

**From:** [NSW Government](#)  
**To:** [Flood Inquiry](#)  
**Subject:** Floods Inquiry  
**Date:** Monday, 9 May 2022 11:51:25 AM

## Your details

Title

First name

Last name

Email

Postcode

## Submission details

I am making this submission as

Emergency services personnel

Submission type

I am making a personal submission

Your position in the organisation (if applicable)

SES flood rescue operator

Consent to make submission public

I would like this submission to remain anonymous

## Share your experience or tell your story

Your story

I am an SES volunteer of the unit and in particular I am an & flood rescue operator. I was active in the days leading up to the flood,

participating in the preparations, evacuations and a large number of flood rescues from 24 Feb to 28 Feb and the search / rescue efforts 1 March to 4 March.

As an SES volunteer, we were performing assisted evacuations throughout the night 27/28 Feb. During this time we were active in North Lismore, South Lismore and the Lismore CBD as well as some areas out of town. Once an evacuation order was issued we travelled between jobs in our vehicles with sirens on to wake people up and alert them to the danger. Numerous times we encountered people and advised them to evacuate and most declined to do so as they felt safe in their homes. One commented that he did not spend \$100,000 raising his home to have to evacuate. Another asked us to come back in the morning and get them (I advised that this may not be possible). My team left the Lismore CBD at 3.08am on Feb 28 as water was coming over the levy and it was not safe. We were to return in a boat when it was safer to do so.

We launched our boats at between 4.45am and 5.00am. We had many rescue jobs coming in. So many so, that if we were to read the jobs coming in we would not have had time to do anything but read the jobs. It also became quickly apparent that we had to rescue people as we saw them. Often triaging to rescue people in water over people on a veranda.

It was quickly apparent that more help was needed and the "civilian rescuers" would absolutely be required. On a number of occasions I provided these boats with directions, which they eagerly complied with, such as when advised over SES radio that Ballina Street bridge was going to "go under with 70 people on it" I directed at least half a dozen boats to assist in that evacuation. Our crew also took to rescuing people from roofs (on or in roofs) and transferring them to civilian boats for transfer to shore.

During the Flood the premises of my business

that I own and operate flooded.

My home was not impacted by flood, although I live on a primary production property and the property was impacted by erosion, land slips and some fences were washed away.

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## **Terms of Reference (optional)**

The Inquiry welcomes submissions that address the particular matters identified in its [Terms of Reference](#)

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### **1.2 Preparation and planning**

My observations were that the Lismore community were well prepared for a flood, however were not prepared for a flood that was so much larger than the highest previous flood on record. During Sunday 27 February I observed that most businesses in Lismore CBD had packed up in preparation for a flood, however it appears that most prepared for a flood based on an expectation that a major flood would be around the height of the 1974 flood or perhaps a bit higher.

My observation was that people who live on the flood plain chose to evacuate if their home was likely to be impacted significantly by a 1974 level flood. There did not appear to be much consideration of the consequences of a larger flood.

As an SES operator we assisted many evacuations, notably of older immobile residents, those without transport or those whose home were not raised as high as their neighbours. Many residents who lived in raised houses chose to stay and commented that they were choosing to do so because their floor level was above 1974 flood level.

The Lismore SES unit was prepared by having all of their available resources active. All available members were in attendance and working with no or limited breaks to assist the community. Over 27 & 28 February many members were continuously on duty.

Preparation for floods could be improved if the community have a better understanding of the maximum possible flood height rather than

relying on previously recorded flood heights. Evacuations could be improved if residents and the community have a better understanding of when to evacuate. The time to evacuate is not when water is coming into your home as it may not be possible to safely evacuate then. The time to evacuate is before the evacuation route is cut off. Every residence should have an evacuation plan with a detailed evacuation route that identifies at what flood height the evacuation route is no longer accessible. Greater information about actual and predicted flood heights should be made available and more community education needs to be undertaken so that people understand the risks and the information that are being given. For example, if a warning is given that a river level will reach a certain height, people need to understand that this will change if it keeps raining and know that they need to keep monitoring the information rather than go to sleep.

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### **1.3 Response to floods**

The scale of the flood and the number of rescues were such that no emergency service would be capable to respond to on short notice. An SES boat will never be available for every house in a flood, in a similar way to a fire truck would not be available for every house in a bush fire. Community expectations do not necessarily reflect this reality.

The community response, being the "civilian boats" was amazing and should be applauded. Whilst the spontaneous rescue effort was necessary, I am concerned about spontaneous rescues becoming normalised, because the focus should be on avoiding the need for mass rescues. Evacuation prior to the flood is the only safe option. Evacuation by boat in a flood is dangerous regardless of whether completed by an emergency service or by a neighbour regardless of the level of training.

My observation is that most people who did not evacuate did not do so because their home

floor level was considered "flood free" based on the 1974 flood height. This flood was 2.5m higher, meaning if the water came to the floor in 1974 it was now to the ceiling. This meant that the only safe place to go was on the roof or in the ceiling cavity. Maybe 2,000 people were evacuated from their roofs. Most of the people evacuated from their roof were not necessarily going to die if they were not rescued from their roof in this flood, however, if the water level was 1.5 higher, which is possible, many (possibly most) of the people in their ceiling cavities would have drowned and those people on their roofs would have been in the water. Regardless of how many boats were available, many more people would have died if the flood height was higher. The only safe option is to evacuate early. This message is now understood in relation to bushfire but isn't understood in relation to floods.

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**1.4 Transition from incident response to recovery**

The army were of great assistance with the clean-up. The council have been fantastic with the clean-up.

So far Lismore is still really in the clean-up phase. If we separate clean-up from recovery, I would argue that the recovery so far has been very limited. Limited to those with financial means to do it without Government assistance.

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**1.5 Recovery from floods**

The recovery from these floods will be take a long time and is physically, emotionally and financially difficult. There is a lot of uncertainty in relation to the future of Lismore and the support available doesnt alway match the need. Life in Lismore is not the same. Many people don't live in their homes, the places we go don't exist and the things we do are not possible. Kids don't go to their schools, people work elsewhere or not at all, sports are all out of town, shopping is online or out of town, dining out or a coffee at the cafe doesn't happen. Positivity is running low and the outlook is uncertain.

Many members of the community are currently

without work because the business they work in is current not operating.

For business owners, many have less income or no income, whilst facing mounting recovery expenses. Businesses that cannot afford to pay their staff may have difficulty in finding suitable staff when they are able to reopen their business. Businesses like Norco have the government paying staff wages, but this hasn't been made available to small businesses that employ a significant portion of the Lismore population. A business that employs 20 people can receive a \$200,000 grant, whereas a business that employs 19 people can receive a \$50,000 grant. this isn't logical. A business that employs 19 people can receives \$50,000 whereas a sole trader farmer can receive \$75,000. this too isn't logical. Financial assistance for business requires money to be spent and then claimed back. This can be difficult is you have had no income for over 2 months.

Financial assistance to a household that has lost everything they own is seemingly much lower compared to what a business is able to obtain.

Many members of the community are waiting for more information before committing to repairing their home or business premises. They don't want to commit limited resources to fixing a home or business if that premises are to be acquired under a buy-back. The community needs a well thought out plan that includes community feedback, but it also needs this yesterday.

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#### **1.6 Any other matters**

For many in Lismore it is difficult to contemplate investing back in the town and risking losing it all again. If residents and businesses were able to access affordable flood insurance that enabled them to reduce the risk of rebuilding their lives in

Lismore the decision would be much easier from a financial perspective. Governments needs to consider ways to make insurance for floods accessible.

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### **Supporting documents or images**

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