

2022 NSW Flood Inquiry – Crisis and Opportunity

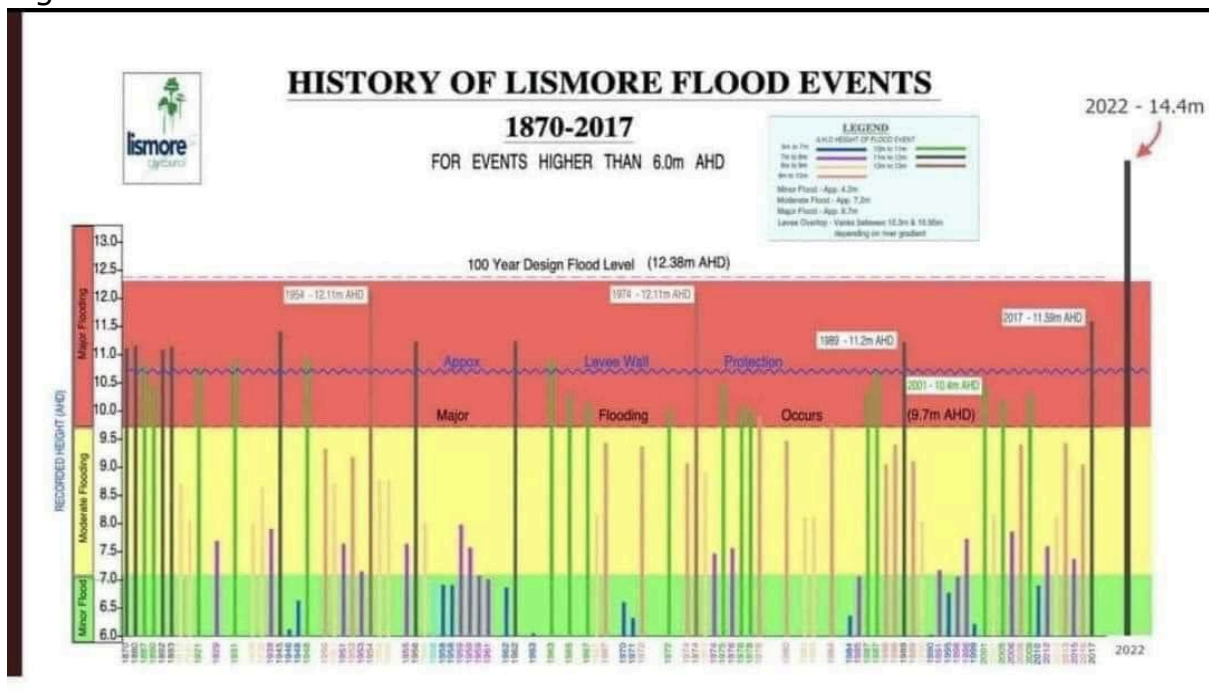
Terms of reference addressed:

- a. the causes of, and factors contributing to, the frequency, intensity, timing and location of floods in NSW in the 2022 catastrophic flood event, including consideration of any role of weather, climate change, and human activity;
- b. the preparation and planning by agencies, government, other entities and the community for floods in NSW, including the accuracy and timing of weather forecasts, current laws, emergency management plans, practices and mitigation strategies, their application and effect;
- e. recovery from floods, including:
 - i. immediate housing, clean-up, financial support and community engagement measures; and
 - ii. longer-term community rebuilding support;

Terms of reference a. and b.

I would particularly like to address the issue of Climate Change. See Figure 1 Surely there can be no clearer illustration of Climate Change’s impact on extreme weather.

Figure 1



The politicisation of this issue continues to cause confusion and debate. It is as though people have been hypnotised into inaction and have to return

to the certainty of the known. In the case of the floods in Lismore this inaction is critical and at times lethal.

Here are some examples of that inaction:

- The placement of the SES headquarters in a flood prone position and the failure to provide emergency power systems for that organisation.
- The failure to provide adequate monitoring of the rainfall and creek heights in 4 high priority areas (see submission by Annie Kia).
- The continual overriding of local knowledge and experience by those further up the chain of command and often by those with no local experience e.g. The prohibition of the "tinnie army" by SES.
- The failure to implement any of the recommendations in the Citizen's Review of the 2017 flood.

