

Interview with [REDACTED]

ANNE-LOUISE: So that's started now and I'll provide you with a copy of the transcript. So would you like your submission to be published? You don't have to.

[REDACTED] Yeah, it's okay, that's fine.

ANNE-LOUISE: Do you want to have your name on it or you can be anonymous?

[REDACTED] As long as it doesn't incriminate me too much, yeah.

ANNE-LOUISE: So by agreeing to have it published it means it would be on IGEM's website. It'll have your name as the person whose submission it is but there'll be no other names in your submission, that all gets redacted. So it's up to you but you don't have to put your name to it, it's entirely up to you.

[REDACTED] What do you think, does it need to be or not?

ANNE-LOUISE: No, it doesn't make any difference.

[REDACTED] Okay, no. If they need to contact me for more information they can, that's fine.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah, I'll keep it so it's anonymous. Were you in an area where the fires occurred? Yes. Were you involved in responding to the fires?

[REDACTED] Yes.

ANNE-LOUISE: Do you continue to still be involved in supporting communities or individuals after the fires?

[REDACTED] Not in a formal sense, no.

ANNE-LOUISE: Local government area is Towong. Your postcode?

[REDACTED]

ANNE-LOUISE: Are you in [REDACTED]?

[REDACTED]

ANNE-LOUISE: You don't have to answer this question if you don't want to, age group in decades?

[REDACTED]

ANNE-LOUISE: Would you like to be kept up-to-date with the inquiry? We're sending out community updates via email.

[REDACTED] Yeah, you could do that.

ANNE-LOUISE: As I said before I'll provide a copy of the transcript back to you via email if that's okay.

Yeah.

ANNE-LOUISE: Just before we go on, obviously talking about your experiences and sharing your story may bring up a range of emotions. If at any point you want to stop I can put a pause on the recording and I'm happy to share with you any support services afterwards if you or your family or anybody else you know needs that.

Basically that's it so it's over to you to talk about anything you want to talk about in regards to the response, the relief and recovery from the fires. I will probably ask you some clarifying questions about things just to get a little bit more detail out of the areas but otherwise I'm basically just going to let you speak and I'll be listening. So away you go.

Where do I start? I guess it was a big event for us, I guess. In the end we did very well I think in the fact that we didn't get burnt out. We lost boundary fencing, us and the park and then the neighbours we lost a bit of country there. The positives out of it I guess the Berringama Lucyvale community I think responded well. There was a good rapport in the whole valley. I think we worked well together. We lost the formal communication with our phones etc except then we soon adapted where we were running UHF systems for communication, I think that worked well. During the whole fire period we kept in touch and held meetings and had updates so everyone was in the loop, I think. I think that was a good positive, just the community worked well, I think, our little local community.

ANNE-LOUISE: You were just doing that communications just via your UHF and via word of mouth, letting people know what was happening?

Yeah so we had the phones out, basically. So we were probably a little bit fortunate because at the time we had satellite communication so we could power up a generator, get the satellite going and we did have some communication out through the 'net where a lot of people didn't have that. So that was handy for us to communicate for family and friends outside that, were enquiring on how we were going etc so they probably don't have that now, we're a little bit more vulnerable because now we're running off the tower, the mobile tower. So in a future event we might lose that ability but anyway that's how it goes.

I guess on that initial response I guess CFA and DELWP were just overwhelmed and I get that, that it was probably too big an event and they were floundering a little bit. We lost a little bit of communication with them. In saying that and in my own experience where we were battling the fire on our boundary, it was pretty much left up to ourself, family and friends and my extended family. It did give us some freedom, I guess, that we weren't burdened with the slow response of the Department so we could make decisions

I guess the problem with the CFA and the DELWP nowadays, they're just too risk-averse. They can't do anything because they're just tied up with – if there's any notion of risk then

they have to no longer engage and they left us to it in a sense and we'd have to basically get the fire under control and once it's under control then they'd come and help. I don't know how to fix that but it's to the point now where if there's any risk they're not there to the point where if you applied their rules to everyday living you wouldn't drive on the road or you just don't do anything which is a shame and I'm not sure how to fix that.

