From: NSW Government
To: Flood Inquiry
Subject: Floods Inquiry
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Your details

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Submission details

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

Share your experience or tell your story

Your story	Communication, Rescue and flood data issues were of a major concern during the floods, fires and in between. As a resident of the northern nsw coast since 1986 i have seen a few disasters here. As a background I have served in the area with the NSW SES, Westpac Helicopter previously and am now with the NSWRFS.

Communication

Most people have willingly and unwillingly accepted and used mobile devices as the one and only cover all communication option for all situations. They are great when they work and nothing when they dont

Society has assumed in modern times the internet system will be there for all tasks to be now performed on. Other communication possibilities have been phased out in our wisdom and in a modern world we are held to ransom for fickle communication reliability with no other options given any hearing.

In disasters though there is no signal and no other channels for a simple message to get out in the year 2022 .
Most people seem to need to recharge phones every day as batteries cant cope with this excessive devices use and functions as a sign of how much we need these and how dangerous it is to only have one option.
It seems this system is not up to the challenges of different situations such as peak load times and disasters.
Often writing signs on rooves or roadside was the only way to message.

If we were going to sea we long would all have used a marine VHF radio, flying a plane an Airband VHF radio. These are all there still, need no updates and have worked well since the advent of radio.
National and Community radio also got through being a testament to the vitalness of this information with praise to the local ABC despite the government's abandonment of this service it became one of the few means for us to know anything about the floods.

As many would have known there are many

communication options that were not affected by the disaster such as emergency beacons, satellite, UHF CB and emergency services radios, VHF, HF, Army, Am radios and so on.
Whilst there is a tragedy of people being not able to request help or send confirmation they were indeed safe but just needed fuel, food water etc this could have been simply relayed in the past with the vast takeup of UHF CB.
Many people have them still and they are not expensive. In addition people listening in on this system could also be informed of vital information.
Traditional UHF CB emergency channels are 5/35 and as im aware has not changed. In remote areas HF Single Sideband (flying doctors) radios have been used for vast remote parts of Australia and given normal low voltage power supply requirements would have been fine to operate in all situations at no cost.

Perhaps towns or villages could have some kind of options like this that can get messages out and in the absence of mobile coverage in disasters a centralised basic communication network can occur.
I noticed the GRN government uhf system was working for SES and RFS. Whilst we don't want everyone having access to that the system it could conceivably coordinate through messages received via citizen band uhf or other means so that at least emergency and essential communication can be exchanged.

Most of what is needed is already there. Maybe we can have a vhf or uhf relay or satellite with battery solar backup as a communication centre or hub. Of course this needs to be a flood and fireproof place.
There would also be a need if required to be able to have a physical person act as the facilitator or coordinator if a remote relay couldn't be passed on and back.
A person in the mountains around here today

could communicate with a voice transmission on uhf cb vast distances to repeater towers with a relatively cheap small radio device.
In valleys it is different and either linked repeaters, satellite or HF radio is needed.
Community based relay persons can activate in disasters.
Perhaps hubs can also broadcast messages or signals like the tsunami warnings in Japan and Hawaii. If a wave was coming to shore right now how do we warn the country in less than 5 minutes. At least a town with potential for any natural hazards should have this function. Surely its not that difficult. Oh and it cant be reliant soley on the MOBILE PHONE cell system
So Maybe the physical communication hubs can also have siren capabilities.
Satellite spot type devices are also existing and would be great to relay messages but to whom and where and what channel, what format.

This is the main challenge with so many communication angles how do we channel that urgent message to whom needs to know and send a message back.
My uhf portable i have used for work will go for a week without a recharge. Listening in on the uhf radio scanning 80 channels during the floods i never heard a call.
If someone asked for help i could relay, but to whom. In the not so distant past the amateur radio guys would set up repeaters on hills and contributed what they could. Most government services seem to have this ability now, so how can the person in need out there tap in. Ok that's communication.

Flood Rescues

Rescues there was a need for community based help to deal with the immense need for help. The lismore flood rescue could have been the biggest flood rescue of all time and is remarkable we didn't lose 3-400 people.

When the call went out for boats to assist i was trying to get a private team from Byron area to head over, by the end of the day it was mullum and then well, every flood town needed more than what there was.
Getting there was another issue, being allowed to help was also a large uncertainty that had to be nutted out.
Some organisations dithered so long it was embarrassing as they could not activate assets to simply get a boat and take it to lismore eg from ballina.
It seems the SLSA could activate quicker and in many towns it seems that was a go to option. Maybe people had more contacts with the SLSA

Emergency services need to potentially prepare to be able to respond in these situations at short notice and multiple agencies (or as we saw whole agency response) with no worries about if they damage their equipment it will be swiftly replaced or fixed and importantly volunteers with be insured and covered.

The Lismore situation teaches us we need to be ready to go when its time to go, not a time to think, just go and send everything and then we can rest well in the fact that everything was done at the end of the day.
The helicopter response echoed the boat situation as well and when private charters are being activated then the system has been showed to be lacking.

Trained people is another issue and as someone whom has experience with swift water and flood activity I was feeling somewhat pedestrian not being able to get to or help respond to the situation.
Unbeknown to me people were carrying out rescues with whatever floated and community members responded with boards, jetskis, tinnies etc. the event was difficult given the isolation of every town from transport, communication, fuel,

resources in general. So much of the rescue load was picked up by the community.

