

### **031. Recording – Neil Clydsdale – 26 March 2021**

**Q:** Just before we start a couple of little questions from the inquiries point of view. Because we get the recording transcribed and it can become like a submission into the inquiry would you be interested in having your submission published? It doesn't matter one way or the other. It's either on our website or it's not.

**A:** It doesn't worry me.

**Q:** So is that like a yes, you're happy for it to be published?

**A:** Yes.

**Q:** Yep. And then the second -

**A:** I can't imagine why.

**Q:** The second question is, do you wish to have your name on it or do you want to be anonymous?

**A:** No, I don't believe in anonymity.

**Q:** Yep. So happy for – and let me just check, your surname doesn't have an E in it or it does?

**A:** Doesn't. It's just D-S-D.

**Q:** Yeah, okay. Yeah, C-L-Y-D-S – dale, yep. Perfect. Obviously it was Tintaldra where you guys were from, wasn't it?

**A:** Yes.

**Q:** Yep. East Gippsland Shire Council. Perfect. And just other quick little questions were around, were you involved in any way in responding to the fires in like an emergency services capacity?

**A:** No – oh, just here at home.

**Q:** Yep, just as an individual.

**A:** I belong to the CFA but local captain left it – a group of us alone because he knew we'd just had enough on our hands preparing and whatever.

**Q:** Yep. Sure. No problems. Yep. Emergency services. All good. And – you don't have to answer this question if you don't want to but age group in decades?

**A:** Into my age decade I'm ■.

**Q:** Beautiful. Thank you. All good. Yeah. And so look, just a little reminder, Neil, obviously when you're talking about your experiences it can bring up those emotions again

and that's absolutely fine. If you want to stop at any point I'll just hit pause on the record and, yeah, we can stop – have a cup of tea or whatever it is and, yeah, have a break if you need to, okay.

**A:** Okay.

**Q:** Yeah, all right. But otherwise over to you, tell me those remaining things that you wanted to talk about.

**A:** Well, I've had a conversation with a couple of other very experience people who are involved in the CFA and – to find out what the hell went on at the duration of this fire and it confirms a lot of the thoughts I've had over the years anyway. So the fire went to the west and south office on the Monday and Tuesday morning. So we were then sitting here until the Saturday afternoon at 2 o'clock when the first spot fire appeared. So it was in that period of time from Tuesday – so lunchtime or something on that I was trying to glean what was going on about the fire front that was out there and I couldn't get any satisfaction. I went into Corryong each day and got told that it was being managed from Tallangatta and that there was a person [REDACTED] who was looking after the – I don't know what their Christian name is but [REDACTED] was looking after the area that I was in, that the Cudgewa Creek was a boundary and in Corryong they were only looking after stuff on the Corryong side of the Cudgewa Creek and we lived just on the other side on it, on the west side of it.

**Q:** Neil, was this like CFA people that you were trying to get the information from or broader, like the incident control centre?

**A:** It was the CFA people in Corryong.

**Q:** Okay. Yep.

**A:** And have to be mindful of the time for – I think on a Monday night – I will stand correction of these times but if I've got the right sequence that at about 8:30 I think we lost our landline phone service and then at about 9:30 it might have been reversed but about 9:30 we lost power and then the next morning somewhere about between nine and 10 o'clock we lost our mobile phone service.

**Q:** Yeah, right. So from early on in that week you basically had none of those – that -

**A:** We had no communication. Eventually, I don't know when it was, whether it was on the Wednesday or something like that, we got limited mobile phone service. They managed to get some power going into the local tower here at Tintaldra and we had some limited service. So to try and communicate was extremely difficult and for us it was easiest to travel -it was 20 – say 25 kilometres into what I'd call an incident control centre but maybe that's not the right terminology but into the centre in Corryong where they were trying to manage things from there, talking with the people there who I know. It was my own fire captain who was in there and he said that they were very limited in what decision making they could do or make, it was being made elsewhere in Wodonga and also Tallangatta. They were only giving a brief to deal with everything on the east side of the Cudgewa Creek. So we were on the west side of the Cudgewa Creek, so to access Tallangatta or Wodonga there were two fire fronts to

