



- Speaker 1: Welcome to CRR Radio from the Vision 20/20 Project.
- Ed Comeau: Welcome to CRR Radio. My name's Ed Comeau. Today, we're going halfway around the globe to learn about what is happening with CRR. Neil, could you take a minute and introduce yourself to our listeners?
- Neil Bibby: Hi, Ed. Neil Bibby's my name. I'm an ex-Fire Chief from Melbourne, Australia, and I was a Deputy Chief of the Melbourne Fire Brigade, and I was Chief Executive Officer of the Country Fire Authority in Victoria. It's a fire service which has 1,300 fire stations and 3,000 appliances, so that just gives you an understanding of the size of the organization that I ran. I retired from that back in 2010, and I've been doing a lot of work in disaster recovery and risk resilience in the Asian area. I edit a magazine called Asia Pacific Fire Risks.
- Ed Comeau: Two of the things we're going to talk about on today's podcast, the first one is the convergence of CRR and climate change, and also what they're doing for CRR when it comes to Asia and that area right there. But let's start with the first one on the convergence of CRR and climate change. What can you tell me, what you're doing down there, or what's happening down there?
- Neil Bibby: It's become very political. Our equivalent of the Republican Party don't believe in climate change, and the equivalence of the Democratic Party believe very strongly in that area. We're coming up to an election on May the 18th. 24 ex-Fire Chiefs got together and raised their concern about climate change and the impact on the community and the community's resilience to handle major events. These major events are escalating in size, and we don't think the politicians and the policy makers really understand what that means to our emergency services' workers.
- Ed Comeau: Can you give me some examples of where you're seeing these changes occurring?
- Neil Bibby: Yeah, if you have a look around ... I'll take Australia as the main part of this discussion. If you look around Australia, our fire seasons are becoming longer. They used to start in beginning of November, they're now starting in the beginning of September, and they're running through until the end of April, end of May as well.
- I was just, look, in Melbourne yesterday, and what normally happens is the aircraft that we use in summer head off to the Northern Hemisphere during our winter. And I was surprised to see two Skycranes still based at an airport, just in case fires were going to break out in the later parts of this year. As little as two weeks ago in Tasmania, which is our coldest state, fires are up to just out of Hobart. That's unheard of for us.
- Ed Comeau: And what kind of role is climate change playing when it comes to these wild fires? What sort of impact is it having on them breaking out like this?

Neil Bibby: Because it's becoming drier, we're in drought conditions as well, we're finding that the fires are more intense, and once they get going, they're very, very hard to contain, because the normal firebreaks that we have, large rivers and things like that, are dried out. The fires are jumping the normal containment lines that we look at.

On the other side of it is, in Australia, this year, the southern parts of Australia had extreme fires, and the northern parts of Australia had cyclones, quite often, very close to major cities. So on one part of the country, we're boiling hot, the other part of the country, we're very, very wet. If you take the heat in the oven approach, on an average, we're not looking too bad.

Ed Comeau: So you say this group of Fire Chiefs is coming together to try to raise awareness about the impact of climate change and the role the CRR can play in that. What sort of things are they doing?

Neil Bibby: Well, the 24 of us, we're now in a position as being retired, that we're not in a political environment. We actually say what we want. We have got together and looked at, with the Climate Council of Australia, documenting this in a research base, and not just looking at it as a one-off event, looking out the window and saying, "Ah, look, it's a hot day today."

The Climate Council, which is an independent body, has brought together a whole lot of information, which we can share across Australia to show our concerns, and to show that the traditional way of fighting fires in Australia is almost passed us now, because one of the things that we depend on very, very strongly are volunteers. The organization I ran had 60,000 volunteer firefighters. Unfortunately, with climate change, the call upon those people is increasing, and they can't leave their place of work as often as they used to. A lot of them are using up their holiday time, so we're looking at volunteer burnout, which means the arms and legs for fighting these fires is diminishing.

Ed Comeau: Have you come up with solutions yet? I mean, is it just such a new problem? Or have you guys been able to start brainstorming what can you do to react to this change that's occurring?