It seemed like the lawyers run the whole joint. If there's any risk involved and everyone's scared about litigation etc but the lawyers don't help fight fires. I get that somebody that's not exposed to any risk, they probably would be in danger and especially the farming community etc where we live it, we know how to manage risk so we can recognise it, we respond to it. We don't do anything dumb, I'm not saying that. I mean it's just we know how to manage risk whereas I think the Department— to the point where they're too scared to take any risk so they don't do anything. I might be too hard on them. Well the situation now and the politics of the CFA now is I feel like the community, that we'll probably disband the CFA in a sense and we'll probably devolve back to where we were 50 years ago when we were a bunch of private units getting around, communicating amongst ourselves with our slip-ons and our privately owned equipment because it's a hell of a lot quicker, respond a lot quicker.

The Department is just too slow, the fire was just too much keeping ahead of them so they were too far behind the event, too slow to respond. They're okay for backup and help but because of the pace of the situation they were too far behind the game and I think that's where the private people were trying to keep pace with it and were more effective. Now I don't know how you fix that. It's easy to spot problems but it's a hard thing to come up with solutions but in our own instance, and it was all a bit of a blur because day went into night and you're sleeping out on the fire line. Time was really stretched and oppressed but when it was hitting on I'd say our eastern boundary where we come across the park it was pretty much left to us. There was no-one around, no CFA, no DELWP ever.

So we put containment lines in with very low-tech gear, I mean very basic equipment, slip-ons and a tractor with a blade and chainsaws and rake hoes etc, quite steep country, quite difficult country and within the bush so on our private bush where we hit the park. So we were back burning from those containment lines for a good while, maybe 36 hours and we had a good plan, we had a containment line going through the creek to fight this fire off. I had the DELWP come – I can't remember if it was day two or three or whatever but anyway. We showed them what we'd done and what we planned to do. I wanted them to have a look at it, look at my plan, some bit of feedback from them and a good young bloke that was head of that crew had a look at our containment lines, what we'd done, what we proposed to do. He said "yeah, this is really good". Going to work, we had the weather ticking right, the ducks were all lined up.

So he then goes back to get authority from further up the chain and they basically said "no, don't light your fire" and they canned the whole plan. He was pretty much embarrassed by it and in the end he says "look, I'm going to have to leave you to your own devices" and he had to pull his crew out and he said "just do what you have to do". Now I don't want to implicate anybody on that but he could see what needed to be done and I thought that what frustrates me, they don't give authority to people on the ground that are there. They need to empower and have confidence in their leaders in the field instead of throwing it back further up the

chain. The reason I thought they gave, because they had a convoy coming out and they didn't want any more fires lit to scare the people leaving. Look, honestly, they would not have known what we were doing, there was that much smoke anyway, it really wasn't going to add to the situation.

But someone further up the chain says "no, don't light any more fires". The conditions were perfect for doing it, we had a nice breeze at the back, we had the containment line in place, we had the equipment to handle it and the personnel and they just said "no". We had to do it anyway. They worry about the risk of the containment line getting away, it was going to go through there anyway so it was pretty much guaranteed that it was going to go across into our bush and then further up through our property and then up the Lucyvale Valley. So I don't know what they were risking, they're not risking much anyway because it's going to happen if you don't do something about it. So it could have gone pear-shaped, the wind could have changed and it could have jumped from my fire, I guess, and kept going but it was going there anyway.

So I don't get their logic. I understand okay, they don't want to have a free-for-all for people back burning and things like that because people are going to do it wrong and people that don't know the terrain, don't know the local knowledge but just a blanket no when this guy from the Department, one of their leaders on the ground says it was good to go and then they don't trust him or don't take his judgement. They should transfer some of that decision-making process to the guys on the ground. They're scared too that if they make a mistake they'll get in trouble and it's not the way it should be, it should be "no, okay, we tried, it didn't work". I'd pat him on the back for trying and say "okay, well we'll jump to the next plan". This doesn't do anything because we're going to risk something is crazy because they're going to lose anyway if they don't do something. As it is it worked out really well, we pulled the fire up. That whole park hadn't been stopped, okay and we pulled it up on that corner. So it was a great opportunity to do it and it worked.

