

**From:** [NSW Government](#)  
**To:** [Flood Inquiry](#)  
**Subject:** Floods Inquiry  
**Date:** Thursday, 28 April 2022 5:33:22 PM  
**Attachments:** [Northern Rivers Flood Inquiry.docx](#)

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## Your details

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## Submission details

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<b>I am making this submission as</b>	A resident in a flood-affected area
<b>Submission type</b>	I am making a personal submission
<b>Consent to make submission public</b>	I give my consent for this submission to be made public

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## Share your experience or tell your story

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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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## Supporting documents or images

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**Attach files**

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- [Northern Rivers Flood Inquiry.docx](#)

## **Submission to Northern Rivers Flood Inquiry: Lismore**

I reside in the Northern Rivers, 14 km from Lismore. While my property suffered storm damage, it was not directly impacted by the catastrophic flooding of 28 February/1 March and 30 March 2022 in Lismore. I have, however, had a close 36-year association with the city and was actively involved in the volunteer recovery effort, as I was following the 2017 floods.

I have a deep affection for Lismore and its people, having worked in the city for over 30 years. My children were born in Lismore Base Hospital and attended Lismore schools. It is where I shop, socialise and dine. I was, and continue to be, deeply affected by the devastation caused by the recent flooding to our beloved city and have witnessed its initial and continuing effects on friends, residents, business owners and properties. The observations that follow are those of an engaged bystander and relate to the need for effective and accurate flood monitoring and early warning systems, and for time sensitive means of communication to those potentially impacted by floods in Lismore. I will not comment upon ways in which the residents and businesses of the Lismore basin may be supported to rebuild, raise and/or relocate. These are matters that require careful professional research and recommendations, extensive resourcing and exhaustive consultation with those directly affected by the recent flood events.

I developed a strong sense of dread when, prior to the afternoon of 28 February, concerning posts began to emerge on several social media sites relating to expected river level rises in Lismore. I live in a elevated catchment area to the east of the city and was aware that our local creeks and tributaries had, from 25-26 February, overtopped their banks and began to flood local roads, bridges and causeways. People living in the catchments to the north and west of Lismore were reporting similar events happening to their waterways. Based on these observations, and the relentless rain bomb that began on 24 February following months of wet weather, local knowledge suggested that Lismore could expect substantial flooding within the next few days. Since roads were impassable and the torrential rain unrelenting - in excess of 400mm within 24 hours where I live - I was unable to travel into Lismore from my home to assist friends with their flood preparations. Instead, I obsessively monitored river heights, road closures, Bureau of Meteorology weather bulletins, Higgins Storm Chaser predictions, SES (NSW) and Lismore City

Council notifications, as well as engaging with a number of social media groups in the region.

Below: Photo of Booyong Bridge on 26 February 2022 (bottom of my road)



By about 25 February, a combination of intuition, data observation, internet research, social media engagement and phone conversations with people in Lismore and catchment areas, suggested that Lismore could expect major flooding within days. At that time, the 11.6 metre flood of 2017 served, in most of our minds, as a benchmark for major flooding. People living in the catchments were aware from their observations and as a consequence of the prolonged El Niño Southern Oscillation rain event, that their local streams, creeks and tributaries were well exceeding their 'normal' flood behaviours and that Lismore would experience an exceptional flood event. There was a growing concern that the river height in Lismore would exceed that of 2017.

By 26 February there were many 'unofficial' social media posts warning residents and businesses in the CBD and residential areas to the north and south to evacuate the basin. At that time, weather predications from Higgins Storm Chaser were at odds with those of the Bureau of Meteorology. Posts and predictions from those residing in catchment areas had an urgency which was at odds with SES and Lismore Council bulletins - the latter both warning of moderate to major flooding. Understandably, many residents and businesses in the basin may have considered 'non official' warnings unnecessarily alarmist. Most, of

course, had little time for prolonged engagement with social media as they were involved in flood preparations. One can imagine that the conflicting information circulating on social media from both official and non official sources would have been a source of confusion for those in the Lismore basin. So, with 2017 as their benchmark for major flooding, many residents in the north and south of Lismore decided to remain in their homes. Residents in the east of Lismore whose properties had never before flooded would not have considered evacuation.

While I'm not certain if it was the case, residents living in the worst flood affected areas of north and south Lismore reported that they did not hear the evacuation sirens prior to the levee overtopping at 3 am on 28 February. Whether this is because of the noise of the rain drowning out the sirens, or the failure of the sirens themselves, I am unable to comment. It is clear, however, that the sirens malfunctioned during the second flood on 30 March, when at 10:07 am, the NSW SES notified residents by SMS and tweet that 'the sirens will not sound due to malfunction, overtopping of the levee was imminent and that everyone must get out of the CBD immediately'. It goes without saying, that evacuation sirens need to be audible and effective when they are most needed.

February 28 - 1 March: I won't comment upon the horror and vicarious trauma as, in the early hours of 1 March, stories appeared on social media of Lismore residents and their companion animals trapped in roof cavities and upon roofs, in the dark, with no power, limited means of communication and no immediate help on the horizon. These stories are best told by those who lived through them.

There is much that could be said, also, of the immediate and rapidly organised volunteer led rescue and recovery efforts that occurred during, and in the immediate and longer term aftermath of the 28 February flood, and the less than timely roll out of 'official' disaster assistance, but I will not address these issues here. I'm confident that the Inquiry will receive many submissions relating to these matters.

During the second flood of March 30, the flood waters reached 11.4 metres, just shy of the 2017 level of 11.6. Again, in the days preceding this flood event, there were conflicting and confusing predictions of expected river heights coming from both the SES and Lismore City Council. Adding to the confusion was that the BOM's weather predictions relating to the low pressure system heading towards the region proved to be inaccurate

and resulted in evacuation orders for the CBD and other parts of Lismore being issued and then rescinded. Levee gauges were reportedly damaged and failed to function. An already traumatised community was again left shaken and confused.

The major point of this submission is to stress the importance of effective, timely and reliable information to all those potentially affected by flooding events in the Northern Rivers. We know from experience that when the Wilson and Richmond River catchments become saturated during prolonged rain events, towns will flood. For this reason, state of the art monitoring technology needs to be installed in all Northern Rivers catchment areas to measure river, creek and tributary water levels and be equipped to transmit this data to emergency services in a time sensitive manner. Such technology would act as an early warning system for those living on the flood plain. A single, effective centralised communication hub having access to all relevant meteorological and hydrological data is paramount, together with the means to effectively communicate this data to all people in flood affected regions using all available media sources. It also goes without saying that older style warning systems such as sirens need to function and be situated where they are clearly audible and that river gauges need to be maintained and functional. Official responses should err on the side of caution when catchment data suggests that flooding can be expected in low lying areas. While Lismore, in particular, is 'lucky' that more lives were not lost, this is a consequence of local volunteer efforts rather than preparedness by publicly funded government agencies.

While the word 'unprecedented' is often used when referring to the 14.37m flood of 28 February 28 - 1 March, this should not be used as an excuse for the failures of monitoring, warning and communication failures that occurred at that time and again on 30 March. The official monitoring, preparedness, public communication and response to both flood disasters clearly fall short of what a community, accustomed to flooding, should reasonably expect.

Thank you for holding this Inquiry and taking time to consider this submission.

Anne Schillmoller

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Ph: