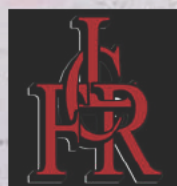


***NSW EMERGENCY SERVICES
FLOOD INQUIRY
Northern Rivers
2022***



Lismore Citizens Flood Review Group

RICHMOND CATCHMENT FLOODPLAIN

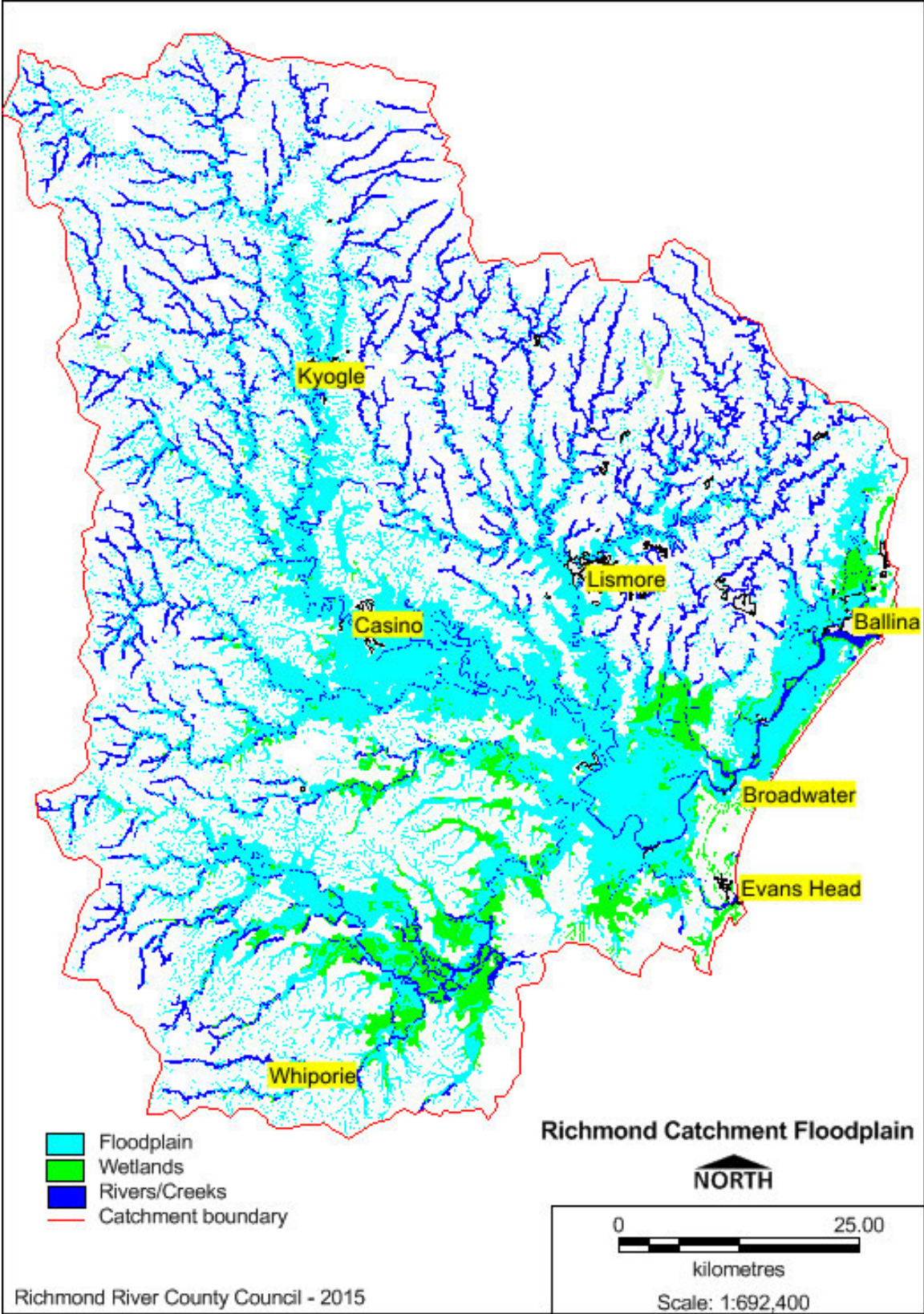


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1. FOREWORD

ABOUT US

LISMORE CITIZENS FLOOD REVIEW GROUP

The Lismore Citizens Flood Review Group (Appendix 1) was formed following the devastating March 2017 flood. It is made up of local citizens from a range of backgrounds who have lived in the district most of their lives, been directly involved with the emergency management of floods for up to 50 years at local and regional level as well as direct involvement in flood mitigation engineering works, local government and flood affected CBD businesses.

The group has spent the past five years continuing to gather relevant information across a range of areas to ensure that the impact experienced in the March 2017 flood never happened again and flood mitigation and emergency management issues are progressed. The floods of 2022 have increased their determination to find solutions to these complicated issues.

Whilst the Tweed, Byron, Ballina, Kyogle, Lismore, Richmond Valley and Clarence Valley LGAs in the Northern Rivers were all affected by the February 2022 flood, the key focus in this submission is Lismore due to the size of the affected population and business community.

From the outset the sole aim of the group has been to examine various aspects of the management of floods from a community point of view and endeavour to work towards recommending constructive structural and administrative changes in the SES, Resilience NSW and the Bureau of Meteorology to ensure that the disastrous outcome of the 2022 floods never happens again.



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May 20 2022

2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Following the March 2017 flood there were 12 Reviews being done by various government departments and universities so our group decided to put together a Review from the community point of view.

The Lismore Citizens Flood Review of the March 2017 flood was distributed widely to SES Commissioner Smethurst, relevant NSW Ministers and throughout the community. It was very well received locally and in the months following distribution we were invited to give presentations in follow up discussions at the Lismore City Council Charette and the Southern Cross University National Flood Research Centre conference as well as to affected community organisations.

