Interview Jeff and Riccarda Brindley

Anne-Louise: – start that now and I've just got a couple of quick little questions to run through at the beginning. So, as I explained to Riccarda on the phone, we'll get this transcribed and it will be like a submission. So, do you want your submission to be published or – you can have it published or not published.

Jeff: Oh, whatever you want to do.

Anne-Louise: Your choice.

Riccarda: Published.

Jeff: Yeah, published.

Anne-Louise: Published? All right. So, the next bit is do you want to have your names to your submission, or do you want it to be anonymous?

Jeff: No, no, name.

Anne-Louise: Name?

RICCARDA: [Unclear]

Jeff: No, I'm quite happy to put my name to it.

Anne-Louise: Yeah, Jeff. So, you're happy just for your name or both of your names?

Jeff: Oh, I don't care. Just put mine on it, that'll be easier.

Anne-Louise: Jeff, yeah, all right, easy.

RICCARDA: [unclear]

Jeff: Oh no, no, put both on.

Anne-Louise: Okay. Yeah. Well, I think I know the answer to this. Were you in an area where the fires occurred?

Jeff: Yes.

RICCARDA: Yes.

Anne-Louise: Were you involved in responding to the fires?

Jeff: Yes.

RICCARDA: Yes.

Anne-Louise: And I think I know the next one. Do you continue to be involved in supporting individuals or communities affected by the fires?

Jeff: Yes, I've still got clients that have been – they're having trouble getting their heads around it.

Anne-Louise: LGA is Towong Postcode or town?

RICCARDA: 3691.

JEFF: 3691. We're in a silly little one –

Anne-Louise: 3691, is it?

JEFF: Yeah. We're in a silly little one. We're an actually isolated pocket. We're in Albury, Wodonga postcode.

RICCARDA: [Unclear]

JEFF: Yeah.

Anne-Louise: Okay. And so, what's your town called? What's your address then?

JEFF: Lucyvale.

Anne-Louise: It is Lucyvale. Yeah. Okay. Beautiful. You don't have to answer this question if you don't want to – age group, just in decades.

JEFF: Ancient.

RICCARDA: Old. 50s and 60s.

Anne-Louise: That's it. Done. So yeah, as I explained on the phone, what we're interested to understand is your experiences of relief and recovery, but also if there was anything you wanted to provide feedback from preparedness and response with regard to the fires. And wherever possible, if you can provide examples, that's the best way of us understanding what transcribed and how it happened and whether or not there's a better way of doing something. So yeah, interested in the good, the bad, the ugly and ideas for improvement. So yeah, I'll just handover to you two and I'll probably ask you some questions as we go through, if that's all right.

JEFF: Yeah. Look, there's a number of areas here. One of them – one of the key points is that people that were controlling the fires and people – to where they go and everything – they've got no idea –

RICCARDA: about the firefighters –

JEFF: The firefighting people –

Anne-Louise: Yeah, the ones controlling the firefighting people?

JEFF: Yeah, the control head – they had no understanding of what the topography of the land is, the geographic position of things. I'll give you an example. We've got a lot of very

steep country at the back of our place. The fire was on that. There were six crews came through, three of them were locals from [unclear], Mitta, and [unclear] that are all hill country. The other three groups were from – two from Yarrawonga and one from [unclear] in the flat country. They gave us the three people from the flat country and sent the three people – three groups into Corryong that were out of the hills. And I felt so sorry for a couple of those blokes. They'd never been in really, really steep country. I'm talking country where you've got to drive up a road. You can't even put a bulldozer on it. It's that steep. And the road was wide enough for two vehicles, but he was that scared because he'd never been there. And it put him in a very dangerous position because he was out of his area.

RICCARDA: And out of his skill.

JEFF: And out of his skill and just little things like that where you're actually putting other people in risk even though the fire – that don't need to be there. They could have sent the people that are out of the hills and it would have been all good. And there's a number of instances like that where people came in that didn't know what to do. We had another incident where the actual lieutenant or whatever he was, the paid firey that was in charge didn't know how to open a gate, a farm gate. I spoke to him. I got talking to him. And he was a nice chap and everything, really nice bloke. And he admitted that he had never been in a fire outside of Melbourne metropolitan area. He'd never been into the bush. And because everything was so thin on the ground – what part of Victoria wasn't alight was more to the point.

But because everything was so thin, the people were being pushed into positions that they'd probably never been in and probably never go in again. But it just puts too much pressure on them to have to go into these sorts of things. And he said he'd never been out of Melbourne. He didn't even know how to put a vehicle in four-wheel drive because he'd never had to because he's been in the city. But because they were so short-staffed, he had to come out. These are the things that just make it not only tough on the people that are fighting the fire because they've got to protect them – it puts them in risk as well because they're just out of their ground.