Then probably within 36 hours we got another fire coming out of the Wabba Wilderness hitting us from our southern boundary. It was heading north in the Wabba Wilderness so this is park two or three at this stage and it was a real concern because it had a pretty heavily southerly blowing behind it coming out of bush, difficult terrain. This is in the middle of the night, might have been 1 or 2:00 in the morning so we're on the other side of the creek trying to stop spot fires coming across. I understand why they come out, has a convoy of DELWP vehicles, might have been five or six come down off the ridge, watching them all peel back out which I understand because it was too hot, they had to get out. I thought oh well, they'll stop down the bottom of the ridge and stay off the road, they'll be safe there, there's a black area within 500m to retreat back to, fine and they'll help us on this line when it hits and they all left. Okay so I thought okay so they just left us to it then it fell back to us again to control this line all night.

Then we burnt back again and we put containment lines in and then they rocked up – I don't know, might have been 10:00 the next morning after things had settled down and we'd already done a recon run up the Peturmba Spur to see where the fire was, what we can do for containment lines. We were working on containment lines and back burning when they turned up. So basically then they took over from there and I thought this is good, we were all

pretty exhausted because we don't get the chance to get the breaks like they do. Okay so that was good, I said "look, yeah, whatever you do, don't let it get out of hand, I've held it this far" and said "yeah, no, we'll do all that". Okay then start working on their containment lines and they're putting containment lines in for the whole Peturmba Spur which is about from the Murray Valley Highway, might be 20 Ks. Okay and this was the plan which was a good plan, to tie it in with the Dartmouth Dam to pull this higher up, it's a big job.

I haven't got a good grasp of the timeframe, whether it was 12 hours, 24, 36 hours, they're in charge of this fire which is all Crown land which is fair enough, Park and State Forest. We'd been working on this and cutting trees and clearing tracks and lighting fires just to hold it at bay. Then I heard third party from the [REDACTED] Brigade that they pulled out of this containment line because it's going to rain because they thought okay, that's going to get too slippery for the vehicles and then they did, they pulled out. It hadn't rained, it didn't rain so they left it so it left it up to then the private guys to patrol this at night because they left because they were worried about the rain.

Now it would have been a lot better if it waited for it to rain and they still had plenty of opportunity before it got too greasy to get out. Again it was just too risk-averse – "oh there's potential it could get slippery so we pulled out before it rains". Now it was crazy so they left it up to the private guys again to patrol this containment line and then they come back when it's safe. So it's just too risk-averse. If they are going to pull out at least let us know and we'll go back in there. I'm being too negative here and maybe I'm too risky but I don't know but they're just too risk-averse.

There was other silly things like the road closure was just too tight for us to move back and forth. You don't want tourists up here, you don't want people that can't cope with a fire or not trained, I get that but in effect all we were doing was go to the road block, they wouldn't let you through. We would go 'round through paddocks back out – it just slowed us down. We knew how to get 'round the roadblocks and we'd have to dodge powerlines and go through gates and paddocks and that just so we can get back onto our farm or we get fuel or just supplies. It wasn't stopping us, just slowing us down. Look, if it was howling and it was shocking conditions, I get that but it wasn't, it was benign, the fire, it wasn't running. We just needed to get back and forth. So in effect all they were doing, they weren't stopping us going, they were just putting obstacles in our place.

They were all trained, we're all CFA members, we're all savvy with how to look after ourselves, we're not suicidal. I don't know how they fix that, again whether you have some sort of local pass that you're authorised to get through or not but again it's hard to organise that during an event. It probably needs to be organised before things happen, that okay, these guys are local, they live there and they're trained, we'll let them through. That may be one way of fixing it.

There was things like the local shire up here that they had equipment sitting idle that they weren't allowed to use because they were told from higher up above "no, it's too risky, we don't use it" and grader operators and that sort of thing, machines sitting idle in the yard when they've just got private people running around with their graders and machines and then they couldn't utilise this equipment, it was dumb.

ANNE-LOUISE: Was that from the higher up the council or from the Incident Controller stuff?

█ I'm not sure, the council, I think. They just told their employee, "no, you can't use it" because they're worried about their liability or risk -

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah.

█ But it was crazy to just let that happen. That's the sort of stuff you need at a fire, is that equipment and it was just sat there let idle, not used. The employees were quite embarrassed by that but they're sitting there, they can't do it and everyone's looking for them for help and they're hobbled by some threat of litigation they're worried about. Also the road closures and early things, they just blanket stop the cattle trucks coming up. We had ample opportunity thereto get stock out and look, when the fire's running I get that but there was an opportunity after that first hit, the fire the likes of our valley and the valleys that weren't hit where we needed to get stock out. We don't want people that can't help, we don't want tourists, I understand that. You have road blocks but you just got to let the key personnel through. We were out of fuel, we basically run out of fuel. We were milking every damn vehicle we had, cars, boats, anything to keep our pumps running and generators. It was quite comical, really, it's like Mad Max -

ANNE-LOUISE: How long were you out of fuel for?