There was no response from SES Commissioner Smethurst who was newly appointed some five weeks before the flood. He had been informed by senior staff that we were “troublemakers”. So we were ignored until Thomas George, our local state politician at the time, contacted the Commissioner and told him he would be very disappointed if the Commissioner did not meet with us on his next visit to Lismore. Following the subsequent meeting we received support from the Commissioner but unfortunately he resigned his position before any improvements could be achieved.

In March 2020 our group made a detailed submission to the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements. Having listened to the broadcast of every public hearing session, it was evident that the NSW SES was not up to the same standard as other jurisdictions.

On the appointment of the New Commissioner Carlene York our group wrote to her attaching a copy of our Royal Commission submission and related video. Concern was expressed that on key management and communication issues there had been no appreciable action since the 2017 flood. This resulted in two visits by senior Operations staff but the issues that are important for the community have still not been effectively addressed.

Following the 2022 floods members of the group were asked what had changed in the SES since the 2017 flood. In short the list includes:

- Two Acting/Commissioners appointed - making total of 7 in 10 years

- Organisation restructured with an extra layer of bureaucracy - now there are 5 layers between community and Commissioner
- Change of area structure names
- Change of all titles of salaried staff
- Large turnover of Senior Staff - No corporate knowledge

There has been no effective change to capability delivery, just restructure and relabelling. None of these changes were of any direct benefit to the community. In the past 18 months the major focus of the SES organisation appears to have been inwards whereas the needs of the local units and the welfare of the community should be paramount.

From reports received, this institutional failing was clearly demonstrated during the February 28 event where the focus of the Incident Management Team appeared to be upwards to HQ not downwards supporting the units as the primary aim. The core pillar of the organisation should be responding to and following up on requests for support from the units and the community.

