



# From all sides podcast transcript

## Episode 19, Lee Miezis, CEO at Environment Protection Authority Victoria (EPA) and previous CEO at Bushfire Recovery Victoria (BRV)

### Speaker Key:

IV Tom Craven, Director Cube Group

IE Lee Miezis, CEO at Environmental Protection Authority Victoria (EPA) and previous CEO at Bushfire Recovery Victoria (BRV)

### Episode Transcript

IV Thank you for joining us for this episode of, From all sides, a podcast by Cube Group, where we explore the strategic, organisational and human sides of the major issues facing public value organisations in the current world, and particularly the current COVID 19 crisis. Our series focuses on the different ways the COVID 19 pandemic impacts public service leaders and their organisations. And we discuss the ways we can be better prepared to lead Australia through response and recovery.

Cube group acknowledges the traditional owners on the land in which we work. Cubes offices is on the land of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nations. We acknowledge them as the traditional owners of the land on which we work and pay our respects to elders past, present and emerging. And Aboriginal elders and community members who may be listening today. For more information on each episode of the podcast, please visit our website [cubegroup.com.au](http://cubegroup.com.au). We hope you enjoy the conversation.

Hello, today is December 3rd, 2021. Australia is continuing to move towards a new normal, as the worst of the COVID 19 pandemic is hopefully behind us, in many parts thanks to our higher vaccination rates. In today's discussion, we're continuing on our series reflecting on the experience of public purpose leaders during the pandemic.

One of the stark differences the pandemic created has been the focus of public purpose sectors. Some sectors, especially our public health system, were brought sharply into the spotlight. Others found themselves quickly out of it. This experience could not have been more true than for our guest today. Lee Miezis is the CEO of the Environment Protection Authority.

The EPA is Victoria's environmental regulator, focused on protecting Victoria's natural assets from harm, from pollution and waste. With a new environment protection Act the EPA is going through a period of significant change which will be part of our discussion today. But Lee was also the founding CEO of Bushfire Recovery Victoria.

BRV is a dedicated agency to support Victorian communities, to recover from the devastating impact of bushfires. It was established in response to the catastrophic bushfires that occurred in Victoria in the summer of 2019/20, just a few months before the pandemic began. I'm delighted to have this chance to learn about Lee's experience, through these two exceptional periods. Lee, thanks so much for being part of this conversation.



IE Thanks for having me.

IV Can we start Lee, by talking about where you're speaking to us from. What's been your remote working set up and how have you found it?

IE I'm coming to you from our spare room, at our house in Ballarat. Pretty quiet here today actually, with kids back at school and wife working. But I guess it's fair to say, over the past two years, like many people, it hasn't always been this quiet in the house. With the combination of home schooling, dogs, deliveries. The number of meetings that get interrupted by the postman or package delivery at the door.

It's been an interesting couple of years. But I think, I've got to say, I think I've adapted pretty well. And I think the organisation's I've worked with, have adapted pretty well. Even when we get the power outages and you find yourself in the car, trying to charge your phone, to do a national heads of EPA's meeting. They're the little curveballs we get thrown and we get through.

IV Keeps things, keeps it interesting. I certainly love the humanising of having meetings interrupted for real life like, postman and dogs and cats. There's something beautiful about that. When we began all this, when the pandemic began, you had a very different role to the one you had today. You were the founding CEO of Bush Fire Recovery Victoria.

And you were responding to what we all thought was going to be the defining event of 2020, those enormous and catastrophic bushfires that happened over the 2019/20 summer. Let's start with your role there. What was BRV up to at the commencement of the pandemic and what did the shutdown mean for you and for bushfire recovery?

IE Bushfire Recovery Victoria was established by the Premier on the 6<sup>th</sup> of January, 2020. And as you said, really in response to, what were the biggest bushfires that Victoria had seen since 1939. Hundreds of communities impacted. Hundreds of houses lost. 1,500 or 1.5 million hectares of public land. And what was recognised by government was that, there needed to be a real dedicated focus to recovery in the long tale of recovery.

