

From: [NSW Government](#)
To: [Flood Inquiry](#)
Subject: Floods Inquiry
Date: Thursday, 7 April 2022 1:02:43 PM
Attachments: [RAPID DEPLOYMENT UNIT.docx](#)

Your details

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Last name	O'Mahony

Email

Submission details

I am making this submission as	Emergency services personnel
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Submission type	I am making a personal submission
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Organisation making the submission (if applicable)	NSW Police Force
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Your position in the organisation (if applicable)	Sergeant
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Consent to make submission public	I give my consent for this submission to be made public
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Share your experience or tell your story

Your story

I am a 33 year career General Duties Police Officer. I was born and raised on the North Coast of NSW. I have previously worked in Metropolitan Sydney, Far West NSW and the North and South Coasts. I have experienced floods having been in the Coffs/Clarence Command from 1994 to 2015. During that time I have been involved in the 1996 Coffs Harbour Flash Flood event and all other Flood Events on the Clarence River from 1999 to 2015. I was directly involved in the Tathra Bushfire in 2018 and 2019/20 Bushfires on the South Coast of NSW.

Terms of Reference (optional)

The Inquiry welcomes submissions that address the particular matters identified in its [Terms of Reference](#)

1.1 Causes and contributing factors

I can say that a contributing factor from my Policing and personal experience that recent events in Lismore are partly due to complacency and over reliance upon the 1/10 year levee system which was only designed to allow more preparation for an approaching flood and allow evacuation in a more timely manner. Prior to the levee people prepared and did what they could for themselves. I believe that now there is an over reliance upon Government assistance and warning.

Th Lismore flood saw 2.5 metres higher than any previously recorded flood. Now transfer that same problem to any other major centre such as Taree, Kempsey, Grafton Maclean, Murwillumbah and you have a significant problem. The same complacency exists in all of these towns. We have seen previous evacuation orders for Grafton in 2008 relatively ignored. People are not aware that sewer does not work in floods. Power is disconnected for safety. As in a bush fire situation emergency services cannot get to everyone. You may call but that does not mean that they can get to you. People just think, "... I will wait here and if I can't get out a helicopter will get me."

1.2 Preparation and planning

Lismore previously had, and still does in some areas, signs which marked the level of the 1974 flood. I believe that this type of awareness needs to be in place to overcome complacency. It is a visual reminder of where the flood can come to. With notices in specific and high traffic public areas awareness would always be there. It has been 48 years the 1974 flood so it is only memory for a small minority of locals, so younger and more recent arrivals to town are not aware and do not know how to respond.

The attached proposal could be included in preparation and planning for future events.

1.3 Response to floods

The attached Proposal gives a response that could be offered from a Policing perspective. It is one which can be applied to a number of Natural and Man made Disasters situations across the state. It is an area which would address some of the criticism currently being thrown around about response to the Lismore Floods.

1.6 Any other matters

This flood incident also translates to beliefs and ways of thinking which occurred during the 2019/20 fires. People are not resilient and need to be spoon fed. We have to get away from their reliance on Government Support and make them think for themselves. What do I do now? How do I fix my own problem? The handouts during the fires and the floods were and will be abused. Multiple claims by the same person through multiple agencies. I do not think that handouts are the answer. They have come to be expected and often by persons that either do not require them or do not need them.

Supporting documents or images

Attach files

- [RAPID DEPLOYMENT UNIT.docx](#)
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INTRODUCTION

RAPID DEPLOYMENT UNIT

I have now been a General Duties Police Officer for 33 years and that has exposed me to the many and varied responses to both Natural and Man-Made Disasters. I have seen the worst of what nature can throw at you. The one thing that, I must say, is that I have not seen the NSW Police adapt and change the way in which they do things for the better. This not being more evident than over the last three years. I put forward this proposal and information having been involved in various incidents, operations and units over my 33 years of General Duty Policing.

I was Sector Supervisor for the Narooma Sectors during the 2019/20 bushfires. This included the towns of Narooma, Cobargo, Bermagui and Quaama. Cobargo and Quaama were directly impacted by fire with deaths and significant property loss. Bermagui was entirely evacuated a number of times. Narooma became the centre of the evacuations for the South Coast area and itself being under direct threat for a number of days.