Anne-Louise: Yeah. We heard quite a bit about that in phase one where people – and particularly around – I'm not sure whether this was an issue for you as well, but not being aware of local knowledge or not using local knowledge in a number of situations. Did that happen up your way as well?

JEFF: Oh, look –

RICCARDA: Absolutely.

JEFF: Yeah, that happened all the time.

RICCARDA: [Unclear]

JEFF: Riccarda and I spent the entire day keeping the fire on the bottom side of the highway. We knocked off that night. The fire in Middleton was up on top of this hill and he was just doing a little bit of a backburn to keep it – someone came along that evening and did a

backburn from the highway and burned three properties that didn't even need to be burned. I haven't been able to find out, but it was someone away from somewhere. They saw the flames on top, didn't know the lay of the land, went along the road and just lit it all up. There was another case. When the fire went through, I was at [unclear] Gap trying to fight it. And there were six tankers on top of the hill, and I went back and asked them if they'd give me a hand. And they said, "We're just not allowed to. Our orders are we have to go to Corryong."

And I said, "The fire's gone from Corryong." I said, "It's through [unclear]." I said, "It's miles away." And they said, "No, we can't shift off what our orders are." And yet the fire was there. They could have saved probably five, 6,000 acres had they [unclear]. There was a gate. They could have just driven through and gone round it, but they weren't able to call anyone or do anything [in aid of] what their orders were.

RICCARDA: I think the message from all this is that centralisation of [unclear]

Anne-Louise: Did you say decentralisation?

RICCARDA: Well, centralisation of this sort of thing doesn't work.

Anne-Louise: Yeah. It's a little bit hard to hear you, sorry.

RICCARDA: Yeah. I could yell, but –

JEFF: And just going back to years ago when I was in the – when I was an area lieutenant and it used to be that the locals took charge of that area and then another local took charge of his area so that the local knowledge was always used. But nowadays, the local knowledge just doesn't get used at all. There were orders coming from above somewhere.

Anne-Louise: Yeah. We heard a lot of that, both within your area, northeast, but also in east Gippsland as well, community members talking about this.

RICCARDA: What about in regard to you doing the first responding with farmers with fire-affected livestock and all that sort of stuff?

JEFF: Yeah, we'll get into that.

RICCARDA: Oh sorry, you've got other things you were saying.

JEFF: No, we'll jump into that.

Anne-Louise: No, you're all right. Keep going.

JEFF: Because of my stock agent business – who's that?

RICCARDA: [Unclear] .

JEFF: Because of my stock agent business, I sent something like – the second day, I sent something like 1,500 cattle to be killed. The abattoirs in Melbourne were brilliant. They gave us some emergency kills, but we couldn't get trucks, couldn't get trucks in and out because of the roads being blocked. They were allowing hay to come through, but they weren't allowing

cattle trucks to go through. I had clients that had dairies that were screaming up and down. They were just tipping their milk down the drain because they wouldn't let the milk tankers through. But they'd let a semitrailer of hay come through, which was ridiculous. They hay had more chance of catching alight than anything. And thank goodness that we had a local sergeant here that I knew very well, and he just overrode a lot of stuff and just got us through. But it was just a nightmare. His cattle that had burned – we'd gotten a facility to get them killed immediately, to euthanise them, and we couldn't get them out.

Anne-Louise: Do you as a stock agent have a broader body that you can go to in these circumstances? Were you working with any of the agencies responsible in that area or just doing that local work with the police?

JEFF: No. Well, I was using my contacts with other stock agents, trying to get strings pulled with [unclear] and all those. And they were trying like mad, but – 24 hours on a burned animal is a fair bit of time and it just took ages. There was no common sense to say, "Hang on, these cattle are going to Melbourne to be killed because they've been burned. Let the trucks in to get them out" "Oh no, you've got to apply for a permit. You've got to do this." In the end, trucks were just barging through. It was just a nightmare.

RICCARDA: I think there's a certain element of those that aren't on the frontline – no one wants to take responsibility. It's just easier to keep shifting it along. Someone else can make that decision. So, by the time 10 people have done that, eight hours have elapsed to help.

Anne-Louise: Yeah. And I can imagine significant welfare issues obviously with the stock –

RICCARDA: At the moment, it's awful. And then you've got a window there where you can shift them and you can do something with them, and once that window elapses, [unclear] prospect. [Unclear] not going to get $1,000 for that animal or whatever, he's – it's got a huge economic as well as social and mental cost attached to it.

JEFF: The thing is you've got that 24-hour window. They've been burned. The infection hasn't started. So, they've got basically 100% salvageable – just put them down and get it all done. And the abattoirs, they were brilliant, but trying to get through the roadblocks was just a nightmare.

Anne-Louise: And so, did you end up getting them through to Melbourne?

