

From:
To: [Flood Inquiry](#)
Subject: Submission re Lismore Flood
Date: Tuesday, 17 May 2022 11:04:38 PM

The following submission concerns the gathering of data during a flood event and the dissemination of information and the provision of advice to the public.

The basic premise of this submission is that all residents, property owners and business proprietors in flood affected areas should receive timely, accurate and regular information and advice.

In most cases these requirements are met. However, it not always so and there is room for improvement.

The comments that follow mainly concern the roles of the Bureau of Meteorology (BoM), the ABC and the SES and to a lesser extent 'other players'.

TIMELY INFORMATION AND ADVICE

The Floodwatch (advice that a flood is possible) was very timely. It was issued on Tuesday 28 March because TC Debbie was moving along a SW track and if it continued along a likely S then SE path, heavy rain and flooding was clearly possible.

No update was given on Wednesday although the movement of Debbie actually made flooding more likely though not yet certain.

Light rain began falling in Lismore about 8pm on Wednesday 29 March when Debbie (then ex-TC Debbie) was about 750km to the northwest.

Heavy 'flood rain' (my definition is 25+mm/hr) began falling in the Wilson's River-Leycester Creek catchment at 2am Thursday 30 March and the local ABC radio reported just after the 7am news that falls of up to 150mm had been reported. This was on an already soaked catchment.

Over our breakfast, my wife and I agreed that a big flood was almost certain. I later found that a number of other experienced locals had reached the same conclusion.

But, still no update from the BoM - the Floodwatch was still current.

When I commenced duty at my SES unit at 9.45am my first comment was that we in line for a 1974 (12.17m) level flood.

Still nothing from the BoM - the Floodwatch was still current.

The BoM issued an Initial Moderate Flood Warning (12.48pm was the time on the fax) and this was broadcast to the public at approximately 1.50pm at which time the level of Goolmangar Creek at Nimbin, a key catchment indicator was at its 1974 peak level.

Further, the fax which came through regional SES HQ did not reach Lismore City SES until 2.01pm.

The worst mismanagement occurred when an out of region Incident Controller, with no local knowledge whatsoever issued an Immediate Evacuation Order much too early and against local advice. This was done without first issuing an Evacuation Order and some 11.5 hours before the levee was expected to overtop.

So, after a promising start with the timely and appropriate issuing of the Floodwatch, what went wrong?

- * no update to the Floodwatch

- * no Minor Flood Warning from the BoM when the level is expected to exceed minor flood level of 4.2m

- * the Initial Moderate Flood Warning was several hours late

- * the grossly premature issuing of the Immediate Evacuation Order was the result of arrogance, incompetence and perhaps panic and caused great angst in the community and significant loss of respect for and trust in SES.

The above comments in relation to the 2017 flood centre much on decisions made or information released in an untimely manner - a mixture of lateness, or too early or not at all.

It is interesting to note that in the two floods this year none of those mistakes/errors were repeated though the rapidly changing situation during the February flood created different and very difficult, almost insurmountable problems.

ACCURATE INFORMATION AND ADVICE

Over many decades of involvement I believe that the accuracy of information and advice provided to the public has been of an acceptably high level. That is not to say that it could not have been better or that all agencies and people involved should not strive to be as effective as possible at all times.

I have found that apart from a small number of real blunders (some of which I have referred to above) most of

the criticisms members of the public have made relate to a failure to understand that weather predictions are just that - predictions that are based on what is likely to happen, and that predicting flood heights in our very complex catchment is quite difficult.

One issue that causes problems is the level of use of social media in spreading information. Social media can be very useful and there are a number of reliable sites both official and unofficial. However, some can be quite misleading and indeed irresponsible. One experience I had during a recent minor flood was a call from a lady in South Lismore to say that someone in Nimbin put word out on a particular site that Nimbin had just recorded 100mm in a very short time and a huge flood was going to hit Lismore. I was able to reassure her that we were aware of the deluge that had occurred because a member of our Floodwatcher Network had called us and indeed the creek at Nimbin had risen sharply but nothing had happened in the other five creek systems that form our catchment and by the time that water reached Lismore it would have virtually no effect. She was relieved and said she put a post up to that effect.

On the broader issue of accuracy more needs to be done to inform/educate the public about the significance of a 'single source of truth'.

I was struck by the significance of this during the inquiries into Victorian bushfires some years ago when the 'single source of truth' was so strongly stressed.

In our flood situations the BoM is the principal source of correct data and the ABC is the official emergency broadcaster and SES is the source of information in regard to which areas are affected by rising water and residents of which areas need to prepare to evacuate etc., etc.

Another issue is communication. Decades ago almost everyone listened to the radio and radio broadcasts were a very effective means of informing the public. Today, the internet and social media have greatly reduced the coverage of radio. However telecommunications can and do fail, and indeed did so in our local area in all three recent major floods. What did not fail was ABC radio, thanks to generator backup and battery operated radios. Is it unrealistic to think that it would be a good thing if everyone had a small, portable battery operated radio so that they could tune in when telecommunications and electricity supply fail. Perhaps the government could consider making free or subsidised battery operated radios available to people in flood prone areas.

REGULAR DISSEMINATION OF INFORMATION AND ADVICE

For some 30 or 40 years until about 1995 regular hourly broadcasts were made during flood event. People in Lismore knew that immediately after the hourly news on the ABC there would be weather and flood update. Each broadcast would give the latest weather conditions and the height and importantly the rate of rise at a number of key stream locations in the catchment. Many people who experienced such reporting have told me that there is a need to reinstitute that format.

MY BACKGROUND

Northern Rivers local 'born and bred'

Member of Lismore Civil Defence Floodboat Group 1964 - 1968

SES member - floodboat crewmember to 1975, transferred to Richmond-Tweed HQ Flood

Intelligence/forecasting team until when I transferred to SES. Now SES Flood Intelligence Officer.

I have collected data and monitored Lismore floods since 1964 and have Lismore flood data going back to the mid 1850s.

I would welcome the opportunity to meet the Inquiry panel if the opportunity arises.