go through because the fire ground went between ourselves here and those centres. So that was impossible. I was told this person's name who was meant to be looking after this corner or sector here. I went to Walwa, we tried on a CFA radio, they tried calling out and couldn't get the person. At no stage did I ever find anyone who had any control or understanding of what was going on or what they were doing and it appeared as though to me absolutely nothing got done. There's the Pine Mt Burrowa National Park and fire was burning in the Burrowa section of it and, I'm not sure which day, I think it was maybe Wednesday afternoon or Thursday, it got into Pine Mount and I knew once it got into the Pine Mountain sector of it then basically I could write off any security, that I was just going to get burnt out, and it was a needless thing. It didn't need to happen because there was a bit of gap there and there's a place where it was very easy to cut the fire off and prevent it from getting in there and nothing was done whatsoever.

**Q:** Yeah, so that sort of like getting – what we heard a lot about was, you know, attacking the fires whilst they were small prior to them getting into areas that would then become larger fires that became unable to extinguish?

**A:** It should never have been allowed into Pine Mountain because once it's in there it's totally inaccessible.

**Q:** Yep. Yep.

**A:** And other areas – where it was it was still containable and work could have been done and nothing was done and then finally late on the Thursday afternoon Corryong overrode all of their authority and sent a small dozer out and there was a – it was a DELWP, I think that's – if I could use that terminology for the department, there was one offsider with it and they asked me where any access trails or anything were up in the area there. They said there's been a decision made because they'd been working on the Corryong side of Cudgewa Creek around another area there and they said that this is stupid, this fire is just burning here and all the work we're doing on our side is going to be brought undone because there's been no containment or control made here. They were there until 11 o'clock at night, 11:30 at night, and they just had to knock off. I took them up and showed them the trails and things that we could work on. We started to do back burning and everything. Then I said, "Well, what time will you be back tomorrow for us to continue?" They said, "Oh, we can't do anything tomorrow because it's a total fire ban day and we're not allowed to back burn." I thought this is a stupid thing. I mean, there's an active fire out there. Who cares whether it's a total fire ban day or not. There's fire there. We just need to do something about containing it.

**Q:** Yep.

**A:** So that's what I was told. True or false, I don't know, but that's the detail I got regarding that and -

**Q:** Yep. So those issues around like, you know, communications, you having to actively go and do that face to face because all your COMS were down and then the fact that those local kind of CFA areas didn't have that local decision making and control over the fires that they're controlled from somewhere further afield.

**A:** By people who had knowledge if it's rain or what was going on and – so, I suppose the rest is history when it blew up Saturday.

**Q:** Yes.

**A:** So there was a CFA person from Mansfield who I think is a group captain in that area and he was brought up here for a while. I think he went off duty either Friday or Saturday morning and returned to Mansfield but I phoned him and he said he was to be the CFA liaison – his role was CFA liaison officer with DELWP, with the DELWP officer in this area, and he came and saw me here a couple of times over those few days. I told him what the issue was and what I believe would happen and more recently one evening he was up to see one of a friend's who he's friends with and over a few drinks we had a chat and he said, "You know, that fire did exactly what you said it would do when nothing is done with it." I called him again the other day and he gave me that information. He said he actually did catch up with this [REDACTED] who was a DELWP officer and said to him, "What are you doing about this fire?" I think it might have been about the Thursday and he said, "Oh, nothing, it's just been in there in time out. We're just going to let it burn." He said, "But on Saturday you've got a 40 degree day and X wind and everything coming, what are you going to do then?" And he just – he told me – he just sort of got a blank look and, "Oh, it's just going to burn. It'll be right." So there was no attitude towards containing the fire or blacking out the front or doing anything and back burning or doing anything anywhere with the fire front after it went through.

I suppose I should give a bit of an overview of my own life experience. My father was a group captain on the New South side going back in the late 40s/early 50s and was in charge with the sector around south Tumbarumba and down to the river and everything during the 1952 fires and then as a young lad I used to go to him to fires and work on fires and things until I went to boarding school. A lot of them were only lightning strike and small things but still I was with him and I was learning about fire management and control. And then when I started I got my own earthmoving business and I spent 40 years earthmoving. I had a lot to do with fires, having dozers out to the fire fronts and things like that and working with fire officers. I had machines in Canberra on the Christmas Eve/Day fires in 2001 and again I had five D9s working in the fires in 2003, a grader, a D6 and an excavator and I spent a lot of time working on these things. The things that I've learnt in all of that time and the people I've dealt with unfortunately a lot of the people who understand fire – wildfire management and how to control it now no longer are in the system.