To date there has been no effective action on issues of importance to the community discussed in multiple Reviews and Inquiries such as the Dungog and Dulguigan Coronial Inquiries, Tathra Fires, Lindt Cafe and the Owens Report into the March 2017 flood. Each report included issues regarding

- early warning
- local information
- community information
- 132500 (SES Hotline)
- communication difficulties within and between agencies,
- inter agency territorial issues

There is still no recognition at HQ level that blanket statewide policies and procedures do not work for our topographically complicated Northern Rivers region where there is a short timeframe of 8 -12 hours before we are facing a major flood. There has been no implementation of a common operating picture communication system which can be utilised by all agencies and accessed by the community on an app.

There is a lack of genuine leadership throughout the SES senior executive staff. Anyone exhibiting talent is seen as a threat to senior Head Office staff.

Regardless of all the senior staff and structural changes, the February 28 event was handled no better by salaried SES staff than it was in 2017, in fact the salaried staff were overwhelmed and local volunteer units received little direct IMT or HQ support when required.

Historically, local unit and regional managers harnessed community support very successfully with support from HQ when requested. Unfortunately since 2010 an increasingly top down bureaucracy has reduced effective capability.

During the 2022 incident, management was hampered by interagency communication systems that are not able to “talk” with one another creating multiple bespoke information feeds and distribution loops with resultant disruption to work flow. Interagency rivalries persisted with agency decision making power of more interest than the needs of the community. Much of the IMC approach at all levels was spent feeding information up to HQ to satisfy the media organisations both within and outside the system rather than supporting front line workers on the ground and in the water by providing them with assistance when it was needed.

Across the region the local unit frontline agency volunteers from the SES, RFS, Police and ADF did an outstanding job under challenging circumstances which the community greatly appreciated. The non impacted local community offered valuable support and with their privately owned boats of all sizes and shapes saved many hundreds if not thousands of lives. As the water went down communities across the region continued to rise to the occasion in large numbers volunteering their time, their homes, food and clothing etc to the homeless and assisting with the clean up.

Both the SES and Resilience NSW have a mantra of educating the public to “be prepared”. Preparation is the key. Unfortunately overall, the following details will show that both these agencies themselves were totally unprepared for what is required for a major flood response in the Northern Rivers let alone an effective response to the magnitude of the February 2022 event.

3. BACKGROUND

Throughout the Richmond catchment, from the time flood rain starts falling on the northern border ranges, accurate information is critical as the emergency management implementation timeframe is short. Major flooding can occur in many towns, and villages in the catchment within 8 - 12 hours. Rural residents and farmers need time to shift cattle and equipment to higher ground and urban residents and businesses need as much time as possible to pack up and move assets.

Up until about the year 2010 all major and minor floods were managed locally by volunteer local SES units throughout the catchment supported by a salaried locally born and bred Regional Controller and many local volunteers at regional HQ. Regular hourly bulletins were given to the community via local radio direct from regional HQ and current information was gathered from all areas of the catchment. Based on the up to date information they were receiving, the affected community could make their own considered judgement on the protective measures required.

Each of the local volunteer SES units had their own rainfall and river rise intelligence source and the Region SES office co-ordinated the information and secured any additional logistical requirements. Local people, with years and often generations of experience and rain gauge data, took the responsibility seriously and provided accurate local information through a single source ... and it worked!

The bureaucratisation of the SES with it's large budget, salaried staff and excessive risk aversion in recent years has led to centralised policies, procedures, management and information that is far removed from the needs of the local community.

The never ending turnover of salaried staff within all associated emergency management agencies together with the out of area fly in fly out decision makers to regional incident management positions ensures there is no community connection or local knowledge. This is a recipe for disaster which is what occurred in 2017 and again in 2022 flood events.

Fly In Fly Out SES Incident Controllers with no local flood knowledge and supported by SES HQ in Wollongong routinely disregard information and requirements from

the local SES City Units with their 50 years of flood data, local flood management experience and highly refined local flood height prediction methods. It has been reported that at one stage during the early development phase of the February flood, members of the locally trained Northern Rivers Capability Unit did not recognise one face in the IMC room.

The Goonellabah SES HQ was once again proven to be inadequate to effectively manage a major flood. The area was crowded, the bandwidth was inadequate to meet requirements and the electrical system failed at times.

