

**From:** [NSW Government](#)  
**To:** [Flood Inquiry](#)  
**Subject:** Floods Inquiry  
**Date:** Thursday, 28 April 2022 9:11:14 AM  
**Attachments:** [2022 Flood.docx](#)  
[ADF complaint response.pdf](#)

## Your details

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<b>Title</b>	Mrs
<b>First name</b>	Candida
<b>Last name</b>	Lawrence
<b>Email</b>	
<b>Postcode</b>	2469

## 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

## Share your experience or tell your story

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<b>Your story</b>	The 2022 Flood as experienced at 2520 Bungawalbin-Whiporie Road, Gibberagee  OUR BACKGROUND AND EXPERIENCE  I have lived in Gibberagee since September 1st, 2007. My partner _____ and I are in our
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mid to late 60s. He is a former yachtsman, with Sydney-Hobart sailing experience which predates press-button technology; this background means that he understands water flow and is excellent at predicting the weather by assessing information from the Bureau of Meteorology, by watching the local conditions and by learning from past weather- and water-related experiences.

Before buying this property, I scrutinised the 100-year flood projection map provided by Richmond Valley Council and observed that even at peak flooding, this property is well above flood level. I also talked to long-time locals and understood that flooding was a regular occurrence here but could be lived with, as long as one stayed alert and well prepared. My insurance company was happy to provide flood insurance for both my vehicle and our house.

Bungawalbin-Whiporie Road is home to a wide variety of farmers and farm workers, educators, artists, retirees, essential workers, commercial fishermen and more. It extends for nearly 50km between Whiporie township in the south-west to the Coraki-Woodburn Road in the north-east, and contains around 100 residences, some being weekenders and some being permanently inhabited. It is tarred for some 10km at each end, but then becomes a dirt and gravel road which is almost invariably the first road affected by Northern Rivers floods due to the proximity of the meeting place of three major watercourses: the Wilsons and Richmond Rivers, coming from the Lismore and Kyogle areas respectively, and Bungawalbin Creek whose tributaries come from the Rappville area and beyond. Excess water which gathers at Bungawalbin Junction and Coraki during heavy, protracted rain backs up through the Bungawalbin area, rising over the road in several predictable places.

Over the last 14+ years, we have observed clear

patterns in the many floods that have occurred. The Whiporie end of the road is cut off first, usually at Elliotts Rd intersection or at the causeway past the cattle farm; there is then a small window to get supplies in at the Coraki end, which goes under within a day or two of the Elliotts intersection and takes much longer to clear. Sometimes we have been flooded in three times in a single year, but usually we are trapped at least once. The longest we have been isolated has been around two weeks, when continuing rain kept the water levels high.

New residents are sometimes a little naive at first about the need for both a dry box and extreme caution when driving in a flooded wetland. There are two local Facebook pages which more experienced residents have organised to provide advice and information about the road conditions and other local concerns. Floods turn Bungawalbin-Whiporie Road into a series of 'islands', and getting supplies in by boat is a last resort, which would require trapped locals to move the supplies over land to the next stretch of water; in past floods an SES helicopter has been utilised at the discretion of Woodburn SES, which in the past has landed on our 'island' at 2670 Bungawalbin-Whiporie Road. Our own 'island' extends from Elliotts Road to the Shady Gully dip, or in less severe floods to the Jackybulbin Bridge.

Our property backs onto Bungawalbin Creek, 1.8km from our front gate. The very deep gully behind our homestead area joins up with the creek in a severe flood. The property, including the siting of the dams and house, was carefully designed by the previous owner to facilitate excess water flowing away from the house even in a big flood with protracted heavy rain. In 2009, 2013 and 2017 the gully was full and we had water overflowing our lagoons near the house, but this water never came anywhere near the homestead itself. Around the house, excess

water flows in a circular pattern out of the big dam to the north of the house, into the small dam to the east of the house, out onto the road, then from north-east to south-west down the road and into the lagoons to the south of the house. It then flows back through the gullies to the creek. We have watched this same pattern of flow occur in every flood for 14 years.

We are usually self-sufficient and well-prepared in terms of food and other personal supplies, but the first thing we all tend to run out of in an extended flood here is fuel for our generators, which back up our solar power when there is a lot of overcast weather. There is no mains power down most of the length of our road, so we are all either reliant on solar power plus generators or on generators alone. We have only had cause to contact the Woodburn SES for supplies twice in 14 years, and I have asked to be evacuated by helicopter twice (once when I had cancer and was due for chemotherapy, once when several locals needed to catch domestic or international flights). I have the coordinates of the landing site written in a book by the phone for emergency use.

In short, we are very organised and used to sitting out and coping through a flood. There has never before been a problem getting supplies, including fuel, flown in when we find ourselves in extended isolation – until this year.

## WHAT HAPPENED

24th February:

Our observations of the BOM information and the height of water already in our gully suggested to us that topping up our supplies, particularly of fuel, would be wise, as an extended flood seemed likely. Elliotts Road had yet to go under but the rain was heavy and

persistent. I tried to get to Lismore to shop, but road conditions towards the Coraki end were so dangerous that I turned the car around and came home; there was water already flowing across the road in several spots and I had no desire to become a statistic. The level of water at the north-eastern end of the road was highly unusual, given that the Elliotts Road intersection was not yet submerged.

26th February:

Elliotts Road intersection was cut by water.

27th February:

The water near our homestead area was only around 1.5m below the 2009 level already, and there was no sign of the heavy rain abating in the next week, so I rang the SES pre-emptively to request a supply drop for people on our road.

