

SUBMISSION TO THE NSW GOVERNMENT INDEPENDENT INQUIRY INTO THE 28 FEBRUARY 2022 LISMORE FLOOD

BACKGROUND:

My name is _____ and I am a long-term resident of Lismore (39 years). I live at _____, Girard's Hill which is located approximately _____ metres from the Lismore Post Office. Prior to purchasing my home, I conducted research into the area to ensure that I purchased a property not impacted by flood. The house was built in the late 1800's and there had never been an incident of flooding in its history. The February 2022 flood resulted in 750ml (2.5ft) of water on the property.

I consider myself fortunate in that the house itself was not flooded with the flood waters stopping at the property. As such, my home became the immediate evacuation point for residents from Dawson, Parke, Keen Streets and Ballina Road who were rescued by the myriad of local residents who took to their boats and other water craft to rescue people. On the day of the flood I had over 30 people, 4 dogs and 2 cats located at my home and with the help of neighbours managed to shower, feed, clothe and provide basic medical attention and support to these people.

PREPAREDNESS AND RESPONSE TO THE FLOOD EVENT:

Lismore is situated on the convergence of the Wilson River (north arm of the Richmond River) and Leicester Creek and has a history of flooding. As such, Lismore is generally well prepared for flood events, however, the February 2022 flood was of catastrophic proportions exceeding by 2 metres the highest flood on record. Lismore residents are generally aware of flood levels, pack up possessions above anticipated flood levels, purchase additional food supplies, relocate motor vehicles etc. In the lead up to the February flood, residents prepared and activated their flood action plans.

Whilst it would be difficult to be totally prepared for an adverse event of this magnitude, Lismore was woefully underprepared for this event and the result has been catastrophic. It is my firm view that the local SES were clearly under-resourced and overwhelmed during this event. NSW SES was asked if it required additional support from the ADF prior to this event and declined the offer. This was an extremely poor decision as it is better to have the resources on hand and stand them down if not required than to experience the level of under-resourcing and lack of action..

Residents rely on accurate information from the SES and plan their actions accordingly. I received two texts from the SES in relation to the February flood. The first at 5.39pm on Sunday 27 February indicated an evacuation warning for low lying parts of Lismore suggesting that evacuations were likely sometime on Monday 28 February. The second text was received at 12.43am on Monday 28 February stating that Lismore was isolated and to evacuate to higher ground if safe to do so and that

critically the flood height was expected at around the 1974 record flood level. The text advised that this was a life threatening situation & risk to life imminent. This was the first indication from the SES that we were expecting a life threatening record flood.

The first text gave no warning or indication of an anticipated record flood and there was no additional information provided by SES in the 7 hour intervening period between the first text and the second text to suggest otherwise. Flood events are evolving and the situation can change very quickly so regular updates are required. When residents received the second text it was already too late and their escape options were limited or nil. The second text was sent in the middle of the night which made it almost impossible to evacuate and far more risky. In the absence of clear, accurate and timely advice from the SES, people remained in their homes and their lives put at risk..

In the March 2022 flood event, the SES issued a flood evacuation order on Tuesday 29 March only to later recall the order creating confusion for residents and business owners. **The lack of decisive decision-making and timely, accurate advice from the SES requires immediate investigation and remedy.**

All the residents who were located at my home as a temporary evacuation point stated that their calls to the SES for assistance went unanswered or they were told that it was now too risky for the SES to rescue them in the dark; and were advised to climb onto their furniture or into their roofs. Calls to 000 resulted in long delays in responding as the system was unable to cope with the volume of calls. Many of these residents were elderly or frail and simply did not have the mobility or strength to do so. Residents freely expressed their fear that they would drown in their own homes.

In desperation, residents contacted Police who whilst sympathetic, could do little more than try to contact the SES on the residents' behalf. Elderly residents who remained living with us after the flood were contacted several days later by Police to check on their welfare. Residents felt that the follow up call was really a 'head count' by Police and 'too little too late.'