Bushfire Recovery Victoria was established to really coordinate across all the government agencies. And to empower communities to lead their own recovery, from those devastating events. Early on for me, from the 6<sup>th</sup> of January was, I described as building the plane and flying it at the same time. We had these real needs from community and at the same time, trying to stand up and establish the basic systems and processes that you need for an organisation, to staff up an organisation.

And to really start getting that assistance, whether it was financial assistance or case support out into where it was really needed. It was a crazy busy time but one of the most rewarding times of my career. When you could really start to see those services flow. I'm really proud about how quickly we've got those services flowing into community.

IV BRV had a very big on the ground presence, too. Part of what you're talking about is setting up, is also teams on site, different locations. Tell us a bit about what was happening on the ground through BRV?

IE I had a strong view, and perhaps, really based on a career in leading regional program delivery that, BRV could not operate effectively, if we were just based in Melbourne. We needed local people, in local communities understanding local needs, local values, local priorities. One of the first things, I



think it was in the first week of our existence, we were kind of leveraged a bit off what was then, The Department of Health and Human Services, to co-op some staff through secondments and stand-up regional teams.

We stood up regional teams in Gippsland and in the Northeast of the state, so the two main impacted areas. And off those regional kind of basis, so we had our regional offices in Bairnsdale and up around, we kind of moved a bit but around Corryong, in the North East.

We then built out recovery hubs. We found ourselves with recovery hubs, service centres, based in small communities, whether it was Sarsfield, Mallacoota, Bright. I think we had at one point, up around eight or nine recovery hubs, based in communities wherever we could, staffed by local people, because that was important, they had local relationships. It was enabled us as an organisation, by using locals, to establish trust and a connection really quickly. And as you know, that's so important in the type of work that we were doing,

IV You said you set up in January. You had all of six weeks before the pandemic started to make the news. And maybe a couple more before into some significant physical distancing restrictions. Give us a sense of that experience, being in such an embryonic stage of work, in such a formative period. And then, moving to remote working.

IE It's funny, I was reflecting a bit on this, not long ago, walking out of a government meeting. I think it was one of the cabinet committee meetings, that was talking about the bushfire and some of the services we were delivering and what we were intending to do. I remember that meeting finished and walking out. And I was walking out with a colleague from Health and Human Services, who turned to me and said, I'm hearing that this COVID, it wasn't even called COVID-19, at the moment. I can't even remember what, I reckon we're potentially on the verge of a pandemic. And sort of going, not paying too much attention.

Little did I know that, very shortly after that, the world changed for everyone but BRV as well. It had some really immediate impacts on Bushfire Recovery Victoria. My model for staffing up was bringing in a surge capacity through secondments from other parts of government. And departmental secretaries were amazing. They were giving me their very best people because it was the big priority. It was a big disaster we were dealing with.

I'd have a plan where, I would bring some secondments in and have a very planned approach to recruiting the right people because I was establishing an ongoing organisation, BRV is permanent. All of a sudden, pandemic hits. The secretaries very apologetically were ringing and saying, we need our people back. We've got all of these other priorities. You're going to have to find an alternative. I guess that caused me to have to fast track recruitment, which we did. And I've got a great team in place, so that was one example.

Obviously, as a very, very new organisation, we were still getting to know one another, in many cases. Those kind of, the culture of the organisation was really still forming. Again, reflecting on it, I'm not convinced whether it helped or hindered, not having really deep roots, as an organisation. In one way, we didn't have set ways of doing things. We weren't sort of wedded to particular technologies, particular ways of working, so that did enable us to adapt quite quickly.

The other side, we didn't have the relationship sides, that I think we've all relied on so much, over the last two years, weren't as well established, too. I land on, there was pros and cons to being fairly young and immature organisation.



IV That's pretty fascinating. That's a really interesting observation, to actually in some ways, have the advantage of being a brand-new team. And then, moving into that environment where all you've known is relating this way, actually, in some ways, makes that transition much, much easier, as opposed to trying to change established practices, that are already happening. What about on the ground? What about in community? How much were your activities restricted there? And when how much did that hinder their recovery effort?

IE It just a whole wave of new complexities for communities. We were in the process of really rolling out our clean-up programs. We had a state managed clean-up program. We were working with Growcom, as the master contractor. COVID slowed that down, slowed down the process of establishment. And then required us to put in a whole new layers of controls, to make sure that we were not spreading COVID 19. So, we had to put lots of controls in place. And then deal with his overlay of almost fear from within communities.