I expected to be transferred to Woodburn SES to talk to former SES captain Jim McCormack or new captain Ashley Slapp, who understand our area and have always looked after us brilliantly. However I found myself talking first to someone in Wollongong who had no idea where I was, then to a very inexperienced SES member in Ballina who admitted he'd only been on the job a few days and had no idea either about our area or our problems and how to solve them. I then was told, to my shock and amazement, that the SES wouldn't bring fuel by helicopter as it was a 'safety issue'. I made further phone calls all evening trying to sort this out, but at no point was I given access to the Woodburn crew. This was well before Woodburn went under water. For the first time in 14 years here I felt that we were very much on our own in an emergency and nobody really understood our issues or cared about our welfare out here.

Despite the frustration with the fuel, I knew we

may well need food delivered still; I did as we had done before and asked where to do our online shopping so it could be picked up by a helicopter crew and dropped to us. Via the Facebook groups, I organised for everyone on our Facebook group to put in their orders at the same store in Casino to minimise inconvenience to the SES crew. This supply delivery never arrived due to Casino experiencing flooding the next day; Woolworths cancelled all orders.

28th February:

I received a phone call before 8am from a local, Dean Russo, who lives next to Shady Gully. He sounded extremely distressed, saying his house was full of water and he was about to turn off the power (which would terminate his ability to make phone calls in our heavily-forested area) and climb onto the roof. He had already tried to call the SES for help but was told help was not coming. He wanted someone to know where he was, as his call to the SES had not inspired any confidence that he would be rescued at all, let alone soon.

We were already in crisis, yet nobody in our area had received any text message at all about the impending disaster. There had been no official warnings sent out and no notice to seek higher ground or evacuate.

At this stage the deep gully behind our homestead to the west was fuller than I'd ever seen it, but as usual, we had no floodwater near the house. Around 9am my partner started walking down the road to the north towards 2405 Bungawalbin-Whiporie Road, where the Forrest family lives; they had offered us a drum of fuel as they had plenty. He had assessed the road as unsuitable for driving in our ute due to the amount of water already flowing down it at ankle level and a very deep puddle at our gate. He was startled to notice that the water was running in

the opposite direction from usual – from the SW to the NE.

By 9.45am he was back with the fuel and a lot of the Forrests' clothing and supplies, arriving riding in the bucket of the Forrest's tractor driven by Mr Forrest. The water was already so high just over a kilometre down the road that the Forrest's house was about to be flooded and they were going straight back in the tractor to pick up Mr Forrest's wife, his two small boys aged 3 and 5 and his three dogs. The tractor is a huge John Deere model with high clearance and was by this stage the only way to drive down the road in any safety. Even in this vehicle, the trip to 2405 and back was fraught with danger as the water was making it very hard to see the side limits of the Forrests' long, narrow driveway. By the time they were back at the gate of 2405 with their passengers, the gate posts had almost disappeared under the water.

On the way back up the road they observed two other neighbours from next door to 2405, Kate and Dave (unsure of surnames), attempting to evacuate in a one person kayak with their dog and minimal supplies. They said their rental house had already filled with water; the kayak was being pushed around by the strong current and it was almost impossible for them to make ground towards safety. There was no room for them to get on the tractor; the elder of the Forrests' two children, a sensible, strong child, was already being entrusted with his own safety, hanging on for dear life from a standing position while the other adults dealt with the driving, the 3-yr-old and the dogs. They dropped their passengers and goods at our homestead and returned once again through fast flowing, dangerous water to rescue the kayakers. We all adjourned to the relative safety of our deck; by this stage we were all shaken, but were quickly making what preparations we could for eight people and six dogs to live upstairs in our

bedroom with surrounding deck for an unknown period and lifting furniture in case the water continued to rise. Our house was built to council standards and the builder had added a small extra floor height margin in the main living area; this was to prove extremely fortunate for us.

By 11.45am water had started rushing across our property, again from SW to NE, in what could only be described as a flash flood. This had never happened before – not even close. Over the next two hours it rose to engulf our lower deck, our storage container containing my entire business stock of children's books, our shed (where our vehicles were parked and our farm equipment stored) and my partner's office off the shed. By 2.15pm the water was in our pantry and we turned off the fridges and moved to the upper storey. Our water pump was then submerged and it shorted out the power, so we no longer had running water, internet or a booster to the (normally minimal) mobile phone signal.

By 6.45pm the water had slowed and then stopped rising – fortunately for us, a matter of a few millimetres before entering the main part of the house.

March 1st:

As the water gradually subsided we were able to disconnect the water pump and regain internet and phone services. We discovered via Facebook that two older, ill neighbours further down the road, Chris and Lorraine Carroll, had been on their roof waiting for rescue for over 24 hours already in the rain without fresh water, food or warm clothing. My partner and Mr Forrest got in the one man kayak, a precarious balancing act, and paddled down to give them what they needed. The men were dismayed to discover much later on that Mr Russo was also still on his roof, further down the road; they had discussed trying to get to his house but were



exhausted already by their efforts, all done on almost no sleep, and assumed he would have been rescued, considering that he was surely one of the first to raise the alarm with the SES. Knowing they had to paddle against the tide to get back, they returned home without checking whether Mr Russo was okay.

March 2nd:

Our Facebook residents' pages were being used to try to find out who needed help, who was in a position to help and whether there was any help coming from the outside. Some people had been stranded on their roofs for 48 hours or more, first in the rain then in burning sunshine with no protection. Civilians were trying to organise private helicopters to drop supplies and to evacuate those who were needing to get out because their houses were now uninhabitable. We had eight people and six dogs living at our house, with no running water, and I asked for supplies to suit. Nothing came for days, and we were bailing water out of our tanks by hand to drink.

