

From: [NSW Government](#)
To: [Flood Inquiry](#)
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Your details

Title Dr

First name Jonathan

Last name Wardle

Email

Postcode 2480

Submission details

I am making this submission as An academic/researcher

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

We fell in love with Lismore the first time we moved here when I took up a position to develop a centre at Southern Cross University. The diversity and social and cultural fabric of Lismore were key attractions to us when considering the position. We have since made a lovely home in East Lismore - and it truly has become 'home'. Although not directly impacted by the floods

ourselves, we have been part of our community response. For two weeks we formed part of the mud and river army until I had to return to work, where I took up a part of response efforts at the University. Since the floods we have hosted a number of flood refugees in our small house, and currently have a family of five staying with us for the foreseeable future. The entire community is affected in many ways - my daughter will not return to her school for 12 months, and she has heard stories of friends who had to bash their way out of their roof as flood levels rose. The entire community has felt trauma, and many will live with it for years. This town has a tremendous amount of heart, which is why I believe in its recovery, however its heart is currently broken

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

Although some people have attempted to simplify the causes and contributing factors, these were multi-factorial. Whole-of-catchment solutions such as revegetation and riparian management efforts have been largely insufficient, resulting in less water being absorbed by the ground, and increasing the speed and levels of floods. Engineering solutions (such as levees) have been built to budget, rather than need, and were insufficient to protect infrastructure (and were in fact lower than recommended before their initial construction). Often terse ideological and political tensions and local council and community level have hampered progress in both these areas. While it is clear that both environmental and engineering responses and protections are required, supporters of one method have often opposed action on the further, often along political lines. The dire financial standing of the Lismore council was also a contributing factors, with many works and projects that could have assisted being shelved due to lack of funds. While it is easy to

blame the council for mismanagement of this issue, both the State and Federal governments need to take ownership of their role in constraining resources that directly resulted in the resources that could have been spent on flood prevention or management not being available. The NSW government's road transfer policies (i.e. transferring costs of arterial road repair and maintenance) have hit Lismore council harder than most councils, ripping millions each year from the budget. The Federal government has rejected multiple grant submissions from council related to disaster preparedness, and overlooked the region in its most recent flood prevention programs, despite Lismore being the 'flood capital' and often in favour of areas of lesser immediate need. Funding cuts by the Federal government also resulted in the closure of the National Flood Centre based on the Lismore campus of Southern Cross University, which would have been an invaluable resource for mitigation planning and response.

One factor that some in Lismore - including those in city, State and National leadership and representative roles - have tried to downplay is the impact of climate change. Although floods have always impacted Lismore, it is undeniable that climate change is making the floods more frequent, more intense, and more destructive.

1.2 Preparation and planning

It is clear that the city of Lismore was not adequately prepared for floods. Multiple reviews and studies had been prepared, but the recommendations of these reviews had been - at best - only partially implemented. Moreover, State and national infrastructure that the city ought to have relied on was also found lacking. Notably BOM equipment and modelling malfunctioned - and these still have not been replaced in Lismore leaving the city at risk of the same mistakes occurring again.

1.3 Response to

Whilst the floods highlighted the resilience and

floods

resourcefulness of the local community, they also highlighted multiple failures across multiple agencies. SES proved initially ill-prepared and under-resourced, in part because much of their base was in the immediate flood zone. BOM not only failed to adequately warn people, but offered false senses of security not only in the first flood, but the second as well. The location of the response HQ at Southern Cross University was initially poorly managed, largely through lack of communication between multiple agencies offering duplicate services. Evacuation centres were initially poorly managed, with sexual assaults and COVID being some issues caused by poor security. Non-core police activities were unnecessarily draining resources that could have been used in flood recovery - for example a police speed vehicle was seen just outside Lismore when police were light on the ground. The delay in support from the Federal government was an abysmal derogation of duties, particularly the delay in declaring a national disaster that would have allowed the delivery of more resources. The defence force response was initially poor, but improved over time and was well received by communities. Improved coordination and preparedness would have assisted all of these measures. The defence force is a clear example - climate change means that disaster response will become a major part of their scope in coming years, and they need to be appropriately prepared for this role in future. There appears to be very limited response team activity to floods, with most acute response reliant on existing infrastructure and resources. This differs from responses in other areas - for example, the implementation of temporary steel barrier levees in Maryborough saved much of the city from their floods, and a similar tool could have saved thousands of homes, particularly in the East Lismore and Girards Hill areas.

1.4 Transition from incident

There is an unfortunate sense among many outside the region that the worst of the floods is

response to recovery

over, however for many the trauma is just beginning. Long-term services are required, and a 2 year minimum recovery from trauma program for flood-affected persons is required. The community is only now entering the 'hard' part, and most resources appear to be winding up just as the community needs support most, with many previous commitments by the Federal government already being reneged.

1.5 Recovery from floods

Lismore is a city of massive potential. It is undeniably the cultural, social and economic heart of the region. It has attracted a diverse population that is resilient and resourceful. If these traits are supported the community will find a way to assist in its own recovery efforts (though, as stated above, active government support is also necessary). However, there are many artificial barriers to growth in some sectors. Health Care is responsible for ~22% of the Lismore economy, with health infrastructure and services present that would usually be expected in a city many times its size. However, it is difficult to leverage this potential due to lack of appropriate travel links (especially public transport links to Brisbane and SEQ, or 'quick' routes to same) and lack of professional accommodation in the city. Correction of these could lead to an influx of health and research activity in the region. Education makes up ~12% of the economy, largely due to the presence of the main campus Southern Cross University, but government funding limits mean that ~15% of students at that institution are unfunded, causing an impost of nearly \$10m per annum on the region. The Lismore campus has room for >2000 additional students on campus, all of whom come with ideas and money that support the social, cultural and economic vibrancy of the city, but is unable to bring students to campus due to these policies. Before the floods Lismore was one of the few areas where manufacturing was increasing, including those based on 'value-adding' the agricultural sector (e.g. foods and natural health products) and those attracted by

the research presence of the university. The drive remains in Lismore, but incentives for industry to start-up in Lismore could leverage this cultural and social capital, though would also need additional supports such as better research links. Lismore is also the cultural heart of Northern NSW, with the arts and culture sector a major driver of the economy and tourism in the areas. Artists were a group disproportionately impacted by floods - in part because low-lying areas were the most affordable. This group is integral to Lismore's recovery, and should be included. Lismore also hosted many support services for the disadvantaged, in part because Lismore is the most tolerant and diverse community in the region, as well as one of the few affordable areas for residents and services. Relocating these services will do immense harm to a community reliant on them being co-located in an affordable and accessible setting, and the rebuilding of Lismore as a services hub should be seen as a priority to improve not only health outcomes, but also those reliant on the social determinants of health.

1.6 Any other matters

Don't forget Lismore, because it already feels as though we've been forgotten too much.

Supporting documents or images