JEFF: Yeah. We got them through, but it was just a nightmare and arguments and to the fact of where the trucks were just driving through regardless. And the local sergeant was saying, "Just go down. Just go through. Don't stop," because there was no communication. He was frustrated because he couldn't get any information on what was going on. Yeah. And it was the same with clients that were really badly burned. Trying to get stuff to them with getting hay in and someone in the powers to be was saying, "No, no, this hay has got to go to the depot. It's got to go to this depot." And I'm saying, "No, this hay is being donated to this particular person. That's where it's going." And we were having blues with people trying to hoodwink trunks to go to a depot because they had control of the depot. Where these people had bought the hay or the hay had been given to them, the people in higher authorities were trying to overrule people that even purchased hay – it was theirs – to go to a depot.

Anne-Louise: Is there a better way, Jeff? If it was going to happen again, what would you say is the right way to do it?

JEFF: You've just got to have someone that's got a bit of common sense. If there's paperwork to say that the chap's bought the hay, it's got to go to him. It doesn't have to go to the depot. And then have to argue for an hour or two hours and then drive another 30kms back out to this bloke's place because no one will listen to a bit of common sense.

Anne-Louise: And were farms relying on you to be this conduit between them and the agencies? Is that the type of role that you were playing?

JEFF: Oh look, I was playing all different roles.

RICCARDA: [Unclear]

JEFF: Yeah. Look, I found one client one day and he's got blood just streaming down his head. And his wife has got dementia, so we got her out. And I got Riccarda to make a meal for him and took it round to him, but he hadn't eaten for two days because he's trying to get his livestock sorted. He's trying to get them fed. He's trying to get them watered, trying to work out what ones have got to be shot. And he's just there on his own doing [unclear] And I'm trying to drive in and help him, and they're pulling me off and saying, "Well, you can't go in there. You can't do this." In the end, I had a pass to just go wherever I wanted to, but it's just all the bureaucratic red tape that went on and on and on.

RICCARDA: I think particularly for the first – I don't know whether it was four or five days, after the initial fire front went through, but there was still the likes of the rest of us all battling it on the sides – they just shut – they cut us off. They just cut the roads. They wouldn't let anything in. And, of course, as you could imagine, suddenly it's like a warzone and the currency becomes food and fuel. And it's like money doesn't matter anymore because it's a limited resource. No one knows when you're getting more or seeing more because they're not letting any trucks in. They're not letting any fuel in. The only way you fight fires is with pumps that pump water. So, the situation it put people in was mentally really terrible. You just felt like you'd just come – like Ebola virus had landed on the planet and you were just being sealed off. And that was the way they left us for days and days on end.

JEFF: We were nearly four weeks without power.

Anne-Louise: Four weeks? Goodness.

JEFF: And, of course, you could imagine no power, you can't pump fuel. In town, the bowsers had fuel in them, but they had no power to pump the fuel. We had people coming to our own petrol supply on the farm, getting petrol to keep the generators going because you couldn't buy any petrol anywhere, couldn't do anything.

Anne-Louise: For that whole period?

JEFF: For that whole period. Yeah, for that whole period.

Anne-Louise: How did people survive?

JEFF: Oh look, we lent people generators and people just pulled together. They just did whatever they did to keep going, but –

RICCARDA: You bring all the garden solar lights inside and work out a system.

Anne-Louise:: I imagine you're very adaptable after that.

JEFF: And the other thing was then all of a sudden when the next front was coming, we had all these police officers out of Melbourne reading the riot act to us, "Leave or you'll die. Leave or you'll die." And they had no idea of what they were talking about, no idea how to fight a fire. They just had a rhetoric that they were given from head office.

RICCARDA: And they were scared.

JEFF: And they were scared. They didn't want – one poor bloke was on a checkpoint and I said, "Well, you're on a checkpoint here." I said, "Why don't you move further down where it's burned. At least you're safer on the – "Oh, didn't think of that." And they were on a checkpoint where there was grass up to your eyeballs. And silly things – the army came in and they were raking round the power – we had no power, but they were raking round the power poles that were still standing after the fire had gone through just to –

Anne-Louise: So, they had nothing better to do.

JEFF: That was just someone that came up with that idea.

Anne-Louise: Yeah.

JEFF: There were something like 3, 400 poles or something burned off. Just going into town, there was hardly a power pole standing. It had just all burned. So, they all had to be replaced before we could get power.

Anne-Louise: And how long was it for you from when the fires first started to when you really felt as though you were out of the woods? Before you were –

JEFF: New Year's Eve was the –

RICCARDA: [Unclear]

JEFF: Yeah.

RICCARDA: Three weeks

Anne-Louise: Three weeks?

RICCARDA: [Unclear] around our boundaries, you know.

JEFF: Just kept coming back in, swirling about – when it got on the open, you could do something with it, but when it got into the bush and the eucalyptus, it's all round and you

can't get to it. It's too dangerous. So, you've just got to let it go and the wind changes. So, it changes a bit of a direction and it goes another direction. So, you've just got to stay on the outside and wait. And so, we had that waiting game for basically three weeks.

