

From: [NSW Government](#)
To: [Flood Inquiry](#)
Subject: Floods Inquiry
Date: Tuesday, 12 April 2022 2:50:09 PM

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	On Sunday 27th of February 2022, I went to bed knowing there was flooding occurring in our region and that a Facebook post said "Flood Evacuation Orders will be issued by the NSW SES if and when evacuations are required." At 4:30am on Monday 28th of February I saw a notice to residents of Woodburn for a Flood Warning on Facebook. It simply said to prepare
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for possible flooding in low lying areas of Woodburn. Thirty minutes later we received a phone call from house owner saying that they were expecting water to come through the bottom level and be similar to the 1974 and 1956 flooding events.

We began the process of moving all items to the upper level to prevent inundation damage of belongings. By 6am we had decided that once the belongings of ourselves and the home owners (who were still in the process of moving out) had been moved upstairs we would leave town with our four children and two dogs as we had not been in a flood before. Everyone in town felt confident that they had prepared well as always (we were in what was considered a high point in town, other than the only hill which has the school and retirement village perched on top. By 10am we had moved all items to above expected flood height or upstairs to the living areas. This included all possessions of the home owners and ourselves. Two large families with decades of belongings that had survived past floods into the living areas of the house. By this stage there were a few items left of the homeowners who were trying to get the last items out in a trailer to save them. They told us to leave and be safe. So at 10:30am we drove out the driveway and away from the house we called home with little with us except a few sentimentals that I had grabbed and 5 days worth of clothes as we expected the water to recede within three days like past flooding events in the area. By this stage the water had risen onto our front lawn, which we could now only see parts of and it was starting to lap at the garage door.

The town was a buzz of activity as others moved things out of the way of water, elderly people were being evacuated out of their lifelong homes by the local fireies. By this stage the streets out were starting to succumb to the rising water. The

former Pacific Highway, now called River Street, was covered halfway over in water with only the pedestrian island holding the water back from the shops in the main precinct. We drove past the hill which was by this stage covered with cars whose owners had taken their usual precaution to drive to this high point as well as the high point near our home. We drove to Ballina to seek refuge there.

We arrived at the allocated evacuation centre Richmond Rooms to find it already rather full with people who had evacuated from Wardell and then were told that we could not have the dogs there and that we had to call the pound to take them, the rangers couldn't be reached by council. We were also told there was no-where for us to go yet as they had not been informed of where we would be going. My husband asked a work friend if they could take in the dogs in the short term. We were luck enough that after lunch this friend and his family had offered to take in not only the dogs but our entire family.

The goal posts for the peak of the flood in Woodburn kept changing. That afternoon we heard from our home owners. Had we waited another half an hour or so we would not have been able to get out of Woodburn. Still no Evacuation Order had been issued and I continued to monitor this online. I have since found out that the Order was issued via an SMS sometime after 4pm on Monday 28th of February by which stage the roads had become torrents of water more than a foot deep. Evacuation was not possible. Those who could made their way to the school to seek refuge, others waited in their houses. We recieved regular updates from our home owner who had stayed behind. Images and videos showed the rush of the water which sent rippling waves over the road and fencing. Before dark it was in the house (as expected) but then we had an update from our home owner that it had exceeded the expected peak. Still no

official word. We spent hours trawling for updates with the data from BoM river heights showing an exponential growth never seen in the rivers before, so much so that the chart had to be altered. Locals on the ground reported different river heights than what BoM had recorded. It quickly became apparent that our short stint out of the house was not going to be the case. With patchy mobile service and patchy internet we found out that it continued to climb. At 6am we finally heard from our homeowner that he had stayed the night, he was waiting rescue as the water was lapping at the top step inside the house. He sent through pictures of the childrens Christmas present, a monkeybar and swing set not visible through murky brown water and only the very top of the large trampoline visible. We then spent an agonising time waiting to hear that everyone was safe, waiting to hear the extent of the flooding, waiting to hear just how much we would lose in the house. I thought of all the things I could have grabbed but we had no room for. An agonising time waiting to find out where we would live, would we have to split our family up so that the children who were at school would be close by while the younger ones were taken elsewhere.