March 4th:

On returning to their own home in the tractor to survey the damage, the Forrests discovered that their high wheel base diesel ute, which was parked on high ground, still ran. No vehicles on our property were in working condition due to being partially submerged in the floodwater. The Forrests, now very distressed by the destruction to their home, decided to attempt to evacuate via Whiporie and were able to do so despite the road being severely degraded (to the point where a car could overturn if one wheel entered one of the large excavations under the water level). The road was far too damaged for normal cars to use, but in any case, almost nobody had a car that worked. Another neighbour with a tractor with bucket, Paul Keegan, had managed

to get in from Whiporie and took our other two flood refugees back out there in convoy with the Forrests. At this stage we still had had no contact whatsoever with the SES or any other recognised emergency organisation; we discovered via Facebook that calls to the SES had overloaded the system and were often not answered. I was relieved to find the Mr Russo had not drowned and had finally been helicoptered off his roof.

March 6th:

Mr Keegan brought in FoodBank dry box parcels from Whiporie on his own initiative. This was the first help we'd had. Late in the afternoon a private helicopter organised by civilians finally dropped substantial amounts of food and toiletries, which was now far more dry box supplies than we needed; the time lapse between request and delivery was so long that we now had only two people and two dogs to feed instead of eight and six. The civilians were doing their absolute best to help us, but were hampered by a lack of organisational skills and professional support. I set about sorting out the supplies and asking people online what they needed so I could spread the food and toiletries around to others, but many of the people who stayed were not on Facebook and had no phone service, or were still separated from our 'island' by impassable stretches of water, or both – so this was a frustrating time. In the absence of any official assistance, we needed either an amphibious vehicle or a convoy of boats and working vehicles to pass supplies from one 'island' to another. We did what we could with our one working vehicle, a diesel RTV which we'd been able to get running again, and a wheelbarrow.

March 7th:

A full WEEK after they were needed for rooftop

rescues, the Army turned up with a huge helicopter which proceeded to hover so low over our dam and conservation area (registered with the Biodiversity Conservation Trust) that it broke the tops out of many mature native trees, including some in the conservation area, and pushed others over completely. Fallen, broken branches and flood refuse were being propelled across the ground at high speed by the downdraft and it was extremely dangerous to people on the ground. On other neighbouring properties, damage was done to residences and other fixtures including wet plasterboard walls being blown out and a gazebo being torn to pieces.

This helicopter made an appalling mess for no reason whatsoever, as there were no longer people stuck on rooftops and we all had ample emergency food and water supplies; thanks to this failure of the information system, we now had even more carnage to clean up amongst the dead wildlife, trashed gardens and ruined personal goods. We had repeatedly waved the helicopter away when they buzzed over and made visual contact with us, but they kept circling, doing more and more damage.

I put in a formal complaint about this event and eventually received a 'no responsibility taken' reply from the ADF which further added to the stress and anxiety I was experiencing.

The absence of any real acknowledgement of the damage, any offer to make reparation or any apology for the distress caused created further injury to our spirits. Absolutely no attempt had been made by the ADF or any other body to contact locals on our 'island' directly and find out who actually needed help, where they were, and where to land. As mentioned earlier, I had the correct landing coordinates written down next to the phone; I also had the coordinates of another landing site right next door. During this time I had

been contacted directly on my landline by Jim McCormack's brother, from Woodburn SES, to find out what was going on with the state of the roads; it's not like there was no way to find out what was happening in here, it's just that nobody else official had tried and information was not being shared. Many of us had landlines still working, some had mobile reception, and a lot had internet of some form. This failure to seek and collate information before coming and wrecking our environment even further showed a jaw-dropping lack of initiative and organisation.

In the ensuing days we received no less than three road visits from ADF personnel. They arrived in troop carriers which were totally inappropriate for the conditions, being far too heavy for wetland roads, and two of the groups drove up our driveway and further degraded our access. All three groups asked exactly the same questions about what we needed and appeared to be busily filling in a form on their iPads. We explained, repeatedly, that we were on the lower end of the list in terms of needing their help, but would appreciate help later on with some heavy lifting and with cleaning up the appalling mess the helicopter had made. We directed them first to our neighbours who had had floodwater all through their houses and they left, but never came back to actually do anything at our place, which suggests to me that nobody was collating the information gathered and prioritising tasks.

March 8th:

More rain came and again cut all access at the Whiporie end of the road.

March 16th:

We were finally able to use Elliotts Road to get to Casino to stock up after a mechanically minded friend managed to get in to us and get a neighbour's car working. On our way north up

Elliotts Road we encountered two 12 tonne troop carriers heading for the 2 tonne load limit bridge on that road at a speed which was completely inappropriate for the conditions and the terrain. We flagged them down and my partner warned them that if they proceeded, they would likely destroy our only access. The apparent lack of preparation and failure by senior staff to provide these young ADF personnel with even the most rudimentary knowledge of the terrain and environment they were entering shocked us, as did the drivers' personal failure to read and obey the road sign which clearly warned of the load limit. We did not feel 'saved' by the army. Far from it.

March 24th:

The road towards Coraki was still all but impassable due to two massive potholes which again posed a threat of rolling one's vehicle and drowning. Two army vehicles got bogged in the hole at number 1330; the extraction effort made the problem much worse.

March 28th:

A local, Mark O'Toole, who had earlier been evacuated by helicopter from the roof of his fully inundated home started organising fresh food deliveries by boat and road via the Facebook group.

March 29th /30th:

Cyclonic rain and wind continued for two days, blowing large trees out of the wet ground. The road was blocked by water again at both ends.

March 30th:

Some locals received text messages to seek higher ground and evacuate, AFTER Bungawalbin Creek exceeded major flood level.

There was absolutely no awareness that we were still trapped and unable to leave.

We were not re-flooded here, but the road sustained further damage.

April 4th:

Mr O'Toole and other locals who had continued to organise the fresh food deliveries managed to get supplies in by boat and road to our 'island'. We have pretty much survived on these supplies ever since, with the exception of a few supplies brought in by a friend with a high wheel base ute, as the road has rarely been safe to drive on in our neighbour's car.