RICCARDA: It was a bit – it was really hard on your head, just waiting, just a lot of waiting and just you can't see anywhere because the smoke's so thick. So, you can't see where the fire is. You can't rely on any intel because it's all so late and out-of-date and communications were hopeless. We had nothing other than UHF radios. And the best thing was actually to go out and find the fire so you could see where it was for yourself and then make a plan as to what you were going to do that day.

JEFF: We've only just got a phone tower here now in the last couple of months. So, when the fires were on, we had no mobile service here.

Anne-Louise: So, you literally were relying on that UHF and actually having a look to see where the fire is.

JEFF: Yeah. For us to get service, we had to go – well, basically back into Corryong and then they had no phones because –

RICCARDA: Which you couldn't go to because you went in and they wouldn't let you out.

JEFF: Yeah. The towers had all been scorched anyway, so –

Anne-Louise: And did you work with some or have much to do with – were there vets who were out there assisting farmers with stock that were burned or needed to be euthanised or were farmers doing that themselves? Yeah, were you a part of any of that?

JEFF: The vets just couldn't keep up. They were just flat out. There was that many cattle. In that big of an area, the vets were flat out. I was making decisions for clients. I'm saying, "Right. No, that's good enough. We can get that killed now and we just put them on trucks and get them going." They were so badly burned they were shooting them or waiting until the vet could get there, which could have been a couple of days. But there's a vet in Corryong and a vet in Walwa There's something like 180,000 cattle in this area just in that itself. So they just didn't know what hit them.

Anne-Louise: Did you have Agriculture Victoria people come through or anything like that? Vets from the department?

JEFF: The same with them because they were stretched. They came, but they took a while because they were so stretched.

RICCARDA: They didn't come for days

Anne-Louise: How long was that?

RICCARDA: I think it was about four or five days after that front went through.

Anne-Louise: Yeah. Right.

RICCARDA: They just weren't letting anyone in

Anne-Louise: Yeah.

JEFF: It was just like the Great Wall had been put up.

RICCARDA: Yeah. This would be a certainly key message that if this ever happens to another community again, don't do that to them. That idea where they just cut you off and let you fend yourselves is just a disgrace. Certainly not in the spirit of what we were all raised on. On the spirits of the ANZACs and mateship, that was just terrible.

Anne-Louise: Yeah. I can hear that it must have been a terrible experience, feeling as though you're alone too and that other people can't come and help you.

RICCARDA: Yeah.

JEFF: Yeah. You just couldn't get in or out. I could get about because they'd given me a pass because of the stock agency business and everything else and also [unclear]

RICCARDA: But I couldn't go into Corryong because if I went into Corryong, you wouldn't be allowed back out. And when you've got family and everything and a farm and a thing, that's just – so you don't go. So, it kind of – it doesn't really help.

Anne-Louise: Yeah. We heard that in phase one. Were you having community meetings or how were you getting your information? Were you able to come together in Lucyvale collectively with the CFA or, yeah, how did that work if you couldn't go into Corryong where perhaps they were doing those broader community meetings?

JEFF: Well, the police came into Lucyvale itself and they put that much pressure on everyone that there was only Riccarda and myself, [redacted] and Ricarda's father [redacted] left in the valley.

RICCARDA [redacted] were still here.

JEFF: [redacted] were still here. Everyone else had left. So I'd plough firebreaks right along one side of the valley and just cut the fences and did all the neighbours, just kept going all the way through, but we were the only ones left here to defend it because the police had put so much pressure and so much fear into some of these people that they just panicked and said, "We're going to go."

RICCARDA: Not that there's that many people in the valley to start with, so –

JEFF: So, it just –

RICCARDA: And by the time you put a few of them on trucks, like fire trucks and stuff, they just – there's really not that many people here, I suppose. But we just – and to answer your question, I guess we formed informal blocks, if you like. Certain families seemed to bond together and would keep in touch. And other families – and that worked a bit. I was saying the other day at a meeting, "If we did this again, I'd actually like to see us have a

formal response plan for the valley so that we know who's got children up this valley so that we know who will be on a fire truck or whatever." We know that, okay, there's a fire. My job's children, so I check with the families and pick up whatever kids need to be taken to somewhere safe or that sort of response. So that we don't feel like we've got odd families left out in the cold or –

Anne-Louise: Yeah. And what about in the recovery since, so since – you had all the work you did during the fires. And then what about afterwards? Any examples there of things that were good, bad?

JEFF: Look, just talking to a lot of people, they just need to unload. They don't need anyone to tell them what they should have been or shouldn't do. They just need someone to unload on. I found that with a lot of my clients, so I just go there and they just talk for ages about what happened and just someone else to talk to that had been through it but understand what they're going through mentally and physically. And everyone – they all do it in a different – all have different ideas of how they cope with their stress and everything. Yeah.

