still going to have to do it, so what I'm actually doing is I bought this other block, I'm going to rewrite the boundaries to get one block shrunk and the other enlarged so I don't have to do that and I'll be able to have a thousand square metres, but you know. But things like that.

It's ridiculous to say that these tankers are going to come round to your block, load up their tankers and then use it. They're not. The only reason we had a lot of tankers in Mallacoota

was because they diverted several of them into the town because they couldn't get through. If that hadn't have happened the town would have burnt down, but if that hadn't happened we would have two tankers here and they would have been deployed down the main street stopping the important things getting burnt down, like the school, the medical centre and all those things. So the fact that they're expecting us to put in all these zillions of water tanks is just silly. It doesn't make sense.

I know that the fire penetrated to my block. The guy next door, [REDACTED], there was no water pressure. He actually saved his house with this dribble coming out of his hose. He just managed to keep the weatherboards on the fire side wet enough so they didn't ignite. Fortunately, he only had a one-storey house. So yeah, I don't know. Anyway, so what we actually -

**ANNE-LOUISE:** It's been tricky.

**DON:** What we actually need, as I said, is we need stuff on the ground here, we need decentralised, we need to be decentralised, we need the community - everything needs to be community-led. We were one of the few communities in Mallacoota - because about a week after the fires Lyn Harwood rang me up and said we've got to have a recovery association and so Lyn, myself and other people spent the next six months getting one together. And the biggest problem that we've had has been BRV in getting things done. The Victorian Electoral Commission managed our elections. We have an elected 12-member committee who are completely frustrated and getting completely - their morale's been knocked around - because they're not getting the support from the State Government.

**ANNE-LOUISE:** Yeah, we've been very interested about that, which I mentioned before, and I've heard from some of those members, not having the funds available to do - whether it be communications or paying rent for things, they've had to wait for such a long time. But they knew they needed these things right up the beginning, so for us thinking about having those funds available through government immediately and that communities can use them as they wish, rather than having to wait for such a long period of time to identify things and then put in grants and so forth.

**DON:** Go figure that they haven't even got internet connection in the hub. If I hadn't supplied it, you know. That doesn't make any sense at all, does it.

**ANNE-LOUISE:** No, not at all.

**DON:** And it's good that we got this Sky Muster thing happening in the hall now, which they're coming next week to install it, which will be an interesting thing. But again, it's an amazing amount of lack of communication. I went on a webinar thingo, Zoom meeting, with Sky Muster and NBN to talk about installation, to talk about all that kind of stuff, and I explained to them about the site, about how it was a basketball stadium, reasonably tall ceiling, all the stuff.

I got rung up yesterday by the person who's implementing it and they'd received none of that information, so I had to give it to them all over again, saying blah blah blah and now what I've got to do today is go down and get some photos of the main hall and send them to her or

email them to her. Apparently they're coming next week to install it and if they don't have the right gear, I mean as I said, we've got a 10-metre ceiling, a 10-metre roof. They'll need a cherry picker, they'll need the gear. And they'll send this crew all the way from wherever, five/six hundred kilometres from Melbourne, and they'll go, 'Oh gosh, it's a tall building'.

**ANNE-LOUISE:** You've got plenty of challenges.

**DON:** That's right. I don't get it, I really don't get it. I mean it seems to me that what they did with BRV was that they seconded a lot of public servants from other departments who didn't have much to do and said, 'here you are, it's a job', rather than going 'we need people, specialist people in these areas to think about these things'. Because what I've actually found is, talking to some of the people up the line, is really they haven't got a clue about emergency stuff or about fires. They're just bureaucrats, public servants who for all we know, don't know what questions to ask. That's one of the biggest things about this stuff is you've got to know what questions to ask, otherwise you don't get the answers you need.

Details for recording are:

Submission to be published - yes

Submission to be named - yes, Don Ashby

Were you in an area where the fires occurred - yes

Were you involved in responding to the fires -no

Do you continue to be involved in supporting individuals or community members -  
yes

LGA - EGSC

Postcode/Town - Mallacoota

Age group -

Gender - man

Keep up to date with the inquiry - yes -