It is now approaching the end of April and many locals, including us, are still unable to move around freely or get out with any sort of reliability due to the state of the road (slowly being addressed by council after many submissions and a resident speaking at a council meeting). The drive ranges from 'difficult' to 'impossible' depending on the current weather. Additionally, there are almost no cars still working out here and many driveways are degraded to the point that they are unusable. Insurance assessors have been unable to get in and so everyone is stuck in a holding pattern, surrounded by their destroyed possessions and moulding infrastructure and unable to move forwards.

#### IMPORTANT ISSUES THAT MUST BE ADDRESSED

1. Centralising the SES has had a very negative impact on our community. We have lost access to the volunteers with local knowledge and are being denied the support we need as a result. We need to go back to getting direct support from local volunteers who understand our

circumstances and landscape.

2. The lack of organisation demonstrated by the authorities we elect to look after us in these situations has been frightening. Our area was ignored – not warned before the event, and neglected after the event. Then when the second flood arrived, absolutely nothing had been learned and we were ignored all over again. The authorities then sent in the army, supposedly to 'help' us, without ascertaining what sort of help was needed or where. We were left to organise help amongst ourselves; if this is the best our 'leaders' can do, it's simply not good enough.

3. This was not a normal flood. The water flowed in the opposite direction from usual and was far in excess of 100-year flood predictions, and the pattern of flooding – ie which end of the road flooded first – was back to front also. The cause of this needs to be investigated, as residents are increasingly enraged by the failure of government to listen to AND ACT ON local knowledge – the failure to put the new highway on piers instead of creating a solid 'dam' is a case in point – and to act urgently on climate change. The atmosphere is holding more water as a direct result of global warming, yet governments continue to pretend this is not happening. The Northern Rivers area of NSW is the canary in the planet's coal mine; we may be the first to experience a flood that wipes out towns to the point where relocation of the whole community is being considered, hot on the heels of equally disastrous bushfires, but we will NOT be the last. How many catastrophically destructive climate events need to happen before anyone in power takes the science seriously?

4. The army was ill-prepared to help us and some of their actions increased our problems and our distress. While their 'muscle' was clearly useful in places where whole houses needed the contents removed to the street, and we thank them for that, their failure to understand the sensitive environmental factors of the

Bungawalbin wetland meant that they did actual damage, which they then departed without remedying. The level of disorganisation was also extremely concerning, with some jobs being done multiple times and others being completely neglected due to there being no apparent central data base of information about individual properties.

5. The failures in communication are ongoing. There are still multiple properties with piles of flood-destroyed property sitting by the road, waiting to be washed away by the ongoing rain. There does not seem to be a plan in place for removing these destroyed goods, or if there is a plan, it has not been communicated to residents.

6. If you're going to leave us to our own devices in an emergency, you need to equip us. The truth is that there is no evidence of any plan whatsoever being made at any stage during this crisis. Where was the spreadsheet of addresses, with information collated through door-to-door, phone tree and social media about who was where and what help they needed? IT NEVER HAPPENED. We have been able to look after many residents to some extent by working as a community to help each other, but vulnerable people have fallen through the cracks and the mental health repercussions will be ongoing. We feel betrayed and angry. If we're going to be abandoned like this, we need you to give us amphibious vehicles, boats and adequate mobile phone reception.

While we understand that this was an unprecedented disaster and many emergency services were either compromised themselves by the flooding or quickly overwhelmed, it was clear before the flood started that there were problems with the system, as evidenced by my experience calling the SES on February 27th.

This sort of flooding, perhaps even worse, is going to happen again; you can't relocate everybody. There has to be a plan so emergency



services and support crews can both communicate with and provide support to rural-remote residents through the chaos created by the intersection of unaddressed climate change and flawed decision making, ie the construction of a 'dam' thanks to cost-cutting when building the highway and the centralisation of the SES to the point where it loses all local viability.

There must be much more respect shown by the authorities for our local knowledge and experience. Please start now by giving our submissions a fair hearing and ACTING ON THEM.

Candy Lawrence  
Gibberagee

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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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### 1.1 Causes and contributing factors

1. Climate change causing the atmosphere to hold and drop 7% more water for every 1 degree that the oceans warm.
2. Cost-cutting and failure to listen to local advice by the government when building the new highway as a 'dam-like' structure instead of putting it on piers.

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### 1.2 Preparation and planning

1. Local knowledge about the need for water to escape from the catchment was ignored when the highway was built.
2. The SES was centralised to Wollongong and inappropriately delegated to Ballina who know nothing about this area. The loss of local knowledge when help was needed caused numerous problems.

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### 1.3 Response to floods

There was none for us. We were not warned at all of the first flood and not warned in time to evacuate for the second. The lack of a system for checking on residents' welfare and following

up was a staggering oversight. This continues to hamper the recovery effort.

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**1.4 Transition from incident response to recovery**

There has been no official attempt to help us beyond sending in the army. The army seemed disorganised in their efforts and was ill-prepared for working in a wetland, causing further damage to our roads, homes and trees including in designated conservation areas. They also arrived in a helicopter a week too late for rooftop rescues, yet maintained that the damage was incidental and unimportant as they were performing rescues and welfare checks.

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**1.5 Recovery from floods**

The repairs to our road have been far too slow and there have been no special provisions made for access or offering services. While those in town have recovery and information services and hubs, we have been offered nothing and CANNOT GET TO TOWN BECAUSE OF THE ROAD and the lack of working vehicles.

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**1.6 Any other matters**

Richmond Valley Council have made it very difficult for help to access all residents in emergencies by refusing to repair our bridges on Bungawalbin-Whiporie and Elliotts Road. Instead they have put load limits on the bridges which make access for fire trucks, army vehicles, gravel and rock trucks and anything over those limits of 5 tonne (Whiporie Road) and 2 tonne (Elliotts Road) illegal.