Without the support of a well-resourced SES, residents turned to social media and neighbours to respond to their desperate calls for assistance. The local community responded and community members with their boats, canoes, kayaks, jet skis took to the flooded streets to rescue residents. It is evident that had it not been for this grassroots response to the event that many more residents would have perished. Residents felt 'abandoned' and there was a strong sense that as a community we could not rely on government agencies. In addition, SES headquarters were inundated with the result that the rescuers had to be involved in their own rescue. **With climate change we will inevitably experience more climate crisis events (Lismore has experienced 3 flood events in 5 years) and we need to be better**

prepared. As a flood town, Lismore requires a well resourced and well staffed SES with headquarters located in a flood free area if it is to adequately respond to flooding events.

Many areas of East Lismore were negatively impacted by storm water as a result of blocked storm water drains. The clearing of storm water drains is a responsibility of Local Government and it is clear that there is no regular maintenance of these network of drains. **Action needs to be taken by Lismore City Council to ensure that there is ongoing maintenance of storm water drains.**

The inadequacy of forecasting of flood levels was a major contributor to the devastation of the February flood event. Historically, the SES were controlled locally and there was greater use of local knowledge and flood modelling with farmers in the catchments playing key roles in forwarding information on water levels to the local SES. It is difficult to comprehend that forecasting and modelling could not have predicted a significant flood event earlier. **There is a need to integrate local knowledge in ALL decision-making structures going forward.**

IMMEDIATE RESPONSE AFTER THE FLOOD EVENT:

Lismore was effectively isolated after the flood, there was no mains power so no lighting, limited cooking options, no laundry capacity, many were homeless, food supplies were limited. The community's basic needs for food, clothing and shelter were not being met. Again the community stepped up and pop up food stalls appeared, food, water and ice drops organised, clothing, towels, bedding distributed and clean-ups organised to assist those flood effected. **Future crisis response needs to acknowledge and build on the strengths of these grassroots initiatives.**

Many residents required their medication or had been injured during the boat rescues and I can commend the North Coast Telehealth Service which provided vital telephone medical help in the immediate aftermath of the flood.

In the absence of government assistance, community based agencies stepped up. Two wonderful examples are Resilient Lismore and the Koori Mail Hub which were able to quickly marshal a range of support, assistance, food and clothing. These two hubs are still operational as the crisis is far from over and there is a long way to recovery. **With the best of intentions, governments are generally slow to respond and are often not able to cut through the bureaucracy. Consideration needs to be given to providing assistance to those community responders who have the ability to work in a timely and grassroots manner.**

Information is vital in a crisis situation and this was very lacking in the immediate aftermath as well as during the crisis. Residents need information about services available, their location, opportunities for help and assistance. This information must be delivered in multiple forms as many people had no internet and

mobile coverage was impacted. Social media played an important role in quickly disseminating vital information but was not always accurate. For example, social media posted that the town water was not drinkable and would be limited and had to be corrected by Lismore City Council.

RECOVERY:

The magnitude of the devastation requires a corresponding response from government. Essential infrastructure (sewerage works, roads, schools, etc) need to be rebuilt. **Lismore will be in recovery for many years and the financial support from government needs to be there for the long journey.**

Many government organisations continue to work in silos whereas what is needed is a coordinated and planned response.

Information about grants and financial assistance has been difficult to navigate for people who are suffering post traumatic stress. **The community needs plain English documents, easy to navigate systems to access financial assistance.**

Grants to house-owners, renters and business owners have been slow to roll out and this has halted the pace of recovery.

Subsidies could be offered to businesses, homeowners and landlords to rebuild with more sustainable products.

Residents & business owners who are insured remain in a holding pattern awaiting advice from their insurer regarding coverage. Assessment and decision-making is taking far too long and halting recovery. **Insurance companies must be held to timeframes (even despite the volume of work) so that recovery can proceed.**

Many businesses in the CBD and residents of North and South Lismore are unable to obtain flood insurance or the cost is prohibitive. **Consideration needs to be given to an insurance levy similar to the current cyclone prone North Queensland example.**

Finally, there needs to be an acknowledgement of the collective trauma experienced by residents and **recovery will need to address the mental wellbeing of residents with provision of services specifically address this aspect of recovery.**

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission.

Mob:

Email: