

After the Victorian bushfires: not just surviving but building and growing

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He is a contributor to the current Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority (VBRRA) working groups on 'Lessons Learned from the Recovery Process' and 'Advice for Government'.

Colin, Managing Director, Big View Pty Ltd, has been consulting in information technology for more than twenty years, including managing information technology support for approximately 170 Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development sites in the Gippsland Region until his most recent retirement in April 2011.

Colin previously retired as a Senior Lecturer from the School of Applied Science, Monash University in 1997 and operates a 200 acre beef and sheep grazing property. His research interests include supervision of research on drug absorption in intravenous giving sets under high concentration – low volume use (MSc thesis, J. Burton), digital imaging for water and waste water monitoring (MSc thesis, M. McCrum), active carbon and coal science.

Prior to joining Monash University, Colin coordinated the Certificate of Applied Science and Tertiary Orientation Programs in the TAFE system and taught in the Technical School system before that.

Colin has been involved in voluntary community work for more than thirty years including election to community response committees for proposed coal mining in the Merriman's Creek Valley and the Basslink electrical interconnector between Victoria and Tasmania. He has conducted a large number of media interviews over the course of the community campaigns and has been an occasional ABC Gippsland radio science presenter.

Vanessa and Colin's daughter is a fourth year medical student currently on exchange at the Karolinska Institutet in Sweden.

Thank you very much for inviting us here today and it's great to see you all here. First of all, I'd like to express my acknowledgement of the traditional owners; the Noongar people here, as I understand it, and the Gunai Kurnai back where I'm from.

Welcome Minister. I'm pleased to see that you're here and with us again today—or with us today. And first of all, I'd like to take you through a little of how we're going to run this bit. It is a little bit of death-by-PowerPoint, but I promise I'll try and just make you comatosed, not fully dead.

First of all, some personal lessons from surviving the bushfire, and secondly, we really want to talk about the community building and stuff that we've been doing.

Guys, if you could just swing in the overhead please? Thank you. This is going to take you through a google earth transit from about partway where the fire started in our area, and will end up on the top of our place. So it's going to head from approximately the west across, as you can see, some fairly hilly terrain—let's go—thanks. So this is running at a few hundred metres above ground level and this is before the fires. You can imagine that afterwards, this was just completely blackened. The terrain on which we will end up is at about 360 metres, and you'll get a glimpse, in the distance, of the sea over in the background. And that's important, because the fires themselves actually continued to spot in that direction and threatened the township of Yarram, which is over by the coast.

Okay. Thanks guys. We'll just flick back to the main presentation. Thanks.

So now we're about on top of here, and you can see our place in the middle, surrounded by quite a lot of land around the outside here, and you can see we've kept as much clear space as possible.

Early on the day of Black Saturday—this was about 5 o'clock in the afternoon for us, and probably our first glimpse of what was about to happen. I'm going to point out a fire that was very low in intensity for us; no one in our immediate community did not survive, although there was quite significant damage. But, as you see, this smoke here—there's about 13 people dead.

Now it starts to get quite dark looking in that direction. Quite early in the day, frighteningly dark. Again, darkens up—clearly very orange—not sure what's going to happen here. That's your's truly in the middle—probably hard to see. I'm still in a pair of shorts and you'll notice what looks like snow in the photographs. We were connected, by the way—this is just to show you that we have a power supply, which runs a pump into the house pump, and although we're only a few kilometres from the Loy Yang Power Station, we might as well be in the third world, because our power browns out about three or four times a week—so even if it had failed, we were ready to keep going. That arrow in the middle there is pointing to what looks like snow, and it's white because we left the flash on on the camera. We were sort of a bit too busy to turn it off and get the really good photos. But what they're showing is ash that's coming in and attacking the property, and that long one was about this long, burning, and floating because of it's own buoyancy.

So the house was being attacked by these at about eye level and gradually got worse and worse, as you'll see from the other photos. The circle there shows me out on the edge of the dam—that's our fire dam with no water in it, and I was on the phone trying to get a message out to the ABC radio so that other people would know what I could see from our place and where the fires were, because the information was quite limited and restricted.

So at this point, we've got—in those spots there—you can see a spot fire down on our southeast, where the arrow is pointing, and there's two other spot fires up above the road not far from the place. This one down to the southeast looks like that, and you can see the white snow—that's ember attack from that fire as well. We had only about 30,000 litres of water, all up, that we could use for this fire, and that's about, roughly, 100 tanker loads. We needed to divide that so that half of it was available to keep the house and stop that from burning, so I had about 500 300 litre tanker loads of water and I couldn't go and attack this. So I had to watch it and hope that it didn't get us.

As the night goes on, this goes on to engage more and more trees. It gradually gets to the point where that—this is just the spot fire—the spot fire is taking out about 20 or 30 trees and miraculously did not take out any of the—or spread into that forest down there, where it would've gone on to a township up here in this direction.