On Tuesday 1st of March we were told that the CBD and island of Ballina had an evacuation warning in place. At 3am on Wednesday 2nd of March we were woken by the family that had taken us in, an Evacuation Order had been issued. We helped move things upstairs, they were well built up but seeing what had happened to our home. As a precaution we evacuated with them, they were able to go stay with friends, however we didn't have anyone who could take us in, so like many we went to an evacuation centre. At 5am, in the dark we drove around trying to locate where we could park and where we could go to settle in. We met some beautiful elderly men and women who had been evacuated from their care house. We ended up

in the eating area, we fed the children and eventually they started playing. The community were supportive of us, the community took us in. We three days before returning to Ballina had our friends. We felt like a burden, a burden on the supplies because deliveries were already so badly affected. We are the type of people who help people (our work and weekends revolve around this), we are not those who ask for help.

The first time we saw anyone official was at 5pm on Thursday 3rd of March when a lady came to speak to the people in the evacuation centre and tell them they could return. She did not actually provide all the information at once. Instead she told only the first part and then took questions. People assumed that there was no other information. After we found out that the evacuation centre was being closed and we would all have to move again.

Throughout this the entire event it is the community members that have stepped up and helped out. It is the community members who saved lives, who organised supplies and food, transport of those stranded or those needing to relocate after losing everything.

On the 6th of March my husband went to the house to retrieve what he could. It was very little and required him to wade through water above knee height.

A week after evacuating, on Monday 7th of March, I reentered what was once our home. Wading through water which was now below knee deep in front of our house I entered what can only be described in smell and appearance as a cross between a rubbish dump and sewerage treatment plant (yes, I have in fact visited these places and know exactly what it smells like). My childrens soft toys wet with 'black water', nappies exploding because they had absorbed too much, toy cars with a layer of

mud dust over them. Our room was smelly, my husbands groomsmens suit that is due to be worn for his borthers wedding in April sopping wet. Bedding on the floor and my 33 year old Big Ted on the chair (two days later I witnessed him being impailed by the heavy machinery). There was so much to do, to throw away, to try and save that it was overwhelming, add to that the discovery of a very much alive brown snake in a box upstairs, it was unnerving. we spent the day trying to start sifting through. throwing things over the balcony into a rubbish pile. We worked through the home owners things first and then started on our own things as it became apparent that we could not do it alone.

March 8th saw us return and with a crew of mates that the homeowner had we began in earnest, sorting things into could be washed, maybe save, and the biggest pile of all, throw away. We were restricted in the hours we could do due to our young family. Floors were ripped up in attempts to save the structural integrity of the house and the floorboards were left to try and start drying. One of the hardest things of the day was seeing the sodden books on the bookshelf. My childrens books that I had spent the last 8 years collecting for them. The library that saw a special display of books each month. March was supposed to be Hairy Maclary, instead these books were thrown over the balcony with all the rest. By the end of the day the pile of stuff to be thrown was the height of the balcony, this included the homeowners things that had not been moved out, our things and the gyprock, bathrooms and kitchen cabinets that could not be saved, the lounges, beds and ensembles that just could not be salvaged because not only had they been wet, they had been wet for days on end.

March 9th and as more water receded from houses further up the street, more people were around. We moved what salvagable things we

could, very few in fact and then the walls came down.

Our Journey continues as we have again been flooded at the end of March/beginning of April, thankfully only the lower level but that is where we had things attempting to dry them out. It is two in a month for us. The drains are not draining like they have in the past, its slower, areas that would be dry by now are still sodden.

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

The rain bomb at the end of February 2022 had a major impact on the flooding of towns such as Woodburn however this is not the exclusive contributing factor.

The governments decision not to treat the Pacific Highway upgrade over floodplains equally has seen the changing of the water courses, helicopter footage and aerial photography show the decision to create a highway not built on pillars has resulted in the creation of a dam. The water is not behaving as it has in the past. Recommendations for the highway to be on pillars above floodplains Water is not spreading as it typically would, instead it is being forced into bottlenecks and spilling over. The highway was supposed to ensure that transport would not be compromised, this is clearly not the case as the highway was cut in multiple places. The Pacific highway upgrade has had a negative impact on the hydrological behaviour of water distribution.