The biggest issue we faced in that time was lack of communication and “boots on the ground”. We were severely impacted on the morning of the 31/12/2019. We received no information guidance or response by the 2/01/2020. I managed to get some emergency mobile phone connection on the 02/01/2020 and I sort that assistance through the Police Association of NSW.

The first “boots on the ground” we received was three days later on the afternoon of the 05/01/2020 consisting of five officers. They had travelled from Sydney that day. They were supplied with food and other resources from Batemans Bay which had also been heavily impacted by the fires. We then had utilisation of those Officers for two days at which time they then had to travel day back to Sydney. They had a four-day deployment which included their two travel days. Their replacements then travelled the following day thus leaving a lag of two days until replacements arrived. There was no ability to gain an appreciation of by these Officers on what was needed and where. Local Police were under immense pressure and could only advise quickly on what they thought they could do. Having more time on the ground means that they become self-aware about what was needed and where and thus being able to respond better. In no way am I criticizing those officers that were sent.

I have seen what was made available during the search for Malcolm Naden in Gloucester 2011 20012 which was greatly assisted by RFS with tents, food and ration packs. During the fires all services were overcome and the services and equipment which we previously reliant on from the RFS were now not available.

The last three years has seen utilization of the ADF in a Disaster and Humanitarian role. They themselves are rethinking their ability to respond and how they will respond in the future due to many of the recent events. Humanitarian and Disaster Relief (HADR) has become more and more common for the ADF.

Only a decade ago, 1200 ADF personnel were deployed on 2011 Queensland Flood Assist; this was the largest ADF deployment since Cyclone Tracy hit Darwin in 1974. Since then, other large-scale deployments include 2017's Cyclone Debbie (1600 personnel), 2019 Queensland Flood Assist (3000),

2019/20 Operation Bushfire Assist (8200 plus 500 foreign personnel) and today's huge Operation Covid-19 Assist (16,000 and counting).

Some are of the thought that the ADF be restructured with a dedicated element to better tackle relief operations on a full time basis. There are reasonable arguments that such a HADR force [need not be military](#).

From the time of the fires I have thought and pondered a better way to do respond during times of significant disasters. I have spoken with countless staff and looked at what the issues are for them on the ground. This not only from a Policing perspective but a Community perspective as well. What did the Community want? What did the Community need?

Having worked all over the state I am fully aware that my idea is not only fire related but relates to any disaster which may occur. The list of possibilities is endless. In my thinking I had included the North Coast floods in my planning prior to Lismore occurring.

A list of incidents, from my limited knowledge, which could have utilized or benefitted from a more rapid response:

1989 Grafton Bus Crash – 21 Dead – 22 injured

1989 Clybucca Bus Crash – 35 Dead – 41 Injured

1989 Newcastle Earthquake – 13 Dead – 160 Injured

1990 Nyngan Flood – Entire town evacuation – 2,300

1992 Condobolin Cyanide spill – 3klm Evacuation Radius - Emergency lasted 10 days

1993/94 NSW Fires – Thousands on standby for evacuation – 100+ homes destroyed

1997 Thredbo landslide – 18 deaths – 8-day duration

2011 North Coast Floods – Evacuation 1000+

2013 Floods North Coast

2018 Tathra Bushfire – 70 homes destroyed – 300+ evacuated

2019/20 NSW Bushfires – Thousands displaced - 2448 Homes Destroyed – 26 deaths.

2022 North Coast floods – Thousands evacuated – Homes Destroyed

My proposal is for the formation of a New South Wales Police - Rapid Deployment Unit. This RDU would have resources stored and available to respond swiftly to any type of Natural or Man-made disaster within the state of New South Wales when required.

SWOT ASSESSMENT

STRENGTHS

The NSW Police lead the way controlling and coordinating Emergency situations every day. We do it without thinking and often take up the slack with deficiencies in another Emergency Service Organisations. I have always thought that NSW Police have been inventive and forward thinking of all the Australian Police Forces, if not the world. We meet challenges head on and do not shy away from what is required to do. This is no more evident that in the last three years. We dealt with unprecedented 2019/20 fires. This being closely followed by COVID19. We me the challenge of closing our state border to Victoria which was a logistical and unequalled response by any State Police Force.

I saw firsthand the resources which were given to the search for Macolm Naden in the Gloucester area in 2011-2012. What I saw there logistically was amazing and along the lines of what I am trying to portray in this proposal. In that instance we were reliant upon Rural Fire Service for a lot of that equipment. Either way we did it well

We have a certain degree of Public Confidence in that we know what we are doing and can do it if needed and our staff are willing to do it.