RICCARDA: Everyone has their own story and for a lot of people, it's often about the decisions they had to make. And it could be whether they stayed or whether they left or – I was talking to a farmer here who was on a fire truck, and he was so convinced at the time that his place was going to burn and he wants to be there to defend it. But he had a bitch and pups and he shot them. But his place didn't burn, and he was very, very fond of his dogs. And he was just talking about that decision that he shot them, and he didn't actually need to because it didn't burn. But he didn't know that, and he thought it was the best decision because he didn't want to leave them to die on the chain. And those sort of things, the decisions people had to make –

JEFF: But that gets back to the fact that the pressure that was put onto him by the police and the people that were calling on him – and he was on a fire truck. And that gave him all this information, "This is what's going to happen. This is what's going to happen." He had that much on his mind that he couldn't make a rational decision. And if they had to point out to him that the fire's not going to burn across burned country and his house would have been all right – but he wasn't rationally thinking and he didn't want his dogs to suffer, so he shot them. And that's what people – some of them just weren't in a rational state of mind to make decisions. And the pressure just gets to some of them and they can't think straight. Other people just stand up and they go, "Yes," boom, boom. And that's why we're all so different and they just make those decisions and away they go, and others can't.

Anne-Louise: Do you think that's had an impact on people's recovery because of some of those decisions that were made?

JEFF: Yeah. Look, it's made a big impact on some. Some of them are still coming to terms with what happened. Even now, psychologically, they're just going to get their heads around things. Others have got round it, moved on, made the decisions and gone.

RICCARDA: It's funny, isn't it? Some of those you thought were strong aren't coping so well, and some of those you thought wouldn't cope that well are the reverse.

JEFF: Yeah. It's just amazing how some people can think, "Oh no," and then they've just stepped up to the plate and gone bang, bang. And then others you think that are very strong just haven't. They're physically not even supplying – coping with what's going on now.

Anne-Louise: Has the access to services within your community – I know you've got a tiny little place and whether you access it in Corryong, I'm not sure, but are people accessing the recovery services that are available?

JEFF: Yeah, they are. They are. Then it's that human element, pride, with some of them. Pride is a big thing with some of these chaps, "Oh, I can't be seen to get help or can't be seen to cry." It's just human nature. I don't know how you get – I don't think you can fix that, can you?

Anne-Louise: Yeah, probably not. I mean I think it's about how services can be flexible and adaptable and meet people's needs, like someone like yourself, who's got a really critical role in the community – without putting it onto you – but how does someone in your role be able to also provide that other types of support or other organisations that can support you to do that? That's maybe how things have to be done differently in some of these more rural areas.

JEFF: Yeah. Look –

RICCARDA: It's a bit like your client that you found – that we cooked the meal for. If you'd said to him, "Would you like me to bring you dinner," he'd have said no. But you said, "Here's dinner."

JEFF: Yeah. I rang Riccarda and she –

RICCARDA: We got strict instructions that he hasn't got any teeth, so it needs to –

JEFF: He'd had his teeth out to get his false teeth done. So, she made a shepherd's pie for him.

Anne-Louise: Nice.

JEFF: And I took him round a couple of beers and a couple of light beers, and I said to Riccarda, "He'll never eat all that shepherd's pie." Anyway, I gave him half of it on this big plate and said, "Here's a cold beer." And he sat down. He ate the lot because he hadn't had a meal for a couple of days. But yeah, if I had said, "Oh, I'll go and get you something to eat," he would have said, "No, no, I'm all right." But because I just turned up and said, "Here it is. Sit down and we're going to have this –

RICCARDA: [Unclear]

JEFF: – he didn't. And he's forever grateful. Look, it's something I don't know how you get round people with it. There are people that will – pride will be their downfall. No matter what you try and do for them, they just don't want to be seen to be weak or help – in actual fact, if they said something, you could do something for them. I had avenues of blokes to get their paddocks resewn. I had clients away bringing in drills and tractors and all that to get going, to get things up and running for people, like grain. I had an endless supply of grain for people. I

had an endless supply of hay donated, just giving it up and sending it out to people. And sometimes I found it was just easier to just get it to happen and get it turned up at their place because you'd say something – "Oh no, I'm all right." And that's just human nature.

Anne-Louise: And has your small community been able to come together with COVID and everything? Have you still been able to meet together or not really?

JEFF: Yeah. We've still got the hall still going.

RICCARDA: [Unclear]

JEFF: Yeah, but now everyone's up and about and up and running, so –

RICCARDA: I think that COVID restrictions came in at a really bad time because it was just at the point where the communities were getting back together, and people were just loosening up. And every time you went to any little get together, it was always just this – people were just – needed to tell their story, needed to share their experience and needed to just be able to tell it. And COVID cut that off for a lot of people and I think that was just, yeah, unfortunately part of the recovery process that got interrupted.