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**Supporting documents or images**

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**Attach files**

- [2022 Flood.docx](#)
  - [ADF complaint response.pdf](#)
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## The 2022 Flood as experienced at Bungawalbin-Whiporie Road, Gibberagee

### OUR BACKGROUND AND EXPERIENCE

I have lived in Gibberagee since September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2007. My partner [redacted] and I are in our mid to late 60s. He is a former yachtsman, with Sydney-Hobart sailing experience which predates press-button technology; this background means that he understands water flow and is excellent at predicting the weather by assessing information from the Bureau of Meteorology, by watching the local conditions and by learning from past weather- and water-related experiences.

Before buying this property, I scrutinised the 100-year flood projection map provided by Richmond Valley Council and observed that even at peak flooding, this property is well above flood level. I also talked to long-time locals and understood that flooding was a regular occurrence here but could be lived with, as long as one stayed alert and well prepared. My insurance company was happy to provide flood insurance for both my vehicle and our house.

Bungawalbin-Whiporie Road is home to a wide variety of farmers and farm workers, educators, artists, retirees, essential workers, commercial fishermen and more. It extends for nearly 50km between Whiporie township in the south-west to the Coraki-Woodburn Road in the north-east, and contains around 100 residences, some being weekenders and some being permanently inhabited. It is tarred for some 10km at each end, but then becomes a dirt and gravel road which is almost invariably the first road affected by Northern Rivers floods due to the proximity of the meeting place of three major watercourses: the Wilsons and Richmond Rivers, coming from the Lismore and Kyogle areas respectively, and Bungawalbin Creek whose tributaries come from the Rappville area and beyond. Excess water which gathers at Bungawalbin Junction and Coraki during heavy, protracted rain backs up through the Bungawalbin area, rising over the road in several predictable places.

Over the last 14+ years, we have observed clear patterns in the many floods that have occurred. The Whiporie end of the road is cut off first, usually at Elliotts Rd intersection or at the causeway past the cattle farm; there is then a small window to get supplies in at the Coraki end, which goes under within a day or two of the Elliotts intersection and takes much longer to clear. Sometimes we have been flooded in three times in a single year, but usually we are trapped at least once. The longest we have been isolated has been around two weeks, when continuing rain kept the water levels high.

New residents are sometimes a little naïve at first about the need for both a dry box and extreme caution when driving in a flooded wetland. There are two local Facebook pages which more experienced residents have organised to provide advice and information about the road conditions and other local concerns. Floods turn Bungawalbin-Whiporie Road into a series of 'islands', and getting supplies in by boat is a last resort, which would require trapped locals to move the supplies over land to the next stretch of water; in past floods an SES helicopter has been utilised at the discretion of Woodburn SES, which in the past has landed on our 'island' at [redacted] -Whiporie Road. Our own 'island' extends from [redacted] Road to the [redacted] Gully dip, or in less severe floods to the [redacted]

Our property backs onto Bungawalbin Creek, 1.8km from our front gate. The very deep gully behind our homestead area joins up with the creek in a severe flood. The property, including the siting of the dams and house, was carefully designed by the previous owner to facilitate excess water flowing away from the house even in a big flood with protracted heavy rain. In 2009, 2013 and 2017 the gully was full and we had water overflowing our lagoons near the house, but this water never came anywhere near the homestead itself. Around the house, excess water flows in a circular pattern out of the big dam to the north of the house, into the small dam to the east of the house, out onto the road, then from **north-east to south-west** down the road and into the lagoons to the south of the house. It then flows back through the gullies to the creek. We have watched this same pattern of flow occur in every flood for 14 years.

We are usually self-sufficient and well-prepared in terms of food and other personal supplies, but the first thing we all tend to run out of in an extended flood here is fuel for our generators, which back up our solar power when there is a lot of overcast weather. There is no mains power down most of the length of our road, so we are all either reliant on solar power plus generators or on generators alone. We have only had cause to contact the Woodburn SES for supplies twice in 14 years, and I have asked to be evacuated by helicopter twice (once when I had cancer and was due for chemotherapy, once when several locals needed to catch domestic or international flights). I have the coordinates of the landing site written in a book by the phone for emergency use.

In short, we are very organised and used to sitting out and coping through a flood. There has never before been a problem getting supplies, including fuel, flown in when we find ourselves in extended isolation – until this year.

## WHAT HAPPENED

### **24<sup>th</sup> February:**

Our observations of the BOM information and the height of water already in our gully suggested to us that topping up our supplies, particularly of fuel, would be wise, as an extended flood seemed likely. Elliotts Road had yet to go under but the rain was heavy and persistent. I tried to get to Lismore to shop, but road conditions towards the Coraki end were so dangerous that I turned the car around and came home; there was water already flowing across the road in several spots and I had no desire to become a statistic. **The level of water at the north-eastern end of the road was highly unusual, given that the Elliotts Road intersection was not yet submerged.**

### **26<sup>th</sup> February:**

Elliotts Road intersection was cut by water.

### **27<sup>th</sup> February:**

The water near our homestead area was only around 1.5m below the 2009 level already, and there was no sign of the heavy rain abating in the next week, so I rang the SES pre-emptively to request a supply drop for people on our road.

I expected to be transferred to **Woodburn SES** to talk to former SES captain or new captain Slapp, who understand our area and have always looked after us brilliantly. However I found myself talking first to **someone in Wollongong who had no idea where I was, then to a very inexperienced SES member in Ballina** who admitted he'd only been on the job a few days and had no idea either about our area or our problems and how to solve them. I then was told, to my shock and amazement, that **the SES wouldn't bring fuel by helicopter** as it was a 'safety issue'. I made further phone calls all evening trying to sort this out, but at no point was I given access to the Woodburn crew. This was well before Woodburn went under water. For the first time in 14 years here I felt that we were very much on our own in an emergency and nobody really understood our issues or cared about our welfare out here.