Shortly after that, the whole horizon started to look like this, and that was getting a bit scary. This is coming up over the hill towards us and about this time, I think Vanessa said, "You know, I think we should go." Well, we couldn't go because the entire area to our north, and our escape route, was simply on fire. Nowhere you could go—had to stay. We thought about, you know, going to the south. Couldn't go to the south—it was orange over in the south, just like the rest. So nothing we could do. And again, the white snow here is all ember attack, which is coming in, trying to get at you from the house and behind and all the places you can't see. So this is about the situation where we were.

That direction we flew in from is over here, where it took out the second house on our property, missed the hayshed, which is just right next to it—full of hay—didn't catch fire. The guy who lived here decided to leave. It went up around his place, burned his veranda—nothing else. He came back to find his house was fine. The fellow who lives here fought it, so that along that boundary it didn't get any further. We fought it all in this area in and around here. So we ended up with the fire all the way around here, running up here and we were able—that sort of petered out about there. This—all around here we had to stop actively. In this direction, there was another fire up on the Grand Ridge Road, not far from here. It was getting going in an area where I—I'll point out later—it looked like it was going to take out another township as well. So it got pretty busy.

So we had a chat about the escape routes—decided we couldn't do it. Here it is now, marching down the driveway towards the house, and there it is in the direction and you can see the full—whole of the northern horizon is now just full of flames.

There's the spot fire to our southeast getting going pretty well, and it got pretty busy. We didn't have much time to take photos though. And that's where all the other interesting stuff happened. About half way? Right. I'll be really quick now.

Okay. So in the middle of the night, everything that could go wrong went wrong. I pulled the fire hose off the tractor, out in the middle of the paddock. Couldn't fix it in the paddock. Got back up to the refilling station—fixed that. The little mini boom on the front of the tractor that I was using to put the fire out, which is significant, because when I had up enough courage, I would drive over the fire front twice and that would knock down about 80 per cent of the flames, and then I'd get the rest out. If I didn't do that, I couldn't have got everything done in all of the directions that I had to prioritise in order to save ourselves, because this fire was just creeping around behind you all the time—nothing you could do about it, unless you hit it with a priority. So I had to fix it. So anything and everything that could break, broke.

Early in the morning, neighbour said, "We're done. We'll come and help you." So he came over—he was here five minutes and he said, "Look, I've got to go. It's starting back at our place." His tractor hydraulics failed so he dragged the 300-litre tank of water back to go and fix it, and left his mate with us. And it was like this all night. We were just fighting, and fighting, and fighting.

About 4 o'clock in the morning, another neighbour from down in the town rolled up in a big front-end loader—tractor and front-end loader. He'd driven up through the burning road, all the way up, so he had trees over the top burning—they'd fall and he pushed them out of the way. Got up there and said, "Couldn't sleep. Thought I'd come and see you."

So just before I finish this section, at about 4 o'clock in the morning, these guys went to sleep in the machinery out the front; one of them in the bucket, one of them sprawled over the back of a ute. So we pulled them in and Vanessa kept awake whilst we got an hour's sleep, and then kept going again. There's the little tractor that we fought with, and you can see in the background the—where the flames got to.

Next day—these are the—there's the road that the fellow came up. I'll go through these very quickly. There's breakfast—a bronze-winged pigeon, which was nicely roasted, and at one end of the place, you can see burning hay bales. Some of them were still burning. By the time that one got to the edge of the slide, it was fully alight and that was quite difficult to deal with—I had to put it in the dam to get rid of it. There's the little house—oh sorry, that's the shed. The little house that went—some of the neighbours thought they would go and try and give us a hand to put it out, but there must have been some ammunition stored in it, and as they went over, the ammunition went off, so they ducked and went home again.

There's quiet a few of those and I'll just get to the end of these. And then we thought it was over and then the spot fires—the re-ignitions, smoke in the background is from where a bulldozer went over and a guy nearly died—suspended upside down with the track still turning. The dozer in the front is the replacement, and they ran out of people to help control these dozers, so I became a dozer controller for a while, at the same time talking to my guys in the IT area.

And then the water bombers came in—got really busy. At one stage we said, "Listen, you fellows want a cup of tea or, you know, whatever?" and they said, "No, we're too busy," and then shortly afterwards, they said, "Is the offer still on?" I said, "Yep." They said, "Right. We'll be down." So these blokes—Minister, I'm not showing this actually landing on the edge of the dam, because I'm not sure that that is okay in terms of CASA Regulations, but it might have got very close. And then—so they came and landed and then the guys who were down at the bulldozer rollover came down and said, "Look, you know, we'll come and join you," and then, you know, some of the other fire teams came, and then all the locals saw that everybody was gathering at our place, so they came. So we had virtually no body in the lounge room, and then we had 20 or 30 and then a message came through that the next water bomb was coming and they all went. So, you know, it was just like that.

Then the mini-tornado, yeah, and then nine months later the—you know, the tree that was still burning. All that sort of stuff.

So later on, we bought a fire truck and you can see that all the visitors love to have their photo taken in our own fire truck. Next time you're up, you're welcome.