Anne-Louise: Do you feel like it's starting again now people are having more of that opportunity?

JEFF: Well, we're still under restrictions, so you still can't do much. We have a community hall meeting – well, used to – every last Friday in every month, so –

RICCARDA: Which we will again.

JEFF: And the thing was everyone would go. Everyone would take – there'd be a theme. There'd be cold meat or the casseroles

RICCARDA: Everyone brings something

JEFF: And everyone shares everything. And there's people in the district here – about 94 that turn up with their sponge cake and all this sort of stuff. It's a very tight little community. And that's only just starting to start again hopefully very shortly. We're very lucky here. It's a very tight little community, not so much moving to Corryong and that where you've got more transient people.

RICCARDA: More factions –

JEFF: Factions and everything else.

Anne-Louise: Yeah. No. Some of the smaller ones seem to have that really strong connection because you already had that connection before the fires. You were working together, doing a whole bunch of things. So, I find it – then my experience of some of these emergency events, the ones that were actually already quite well-connected seemed to generally, with their recovery, do better than others that were perhaps not as well-connected.

JEFF: Yeah. We had a community meeting for the recovery with the CRC the other day. And anyway, one of the ladies that were there from The Shire – and she was saying, "Oh well, this and – " I had to say to her, "No, this is a privately owned community hall. It's on a private bit of ground." I said, "There's no Shire funding. It's all community done." And she just couldn't get over it, that here's this little place and it's got a little bit of ground that's owned by the community. The hall is built and owned by the community. There's no DELWP or Shire or anything involved in it. And she had trouble getting her head around that.

Anne-Louise: They can be pretty resourceful, small communities.

JEFF: Yeah.

Anne-Louise: Can't they? Is there anything else that you wanted to talk to me about with regard to relief or recovery?

JEFF: Yeah. Next time the fires come through, just send smaller doses, not the whole lot at once

Anne-Louise: Yeah. That would be helpful.

JEFF: Yeah. And that's half the problem this time. It was just so big, so horrendous in so many places.

Anne-Louise: How do you think people are feeling about the upcoming season?

JEFF: Look, the cattle price is good. Share prices are good. There's plenty of feed and I think everything will be all right.

Anne-Louise: Yeah. Right.

RICCARDA: If it stays green, it will be all right.

Anne-Louise: Yeah. That is that because I'm hearing, in a lot of other communities, quite a lot of anxiety around the fire season, particularly those areas that were on the edge, so they weren't directly flame affected. It was just some areas of east Gippsland where those communities are now starting to feel really anxious about this next season because they weren't actually burned.

RICCARDA: And I think that will be the same here, for sure.

JEFF: This fire that went through here – the family came to this area in 1850, thereabouts. And the prevailing winds always bring the fires out of New South across through this area. And the family place was burned out in the 50s, in the 40s and in the 30s, all following the same trend through. And history, it will happen again. It's just got to get the right conditions, so just got to be prepared for this.

RICCARDA: It would be interesting to watch – our son, he's 10. He was still 10 when he went through that, wasn't he? And it would just be interesting to watch – he's a real action Jackson and very pragmatic like his father. So, he just got in and put out fires and so forth.

But I'll watch with interest just to see – because I notice sometimes, he – the other day he made a comment about something about bush, and he goes, "Oh yeah, but bush burns." It was just like – it would be interesting to see how the children here – how they will internalise and cope with it coming up, depending on – some of them were just taken – a lot of them were just taken out, but he was pretty much here for the worst of it and saw the worst of it.

Anne-Louise: Yeah. It will be definitely interesting to see the impacts on children and young people.

JEFF: Yeah. And the kids were the same. Some kids just – and other kids just wanted to get in and fight it.

RICCARDA: We've had two youth suicides here this year, which is not usual for this – they talk about the broader Corryong, whatever. And I think both of those kids were – when I say kids, they were 19 and 21 – but they were both on the frontline of the fires, whether that was a contributing factor or not. But yeah, it certainly had an enormous impact and probably that's a space that needs to be watched going forward.

Anne-Louise: Yeah. Definitely. Definitely.

JEFF: Yeah. One of the boys, his parents – and he was at home at the time, but they were right in the –

RICCARDA: In the mouth of the dragon.

JEFF: – mouth of the dragon as it came through. We got photos as it came over the hill behind them and into their place. They couldn't have got closer to the eye.

RICCARDA: No, I mean we'd be – how far would we be from The Bluff? 20kms as the crow flies

JEFF: Yeah.

RICCARDA: And this just came through at about 11 o'clock at night and you could just see it going over the top of this – it's called The Bluff because it's like a mountain and a drop [unclear] and you could just see flames shooting into the air. I don't know. We were at such a distance and you could see it just exploding in fireballs in front of the front of the fire. And they were at the bottom of that, so –

Anne-Louise: It must have been terrifying.