I note that the most recent Floodplain Risk Management Plan 2014 (LCC) makes the following statement about Climate Change:

"2.7 Potential Impacts of Climate Change A preliminary investigation into the potential impacts of climate change on flooding in Lismore was undertaken by Worley Parsons. This investigation was based on the document prepared by the (then) Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water titled Practical Consideration of Climate Change, which anticipates that **extreme rainfall intensities are expected to increase by between 5% and 10% by the year 2070 in the Northern Rivers**"

I am reminded of a major report on Climate Change and Local Government prepared by the Insurance Council of Australia that stated that the melting of bitumen on council roads would be their most significant problem.

So, the impacts of Climate Change have been wildly underestimated. If the full impacts of Climate Change were understood and appreciated perhaps the preparedness for extreme weather events would get the priority and action that they deserve.

Term of Reference e.

Those areas most devastated by the floods North, South, East Lismore the CBD and the "Basin" are generally populated by people who are poorer financially than many other residents of Lismore. The Henderson Poverty Inquiry of the early 1970's established this region as being the poorest in the whole of Australia. While this situation has improved somewhat the region still ranks as one of our country's poorest.

“ Increasing climate risks are projected to exacerbate existing vulnerabilities and social inequalities and ... inequities (high confidence). These include inequalities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples, ... and between generations, rural and urban areas, incomes and health status, increasing the climate risks and .. adaptation challenges faced by some groups and places. Resultant climate change impacts include the .. displacement of some people and businesses, and threaten social cohesion and community wellbeing.” (FINAL DRAFT Chapter 11 IPCC WGII Sixth Assessment Report Do Not Cite, Quote or Distribute 11-1 Total pages: 151 1 2 Chapter 11: Australasia)

Specifically, these areas identified are at grave risk of spiralling into dire poverty. Without major government intervention the housing will never be insured or insurance will be so expensive that it will be out of reach of homeowners. This situation will result in:

1. The inability of homeowners and landlords to maintain housing in a habitable condition
2. No one will be able to obtain a mortgage to purchase housing in these areas because insurance, which is a condition of obtaining a mortgage will not be available.
3. A collapse of housing prices meaning residents will be trapped with no funds to move out. Mortgagees will be paying off large loans that no longer represent the diminished value of their homes.
4. People living in this housing will suffer major health impacts from inadequate shelter and from the impact of mould and damp.

Ultimately these areas will be blighted and derelict, somewhat similar to what happened to Detroit in the USA.

The IPCC states “Climate change impacts and risks are becoming increasingly complex and more difficult to manage. Multiple climate hazards will occur simultaneously, and multiple climatic and non-climatic risks will interact, resulting in compounding overall risk and risks cascading across sectors and regions. Some responses to climate change result in new impacts and risks. (high confidence)” [IPCC_AR6_WGII_SummaryForPolicymakers](#)

Business owners too have been devastated by the floods. It is hard to see the sense in continuing trading in the CBD under the current conditions.

Northern Rivers Reconstruction Corporation

This is a very welcome development if only to provide government co-ordination and advocacy for the Northern Rivers. Ideally the NRRC will work on at least 3 levels

1. Assisting and contributing to the CSIRO investigation into mitigation of flooding.
2. Direct contact with those communities most heavily affected by the floods, including businesses and collaborating with them to support them to make fully informed decision about their future. This could involve relocation or creating more flood resistant structures.
3. Commission studies and research into the economic situation to map out an economic pathway for business recovery and the employment of the flood affected.

The key to the success of this corporation is the connection it is able to build with the people of the region.

Regarding mitigation, I am extremely sceptical of the idea that there is an engineering solution or solutions to the flood issue. Even a cursory look at figure 2 shows river systems of huge scale and complexity.

A Great Opportunity

The current situation in Lismore and the Northern Rivers is a huge challenge, however we as a society are dangerously delude if we see these floods as a one-off event. Scientists tell us the impacts of extreme weather caused by Climate Change will only get worse even if greenhouse gas emissions were to stop today.

The opportunity we have before us is to deal with this multi-faceted complex crisis in a manner that creates a model for recreating high functioning, resilient communities that can withstand the onslaught of extreme weather events. This challenge will require the very best of our community and the resources, expertise and compassion of some of country's most skilled people.

About the Author

My name is _____ and I have spent most of my life in the Northern Rivers of NSW. I have experienced many floods, especially in the Lismore CBD where I supported my wife in her business for 20 years.

I served for 8 years on Lismore City Council (LCC) as _____ and _____. I chaired the Floodplain Management Committee for that whole period. The Committee released the 2014 Floodplain Risk Management Plan and was responsible for the lowering of the neck of land behind Bunnings to increase floodwater clearance rates. The Committee also unsuccessfully attempted to reinstitute the voluntary house buy-back scheme.

Figure 2