As much as we wanted and tried to, I think we did pretty well. I think we're up 70% plus sort of local crews. We were bringing in specialist contractors from Melbourne. And if you're a community in Mallacoota, far, far East, to the state. And you're hearing about COVID-19 in Melbourne, it's not kind of, we don't want that in our community. There was this kind of, I guess, almost a tension within communities about wanting the fire and the buildings that were destroyed, to be cleaned up really quickly. But this fear of bringing contractors in from outside, so that that was one example.

Another one was fundamental, I believe, to community recovery, is communities being able to come together, to grieve about what they've been through together. To talk about what they want to do, as part of their recovery. To identify their priorities is part of, not just recovery, but I think about resilience building in communities. And there was some great examples, Sarsfield, which just out of Bairnsdale and in Gippsland, they were having a Friday night barbecue. Over 200 people were coming together every Friday night through January into February. And then all of a sudden, it stopped. We weren't allowed to have large gatherings.

And so, those traditional kind of community barbecues or town hall meetings where people come together, talk about what they've been through, talk about their recovery, they just weren't able to happen. And we saw that really impact for the long term. And because part of that coming together was reflecting on what worked well. And what didn't work well, in terms of the fire response.

And coming in, I remember very clearly into the 2021 summer, the community felt as though they hadn't been able to debrief, with the first response agency. So, CFA, Emergency Management Victoria. And they were really concerned that, some of the issues that they that they confronted in the big fires of 2020 hadn't been addressed. And is there a risk? It was not just an inability to grieve together but a fear that some of these issues, they hadn't been fixed. Are we going to go through this again? So, it added layers of complexity and quite deep complexity in communities.

IV And your point about disrupting the recovery and resilience processes, is quite profound as well. We've had conversations on this conversation before with Luke Wilson, who's the Cross Border Commissioner. And he just talked about the significant cultural importance in rural communities of coming together. It's a special thing, particularly for rural communities that we come together. We travel to get together. And that's part of how we build our relationships. It's part of how we deal with difficult issues.

And as adept as many people who live in rural Victoria are with online. They're often well ahead of their metropolitan cousins in terms of Zoom and online working before this hit. There still is



something almost particularly important, for rural communities about physically coming together. And just the worst possible time for that to be disrupted.

- IE Absolutely, you could see it. It was quite palatable, this want to bring people together. I remember, we were having conversations, at some stages about how we might be able to use football ovals and spread people out and loudspeakers and anything we can do. And we were trying to be as creative, as we could in enabling that that to occur. But we did find though, that people did adapt pretty quickly to online.

Community recovery committees formed, they met. We would meet with them. We put COVID safe practices, into our hubs. So, whilst we had to pivot a lot of those services to online, we were able to do that pretty quickly. And we found ourselves providing a whole range of different services, as a result. You think about the digital divide, if you like, in regional Victoria or anywhere. In regional Victoria, we were working with people who still went into the bank, to do their banking. I can't remember the last time I've stepped into a bank. I do everything online. But then some people did that. So, to ask them to get onto Zoom, was a big ask.

And these are traumatised people, of course. They've been through fire, it impacts on your decision making. And then we're asking them to do something new, in the midst of this big kind of COVID pandemic, which is also kind of traumatising for people. We found ourselves almost a digital concierge, where people could come in safely, into our hubs. We'd support them to get online, through our computer systems. They'd be able to talk to their financial counsellor or their case support worker. And then while we were there, we would connect them into the family in Sydney, for example, so they could talk to the grandkids at the same time. So, we found ourselves having to almost modify the services we were providing, at the same time, just to recognise the pressures that people were under.

- IV Also wanted to ask you about the experience of coming out of the spotlight. Yu mentioned at the start, you had wonderful generosity from secretaries, you had all the mandate in the world, you had a heck of a job to do. You were in the spotlight, and so were those communities, that were impacted. Just a couple of months later, this pandemic hits, and it's potentially a feeling of, certainly coming out of the spotlight. What was that experience like for you and your team? And what was it like for the communities, to feel a sense of which we're moving onto another crisis, while clean-up is still happening, homes are still destroyed. There's still very much live trauma. And yet a feeling perhaps, that others have moved on?