The SES Bulletins whilst an improvement on 2017, provide local citizens with insufficient timely information as they remain solely based on BoM warnings, usually 4 hourly. Slow BoM data acquisition and computer simulation capabilities continue to create a time lapse between BoM, SES HQ Wollongong, the Zone HQ, the IMT, the local units and the flood affected community. Consequently, the Zone SES HQ and IMT's interpretation of BoM flood warnings is not synchronised with what is unfolding on the ground.

SES HQ preference for communication with the community remains via TV, ABC radio, multiple websites and social media - all giving information much of it out of date or incorrect by the time it is broadcast. Radio alerts are often not replicated by social media.

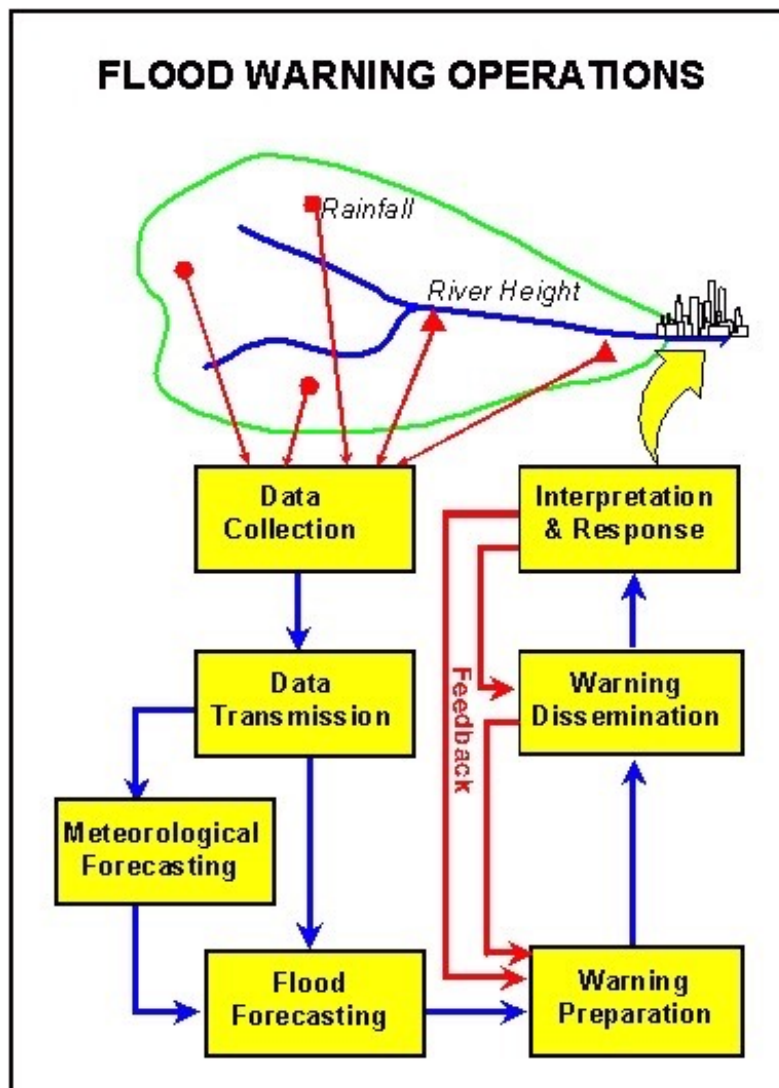
Regular, at least hourly, locally produced SES bulletins broadcast directly from the IMC to the ABC and commercial radio, TV and social media are required to inform and guide those who do not have the benefit of many years experience in floods.

As it happened, unfortunately from the evening of February 27 large areas of Lismore had no electricity restricting access to information. The ABC was also affected and off air for some hours. In some areas this lasted for more than four days so with no TV or radio or computer access there were thousands throughout the area who had no idea what was going on. For those who still had access to cars, information was only available on car radios and this was also the way that telephones were kept charged.