So the rebuilding process, we think, however, is the most important thing. There were a series of relief centres set up and then we started to prioritise the recovery and building process. But we weren't actually formalised as a Gormandale and District Community Recovery Committee until February, so we haven't been going as long as you might think. And the Chair and Secretary were elected at that point, as office bearers, and we said, "We only want to be here long enough to help rebuild new leaders for the community. We see ourselves as temporary." And we aim to promote leadership development, broader decision-making, and things that we thought would make a long-term difference.

About \$600,000 was roughly what we pumped into the community in terms of grants—of basically community infrastructure; about 12,000 hectares in the Shire that were affected, and the local residents pick up about \$1.4 mil in terms of personal assistance of various sorts. Now, I've got to tell you, when we run our community meetings, the speakers are only allowed three minutes—I just don't particularly want James to hear that—I chop them off at three minutes, and because they're all operating in working groups, our meetings never go longer than an hour, or an hour and 10 minutes, and that's proved to be very effective, and a crucial thing that we all do is make sure that we have accurate minutes and formal agendas.

So we put money into public halls and I'm very conscious of the fact that we still had a public hall—our neighbours just over the hill didn't. But we put money into that. There's a lot of community sentiment about public halls; they've been to dances in them and—and they won't let go and I argue that, you know, we ought to abandon this and build a new community hub, but afraid it didn't get there.

Also these sorts of infrastructure projects just tend to run over budget and the local Shires get involved and they want to take the money out of the budgets of the other things, like leadership development and community strengthening, and prop up the building infrastructure stuff. So I think it's a problem.

There's our \$60,000 single stall galvanised dunny, and for a while there, we thought that's what we were dealing with, but basically, this one is connecting the local football club rooms and we're building, in part of a \$90,000 budget, we're strengthening that building so that there's about eight additional toilets, including disabled toilets and shower facilities, so that if it really hits the fan at any point, we can now service a much larger number of people.

We put quite a deal of money into community strengthening projects. Some of these are based around the arts, and generally they involve much more new construction and new activity, rather than repairing old stuff that's broken and dishevelled. One of these is a community memorial garden. The community decided it didn't want an obelisk somewhere that, you know, just pointed to the fact there'd been a fire. They wanted something that was useable. And in the background, from one of the tagged grants, there's a new children's playground. Both of these are starting to get used and currently there's a push on to get a barbeque in here, which we think might be useful, but there's resistance from some sections of the community and, if we get time later, I'd love to take a vote on that.

So here's more of the community artwork and you can see lots of involvement—all sorts of things happening. We've run community dinners; 200 participants, 220, 180—next one's about to come, so you'd be welcome, Minister—we've got a spot for you, if you like. We're going to launch the garden. At one of these, the local luminaries from our council were due to come—there were two of them invited. One said to the other, "Oh, they'll get 20 people and a dog—miserable night like this." When he came, he saw 50 people on the oval and they were all the kids out playing. He thought, "These are strange people." When he came inside, he saw that 200 people had turned up and they'd been very well supported.

Lots of other things; cheese making, chocolate making, soap making, even some writing projects for the elderly but, more importantly, our youth development and leadership project, we think, is very important. We've done a couple of things here; we've sent some of our young people on the tall ships. We also took the unusual step of taking our young people and sending them off to a Victorian bushfire reconstruction and recovery conference. Most people sent their senior committee off to these things and we said, "Well, we're going to do the opposite. We'll send our young people and our developing leaders." Nearly there. So we sent a couple of them off to this sort of activity; sailing and doing things that would develop and help them. Hang on. I need to go down. So here's a young bloke doing some of that, and a young girl—interesting background—very tough family circumstances here.

This one is another of our leadership projects called Jammers for Jamming. This engages young people, who would otherwise be at home and sitting, you know, watching the tele or whatever, and gets them out and involved in music, and that's become an incredibly strong project. It's not being funded directly out of the VBRA Bushfire Funds, but it's picked up independent funding from the Salvation Army, and we've got a clip here—just a very short clip of some of their music, and I'll just play a little bit of that, just so that you get a chance.

So a series of projects, each of them a local project with somebody driving it locally. Person D—I haven't, at the moment, got approval to publish all of this, so that we will do that down the track. D stands for Dallas. He's got a great project; he's trying to get a community hub going and he's so fed up with the bureaucracy that he can't wade his way through, he's actually bought the land and he's moving the building on himself and then he'll make it available. Nearly done.

A young girl, 12 years old, and just have a look at some of the aims that she's got; you know, bring people together, meet new people you haven't met, for people to discover skills they don't know they had yet—great stuff. And again, community garden, first aid training, person K is that young lady you saw on the ship; she wants to get a community bush walk going with team building and community belonging. And the young fellow you saw is actually the bloke who wants to get a sports thing up and running.

We've incorporated so that we can have the community recovery committee morph into something else that's capable of receiving and managing funds, and to structure that new body. And, I guess, if we have a recommendation, let's give the money to the recovery committees and the communities and let them manage it directly and direct how it goes. We think that's important and it's part of the journey for those communities as well.

And if you remember the movie, "Men in Black," Agent K says to Agent J, "I'm not training a partner. I'm training a replacement." And that's what we're doing.