- IE And I think it was probably more acute within community. They felt, all of a sudden, simple indicators. Fire was on the front page of every major newspaper, and then all of a sudden, it wasn't. And there was this real fear that, they would be forgotten. Whilst I'm sure the Premier and government in making the decision to set up a dedicated and permanent recovery agency, didn't have an eye to pandemic, or maybe they did. I think, in hindsight it meant that we, as an agency, did not get involved in the broader pandemic response.

We were there to focus on those communities, that were impacted by bushfire. We were able to communicate that that really clearly. But there was still this sense of, are we going to be forgotten? We did multiple direct mail outs to people literally telling them, we are here for you, you are not forgotten. And it's just really simple things, to reinforce that, we are here, that we recognise that they are still in need, and that we are dedicated agency, to work with them.

But even still, despite all of that, there was this general, we're being forgotten. And in part that was because across the system of government, across the system of service delivery, COVID slowed



things down as people were adapting to different ways of working. What might have taken two weeks, to get to get funding through was taking three or four. It was kind of lots of little things that we had to manage. We had to re-engineer processes, so people felt and knew that they were still being cared for, that we were still there for them. And that they had not been forgotten, through the process.

IV Let's switch gears a little bit now. Earlier this year, you began as CEO of Environment Protection Authority. Quite aside from the pandemic, the EPA is going through a pretty substantial period of change in itself. Do you want to tell us a little bit about that change? What's happening and what are the changes or your operating model that, you're working through at the moment?

IE Environmental Protection Authority or EPA, is a fantastic institution. In fact, an institution that's turned 50, this year. We are victorious, independent environmental regulator. And, as you said, been through, over the last four years, the organisation has, once in a generation change as a new Environment Protection Act has been introduced. And that Act went live on 1st July this year, delayed by 12 months, due to the impact of the pandemic.

A new Act, which fundamentally changes the role of the EPA from that real focus on, we're here to respond to pollution and waste events and the impacts of those events, once they occur, to a real focus on prevention. And central to the new Act, is what's called the general environmental duty. So, a duty that applies to all Victorians, to understand their risks, and to take action to, protect the environment from negative impacts. A positive or duty-based obligation, that's based very much on the occupational health and safety laws, that have existed here in Victoria for 10 years. It's been a really interesting process of standing up all the systems and processes that support such fundamental change. Everything from IT changes through to, new policies and procedures within the organisation.

So big, big change and with the Act going live, part of what I had to do was really, change the focus of the organisation from getting ready for the commencement of a new Act, to being ready to deliver. And that required a different set of capabilities and much more of what I would call, an outward looking focus for the organisation and a new operating model, is what we've put in place to achieve that.

IV As you describe it, it's a profoundly different mindset for a regulator, isn't it? It's a particularly a rich history of 50 years. Organisations develop methods, cultures, ways of thinking. And there's always a temptation towards compliance for a regulator. It's always a risk. This is quite a profound shift in the whole sort of regulatory mind shift. I'm just thinking about how much that impacts not only your formal processes and systems, but your culture around your values. How you go about your day to day? What you look for? That's quite a profound change.

IE Absolutely, it is. It was said to me early on, it took us 50 years to learn how to work under one piece of legislation, we're not going to change overnight. And that was reinforced by reflection from colleagues, at WorkSafe, about when the duties based or positive obligations were introduced through to OHS regulation. It really took 10 years for that organisation to optimise its performance under that new framework.

Now, hopefully, it doesn't take us 10 years, because we've got the benefit of the learnings that WorkSafe went through. But it will take time. And it's an absolute mindset change. It's not about us taking out the big stick, although we still have a big stick. In fact, we've got stronger sanctions and more powers under the new Act. But a much stronger emphasis on how we engage, educate, lift





the state of knowledge across business, across community about impacts on the environment. And the practical steps that they can take to, reduce or avoid those impacts.

And that means that, we need a much stronger presence. We need more boots on the ground. We need to be in community, talking to people, creating those networks across industries so that, they can share. Ultimately, what we want to see is better environmental performance. It's not about the number of fines we issue, the number of penalty infringement notices. It's about using all the tools in our toolkit to achieve better environment and better human health outcomes.