Despite the frustration with the fuel, I knew we may well need food delivered still; I did as we had done before and asked where to do our online shopping so it could be picked up by a helicopter crew and dropped to us. Via the Facebook groups, I organised for everyone on our Facebook group to put in their orders at the same store in Casino to minimise inconvenience to the SES crew. This supply delivery never arrived due to Casino experiencing flooding the next day; Woolworths cancelled all orders.

### **28<sup>th</sup> February:**

I received a phone call before 8am from a local, who lives next to He sounded extremely distressed, saying his house was full of water and he was about to turn off the power (which would terminate his ability to make phone calls in our heavily-

forested area) and climb onto the roof. He had already tried to call the SES for help but was told help was not coming. He wanted someone to know where he was, as his call to the SES had not inspired any confidence that he would be rescued at all, let alone soon.

We were already in crisis, yet **nobody in our area had received any text message at all about the impending disaster**. There had been no official warnings sent out and no notice to seek higher ground or evacuate.

At this stage the deep gully behind our homestead to the west was fuller than I'd ever seen it, but as usual, we had no floodwater near the house. Around 9am my partner started walking down the road to the north towards Bungawalbin-Whiporie Road, where the Forrest family lives; they had offered us a drum of fuel as they had plenty. He had assessed the road as unsuitable for driving in our ute due to the amount of water already flowing down it at ankle level and a very deep puddle at our gate. **He was startled to notice that the water was running in the opposite direction from usual – from the SW to the NE.**

By 9.45am he was back with the fuel and a lot of the clothing and supplies, arriving riding in the bucket of the tractor driven by Mr . The water was already so high just over a kilometre down the road that the house was about to be flooded and they were going straight back in the tractor to pick up Mr wife, his two small boys aged and and his three dogs. The tractor is a huge model with high clearance and was by this stage the only way to drive down the road in any safety. Even in this vehicle, the trip to and back was fraught with danger as the water was making it very hard to see the side limits of the Forrests' long, narrow driveway. By the time they were back at the gate of with their passengers, the gate posts had almost disappeared under the water.

On the way back up the road they observed two other neighbours from next door to , and (unsure of surnames), attempting to evacuate in a one person kayak with their dog and minimal supplies. They said their rental house had already filled with water; the kayak was being pushed around by the strong current and it was almost impossible for them to make ground towards safety. There was no room for them to get on the tractor; the elder of the two children, a sensible, strong child, was already being entrusted with his own safety, hanging on for dear life from a standing position while the other adults dealt with the driving, the 3-yr-old and the dogs. They dropped their passengers and goods at our homestead and returned once again through fast flowing, dangerous water to rescue the kayakers. We all adjourned to the relative safety of our deck; by this stage we were all shaken, but were quickly making what preparations we could for eight people and six dogs to live upstairs in our bedroom with surrounding deck for an unknown period and lifting furniture in case the water continued to rise. Our house was built to council standards and the builder had added a small extra floor height margin in the main living area; this was to prove extremely fortunate for us.

By 11.45am water had started rushing across our property, again from SW to NE, in what could only be described as a flash flood. **This had never happened before** – not even close. Over the next two hours it rose to engulf our lower deck, our storage container containing my entire business stock of children's books, our shed (where our vehicles were parked and

our farm equipment stored) and my partner's office off the shed. By 2.15pm the water was in our pantry and we turned off the fridges and moved to the upper storey. Our water pump was then submerged and it shorted out the power, so **we no longer had running water, internet or a booster to the (normally minimal) mobile phone signal.**

By 6.45pm the water had slowed and then stopped rising – fortunately for us, a matter of a few millimetres before entering the main part of the house.

### March 1<sup>st</sup>:

As the water gradually subsided we were able to disconnect the water pump and regain internet and phone services. We discovered via Facebook that **two older, ill neighbours further down the road, and , had been on their roof waiting for rescue for over 24 hours already in the rain without fresh water, food or warm clothing.** My partner and Mr got in the one man kayak, a precarious balancing act, and paddled down to give them what they needed. The men were dismayed to discover much later on that **Mr was also still on his roof**, further down the road; they had discussed trying to get to his house but were exhausted already by their efforts, all done on almost no sleep, and assumed he would have been rescued, considering that he was surely one of the first to raise the alarm with the SES. Knowing they had to paddle against the tide to get back, they returned home without checking whether Mr was okay.

### March 2<sup>nd</sup>:

Our Facebook residents' pages were being used to try to find out who needed help, who was in a position to help and whether there was any help coming from the outside. **Some people had been stranded on their roofs for 48 hours or more**, first in the rain then in burning sunshine with no protection. **Civilians were trying to organise private helicopters to drop supplies and to evacuate those who were needing to get out because their houses were now uninhabitable.** We had eight people and six dogs living at our house, with no running water, and I asked for supplies to suit. Nothing came for days, and we were bailing water out of our tanks by hand to drink.

### March 4<sup>th</sup>:

On returning to their own home in the tractor to survey the damage, the discovered that their high wheel base diesel ute, which was parked on high ground, still ran. **No vehicles on our property were in working condition due to being partially submerged in the floodwater.** The , now very distressed by the destruction to their home, decided to attempt to evacuate via Whiporie and were able to do so despite the road being severely degraded (to the point where a car could overturn if one wheel entered one of the large excavations under the water level). **The road was far too damaged for normal cars to use, but in any case, almost nobody had a car that worked.** Another neighbour with a tractor with bucket, had managed to get in from Whiporie and took our other two flood refugees back out there in convoy with the Forrests. **At this stage we still had had no contact whatsoever with the SES or any other recognised emergency organisation;** we discovered via Facebook that calls to the SES had overloaded the system and were often not

answered. I was relieved to find the Mr                      had not drowned and had finally been helicoptered off his roof.