**Q:** Yes.

**A:** And the other people I've found most difficult to deal with and just lack, I don't know, understanding or logic or something is anyone who's anything to do with the park service. They should not be allowed to be in charge or manage wildfire. I suppose I've got a real issue, that – and this came out in a phone conversation that went for well over an hour last night with a CFA person who finished up being an incident control manager and finished up being a senior state manager in the CFA, was looking after aircraft management and everything, and he said he just finally stepped out of the door because he couldn't live with the difficulties of dealing with the bureaucracy and everything and the departments and the

professional and paid people. He said they've got a totally different attitude towards managing fire compared to the volunteer side of it. He said it's just totally unworkable. The wrong people are managing it and controlling these things.

**Q:** Yeah, right. You have like incredible back – incredible local experience too, you know, you've been in the area a long time. You've had a lot of experience in, as you just described, so yeah, I can understand how like difficult it is to see, you know, you know what's going to happen and then you don't see anything happen.

**A:** Yes. So I suppose to reinforce from our previous meeting, I believe it's imperative that we have permanent fire control lines and on the interface between – and this was reinforced again on these couple of conversations I've had with these two people in the last few weeks, and that should be on the interface between the private and public land, we need to look at that and obviously there's got to be a lot of rationalisation and work done, changing of titles and – amending title boundaries and whatever it takes but we really need to do that because the attitude of the professional – if I use – the paid people, and the departments is to go to the road that runs down the middle of the valley and let's burn it back from there or wait for the fire to come to us and just burn out, you know, whatever private assets are between the fire, you know, the bush and that and that's not a workable proposition.

**Q:** Yep. Yep. What about your thoughts around that whole sort of local decision making, have you got any thoughts about how you'd like to – like, and the role of those local people providing input and making local decisions, have you got any thoughts about that?

**A:** Well, my gut feeling, if we were to have another incident like this in the next few years whilst it's still in the minds of people, talking to the locals here and that and, I don't know, within myself I think the attitude is to hell with whatever the law is and whatever these people say, it will just – we'll finish up doing our own thing, just getting on with doing what we believe has to be done but just walk past anything they're telling us that we should be doing, that whatever they're trying to do is just gubbly gooked.

**Q:** So just sort of take on that responsibility yourselves?

**A:** Yep. It's just to – I think there's too much control centralised by people who – and people in a centralised situation have known what local knowledge or they don't particularly care, they're more worried about their job and saving their own skin and all the rest of it rather than actually making some of the decisions that need to be made and – I don't know, there's too much covering backsides I think. It's – and that came out particularly in the conversation last night with this chap who was very senior in the CFA and he just said that any paid people he said it's just – that's where it breaks down.

**Q:** Yeah. And look, I mean -

**A:** And the decision making – I mean, the people at the fire – at the base of the fire working with the fire they can see what's going on and they can see everything around them, in my mind a lot more decision making should be being made there and the centralised services should be the support mechanism for them, not the decision making mechanism if that makes sense.

**Q:** Yeah, yeah, and, you know, you're telling me things that we've heard from a number of people right across Towong but also in East Gippsland as well. Yep. Yes. Significant concern for many people in the rural areas.

**A:** Yeah. There's a few other things I'll raise, like, [Wernatong] 00:17:32 Hill here, it's all totally privately owned and I don't know exactly for how many years but it's something like 10 years I was trying to get a fuel reduction burn done on it. My first attempt was about 10 years ago. It might have been a bit longer. And I wasn't allowed to do anything until after fire restrictions were lifted and by the time fire restrictions were lifted and we had a tanker up and everything I spent a whole day trying to get something to happen and it was just too damp and just wouldn't happen. And then I pursued that through the CFA and the mechanisms and it just never happens. It just didn't happen and I explained that it was no good waiting until fire restrictions were lifted to try and burn it, it was going to have to be burnt in the drier months. We needed to be in there no later than March trying to burn it. In the year like this would be too late now. And unfortunately it and Pine Mountain and parts of the Burrowa National Park [unclear] 00:18:40 hadn't been burnt since 1952. So you can imagine the fuel loads in all of that country and it just went off like a bomb.

