

Submission re Flooding in the Tweed Shire LGA

The [redacted] is an organisation representing the interests of the different rural industries in the Tweed [redacted] and has been an effective lobby group for rural people since 1981.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this submission and bare in mind that many of the views expressed are from families with up to 6 generations of experience with Tweed River flooding. The issues, as we see them, not in any particular order of importance are:

1. Dredging of the Tweed River System

For many years after the valley was settled by white people sea going vessels were able to navigate the river to several kilometres upstream of Murwillumbah and with the establishment of the sugar cane industry, the financial backbone of the Tweed rural economy, navigation lanes were continually dredged to enable the movement of punts up and down the river system transporting sugar cane to the Condong sugar mill. When this reverted to road haulage very little attention has been given to the river system.

There are now places where you cannot even navigate a “tinny” without running aground!

The river system, of which there are 3 branches, namely the Tweed, Oxley and Rous rivers, is the drain of the valley and this drain is so clogged with sediment it cannot operate effectively.

The many obstructions in the river are causing changes in the flow patterns of the water, diverting water into the river banks causing them to be undermined, they then collapse into the river further compounding the problems.

For many years there were several dredges operating in the river providing a 2 fold benefit, keeping the drainage system clear and providing valuable sand and gravel resources to the building industry.

On the flood plain of the river there are farms that cannot drain because the the sediment in the river has built up to such an extent that the outlets of the farm drainage system are now below the bottom of the river !

Not only are the rivers a drainage system for the valley but they are a recreational and tourism asset important to the economy of the Tweed Shire and this is being impacted by the poor state of the rivers.

We are confident that a truly independent study into the efficacy of the river system will recommend the unclogging of this vital asset, but it needs to be done ASAP in light of the current predictions on climate change and changing rainfall patterns.

2. Poor and inadequate flood information

For over 4 decades a very dedicated team of volunteers has mapped and recorded the details of every flood event in the Tweed Shire and their record in being the “go to group” when it came to flood information was second to none.

When a flood event was imminent, the local radio station was manned 24hrs a day and regular updates were broadcast to district residents. These were both timely and accurate!

Bureaucracy intervened, and SES headquarters in Woollongong became the only source of information.

Unfortunately for the Tweed our local team now has no direct input.

The information coming out of Woollongong is not timely and in some cases is extremely inaccurate.

For example, in the 2017 flood, the information coming out of SES headquarters was so far removed from what was happening and it wasn't until our local team had rung them 3 times in the early hours of the morning that they finally accepted they were wrong , but by then it was too late for many residents to take the necessary precautions!

In the recent February- March flood the BOM river condition site only gave flood ratings to 3 places on the Tweed, Tumbulgum, Chinderah and Murwillumbah and the first 2 ratings were extremely inaccurate.

Our only radio source is ABC in Lismore and if Lismore is in crisis then there is very little meaningful information being broadcast for the Tweed.

Action needs to be taken to correct the present system of centralised information and the skills and knowledge of the local SES team need to be properly utilised.

3. Local Communication in disaster events

In the recent flood event, many people lost power, the internet was down, mobile phone coverage was a lottery, if you were able to charge your phone, and many roads were damaged so severely as to make them impassable.

We would like to suggest that in disaster times people be encourage to have battery powered UHF radios, which have dedicated emergency channels, where neighbours would be able to pass on messages to a central location where a community volunteer would have a government supplied emergency satellite phone for communication with the outside world .

This would be invaluable in medical emergencies, food drops etc.

4. Housing Availability

There is no disputing that there is an acute shortage of housing in the Tweed Shire and this has been exacerbated by the recent flooding.

There are a significant number of houses in the Tweed shire which council has decommissioned for varying reasons.

We are requesting that the State Government pressure Tweed Shire Council (TSC) into allowing landowners to recommission these houses, which could be done quickly and easily which then would go some way to alleviating the housing crisis.

There is also a lot of flood free rural land in the shire on which TSC could allow another dwelling without interfering with rural activities, just as our neighbouring 5 shires have done, but TSC has only allowing detached dwellings on rural properties from 40 Ha and above and secondary attached dwellings on 10 to 40 Ha. These have a 60 sq metre size limit which is too small for accomodating a family.

This needs to change but unfortunately the overly restrictive conditions imposed byTSC on rural land means that many rural landowners will be unable to comply.

5. Provision for training a voluntary flood rescue group

In the recent major flood there would have been many more deaths if it weren't for the amazing efforts of volunteers using their own water craft to rescue people.

The SES simply do not have enough boats or volunteers in the event of major flooding and it would make sense for a properly trained and safety equipped volunteer group to call on for assistance in major flooding events such as we have recently experienced.

6. Evacuation Centres

More publicity needs to be given to the general public as to where evacuation centres are located and there is anecdotal evidence that people were unable to access their nominated evacuation centre because of flooded access.