#### **March 6<sup>th</sup>:**

**Mr                      brought in FoodBank dry box parcels from Whiporie on his own initiative. This was the first help we'd had.** Late in the afternoon **a private helicopter organised by civilians finally dropped substantial amounts of food and toiletries**, which was now far more dry box supplies than we needed; the time lapse between request and delivery was so long that we now had only two people and two dogs to feed instead of eight and six. The civilians were doing their absolute best to help us, but were hampered by a lack of organisational skills and professional support. I set about sorting out the supplies and asking people online what they needed so I could spread the food and toiletries around to others, but many of the people who stayed were not on Facebook and had no phone service, or were still separated from our 'island' by impassable stretches of water, or both – so this was a frustrating time. **In the absence of any official assistance, we needed either an amphibious vehicle or a convoy of boats and working vehicles to pass supplies from one 'island' to another.** We did what we could with our one working vehicle, a diesel RTV which we'd been able to get running again, and a wheelbarrow.

#### **March 7<sup>th</sup>:**

**A full WEEK after they were needed for rooftop rescues, the Army turned up** with a huge helicopter which proceeded to hover so low over our dam and conservation area (registered with the Biodiversity Conservation Trust) that it broke the tops out of many mature native trees, including some in the conservation area, and pushed others over completely. Fallen, broken branches and flood refuse were being propelled across the ground at high speed by the downdraft and it was **extremely dangerous to people on the ground**. On other neighbouring properties, damage was done to residences and other fixtures including wet plasterboard walls being blown out and a gazebo being torn to pieces.

**This helicopter made an appalling mess for no reason whatsoever, as there were no longer people stuck on rooftops and we all had ample emergency food and water supplies; thanks to this failure of the information system, we now had even more carnage to clean up amongst the dead wildlife, trashed gardens and ruined personal goods.** We had repeatedly waved the helicopter away when they buzzed over and made visual contact with us, but they kept circling, doing more and more damage.

I put in a formal complaint about this event and eventually received the following 'no responsibility taken' reply from the ADF which further added to the stress and anxiety I was experiencing.



Mrs Candida Lawrence  
- Whiporie Road  
GIBBERAGEE NSW 2469

Dear Mrs Lawrence

Thank you for your email to the office of the NSW Premier on 08 March 2022, where you raised concerns about Defence helicopters causing issues during flood recovery. Your correspondence has been passed to me for response.

The Australian Defence Force (ADF) was tasked to support rescue and recovery operations in the Northern Rivers Region.

Helicopters responded to urgent requests for assistance from the NSW Rural Fire Service. On 7 March 2022 ADF helicopters in the Bungawalbin area were conducting emergency support to the local communities by assisting in searches for missing persons, critical food distribution to isolated people and essential welfare checks.

In relation to your concerns of damage, where possible within the operating profile of the aircraft, aircrew avoid overflying areas where damage may be caused. Through inquiries conducted after receiving your letter, I am confident all aircrew acted in accordance with civil and military aviation regulations in the Bungawalbin area and surrounds.

Thank you for your correspondence,



**The absence of any real acknowledgement of the damage, any offer to make reparation or any apology for the distress caused created further injury to our spirits.** Absolutely no attempt had been made by the ADF or any other body to contact locals on our 'island' directly and find out who actually needed help, where they were, and where to land. As mentioned earlier, I had the correct landing coordinates written down next to the phone; I also had the coordinates of another landing site right next door. During this time I had been contacted directly on my landline by Jim McCormack's brother, from Woodburn SES, to find out what was going on with the state of the roads; it's not like there was no way to find out what was happening in here, it's just that nobody else official had tried and information was not being shared. Many of us had landlines still working, some had mobile reception, and a lot had internet of some form. This failure to seek and collate information before coming and wrecking our environment even further showed a jaw-dropping lack of initiative and organisation.

In the ensuing days we received no less than three road visits from ADF personnel. They arrived in troop carriers which were totally inappropriate for the conditions, being far too heavy for wetland roads, and two of the groups drove up our driveway and further degraded our access. All three groups asked exactly the same questions about what we needed and appeared to be busily filling in a form on their iPads. We explained, repeatedly, that we were on the lower end of the list in terms of needing their help, but would appreciate help later on with some heavy lifting and with cleaning up the appalling mess the helicopter had made. We directed them first to our neighbours who had had floodwater all through their houses and they left, but never came back to actually do anything at our

place, which suggests to me that nobody was collating the information gathered and prioritising tasks.

#### **March 8<sup>th</sup>:**

More rain came and again cut all access at the Whiporie end of the road.

#### **March 16<sup>th</sup>:**

We were finally able to use Elliotts Road to get to Casino to stock up after a mechanically minded friend managed to get in to us and get a neighbour's car working. On our way north up Elliotts Road we encountered two 12 tonne troop carriers heading for the 2 tonne load limit bridge on that road at a speed which was completely inappropriate for the conditions and the terrain. We flagged them down and my partner warned them that if they proceeded, they would likely destroy our only access. **The apparent lack of preparation and failure by senior staff to provide these young ADF personnel with even the most rudimentary knowledge of the terrain and environment they were entering shocked us, as did the drivers' personal failure to read and obey the road sign which clearly warned of the load limit.** We did not feel 'saved' by the army. Far from it.