IV I think what I'm hearing from you, as well, is appreciation. You said that took the EPA 50 years to get used to your Act. It probably also took your stakeholders, some people operating under the Act 50 years, to get used to that one. And it won't take them 50 years to get used to the new one. But as much as it's a mindset shift for you, just as much for people operating under the Act, to get used to what it means to understand it, a transformative change for them too.

IE And it was, fair to say, a real fear that, if they made a mistake, we were going to be there with a big stick. And part of what I did was, we put out a statement of regulatory intent. And it really was describing how we would go about our role in regulating new laws. It served two purposes in my mind. One was to align the organisation end-to-end about, this is how we're going to go about it. But it was also to send a strong message to industry that, we wanted them to have a go. And that we accept that, this is new. For some businesses, they had never dealt with an EPA. Never dealt with environmental regulation before, they were new entrants.

Others, it was a bit different. They'd been in and around environmental regulation for a while. But we needed to send a strong message that, we understand this is new. We understand despite best efforts, honest mistakes are going to happen. We're not going to take the big stick. We want you to have a go. We're here to support you. We want to build capability, because prevention is a long game, right? And we don't want people being unwilling to take those first steps to really change how they manage risk, how they identify risk through fear of EPA coming in and hitting them with a big fine. So

The statement of regulatory intent, was a really important document for us to send a signal to industry recognising exactly that. This is new, it's going to take time for us all to adapt, let's learn together. But ultimately, we're going to get to a standard where, we will start always trying to kind of lift performance. And we do that again, using those different tools, that we have.

IV So between BRV and now your time at the EPA, you're developing a habit or a tendency to lead pretty dramatic change processes during times when change processes are pretty difficult. Where working remotely and already under a great deal of change. And the ability to get together, which we've already discussed.

Tell us about leading such a significant change process, often through the other end of the screen with ongoing, physical distancing restrictions really impacting how we do it. How have you gone about engaging your staff? How have you gotten to engage in your stakeholders? What's the online experience been like or what have you been able to do, even with a bit of innovation to either do things differently, to still get the kind of engagement and the leadership that is needed through a period like this?

IE I've had one benefit. I live in regional Victoria and a lot of the business that we do, has been in regional Victoria. I've still, even through the 12 months, despite the bigger lockdowns, have been



able to get out and about a bit. But that's meant that, I can eyeball and sit around a table and a whiteboard with parts of the team. But certainly not all of the team.

I know at BRV one of the things that we would do is just twice a week, we would get all staff together online and just talk through what are the priorities because those incidental interactions that you would normally get in the kitchen area, the water cooler conversations, for want of a better term, just won't happen.

We were trying to create that environment online. Coming together often, not around a particular meeting agenda, but just to talk about what's happening. And giving people the opportunity to acknowledge colleagues. I'd always end each meeting with one of my bad dad jokes, just to try and create a bit of sense of fun, within an organisation. You think about BRV, you're dealing with trauma all the time. You do need to be able to lighten the load a little bit on people.

And EPA has been no different. Trying to create good interactions online. And what I will say, EPA is a much more formal organisation. I'm trying to break down a bit of that formality to connect the organisation together. One of the biggest challenges for me, has been going through that operating model, which was a fundamental restructure of the organisation. I wanted to engage staff and had planned because I'm one of those people who likes to get out, sit in a room, sit around a whiteboard, share ideas and that's hard online.

I managed to get out a few times before, we were locked down. And I would often have to, I remember once out in Bendigo, finishing, ready to drive to Gippsland, being told that we're about to go into lockdown, so having to divert, switch everything online. But I think in some ways, it's that old adage, is you can't communicate enough. And for me through change, I reckon I did. I did three draft structures that I did, must be 60 plus two-hour workshops, online with staff. And it was me, talking to them and explaining but providing that opportunity for them to ask questions.

But at the same time, recognising that not everyone wants to ask questions online. So, giving multiple channels for people to raise their issues or concerns. I felt almost had to double the effort, you normally would because you can get, I find myself, I can get cut through easier, in a room. I can read the room easier. You can read body language, that's harder online.