Neil Bibby: Oh, let's stick on the example of aircraft, because there are quite a few solutions out there, however, they're all very expensive solutions. Because Australia has been blessed with volunteers for a long time, which I don't like the word cheap ... which is a cost-effective fire service. The kind of conditions that we have at the moment are seeing what we called dried lightning strikes, so we'll have a thunderstorm go through with no rain, only lightning hitting the ground. Quite often, we'll have up to 1,000 hits in an hour. In that 1,000 hits, we could have 400 fires starting.

The old days of waiting for the fire to come to a containment line have gone, and we need to now start attacking those fires at their initial stages with aircraft. Aircraft are

very expensive, and the dollars required for that have to be set aside a lot earlier than after the event.

Ed Comeau: Do you have the same sort of problem down there that we have up here with the Wildland–urban interface, where the urban communities are encroaching more and more onto the Wildland areas, creating that interface that now has to be addressed sooner rather than later?

Neil Bibby: Oh, I think it's too late now. If you wander around a lot of the areas in Australia, you'll see that urban interface has become part of society's desired places to live. What we're facing is a community that doesn't understand the problem, and we have to start a massive education program. Well, I shouldn't say, "Have to start." We've been running a massive education program for a long time.

There's a research institution here called the Bushfire and Natural Hazards Climate Change Research Establishment. They're looking at ways of making sure the community understands what the problem is. However, the latest research shows that the people that are listening are the people that are going to do the right thing in a bushfire situation and prepare their property. The people that aren't listening, which is the majority unfortunately, are putting at risk those people that are doing the right thing, because the houses in those environments are often more flammable than the bush around them. After a major wildfire, and you'll see this in California, you'll see all the houses have burnt down, but around them, you'll see green leaves on the trees, because shingles on roofs, old places aren't being made fire secure, and the fires are intensifying.

Ed Comeau: Now, we've been talking about fire, there's certainly a lot of other risks that first responders have to handle, and you mentioned cyclones. So what are some of the other impacts of climate change that first responders are having to deal with down there?

Neil Bibby: Well, let's start with, a quick one is the change in the fire situation, where once, we never had major fires, particularly in Tasmania. We're having old growth forests going through and being burnt out, and these are forests that are hundreds of years, if not thousands of years old. We're also seeing the movement of some of the disasters that we have to confront, mainly cyclones, moving from Northern Australia down the south, so we're getting cyclones in major cities that we've never had had before. We're also getting an intensity in cyclones, as the water increases around Australia, cyclones suck up more and more water, making them more and more intense. We've had category four and the top category five cyclones this year, and we've had more of them than we've had before.

If you look across the Pacific Basin, particularly around Indonesia and Malaysia, Singapore, they're getting hit by cyclones literally weekly. It's something that we haven't heard of before.

Ed Comeau: So as the group of Fire Chiefs that you're talking about, what kind of traction are you getting in your efforts?

Neil Bibby: We started our campaign about three weeks ago, and we were getting quite good traction, particularly with the politicians, however in Australia, we don't have fixed-term elections. The governing party can decide to call an election any time. Two days after we started our campaign, they called an election, which pulled the plug on most of the stuff we were doing as the political arms of the party started getting into election mode.

However, the good thing is that we've raised the issue, and both prospective Prime Ministers of Australia have said they will meet with us after the election, so at the moment, we have a promise of action after the election when the winner is announced. The way it's going, there'll be a democratic win in Australia, and we'll have the next three years as a democratic, or labor as we call it, government in place. They have a very strong climate change manifesto, so they'll be setting up a Climate Change Council with us onboard to help advise government.

Ed Comeau: And the group of Fire Chiefs you're talking about, is it kind of an ad hoc group, or have you formalized? Do you have a name? Do you have a website? All that sort of stuff.

Neil Bibby: No, we haven't at the moment. What we're doing is there's a bit of history, there was a group formed by government called the Climate Change Council. They were formed to advise government of issues in relation to climate change. The last election, when the Republicans came in ... I'll use your term, Republicans, instead of terms, because I know most of your listeners are from in America. They actually stopped funding the Climate Council, hoping that it would go away. What happened is that once that funding ceased, Climate Council was then funded through social media to a level far greater than government ever funded it. So it is now working and stronger than ever, thanks to the government pulling away its funding for it.