**Q:** Yes.

**A:** It was – there was nothing anyone could do, when it went it went and it's – that's a real worry. We need to – we're not managing the land like it was managed before European settlement or even after European I think a lot of farmers used to burn. When I first came here in 1984 at this property fire restrictions were lifted a lot earlier than they are nowadays and were able to do burning and stuff which I couldn't do now because by the time they lift it the country is too damp and it just won't burn.

**Q:** So that makes that flexibility about being able to burn when the actual country is ready.

**A:** Yep, we've got to do it and if we've got decent fire controls that are permanent then we stand more chance of opening up that window. And the other thing I suppose, I'm having a bit of a war with at the moment, so this might cross over into some of the conversation the other day with – after the fire, that the – it's a bit of both. Not all the bush but there are pockets of country where there is issues with blackberries and blackberries are in the bush and when – if they're not – if there's nothing done with them and I've got some bush like that and once the fire gets into that it just goes ballistic and goes off like a bomb. I'm trying to get a helicopter to spray all that but then you've got to get a permit because you're going to kill eucalypt timber and there's no option, and they won't give a permit. They won't come and inspect it. They just sit in their ivory tower and say no.

**Q:** And this is on your land, Neil?

**A:** It's on my land. It's on the neighbour's land. I've got – there's four neighbours here, we all have the same problem, all similar section of bush and what's not understood is the management of this bush – okay, it's private land – but it was fairly open bush back prior to the 1952 fires I'm told. I haven't seen the photograph but one person told me once they had a photo – they lived across the valley and they had a photo looking this way and it was basically open grazing country with shade trees and after the '52 fires there was a hell of a lot

of regrowth and it just got away and now we've got this country we can't clear, we can't do anything with and it's not natural bush, it's just a fire bomb, just – and now the canopy has opened up, the blackberries are going ballistic growing like hell underneath it and the wattle and everything and it's impossible to spray by hand. It's dangerous. The trees that have died or the tops of them are dead and you're working about out in the paddock and you can hear this stuff crashing and it's going down, so no one in their right mind due to OH&S is going to send anyone in there to hand spray. The only way to deal with it and this is the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, we have to use 21<sup>st</sup> Century tools and a helicopter [unclear] 00:21:53.

**Q:** Yep. Yep.

**A:** So there are pockets of that and if we don't manage those blackberries we've just got a time bomb waiting there and if they ever get fire in them they just go off like a bomb and even it makes fuel reduction burning harder too because you've got to try and manage that aspect of it too and we're not getting -

**Q:** And are you the one – did you say you're not really getting any traction with – is it with DELWP who – or with the council, who is it that you're chatting with?

**A:** It's DELWP where the total roadblock is.

**Q:** Yeah, okay. Yep. So they're not just not interested in even working with you to resolve some of this?

**A:** No. They just say, "The canopy will close over the blackberries have always been there and whatever", and that's it. They just don't want to be – again – you know, protecting their own bums. They just don't want to make any decisions. I suppose the other aspect which is a bit different again – I'll raise this and you deal with this as you see fit, maybe it's irrelevant, but while I've – I sold my earthmoving business at the end of 2004, I had quite a number of machines and staff and that and I worked extensively – I worked [unclear] 00:23:15 Cape Otway from the south west coast of Victoria right through to southern Queensland around St George, I worked extensively a lot of the areas, for forest departments as well as civil works and things like that but dealing with the department in terms – it got to the point they wanted contractors to register their machines and that was all right in the early days and then it started to become a paper warfare towards the finish and I just gave up, I wouldn't do it. It was something like about 40 pages of gobbly gook you had to fill out and read and all the rest of it. Also I was dealing with – finding people who could do paperwork. They weren't finding people who had appropriate machines or operators who were experienced and knew what they should be doing. In the finish I had one factor – another contractor here used to try hire off me and he said can he register it and I said you can do that. And then he came back to me and he said, "Oh, they won't [mar guard] 00:24:13 fitted instead of the glass in the doors and the windows and everything and I said, "No, why bother with that?" He said, "Well, they're happy for us just to fit it into the rubbers." I said, "Well, you put [mar guard] in the rubber and a log or something hits that it just pushes it straight into the cab. It's useless." So there's no understanding of operator safety or anything. They just sit – someone sitting in an office dreaming up and then they want the machine guarded to the point that the operator can't see and vision is very important and if you don't – I don't know how I can

articulate this but if you have too much guarding you finish up – you impinge the ability of the operator to work safely anyway.