█ Probably 24 hours where we were really struggling but we'd get little bits and pieces and we scrounged, basically. So that could have been a bit better coordinated, got fuel up to us to keep things running because we were living off generators and we had to keep pumps going and things like that. So that's another thing. What else?

Look, another good thing was having the army up. That was a good morale booster to the community, I think. Again they were probably a little bit too inhibited in what they could do. They considered any fire fighting or blacking out to be too risky. For a fighting force I think that's a bit bizarre. Even you could have got a couple of old CFA guys give them a few basic minimum skills, just tick the box and they can help with the mundane things. They don't have to be on the hard end of it but they can help with things like blacking out, the time-consuming stuff or just helping with the logistics of shifting stuff and equipment. They don't have to put them at risk but they can be on the fire line and doing behind the scenes work a bit more. But they were just "oh no, they're not trained so they can't do it".

We don't have to be on the head of the fire, they can be helping out a bit back from it. Okay, I get they're not trained but generally they're young and they're fit and they're a lot fitter than the majority of the CFA.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah, I had another fellow in East Gippsland talk about the same thing this morning, actually, just right up the top, Buldah about a truck full of ADF soldiers but they basically weren't doing anything apart from collecting intel which he couldn't see what they were doing anyway. He was like "oh great, they're here to help me" but they actually didn't. We have also heard really positive stories about the ADF too.

There are and there's lots and lots of positive stories about the ADF especially on the recovery side of it which my wife was involved with the Shire etc as far as stock removal and burying and all that sort of thing. But there was some issues – again it was the Department behind the scene that was slow to respond and getting approval from the EPA where to bury stock and how to do it and you're not allowed to do anything until you tell – they were doing it and getting it organised and doing it and then rubberstamping it afterwards because you can't wait days and that to bury stock. They're going rotten and flyblown immediately and they only get worse every day after that and they're sitting there in some poor bloke's paddock and he's – drive past them every day. They need to respond. We know what to do, we know where to put them, not in waterways etc. It's not hard.

You can go and record where they are afterwards, you can do all your mapping and that's what they were worried about, "oh we need to record where they are" and "don't do anything until we get there". No, we can tell you exactly how many stock went in there, where they are. It's obvious, there's a dirty big mound of dirt where they're positioned. So they were more worried about the administration than getting the job done. There's plenty of people on the ground with the DELWP and that, they've got brains, they know where to put the stuff, away from waterways. Not as if you're going to dump them in a gully or something dumb. Again it comes back to giving authority to the people on the ground that are there and not having to wait from the hierarchy up the chain that are days, days late.

Look and again they might make some minor mistakes but you've got to accept that. In their pursuit of trying to do everything perfect they get nothing done. That's the problem, let people on the ground, let the locals organise it and they'll do it. It's in their interests to do it properly.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah, that's right.

They're not trying to hide things or do things, we know it, let us do it, let's get on with it. What else do I need to tell you? As far as food, water, all that sort of thing, I think that worked well. No-one was hungry, no-one went thirsty. They got power up here very quickly in generators for the town, that went really well. The linesmen did a really good job getting the power restored for the job that they had to do, they were really good. It was just horrendous, the amount of power that was down. So I think that side of it, that SP AusNet or whoever is in charge of that did a good job. So all that was good.

All of the volunteer organisations like your BlazeAid and Fencing for Fires, all that did a terrific job.

ANNE-LOUISE: Did you have much involvement with them?

No, I didn't. I had my brother and brother-in-law and that and they whacked up our boundaries pretty quickly. BlazeAid and all that, they're overwhelmed, they got heaps to do so to do our little bit, we could do it so I didn't involve them on that. The other positive out of it was the Department with their assistance with the boundary fencing with the park which was good to see that because we are neighbours. They did help contribute which was – I shouldn't applaud too loudly, they should anyway. They do hide behind an old 100-year legislation saying that they're not responsible for fencing with their boundary and that's a

poor argument. Everyone else is responsible for their neighbours and we cooperate and they say oh well it's in legislation, we're not responsible". Now that's not a logical argument, it's just a legislative point. So I say it's good that they did help contribute but they should be anyway regardless if there's a fire go through or not -

ANNE-LOUISE: Was there much of a process with that like did you have to apply? Did it happen? Like can you tell me a bit about that?