Works done at Bungawalbin to prevent inundation of cane fields and farmland which were completed in 2021 has further impacted the behaviour of the river and its tributaries. In the past the flooding has come from the cane fields first and at a slower pace whilst the river would

break its banks after. The resulting increase in flood waters in the river forced in rushing swirling water damaging houses and fencing that has long stood the test of flooding.

1.2 Preparation and planning

While households prepared as best they could with the information they had (which was at best sporadic, incomplete and heavily reliant on only one weather modelling rather than the one that had accurately predicted the rainfall potential) it is not apparent that resources were prepared for the floods. Local SES and emergency services were active however no additional resources appeared for a week after the main flood event.

Food supplies were not ensured. Locals stockpiled and prepared for flooding as they always do. The communities are used to flooding and prepare for their usual flooding event regularly enough but that is reliant on accurate and comprehensive information from government.

1.3 Response to floods

Evacuation centres were not prepared prior to the event, they seem to be set up as a reaction rather than prior to the main influx of people. In addition it is the community that supports these taking place, no government officials appeared.

We arrived after lunch to find out that there was no displacement plans for pets nor was there a location we could go to for us all to be together, instead we were told to call the pound, family pets being sent to a pound is not an answer to the huge number of displaced family pets.

Where was the support for isolated communities. Rescues were completed by locals with no specialised training. By the time resources were committed many had already taken it upon themselves to be out in the water with their highly trained skills being used before approval by people who were not well informed down in their Woolongong command centre. There were not enough resources available to the

communities impacted. People had contacted their governing bodies a day before they were actually given the green light, instead area command was forced to make the decisions to the benefit of the community.

Evacuation centres were set up beyond the reach of many people. The second flood saw people being directed to locations that they had been cut off from for an entire day. The suggestion for people from Coraki and other areas to go to Lennox Head was beyond anyones capabilities, not only was their main roads already cut, the most commonly used road to Lennox Head was cut as was multiple places along the Motorway (that motorway that you said wouldn't flood and that motorway that had displaced large amounts of water and become a dam wall as well).

1.4 Transition from incident response to recovery

As we saw little response in our small communities other then locals and local organisations finally seeing the army roll into town to support clean up was a welcome sight. However even that was marred by red tape. The army was not allowed to help as needed as it all had to go through the SES requests, neighbours helped each other when they could but the army personnel could not quickly help move a mattress for someone or help shift a fridge without the job being allocated, this slowed the clean up for many residents as business as they had to think well ahead of time, log it with SES and hope that they were approved to help when the people were ready. We needed some help the first day gaining access but because it was not listed those walking by could not help for the two minutes we needed.

Defence personnel are not trained effectively for flood and recovery. It was up to the locals to flag down personnel driving through floodwater cause large wake waves impacting on propertys.

1.5 Recovery from There is a short term view that everything is

floods

better. It has been 6 weeks since the initial flood and not even 2 since the second. We are still trying to reclaim items, houses are unoccupied and we are struggling to move forward with the minimal financial support.

People were hoping for some sort of coverage for the floods as these floods were not normal. We are strong but how much must we endure. This was all avoidable if governments had actually listened to locals and the experts properly in the first place. There would have been minimal impact on households had the water behaved as it traditionally should have.

1.6 Any other matters

Supporting documents show items and the state of the house seven days after the flood event. Many houses were still inaccessible. The water reached the bottom of the window on the second storey. This was well above previous flooding events. The 1974 would have made it into the bottom storey and been 3 inches deep, the 1956 flood would have been a foot deep in the bottom floor instead it was between 800mm and 900mm throughout the entire second floor of the house. This was well beyond the capabilities of the natural event that had occurred elsewhere, water held back and then displaced by the highway forced the predicted height of 1m in the bottom floor of the house into the top storey. The water was held in and took extensively more time to subside.

Supporting documents or images

Attach files

- [PXL_20220307_004151277.MP\[1\]_0.jpg](#)
 - [PXL_20220307_004716593\[2\].jpg](#)
 - [PXL_20220307_005140405\[1\]_0.jpg](#)
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