
Submission to Northern Rivers Flood Enquiry

Recovery from damage to our natural environment

- i) Environmental degradation due to recent flood events in the Northern Rivers has been frequently accompanied by the loss of 20 - 30 years of hard work by landholders and passionate volunteers, causing extreme emotional and mental trauma.
- ii) In a region which is based around the catchment of one of Australia's most degraded river systems, the nett loss of vegetated slopes and river banks is enormous and a major setback to programs trying to restore the health of the catchment.
- iii) Estimates of the removal of vegetated cover in the catchment since European settlement are generally in the order of 99%
- iv) There is a growing body of evidence globally that healthy vegetated catchments assist in reducing the negative impacts of flooding events

Considering i) to iv) above it is clear the damage to the natural environment caused by the February/March/April 2022 flood events cannot be treated lightly.

What is needed?

- There is a need for an environmentally focussed NGO, funded by government and with defined links to government that can step up its operations in response to natural disasters.

This organisation would need to be already operating in the region on a day-to-day basis and have built up trusting relationships within the community, have the skills and knowledge required to support environmental recovery but also be adequately resourced to scale up to the surge capacity needed to provide a one-stop service in times of natural disasters for property owners/community. The 2022 experience in the Northern Rivers has made it crystal clear that government departments simply are not structured to respond flexibly or within the short timeframes required to support mental, social or economic recovery. As well, local communities have been demonstrably more willing to engage with known and trusted non-government organisations at these crucial times

- There has been a long-recognised need for an independent body with catchment-wide responsibilities and the authority to override situations where there are 2 or more government bodies involved.

The recommendations of various past initiatives along these lines sit buried in the files of varying political parties and government departments. Someone needs to find the lever that creates the will to act on these. Amongst their responsibilities needs to be a best-practice flood mitigation plan that considers the entire catchment rather than the current piece-meal approach which often simply pushes the water elsewhere to be someone else's problem.

- access for landholders and land managers to well-informed advice on issues such as:
 - landslip assessment and stabilisation options, including appropriate vegetation types
 - assessment of impacted sites together with action and resource plans for rehabilitation
 - alternative land use options including changing land management practices and options for land uses that provide dual commercial & environmental benefits via the emerging environmental market. (There is a growing realisation that our land management practices have severely impacted both the role of floodplains and the role of well vegetated slopes and riparian zones upstream in reducing the effects of high rainfall events).
- support in the form of:
 - assistance with the capacity to repair / rehabilitate environmentally degraded land
- future focussed action in the form of:
 - data collection and analysis on landslips
 - support for academic investigations into new areas such as geomorphological and ecological resilience in changing climate patterns

Flood events more generally

Preparation for emergency responses:

An important observation passed on to us was that the tops of coral trees prevented access to and from the river and that people could not describe where they were. A suggestion was to address this by ensuring regular breaks in riverbank trees, with signs stating the location, such as they have along the east coast beaches

Recovery:

- support for the community in the form of:
 - assistance in coping with loss / damage of property / loss of income
 - education on how to effectively support others experiencing loss and trauma or, at least, information about services which can provide such support
 - education and partnership building with media enterprises so that in times such as these they, as members of our community/society, avoid the impulse to focus on fear & sensationalism and on delivery or lack of by government and other organisations; instead celebrating the way, in the first instance, community rise to the occasion, being quick to mobilise and on the spot. This is empowering to both the sense of community and to building resilience in community members as they experience their ability to manage in disasters.
 - continued support and resourcing for the role played by the ABC during times of natural disasters.
 - provision of information re useful tool kits i.e. (a) battery radio/mini chargers for access to a local platform/service that provides accurate and credible regular weather/emergency communications. (b) a two burner camp stove with at least 4 extra fuel cylinders (c) battery powered torches plus extra batteries as well as generators and fuel where possible
 - advice that can be accessed without power like a disaster preparedness/resilience package - power and communications appear to be the first services that fail and it is unlikely that service providers will improve the standard of their product
 - Back-up provisions for power and communications services so that when nodes / towers etc are impacted by flood or fire an alternative comes into play.

Chair