They're the ones that are coordinating the 24 of us, and the number is growing. And when you think 24 Fire Chiefs in America, with all your 30 odd thousand fire stations, you think, "Only 24?" You have to remember that we have only eight states. Each state has two or three fire services, so these are 90% of the fire services in Australia are represented by this group. On top of that, we have the state emergency services to look after storm, tempest, flood and cyclones, supported by the fire services. Within that group, we have 10 state emergency services ex-Chief Officers. So we're covering both weather events, we're covering the cyclone, storm, water surge events, as well as the fire events.

Ed Comeau: Well, it sounds like, as you say, it may seem like a small group, but certainly a powerful one, given the impact that you're having down there.

Neil Bibby: Well, the people that we are now working with still have access into government within each state, and as I said, there are only eight states in Australia, states and territories. At

state level, we have access now at federal level, because of the coming together and the small media program that we ran, and that media program has not stopped as the elections kicked in. We're still being asked occasionally to discuss the policies of the government, online or on mainstream TV.

Pretty powerful being on mainstream breakfast programs talking about disasters to people around Australia that are actually living them. So we're getting a lot of media coverage within the social media area as well, and a lot of support.

Ed Comeau: Well, good for you guys. It sounds like you've really gotten some, like I said, some very good traction down there.

We're going to take a short break from our podcast to let you know about a resource from the Vision 20/20 Project that you might find helpful.

Whether you're starting out on your CRR journey, or looking to up your game, the Vision 20/20 Project has two guides that you might find helpful. The Community Risk Assessment Guide is designed to help organizations conduct an assessment of the risks in their community that can be used in developing a CRR plan, and this is the first two steps of a six-step process.

Then the Community Risk Reduction Planning Guide takes you through the remaining four steps of the planning process. Both of these free guides are available through the CRR portal on the Vision 20/20 website, by going to [www.strategicfire.org/CRR](http://www.strategicfire.org/CRR). Again, that's [www.strategicfire.org/CRR](http://www.strategicfire.org/CRR). And now, let's get back to our podcast.

And I think I'd like to switch gears here a little bit, and talk about the other topic you and I have been talking about offline here, CRR at Asia. You had mentioned that there's just a lot going on down there that we may not be aware of. Fill me in, what's going on?

Neil Bibby: Well, I think if you go to the website, the Bushfire and Natural Hazards Cooperative Research Center, you'd get an understanding of all the research that's going on down there. What happens is that every seven years, the government puts aside about \$20 million and agencies bring in their own money, and usually ranges between 50 and \$100 million is set aside for research into a specific area. It could be hearing, it could be climate change, it could be fire.

Our Fire and Natural Hazardous Cooperative Research Center is three years into a seven year program, and a lot of that research is on community resilience. So we're looking at preparing communities for three things: when the event's coming, so they are actually prepared in advance, but not just when it's coming, but when the periods of possibility of it coming.

I'll use the cyclone analogy now. We know there are going to be cyclones around the top end of Australia. The cities, like you may have heard of Townsville, Cairns on the Great

Barrier Reef. They have to be prepared for a cyclone, and they get a good warning when they're coming through.

Construction in cyclone areas is different to the construction anywhere else in Australia. But the important thing is that the community is prepared for it, because if they're not prepared for it after the event, resilience is the thing that holds the community together. So we're concentrating on the recovery after an event, knowing full well the event's going to occur. A lot of our work is being done on making sure communities can recover quickly and with as less trauma as possible to the people in the community.

The other areas that we're looking at, and it's not just Australia, New Zealand, Hong Kong, a lot of these places have different disasters. New Zealand in particular, and this is not a climate change issue, they have a large earthquake problem over there. Having the communities resilient enough to recover is a massive program in New Zealand, and they're doing a lot in the area of making sure that major infrastructure is safe, so that at least, if they have an earthquake, there is water and communications after the event.

Ed Comeau: And is this a newer trend, or is this something that's been going on for a while, this type of effort that you're talking about?

Neil Bibby: This has been going on for a large number of years. I've been in this business for a long time, so back in the early '90s, we were starting to look at community resilience when there was a realization that the fire services can't do everything. Fire services back then were 10 foot tall and bulletproof, Superman came in and saved the day. While the fire services are saying, "Look, it's up to the community now." And we started our processes back then.