Look, it is a process and it wasn't too laborious, I'll give them that. They had people coming around and helping the process so we weren't pulling teeth by any means. So they were very helpful, mapped it out and we indicated the areas that were burnt on the boundary and for a department they did it very well.

ANNE-LOUISE: That's good to hear.

eah, okay so that bit of it they got right and they were quick to respond. Maybe because there's no risk of getting hurt.

ANNE-LOUISE: Maybe.

Yeah. Look, I find that the people on the ground level are good, I want to praise them, not bag them. I think the problem is the process and they need to give more authority to those people on the ground and they need to back them when they make a mistake. There's too many of them too scared to do anything because they're worried about the repercussions from up above. Even prior to fires, doing controlled burning and regen burning, half the time they're too scared to do it, they lose that window of opportunity because they're worried about burning some cockie's fence or losing a shed or whatever. That should be factored into their costing to pay for that. So X amount of fires we're going to lose, we're going to burn fences, we're going to lose the odd shed, hopefully not a house or anything but we might kill a few stock. That should be factored into the costing of doing that controlled burning so they widen their opportunity to do that so they're not narrowing it down so there's no risk.

If you factor in what this costs them, the loss of habitat, fencing and everything from these fires, you spread that over a hundred years, it's still a lot of money per year. By being so risk-averse and not doing anything look what the cost has been. They've spent billions trying to clean this mess up and there's still going to be areas that have lost topsoil. There's ecosystems there that are going to take generations to recover and they may not ever recover to where they were and it's such a crying shame to see what happened to the bush after the fires, just sickening. It's just dead silent when you walk into it, there's just everything gone. Whole canopy of trees, the whole lot, earth cooked and there is no ground cover. Then we had a lot of heavy rain events after that and it's just scoured, absolutely scoured some of the country. That's gone. Look, it will recover to some degree, it's just going to take a long, long time. There's sides where it got really hot where the whole tree's burnt. It's frightening to see how hot it got in spots.

Now there's a lot of dead animals that we found like deer, kangaroo, very quick, fleet animals that got trapped. Now the stuff that's hooked to the trees like your possums and your smaller marsupials and all that sort of thing, they didn't have a hope in hell of getting out of that

because the fire was in front of them and burned back on them, they didn't have a hope. So that was really disappointing, the loss there. Then the irony is, and I'll probably get bagged for this and we can vouch for our private bush that we did save, we've got a big chunk of private bush on our property that's been a hell of a sanctuary for a lot of animals. We've got masses of little wallabies on their place now. We normally only had the Black or Swamp Wallaby on the place, now we've got – sorry, what's the other species we've got here now? The Red-Necked Wallaby's turned up so we've got animals that have just used this as a sanctuary now and it's going to be a long time before they can probably move or re-habit back to their original habitat until they get that bush to regenerate again. So we are a bit of an ark here a little bit at the minute.

Also even when we were working on the Peturmba Spur south of us, there has been areas that were recently burnt for controlled burning and that the fire – well it's pulled it up in a lot of spots and burnt truly through that so it was a good example of how it worked. So I know everyone says “oh yeah, regen burning or controlled burning doesn't help” but it does. It doesn't help when the fire's running hard, it just steamrolls everything but the fire runs hard then it ebbs, slows down and it's during those weather events that it is running slower that's where you can pull it up or it runs cool through an area. That gives those ecosystems a bit of sanctuary.

Also I know it's not politically correct but up in the bush, further in the bush where the logging coups were the fire pulled up on a lot of those and old logging coups that were only fairly fresh or the recent ones, they have a lot of this wildlife sanctuary. I know nobody wants to hear that but the irony is that a lot of these logging coups were sanctuary for wildlife because it pulled the fire up or it burnt quite coolly through it. I am pro-native hardwood logging because I know it is a lot better option than what we see here with these wildlife events. Anyway look, I don't want to get on my soapbox on that but I'm trying to reach this environmental nirvana-type situation where the management's not good enough to handle it. If they're not going to log then they need to burn a lot more, more often to create this disturbance events where you've got areas that haven't completely covered in vegetation because you cannot pull it up if it's running hard through that sort of area.