**Q:** Yeah, right.

**A:** I don't know if that makes sense or not.

**Q:** Yep. So just requirements that are, you know, are being made to be complied with to enable you to – be a contractor for them are onerous?

**A:** They're very onerous and I believe they've gone past a sensible point. I'm not saying there shouldn't be guarding and things like that but they've gone overboard and it just – and there is another issue I can see coming that's – okay, I learnt in the days when we were doing land clearing and stuff, I did a lot of land clearing for the – various forestry departments and things like that, because hard wood logging its diminishing and land clearing operations basically ceased. We're going to finish up some time in the future with no operators who have got experience to work machines in the bush as such.

**Q:** Yes, yeah, we heard a lot about that in phase one, lots, particularly over in East Gippsland way.

**A:** So that's going to become an issue when it needs some addressing. But also, people – as the conversation I had last night, you know, they have people who manage aircraft who understand aircraft and that, but I don't think they have people who are really qualified and understands machines to manage them in a fire situation. You need people there who understand what the risks are, what a particular machines capabilities are so they don't finish up having machines in areas where they shouldn't be or doing things that they shouldn't be doing.

**Q:** Yes. Yeah, no, they're really valuable points and I do recall definitely somebody in a similar position to yourself who I think I interviewed late last year talked about very similar matters.

**A:** So -

**Q:** Just not having adequate – you know, the appropriate machinery in the end. Thank you, Neil. Anything else that you had on your list there?

**A:** No. I think I've pretty well covered it.

**Q:** That's great.

**A:** I've got the stuff there. You've got a base anyway I suppose, if there's any queries or if you want more information or clarification on things or if the inspector feels that he wants further conversation I'm happy work on this or assist in whatever way.

**Q:** Yeah, thank you. Thank you very much. And so, yeah, just so you know, I'll – this goes off, it gets transcribed and then I'll check the transcript and I'll send you a copy so that



you've got a copy and you can check. Sometimes they get the names of things a little bit incorrect, so you might want to check that.

**A:** I hope it's not too waffly.

**Q:** No, no, it's fine. It's fine. It's absolutely just a conversation really with those key points, and as I said you raised a number of matters that we did here about in phase one, particularly that part about keys local knowledge and decision making and where those decisions are being made but also interactions with Government agencies and it can be quite bureaucratic and complicated and communities feel as though they're not getting anywhere.

**A:** So in this phase two, but just separately, the other day I raised about sending cattle away on agistment and that. I was at a Landcare meeting the other night and another landholder was there and the two of us were about the only ones who did it but they raised the issue too and said that they felt that it would be fantastic if there had been a coordinating authority that sort of put the word out and sought agistment and, you know, how many – the numbers on different locations and all that sort of thing and then also assisted in coordinating the transport. Like, in my case once the cattle were all boxed, you know, cows and calves were all boxed and [unclear] 00:28:59 numbers of mobs in one mob and you've got a bit lot, you can't separate them so they've all got to be transported together, those sorts of logistics. And it's something that would have been helpful if there'd been a coordinating authority to do that.

**Q:** Yeah. Definitely. And actually it's quite timely because you just reminded me, you know, we've been telling the teams about the interviews we've been holding but I'm actually chatting with a fellow who's looking after the agricultural part of the inquiry, so – this afternoon, so I'm going to make sure he reads your interview from the other day about the agistment because, yeah, that was something we hadn't heard about and it's a really good idea.

**A:** Okay. Well, thanks very much for -

**Q:** You're right.

**A:** - listening to me Anne-Louise. It's -

**Q:** You're right. Thanks, Neil, and, yeah, all the best for the rest of your journey.

**A:** Okay. We're slowly getting there.

**Q:** Yeah. All right. Take care. See you later.

**A:** Okay. Cheers.

**Q:** Bye bye.