The first research center started in 2002, and it has been going for the last 16 years. So there's a lot of work coming out of it, and a lot of work looking at how we can improve the ability for communities to live through a major event, and then recover.

One of the other things that we're looking at, and it's something that hasn't been looked at before is catastrophic disasters. These are the disasters that we didn't envisage, the unknown unknown. And by just using some scenario planning, we can see that there are a lot of communities that are there that if we had a major event, and let's take Sydney for example, where I live. If we had a major event around Sydney, which was a major bushfire, and then what we call a major storm event, we're also in line for tsunamis. It's just one of those things that if they all come together, the city doesn't have the ability to recover. The event would be too big for the city to recover, and communities then have to be able to look after themselves for that first 24 hours as individuals.

Ed Comeau: Well, we've been talking with Neil Bibby from, as you may guess, down in Australia about a couple of topics here. They're doing a lot down there when it comes to community risk reduction and community resilience, because of that unique hazards they face down there. Not only from wildland, but cyclones, tsunamis, and just a whole

host of other areas too that are having a big impact down there. And also this convergence of CRR and climate change, which I think we've all really kind of known about, but it sounds like you guys are really taking the bull by the horns and addressing it down there, Neil.

Neil Bibby: Well, let me just go through some of the issues with climate change for you, then, and I'll stick to wildfire. I spoke about helicopters, and I spoke about the need for aircraft, which is really our newest attack on fires, particularly the large aircraft, the fixed wings that come out of the States, but are by us, I suppose, five, six years, increasing in numbers. Those aircraft normally move from one hemisphere to the other. The last two years, around October and around April, there's been fights across the world as to who gets the aircraft. You guys are coming into your fire season, and we're going out of our fire season, but there's a crossover.

There's also, we do a lot of fuel reduction burning, which I know you do the same thing. Our opportunities to reduce the fuel through fuel reduction burning has decreased as well, because during winter, it's too wet. We can't do any fire fighting there. Once the wet has finished, it all of sudden becomes very hot, so it becomes very dangerous to start lighting fires to fuel reduction burn. So one of our major prevention strategies, which is fuel reduction burning, we're finding it very, very hard to meet our targets, and I might even say we're looking at only meeting 10% of our targets at the moment, because of the transition from winter through until summer, and not having an autumn or a spring to do that work.

In preparing our communities, we're also looking at the impact of fire and flood on the same community. The community are getting sick and tired of us crying wolf, but the second that an event occurs, they want us to be there at their front door to protect them. And we have to tell them that if in a major event, there is not going to be a fire truck at your front door. And one of the hardest things for a politician to say is, "We can't protect you during the event." And we've had to make sure that our politicians are telling our community that it's up to them to be resilient, up to them to be prepared. We're finding we're getting a lot of traction in that area as well, so a lot of politicians are standing up and saying, "Hey guys, it's not going to happen. You're going to have to look after yourselves."

And this is in a country that is very, very well-off. If you go to some of our Asian neighbors, they've been protecting themselves for years, however, the consequences of an event like a cyclone is horrendous.

Ed Comeau: Well, we've been talking with Neil Bibby, former Fire Chief from down in Sydney, Australia, about the convergence of CRR and climate change, and what they're doing for CRR in the Asian theater down there. Neil, really appreciate you taking the time in talking with us today.



Neil Bibby: My pleasure. If anybody wants to get in contact and talk a bit more about the impact, I'm sure, Ed, you can somehow put our contact details out there.

Ed Comeau: Absolutely. I'll include it in the show notes, along with some information and links to some of the things you've been talking about here, Neil. So really appreciate you taking the time.

Neil Bibby: Cheers, Ed.

Ed Comeau: Well, we're in our third season of CRR Radio, and you can find all of our past episodes at [www.strategicfire.org/CRRRadio](http://www.strategicfire.org/CRRRadio), and on Apple Podcasts, where you can also subscribe and get each episode as it comes out. CRR Radio is edited by Rich Palmer and is a production of the Vision 20/20 Project. My name's Ed Comeau, thanks for listening, and we'll see you next time.

Speaker 1: Thanks for joining us on CRR Radio from the Vision 20/20 Project. For more information on Community Risk Reduction, please visit us at [www.strategicfire.org](http://www.strategicfire.org).