So, it was almost kind of doubling your effort, doing your best, providing multiple channels for communication. Importantly, for me, I was really deliberate, too. If I was asked a question or given a comment, I would feedback, this is how it's considered it. This is how it's being reflected, in an updated structure. This is why it hasn't been incorporated. And just continually keeping that feedback loop open. It took a lot of effort, but I think it pays off in the long term.

IV I think that's well said. I think, you ask anyone who's thought about it for a little while, being present, being visible is really important, during times of big change. And you can at least be visible on the other end of the screen. I'm sure that 120 hours just engaging with staff in long conversations, whether that was the most effective or not, I suspect it meant something to your team that you did it, and I reckon that's pretty powerful.

While we're preparing this, you and I were chatting a little bit about what we're learning about when, online conversations do work quite well and when they don't. And it sounds like you hit on a couple of those, where they don't, where you really would have preferred to be in the room. And to be able to read people a bit better, those sorts of things. Have you found any advantages from doing more online engagement? Are there particularly - I'm sure the tyranny of distance must be quite a





thing for you at times. Has there been any sort of positive learning space, things that have been slightly easier now that, we're doing things online a little bit more?

IE I think there's a couple things. We tend to call a meeting for everything, that's kind of what we do, in the public service. I think online has kind of caused - do we really need a meeting or can we do these things shorter? And I think as we go forward, we will value why we come together in person differently. It won't be, I don't believe, for the transactional. I think that can happen online. It'll be for those more strategic conversations and it will also be for the more incidental conversations. But I think for me, learning what I can do online versus what I really need to be there in person.

And for me, it's for those more difficult, complex strategic conversations where, it's important that people get to read my body language. I get to read them or equally, where you can sit around the whiteboard. So, I think we'll use offices differently, going forward. Meeting rooms, for example, we're kind of busily looking at, do we need all these meeting rooms or do we need to reform how these meeting rooms are used or will be used and what they're for?

We've now embraced online. We've got to continue that, for the right purposes. We've still got to have that provision for people to come back - come together, again because it's necessary. And for a regulator, we've still got to be able to get into businesses on the ground and do our job.

IV I wonder if you could leave us with, what are the one or two things you would like us to learn, from this experience? What do you hope that the pandemic teaches us, that can contribute to better public services and a better public service into the future?

IE I think there's a couple for me. My reflection over a long period in public services is that, as institutions, we do have a bias towards complexity. We make things more complex, than they probably need to, whether that's through process or other. And I reckon what the pandemic has taught us is that, we can really make quite good decisions really quickly. We don't need all of this complexity. And I hope we keep that. I hope we keep these streamlined processes, strong accountability mechanisms. But streamline the processes, so that we can make better decisions faster.

And for me, in EPA, part of that is about pushing decision making down into the organisation, closest to where those decisions are made. Again, strong belief, our local staff know their local communities, know their local environment much better than anyone else. And I reckon they'll make the best decision. Empowering them to do that without needing, I always say, in the organisation, if I'm the eighth signature on a piece of paper, I really question the value I'm adding. So, let's get rid of this complexity. Let's focus on the outcome and let's streamline the processes.

The other thing I think that we've learned is, the real care that's come through in the public service, the willingness to work together. I saw that in bushfire recovery and we've seen that through the pandemic, about how organisations and how the public service works across organisational and institutional boundaries. Sometimes that kind of patch protection, that can creep in, has kind of dissolved somewhat. And again, it's really important again, it's not about confusing accountabilities. But it's saying, how do we leverage the capabilities that we've got in each organisation, to really focus on solving the big problems for community?

I think if we can avoid going back, avoid going back to the complexity, the unnecessary complexity, and keep those permeable boundaries across institutions and that willingness to come together around solving common problems or solving the biggest problems for the Victorian community, I



reckon that'll be gold for us, as organisations, as well as some of these more flexible work practices that I think, we've all benefited from. There's some great stuff that's come out of pandemic and it's really important. And I'll certainly be committed to keeping those things alive in EPA.

IV Our guest today has been Lee Miezis. Lee, thank you so much for this conversation.

IE Thank you. Thanks for having me. I really enjoyed it.

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