#### **March 24<sup>th</sup>:**

The road towards Coraki was still all but impassable due to two massive potholes which again posed a threat of rolling one's vehicle and drowning. **Two army vehicles got bogged in the hole at number 1330; the extraction effort made the problem much worse.**

#### **March 28<sup>th</sup>:**

A local, \_\_\_\_\_ who had earlier been evacuated by helicopter from the roof of his fully inundated home started organising fresh food deliveries by boat and road via the Facebook group.

#### **March 29<sup>th</sup> /30<sup>th</sup>:**

Cyclonic rain and wind continued for two days, blowing large trees out of the wet ground. The road was blocked by water again at both ends.

#### **March 30<sup>th</sup>:**

**Some locals received text messages to seek higher ground and evacuate, AFTER Bungawalbin Creek exceeded major flood level. There was absolutely no awareness that we were still trapped and unable to leave.**

We were not re-flooded here, but the road sustained further damage.

#### **April 4<sup>th</sup>:**

Mr O'Toole and other locals who had continued to organise the fresh food deliveries managed to get supplies in by boat and road to our 'island'. We have pretty much survived on these supplies ever since, with the exception of a few supplies brought in by a friend with a high wheel base ute, as the road has rarely been safe to drive on in our neighbour's car.

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It is now approaching the end of April and many locals, including us, are still unable to move around freely or get out with any sort of reliability due to the state of the road (slowly being addressed by council after many submissions and a resident speaking at a council meeting). The drive ranges from 'difficult' to 'impossible' depending on the current weather. Additionally, there are almost no cars still working out here and many driveways are degraded to the point that they are unusable. Insurance assessors have been unable to get in and so everyone is stuck in a holding pattern, surrounded by their destroyed possessions and moulding infrastructure and unable to move forwards.

#### IMPORTANT ISSUES THAT MUST BE ADDRESSED

1. **Centralising the SES has had a very negative impact on our community.** We have lost access to the volunteers with local knowledge and are being denied the support we need as a result. We need to go back to getting direct support from local volunteers who understand our circumstances and landscape.
2. **The lack of organisation demonstrated by the authorities we elect to look after us in these situations has been frightening.** Our area was ignored – not warned before the event, and neglected after the event. Then when the second flood arrived, absolutely nothing had been learned and we were ignored all over again. The authorities then sent in the army, supposedly to 'help' us, without ascertaining what sort of help was needed or where. We were left to organise help amongst ourselves; if this is the best our 'leaders' can do, it's simply not good enough.
3. **This was not a normal flood.** The water flowed in the opposite direction from usual and was far in excess of 100-year flood predictions, and the pattern of flooding – ie which end of the road flooded first – was back to front also. The cause of this needs to be investigated, as residents are increasingly enraged by the failure of government to listen to AND ACT ON local knowledge – the failure to put the new highway on piers instead of creating a solid 'dam' is a case in point – and to act urgently on climate change. The atmosphere is holding more water as a direct result of global warming, yet governments continue to pretend this is not happening. The Northern Rivers area of NSW is the canary in the planet's coal mine; we may be the first to experience a flood that wipes out towns to the point where relocation of the whole community is being considered, hot on the heels of equally disastrous bushfires, but we will NOT be the last. How many catastrophically destructive climate events need to happen before anyone in power takes the science seriously?
4. **The army was ill-prepared to help us and some of their actions increased our problems and our distress.** While their 'muscle' was clearly useful in places where whole houses needed the contents removed to the street, and we thank them for that, their failure to understand the sensitive environmental factors of the Bungawalbin wetland meant that they did actual damage, which they then departed

without remedying. The level of disorganisation was also extremely concerning, with some jobs being done multiple times and others being completely neglected due to there being no apparent central data base of information about individual properties.

5. **The failures in communication are ongoing.** There are still multiple properties with piles of flood-destroyed property sitting by the road, waiting to be washed away by the ongoing rain. There does not seem to be a plan in place for removing these destroyed goods, or if there is a plan, it has not been communicated to residents.
6. **If you're going to leave us to our own devices in an emergency, you need to equip us.** The truth is that there is no evidence of **any** plan whatsoever being made at **any** stage during this crisis. Where was the spreadsheet of addresses, with information collated through door-to-door, phone tree and social media about who was where and what help they needed? IT NEVER HAPPENED. We have been able to look after many residents to some extent by working as a community to help each other, but vulnerable people have fallen through the cracks and the mental health repercussions will be ongoing. We feel betrayed and angry. If we're going to be abandoned like this, we need you to give us amphibious vehicles, boats and adequate mobile phone reception.

While we understand that this was an unprecedented disaster and many emergency services were either compromised themselves by the flooding or quickly overwhelmed, **it was clear before the flood started that there were problems with the system, as evidenced by my experience calling the SES on February 27<sup>th</sup>.**

This sort of flooding, perhaps even worse, is going to happen again; you can't relocate everybody. **There has to be a plan** so emergency services and support crews can both communicate with and provide support to rural-remote residents through the chaos created by the intersection of unaddressed climate change and flawed decision making, ie the construction of a 'dam' thanks to cost-cutting when building the highway and the centralisation of the SES to the point where it loses all local viability.

**There must be much more respect shown by the authorities for our local knowledge and experience.** Please start now by giving our submissions a fair hearing and ACTING ON THEM.

Candy Lawrence  
Gibberagee



**Australian Government**  
**Department of Defence**

MC22-000752

Mrs Candida Lawrence

GIBBERAGEE NSW 2469

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In relation to your concerns of damage, where possible within the operating profile of the aircraft, aircrew avoid overflying areas where damage may be caused. Through inquiries conducted after receiving your letter, I am confident all aircrew acted in accordance with civil and military aviation regulations in the Bungawalbin area and surrounds.

Thank you for your correspondence,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J Lybrand'.

Commodore James Lybrand, CSC  
Director General Operations and Plans  
Headquarters Joint Operations Command  
Department of Defence

29 March 2022