RICCARDA: Yeah, and the noise of it coming just as much as being – I don't know, can't imagine it. Well, I can because we could hear it from here, but yeah.

JEFF: It was so quick. I rang a client at Walwa and I rang him at 10 o'clock. And I said, "How's it going?" And he said, "It's jumped the river." And I said, "Do you need a hand?" He said, "I reckon we'll be pretty all right. Probably need a hand tomorrow morning." And I said, "Yeah, right. Well, I'll talk to you." That was at 10 o'clock. By one o'clock that night,

the fire was through Corryong and gone. I reckon it was travelling something like between 25 and 30 kilometres an hour.

Anne-Louise: Yeah, the speed of it.

JEFF: Yeah.

RICCARDA: By four o'clock that afternoon they were burned out.

Anne-Louise: Goodness.

JEFF: Yeah. It just got that going and the embers were just lining it so far in front and it was just speeding.

Anne-Louise: Yeah. Anything else?

RICCARDA: No. But you're going to need a lot of wine to get through these interviews, aren't you?

Anne-Louise: Oh, it depends. It's interesting because when you mentioned about the dogs, I was like, "Oh, that's terrible." That was one that just pinged me. It's been all right. But a couple of people – someone lost their partner in the fires in east Gippsland and she did really well to be able to be involved in an interview and provide feedback. She just really wanted to do it and that kind of thing. But no, I feel fine. My part is being able to hopefully make a difference, take this information, get the team to analyse it and then hope that there are changes for the future. Enjoy is not the right word to say, but I really value listening to people's stories. Yeah, it's really beneficial, so thank you very much.

JEFF: And the bird life and that didn't cop as big a hammering as everyone says. There were blue tongues in the heart of where the fire went through. Two days later, I was seeing blue tongues coming up out of their holes and lay on the rocks, wombats back out. The lyrebirds up the back of us here – they've been berserk this year. So, it was good in the fact that it hasn't got as many bird life and animals as we think. It did get a lot of deer –

Anne-Louise: That's probably not a bad thing though, is it?

JEFF: No. No, that's not a bad thing. But the actual birds and that seemed to get away and the wombats got in their burrows and –

RICCARDA: We saw [unclear] flocks of them [unclear]

JEFF: But you were watching them, the eagles and hawks that had been just working on the thermals, just looking and watching.

Anne-Louise: I can imagine.

RICCARDA: How do we – because it would be – you've obviously got a lot of interesting information coming into this. So how do you see, from a contributor's point of view, some

sort of feedback or result of the work that you're doing because it would be interesting? Is any of that going to be made publicly available?

Anne-Louise: Yeah. So as in your submissions or the outcome reports or –

RICCARDA: Yeah, just the outcomes of not just our submission personally, but just of the outcome of the work that you're doing. So how do you read that or see that, or will there be a plan? What's the output going to look like is what I'm asking?

Anne-Louise: Yeah. So essentially, there is a big report that's prepared at the end of it. So, whilst I'm facilitating this community engagement part, at the same time, it's happening with all the stakeholders. So that varies from government departments through to agencies, to the people like Community Health, all the players who've got a role in emergency management. And essentially, they're looking at a – from across the report is all about the effectiveness of relief and recovery. So, there's talks about the governance arrangements, the effectiveness of how program services have been delivered, et cetera. They'll break it down into each of the areas, so in emergency relief, as I said, livestock, emergency relief centres and so forth, recovery into the five lines of recovery and all of this community information will be brought together with the stakeholder information to paint a picture of how things occurred, to demonstrate those things that did work well, the things that didn't and yeah, considerations for improvement.

Basically, the IGEM makes a range of observations, findings, and then recommendations. So, the recommendations are generally things that take probably longer term to improve, but they're all about the arrangements and making it the best that it can be for emergency management going forward. As part of the report, we're going to have a community engagement section that talks about the types of people that we spoke to, what they told us and that kind of thing. So, we'll keep providing community updates to let people know how things are going, how that information's being used. And yeah, and then ultimately the main output is the report at the end of June next.

RICCARDA: Oh well, hopefully it doesn't just gather dust.

Anne-Louise: Yeah. I hope so. No, look, I think there were 17 recommendations in phase one. And if you're interested in jumping on the website and having a look – the report itself is huge, 398 pages, but there is an executive summary as well. A lot of the recommendations – about half of them relate to fuel and land management, which makes a lot of sense. We heard a lot about that in phase one. But then there are other parts. For example, you guys were talking around the state of disaster and evacuations. There are recommendations in those areas, community information, community engagement. Tony Pearce, the Inspector General, he's not going to make a recommendation unless, one, it's got an organisation that can actually deliver on that, and that it's an achievable thing. But they are generally longer-term outcomes as opposed to a quick fix to something. So that's how the recommendations work.

RICCARDA: Yeah. I work with government and policy and it's hard not to get a little sceptical. These things just go round in circles, don't they? But anyway, hopefully something good falls out of the cloud.

