

Flood Inquiry

Professor Mary O'Kane AC

Michael Fuller AMP

Dear all

Re: flood enquiry Lismore 2022.

I came to Lismore 35 years ago as the City Engineer and have lived and worked in the area ever since. There have been numerous floods during these 35 years. The only time there was any effective flood management response was when it was controlled by Council and the local Community.

Unfortunately, State Government has allowed the SES to set up a Bureaucracy that has no effective local input. SES senior staff constantly advises “**they are in charge**” of all flood events. The reality is that they have limited staff and must depend on the good will of the community to manage even small events.

To make matters worse SES Wollongong wants to oversee and approve any activity of any consequence.

However, the icing on the cake is that in most of the recent flood events, someone from another region has been parachuted in to oversee the flood operations. This appears to be standard practice and clearly shows SES management has very little understanding of what happens in a major flood event and the short response times required to meet the needs of the problem at hand.

After being closely associated with the SES for most of my 35 years in Lismore I make the following suggestions.

SES has a serious management problem in both Wollongong and locally. The structure is inappropriate for the rapid flooding events that occur in this region.

Step 1

Local Controllers need to live locally and have a good understanding of the flood events and how the community operates. I would suggest a minimum 5-year term for this position and must live locally. No Fly in Fly out operators.

Preferably the assistant controller will have a similar background and a 5-year contract. The contracts should overlap by at least 2 years to insure a smooth transition at the end of the appointment.

Step 2

The local SES Controllers must be allowed to make their own decisions and have the background and competencies to be left in charge without interference from Wollongong. Wollongong should be simply an organisation to supply resources.

Step 3

The local controller needs to be someone who understands emergencies, understands floods and what needs to be done to ensure the best use of the available resources, ie RFS, Council, Police, Ambo, Local Military, Fire and Emergency etc

Step 4

Consider amalgamating both SES and RFS as it is unlikely that both bushfires and Floods will occur at the same time. It is hard to financially justify the duplication of control centres and permanent staff.

le the same operation centre with the relevant District officer in charge

SES -Flood.

RFS - Bush Fire etc and the alternate acts in a support role.

As a on LCC I was instrumental in persuading , SES Commissioner, to conduct an independent enquiry into the 2017 flood. Dave Owens conducted the enquiry and prepared the final report. The incompetent management of 2017 flood by senior SES staff should have resulted in major changes within the SES. Unfortunately, SES employed media managers to minimise comments from the community and prevented local SES volunteer members from commenting on what happened on the ground.

In the end it appears nothing was achieved by 2017 enquiry.

I sincerely hope that this enquiry will recommend some serious changes to the management of floods in this region. Hopefully this enquiry is not just another whitewash.

In my view you will need to come up with some serious, well thought out recommendations and then ensure that they are implemented quickly.

This will certainly result in major changes within SES management and the competency of SES management.

The community already has an extremely poor opinion of SES Management.

The community and SES local volunteers have done an excellent job in all the recent floods and do not deserve much of the criticism they receive because of the incompetent management of senior SES staff.

It is going to be a tough job to convince the community that SES is a viable rescue organisation if your report does not result in major changes.

You also need to make sure that the recommended changes are fully implemented, so that this report is not seen as yet another Whitewash.

We all saw on TV how locals pulled together to rescue people from rooftops in the major flood.

When these same locals want to join the SES as volunteers, you will be able to claim success with your enquiry.

Happy to discuss

Regards

Lismore

Note

The removal of houses from both South and North Lismore by some form of Voluntary Purchase scheme will be the key to making Lismore a safer place for people to live and raise a family. This needs urgent action before people are forced, by economic need to rebuild their flood damaged houses

I have attached my CV to this letter with the intention of showing I have a good understanding of how a flood in this area should be managed both during the flood event and in the longer term.