As a SES floodboat operator in 2000 i thought geeze how can i help, how do i get involved and who would I approach. In hindsight it would've been easier to simply get a kayak and patrol areas i live where people may need assistance. Even on our street a family was evacuated yet, i could have done that and have the equipment. So how do I know, this got me to thinking there are many people out there whom have skills so how do we coordinate the need for rescue with the people whom can help.
Many boat owners have long standing skills operating on local rivers. I come more from the recreational background doing adventure activities such as kayaking, rafting and river boarding so floods are familiar and all people involved in boating will have various competency in a range of skills that could be used in times when the shit does and did truly hit the fan.
Is there a way to channel this into a more rapid coordinated response when typical agencies are overwhelmed beyond comprehension we need some form of community team responders to activate for this and accreditation to make it official but not hamstrung by years of training requirements.
Simply put when you need lots of people to respond quickly and skillfully we shouldn't be having the community on Facebook seeking desperate evacuation to all comers in all towns.
The first option is the SES or similar emergency organisation turns up soon with enough people and they have enough resources to deal with the situation at hand.
The second best situation is if SES is overwhelmed a community based team of skilled operators, accredited in some basic degree turn up who can do the job and relayback that the job has been done.
The third option is that anyone from anywhere with anything that floats or flies turns up and

rescues you.
So we can certainly pad up community emergency services; police, marine rescue, SLSA, VRA, SES, RFS, fire and rescue.
If its a really bad situation , too busy or not accessible to town based crews, activate nearest community rescue team responders.
If its really really bad as we have seen its raffertys rules and every man and his horse is invited and in the case of Lismore, these people were the bulk of the rescuers with possible hundreds of boats.
My preference is for the first two and in the event of my situation i could help the ses but cant get to their depot in mullumbimby.
So the isolation considerations should also be bourne in all these issues have raised and as we have had seen demonstrated with each community standing alone in its geographical area needs a response adequate for that are assuming roads are out and air support isn't possible or is also overwhelmed.
There are many skilled people out there-how can we activate them close to where they are when the disaster strikes and people are in crisis and isolated. This idea mirrors the communication challenges also mentioned.

A last note is the recurring issue of the Marshals Creek system which has inadequate rainguage data from across the catchment, same many places. All we have to go on is how it is raining right here and now.
On a technical note the BOM river guages in the Marshals catchment froze about 12am and didnt recommence oriper readings for about a week depending on what happened to them or the signal. That said looking at the Floods near me Public Works advisory river levels kept functioning at proper levels. I assume its the same guage but the bureau numbers stopped working. If someone was at home wondering to evacuate they would not have dependent on what channel they got this data through. I didn't

	believe the bureau figures so checked another source and the public works one was fully functional and correct. Maybe on data sources if the data flow reading stops they can have a flag comeup or similar to reflect that last level reading time. Some services will have a “live” statement. On an environmental level so much debris has been swept to sea and litters our river environment in all places across catchment. It’s unacceptable that none of this has been addressed either. Along the river at Boatharbour near lismore is long streams of plastic in trees, banks and in water. Along marshalls creek lies drums, bins, trash. This rarely has been addressed in any floods. Fridges and wheely bins swept into the marshals creek nature reserve in 2017 were never recovered. There may need to be some responsibility to secure this stuff from flooding down rivers. Thousands of tons of rubbish is scattered across the coastline ocean and rivers.

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	A 3 day relentless rain event into a double la nina year on top of saturated catchments. The perfect storm. Inadequately maintained drains and public infrastructure. Over reliance on mobile phone technology! Lack of function in disasters and high peak loads Inadequate backup systems of communication to remote or isolated areas Lack of coordination channels or backup radio methods to channel information to a central agency Lack of adequate resources for large scale disasters in multiple isolated places Better coordination of all agency responses to single disaster situations

1.2 Preparation and planning	Backup communication infrastructure in all villages and towns including sirens and messages if necessary that activate when an Impending situation is bearing down. Establish best backup community communication means already present Establish community hub based ways to communicate to government agencies via various means that can function autonomous without mains power Community based rescue assets that can activate in local areas that may be isolated from other towns centralised resources Seek and Catalogue skilled community members whom can respond to large scale emergency disasters where no other services can respond or are inadequate or not accessible. Simple Accreditation scheme for community back up teams to undertake or assist in flood or swift water based rescues within their area
1.3 Response to floods	Streamline participation in SES flood qualification so previously more experienced persons can undertake these missions but also making membership of emergency services quicker to participate and stay current. The use of intensive course participation may be a better way to go with a several day course to get more people capable quicker Have multi agency capabilities to send in any persons a s resources in a timely manner with all assets and personnel covered Have backup community groups of skilled operators to get involved if necessary Have a means of communication that merges between communty and organisations when mainstream phone systems are compromised
1.4 Transition	During the clean up there were many frustrations

from incident response to recovery	working with the rfs. One is that one can only shovel mud for so many days. The ability to simply wash the streets or houses with hoses became limited with access to water So water supply being more difficult as we werent allowed to refill from hydrants out of town after a while due to pressure or infrastructure damage etc, this made the job of cleaning up harder as we had to pump water onto the trucks from the Brunswick river to clean up mud at places from—-you guessed it, the Brunswick river. A bulk water supply pond or dam separate facility with good access to refill may have been a better option or staging larger tanks that could be pumped into constantly via the river so firetrucks didnt have to back up separately to a muddy boatramp and individually pump out of the river which was time consuming and messy
1.5 Recovery from floods	This seems pretty slow in Lismore after 2 months there are only a few shops open if that in every street. All governments should fully fund the recovery as much and as soon as possible, the federal government needs to do better with the damage to infrastructure
1.6 Any other matters	The community and all organisations involved in this disaster did a incredible job with what they had in a much worse a scenario than any in living memory. I am amazed the death toll was as low as it was. A huge congratulations to everyone involved however small. Floodmarkers are just indicative and not a guarantee. We cant assume a safe level. Anything is possible in the perfect storm

Supporting documents or images