WEAKNESSES

In saying all of the above I can see ways in which we can improve our responses in disaster situations. The biggest issue I have is that there is Officers “biting at the bit” to respond in these situations but their enthusiasm is often overlooked. We have sections assigned to a response who are not that keen to be deployed as it often outside their scope of everyday duties.

Our response is often tied to a lengthy chain of command where common sense is overlooked. We need to be more like: “This is the situation; this is what I am asking for – send it.” Delays also result because someone’s concern for making a mistake and deploying when not required. We often also see and over reaction to situations when not required but then when they are needed, we see a very slow and insignificant response

Changes in Hierarchy and staff movement also sees a loss of valuable local knowledge. We have people who have not experienced or been involved in disasters of this size again making decisions that although well intentioned are not what is needed. Deployment of resources often comes as a knee jerk reaction. Floods, Fires and other Disasters are not new to Australia. We have seen much media attention to the North Coast having two floods in a month this year but it has happened before, many times.

I see our biggest issue being a commitment from management for something new and embracing new ideas and ways to approach a problem we have had for many years.

OPPORTUNITIES

We have seen the ADF start to rethink their response and deployment to Humanitarian Assistance within Australia. They are at a point of making decisions on how they will deal with this type of incident into the future have been floating the idea of a standalone Humanitarian arm. There is no reason that

NSW Police Force cannot take advantage of this and work with them in achieving this role for the State of NSW.

Documenting what worked and didn't work during the last three years or any other disaster is vital. This should then be passed on to new managers and we do not lose the valuable knowledge in the next incident.

The recent events of the past few years have shown a real need for this type of response by not only NSW Police but many other Emergency Organisations. When one takes into account the type of Disaster or incident where such a Unit could be used you will see definite need.

We have staff that would step up into this type of role with little or no fanfare. Manpower is not a problem, over governance and Hierarchy is though.

THREATS

Our Weaknesses expose us to poor community relationships. We have seen a loss of faith by some sections of the Community in the abilities of not only the Police, other Emergency Organisations or the Government in protecting them. This idea gives some support and belief back into communities that they matter in their time of need. Police need to be seen at incidents like these and they need to be seen quickly. They also need to be in a position to assist victims and the community in general. I am aware that under the definitions of the Emergency Service Act that various State Government Emergency Services are the lead agencies for various incidents as they take place in the state of NSW. Police will always be involved at a various level's in any response to a disaster or incident.

The compounding, overlapping disasters are the new normal and now need to be planned for. Indeed, the [Bushfire Royal Commission](#) declared:

“Natural disasters are expected to become more complex, more unpredictable, and more difficult to manage. We are likely to see more compounding disasters on a national scale with far-reaching consequences.”

Also in the Royal Commission into Natural Disaster Arrangements

Recommendation 3.6 Enhanced national preparedness and response entity

The Australian Government should enhance national preparedness for, and response to, natural disasters, building on the responsibilities of Emergency Management Australia, to include facilitating resource sharing decisions of governments and stress testing national disaster plans.

There is no reason that the NSW Police lead the way in how we deal with Disasters. I have always thought that NSW Police have been inventive and forward thinking of all the Australian Police Forces if not the world.

VISION

This idea requires basic infrastructure and framework which does not get bogged down in red tape, rules or people's ego's and be seen for what it is, a quick and rapid deployment of assistance to the people of NSW in their time of need. This vision is loosely based upon previous experience and gives an overview of what would be desired in these circumstances and is subject to review or change as is seen fit for logistical or management reasons. The terminology is also subject to change and only utilised for ease of explanation.

The RDU would consist of Officers who are willing, at short notice, to deploy to an area with the direct intention of getting "dirty". When I say this, I mean that they are willing to live in a tent and eat ration packs for up to seven days or longer. Not worry about the award or 3-star accommodation and hot meals but willing to get in and help communities in their time of need and not be precious.

This is a special type of officer of which the NSW Police abounds but one that can only be chosen at the local level. It is not for "show ponies" or those wanting to climb the promotion ladder but Officers who have genuine interest in helping and caring for their fellow Australians. I am aware of the ability of the OSG having been an OSG Operative for over ten years and I am aware of PORS but do not believe that they are the answer to what is needed. This type of unit does not need a fitness test, the ability to do 50 pushups, this unit needs people who put the needs of others ahead of themselves. I have worked beside many of those Officers in my 33 years.