Doesn't matter whatever planes you throw at it. You can stop a fire early but once it's got a head of steam up like it did then your only hope then is another weather event to stop it. Now we can tinker 'round the edges and think we're doing a great job but really it's all about the weather. We have got a dry environment, global warming's contributing to that. I'm a pro-believer in the effects of global warming and I think it's enhancing all these problems but kicking hardwood logging out I think is a dumb move. We probably don't do enough to help the environment.

The ecosystem has got to have a patchwork quilt of different-type – I don't know what your background is as far as that but it needs a bit of diversity. You can't just have all mature old growth forest sitting there in the one spectrum, it needs regenerative type – it's great for some species, they thrive on that but the species that need the regeneration-type event are not doing well. Anyway we're getting off-track, I guess, there.

ANNE-LOUISE: No, you're right. What's clear to me is your great love for the country and the environment and protecting is what's coming across to me and how considering that role of government and departments and how they manage it and that the locals are the people who are so fond of where they are and wanting to protect that land. That's what comes across to me from you.

Honestly I'd be the first one in front of the bulldozer if I thought that they were doing bad environmental damage because I have grown up in the bush, I appreciate it. We still farm, I still got to make a living off it but the perception that every animal's going to go on its retirement benefits and live off its life and gently go to sleep under a tree and die a nice death, it doesn't happen. Mother nature's not cruel or kind, it's just indifferent and people don't get that, they think nothing should die or nothing should suffer but it does, it all does.

ANNE-LOUISE: It's the reality of it.

An animal in nature if not running at its peak, it's having a bad day, it's in threat of being killed by something. You don't get to get old because then if you're old you're a little bit slower and something's going to take you and that's just the cycle of it. But everything's of the opinion that "oh no, everything Disneyland". You can't bag the predators that kill things, they're doing it for a living so it's not their fault either. You don't blame the predator or the prey, it's just the way it is. They're just it. You can't begrudge something for eating something else because it's just trying to live too.

ANNE-LOUISE: It's the cycle.

It is, yeah. I don't know, I can't think of anything else I need to bring up. I don't want to be all negative because there were plenty of positives -

ANNE-LOUISE: No, you've given me lots of positives. I mean the thing that struck me about your community so far that I've heard from everybody is how everybody did work really well together both during and after the fires and that resilience that's been established for some time from what people have been telling me about good connections between people from a recovery point of view, those communities that are well connected before these types of events seem to generally recover, do better after.

Yeah. Honestly we're all in rival football clubs and that sort of thing and we bag each other and all that sort of thing but when the proverbial hits the fan we really do pull together. Any event like that and we all do, everyone does their bit, whatever they can. That's the best bit out of it, it gels the community well and look, after a few years it'll fragment back out again. That's just natural. Probably the recovery as far as the Grocon or whatever are doing or -

ANNE-LOUISE: Clean-up.

One, it seems very wasteful, the way they do stuff but anyway you just got to stand back a bit and let that happen but they get a bucket load of money and they seem to but they do get the job done, I guess, but it doesn't look very efficient. Again they've got to cover all their bums as far as risk-aversity and everything's got to be wrapped

up in plastic. Everything's made the assumption it's got asbestos in it and all this sort of crazy stuff and it's got to be carted to Whoop Whoop to bury it and a lot of the money dished out for grants and that sort of thing. You think a lot of undeserving people got it, I get that, that weren't affected by it and they're taking advantage of it. But I don't know how you police that to stop because a lot of people were very deserving of it that refused or didn't take it up. That's just the nature of different personalities, I guess. Yeah, was a lot of money wasted and gone to the wrong people but I don't know how you stop that because it becomes too cumbersome to say "oh you deserve it, you don't".

ANNE-LOUISE: As I say you made a comment about people who perhaps needed it but haven't accessed it or feel they're not deserving. Are there many of those people in your community? Are you aware of that?

Look, they're probably not people that are too proud to accept it, probably more they think they probably could get it but they're "no, look, I don't need it. There's plenty of people worse off than me, give it to them". I get that. Then you got the opposite end of the spectrum, people that were probably not affected at all grab every little last cent they can and apply for every grant and cry poor. Now that's just the way it is.

, I think there's probably a heap of welfare payment in there and the fire never got anywhere near it. Because it was shire-wide or blanket-wide there'd be plenty that were flat out smelling smoke and got it. But I don't know how you police that.