JEFF: Can I just say –

Anne-Louise: Yeah, go for it.

JEFF: No, no.

RICCARDA: Go, it's your turn, sorry.

JEFF: No, just two points. One of the things that saved our bacon was that we have a DELWP road behind us and Riccarda and I were able to clean that off before the fire, which gave us a firebreak, which is probably something that DELWP need to be looking at down the track to make sure all their tracks are cleaned up. The other thing is, I had a meeting with some chaps, and they had the mapping with the fire and winds and the way the fire –

RICCARDA: The predictive map.

JEFF: Predictive maps of where the fire was going – but they didn't have anything on their map to show what had already burnt.

Anne-Louise: Yeah. Right.

JEFF: Because they showed me the map and they said, "The fire's this and this wind's going to come here and it's going to come back across." And I said, "But from there to there – and that's 35 kilometres – that's all burned through that strip." So, I said, "It can't come back across there." And it didn't show on their maps. They're looking at their maps, but it didn't show the burned areas that had already burned. They were 100% right on their winds and the way it was going to go, but it didn't show anything –

Anne-Louise: Yeah. Do you think it was because they were looking at so much more in advance?

JEFF: No. It was just it didn't show anywhere on their maps if the fire had gone through.

Anne-Louise: Yeah. Okay.

JEFF: So, they had their mapping, and this is where the fire's going to go and this is where it is, but it didn't show that's already burned. And then the next bloke came along, and he said, "It's going to come out of here. It's going to come across from New South again and go through," but there was a strip on their map and it was never shaded or anything, about 35 kilometres wide that was already burned but it never shaded them to show them that the fire's going to go there. That's all burned.

It's just in design of their – they were spot on with their winds and their directions and everything, but it didn't show what had already burned because what saved our bacon was that we had wind change right on about half past four, five o'clock in the afternoon. And there was only about five degrees shift in the winds. And it showed on the map that it was going to do it, and it did it, and it just turned it back in a little bit and gave us that opportunity to jump on top. But it never showed what had already been burned. Does that make sense?

Anne-Louise: Yeah. I don't know all that much about their systems that they use, but I'm familiar with seeing some of the maps and the predictive stuff.

JEFF: Yeah. But people were looking at it and it wasn't just saying, "No, no, that's all burned. So, we haven't got a way of it coming there. More worries here." And that was one of the things about the police that came. They had that map and they were saying that this is going to come across and it's going to burn everywhere, but no, it's already burned, it can't. I've never seen ground burn twice.

Anne-Louise: Again, it's that local knowledge that's missing.

JEFF: Yeah. But had they had it on their maps, and they had it filled in on their computer images, you'd see that, yeah, no, that's burned. The winds are going to come across and pick it up over here, but it's not going to bring it from there to there.

Anne-Louise: Okay.

JEFF: But it's like floods. You can never predict what they're going to do.

Anne-Louise: Yeah. Any last comments? Have you covered all your bits you wanted to say?

JEFF: Thank you very much.

Anne-Louise: Oh no, that's my pleasure. We really are looking forward to when we can come out and see people face-to-face. So, we definitely will get up your way at some point, whether it's this year or it's early next year, but that's the intention of the team once the restrictions are all right. As I said, I'm all right. I'm in regional Victoria, but the rest of the team are in metro Melbourne. So, they're not travelling too far at the minute.

RICCARDA: No.

JEFF: No. He's not even going to make a decision until the weekend, apparently.

Anne-Louise: Yeah. But it would be really nice to catch up with some of your community, if we can, when we come up that way, at least call in and say, "Good day," or something like that.

JEFF: That last Friday of every month.

RICCARDA: Yes, when it's happy hour.

Anne-Louise: Yeah, sounds good.

RICCARDA: We'll keep you informed.

Anne-Louise: Sounds good. All right. Well, listen, what I'll do is – yeah, we'll get this transcribed and then I'll send it to you on e-mail, so you've got a copy of it. And we'll record it as a formal submission into the enquiry and please feel free – yeah, the intention is we hope to speak to people again or for people to provide further information about 12 months down the track, so February or so next year. February, March, come back again to just have a bit of

a chat and see whether anything's changed with regard to recovery and how people are progressing. But yeah, thanks very much for providing such valuable information. I really appreciate it and, yeah, acknowledge that it must have been a very difficult time for both of you guys and the rest of your community. So, I really appreciate your time.

JEFF: Okay, thank you.

RICCARDA: Thank you for yours.

Anne-Louise: Take care. All right. Talk to you later. See you later. Bye-bye.

RICCARDA: Thank you. Bye.

Details are:

Submission to be published - yes

Submission to be named - yes - Jeff and Riccarda Brindley

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 - yes

LGA - Towong

Postcode/Town - Lucyvale - 3691

Age group - 50's and 60's

Gender - man and woman

Keep up to date - yes -