MAKE UP:

The RDU could or would consist of Ten Sections.

Each Section would have two teams of seven. There would be two Team Leaders chosen based upon rank, experience and ability with twelve constables under their command. I would see any deployment being at least one RDU at any incident. This allowing for possible night shift/day shift scenario if needed.

Each Section would have two trailers, at the ready to collect, for deployment. These would contain the basics for deployment. A large ADF Style Tent, stretchers and sleeping bags for the Section. My view would be that each tent be able to house a Section. Necessary PPE and equipment such as shovels, rakes and gloves would also be stored in the trailers. This list is by no means endless.

How many of these Sections do we actually need in the state? Consultation would be needed for this number. A review of recent disasters and what would be practicable would be required. Bearing in mind that these staff would be spread throughout the state. It may be that in recent events the staff on the North Coast would not be available to respond as their duties lay with the towns already affected.

CONTROL:

Except in planned and controlled environments I see the RDU being autonomous. They would assist in a way that they see fit and is controlled by what is occurring on the ground at the Disaster site. It would be in consultation with Local Police and may include body recovery, it may be shoveling mud, it may be search and rescue or working in an evac centre. They would be greatly guided by local knowledge to a

degree but also have the ability to decide for themselves what they see as the best use of their resources at the time. I have previously seen Specialist Police sections allocated roles in flood zones which were ridiculous and unnecessary. This was even seen by the units themselves and they redeployed based upon the local knowledge available to them and their own common sense.

LOGISTICS:

Logistically we could work with the ADF in preparation, management, and storage of any such deployment equipment. We have seen in recent years Australian Defence Forces (ADF) being called upon for assistance in these times of need. Any such NSW Police RDU could exploit this to the point of dovetailing with any future plans by the ADF and utilizing the strong, robust and proven ADF Logistic Systems. I cannot see why and State response could not leverage off existing ADF structures.

TIME FRAME FOR DEPLOYMENT:

A time frame for deployment of an RDU would be within 12 to 24 hrs of the incident. The reasoning is that we are looking for a rapid response and one which the community can see. In the recent Lismore floods, I saw Sikh Volunteers Australia respond within 24hrs from Melbourne and supply hot meals on the street in Lismore. This was an incredible response and one which a multimillion-dollar organisation like the NSW Police Force, in reality, does not match and cannot match in its current forms.

DEPLOYMENT LENGTH:

Generally, a seven-day deployment but could be up to 14 days. This would be at 10-hour shifts. My view is that in the spirit of what I am trying to achieve these officers could assist outside their work hours as they see fit.

MEALS:

This would consist of space cases loaded with enough Meals, Ready to Eat (MRE) ration packs for a seven-day initial deployment. The Meal, Ready-To-Eat (MRE) is designed to sustain an individual engaged in heavy activity such as a disaster or during actual disaster operations when normal food service facilities are not available. This allows the valuable resources of an already impacted area be spent on those in need and not on those visiting.

CHARTER:

The RDU duties could consist of any of the following:

1. Mass care for sheltered populations; (Evac Centres)
2. Point of distribution for Police response.
3. Medical surge;
4. Isolation and quarantine;
5. Community outreach and assessment;
7. Humanitarian assistance;
8. On-site incident management;

9. Supplies management and distribution;

10. Public health needs.

I am fully aware that under the State DISPLAN many of the areas mentioned above are coordinated and supplied by other Government Agencies but, notwithstanding that, these types of incidents will always require a Police response as well. This again is a Rapid Deployment Unit and is mainly aimed at “boots on the ground” co-ordination and initial support.

I hope that this information can be taken for what it is – that is a realistic approach to initial disaster response by the NSW Police Force and one which does not become bogged down in red tape or unrealistic governance or control. I also do not believe that it is a hard project. I see it as a Common Sense approach and with, at most a twelve-month lead time with the right thinking. I am a strong believer in the KISS principle and would love to see that principle applied to this idea.

We as Police take an oath to protect life and property. It again takes a special type of officer in the mentioned circumstances to step up and fulfill that oath. It is in no way meant to take away from the work of other sections, organisations or training we already receive. It is meant to fill a gap which I, and many others, believe exist in our current emergency response structure.

Thank you for your time

Brendan O'MAHONY

Sergeant

Police Station

7 April, 2022