ANNE-LOUISE: I think unfortunately it happens in all of these large-scale-type emergencies, we generally hear this.

Yeah and again I don't want to be negative, it's been great, the assistance has been great. It worries me how the taxpayer's going to pay it all back. That's the thing. I keep seeing a lot of money splashed around and hang on, we got to pay this back one day. That's probably coming from the taxpayer's point of view. Look, no-one's hungry, no-one starved, everyone provided a shelter for the people that didn't have it so no-one got left in despair, I guess in that sense. There was plenty of loss and despair and grief at the time but there was no-one camping in a tent or anything like that straight away. Everyone would chip in and they could stay here or there or whatever.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah, I got a sense of some of that from the others about just looking out for each other and helping each other out and making sure people had dinner or going to people's places for dinner and that kind of thing.

That's right, yeah, that was all. I mean the biggest tragedy I guess is we lost two young blokes up here to suicide and that's probably the hardest thing. If you can fix that problem you're doing really well, I don't know how to do that. Beats the hell out of me and I've got a . It seems to be around that age bracket. Anyway I think they're well adjusted. There is a bit of anxiety in the community because of that. We're all tired, I guess. We've been really busy since the fire. There's endless fencing and buildings and reconstruction to do and people have just got to work out you can't do it all in one year. It's generations of work that's gone up in smoke and I think everyone's just tired. I don't know how you fix that. I mean I'm working a day job as well in the farm machinery game, it's been flat out and the farm's busy. Don't know how to fix that.

ANNE-LOUISE: I think people naturally just go about that's it, fixing stuff, doing things, keeping going, focusing on all of those things and it becomes quite challenging.

█ The fortunate thing, we've had a terrific season pasture-wise, had a really great autumn break and great winter and having a terrific spring so that's really good, getting fodder conserved, stock are at good prices. There's lots of positives this year. Lucky we had that because if we had had a poor autumn and winter on top of what we had it would have been really tough. So we've had some relief in that sense, that people that did retain stock have been able to feed them so that's been really, really good, really fortunate the season we've had.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah, some of the others talked about that.

█ Yeah, it's been really good and that's helped it's really helped the district.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah, definitely.

█ Anyway don't know what else to tell you, Anne-Louise.

ANNE-LOUISE: No, you're right, you've shared lots of really good experiences. I really appreciate it.

█ Oh that's good, okay. I hope this whole thing doesn't get you down either.

ANNE-LOUISE: Oh no, I'm not too bad. I feel very privileged to listen to people's stories, you know some of the stories are pretty difficult to hear but it is really important, really valuable for us and these one-on-one interviews have actually been just – they morphed out of something else but they've actually been very valuable and quite effective I think for both people because you will have given up about an hour or so, you will have helped do this submission otherwise you would have had to go down, written it down, gone back to it -

█ Wasn't going to happen, it was never going to happen.

ANNE-LOUISE: That's exactly right so if I can make it easier for people then I think it's a bonus but it's also just enabling a few more people to share their story and we're really grateful. I said to the others "we are really keen to get up to see you guys at some point face-to-face and especially perhaps early – well March next year when it will be 12 months after the fire to see how people are going from that recovery perspective. But either way I will definitely make sure I get to Lucyvale now that I've had a good chat with at least about eight or so people. So yeah, I'm looking forward to it at some point.

█ Okay, that's good. Alright, thanks very much, Anne-Louise.

ANNE-LOUISE: No, you're right, █ thanks very much and I appreciate your openness and all of the information you've provided and I will send you through the transcript probably early next week it should be back. It turns around pretty fast so I'll send that through. If you've got any issues or whatever just let me know, we can fix it up but thanks very much for your input.

[REDACTED] Okay, thanks again. Okay, happy to see you later then.

ANNE-LOUISE: Take care.

[REDACTED] No worries, see you, bye.

ANNE-LOUISE: See you then, bye.

Details are:

Submission to be published - yes

Submission to be named - no - anonymous

Were you in an area where the fires occurred - yes

Were you involved in responding to the fires - yes

Do you continue to be involved in supporting individuals or community members -
no

LGA - Towong

Postcode/Town - [REDACTED]

Age group - [REDACTED]

Gender - [REDACTED]

Keep up to date - yes - email - [REDACTED]