This demonstrates the value of information being available to the community on an app on their telephone but to date a common operating picture system (CoP) that includes the community has not been developed in NSW.

4. BUREAU OF METEOROLOGY (BoM)

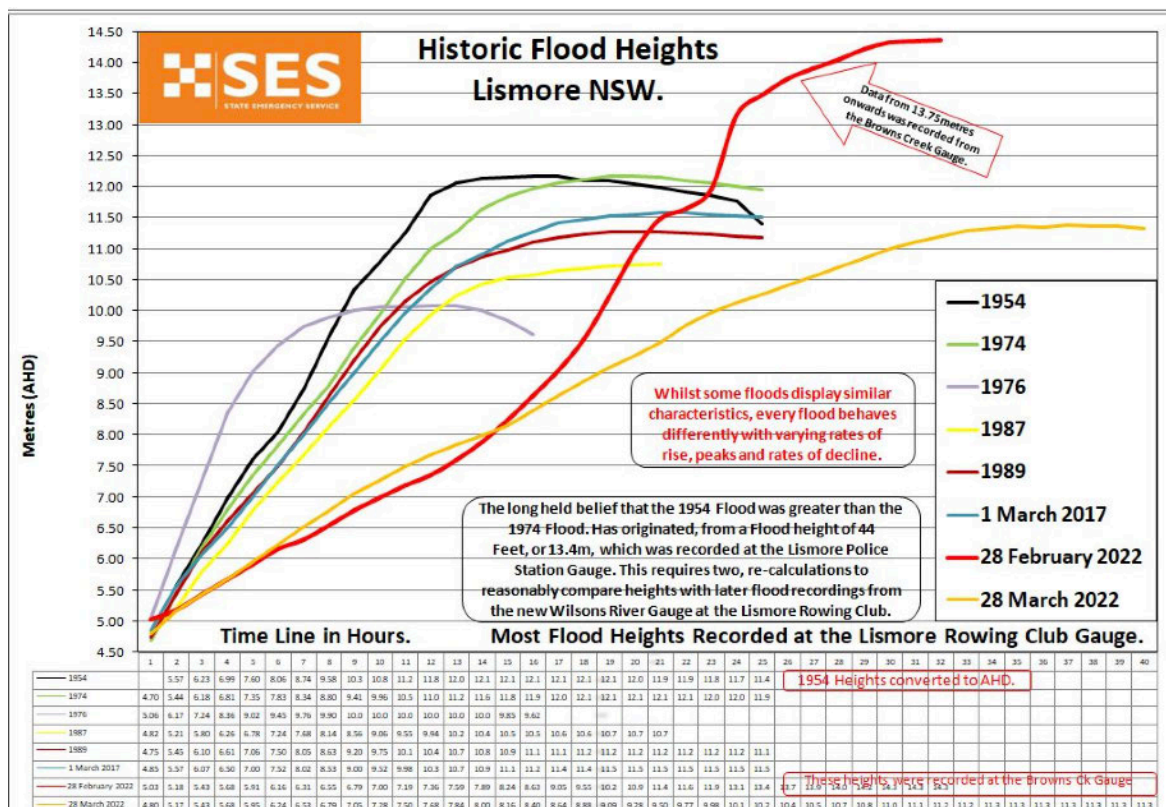
The BoM is responsible for reporting the data that is available to the organisation from gauges as they are being impacted. This then goes through a prediction process noting what is likely to happen in the hours ahead. This information generates a Warning that is then converted into a Bulletin by SES HQ and distributed to the media. Unfortunately, as the following diagram shows. this process is far too slow for the community living on the Richmond/Wilsons River catchment as the situation has often changed on the ground before the information has been made public.



It is our understanding that currently there is no way for BoM to accurately predict where rain will fall in the future and how much. All that can be done is to clearly alert the community to the outcome of current information and a likely scenario should rain persist. Given the magnitude of the 2022 event had the BoM reported the likelihood of a 14.37 metre flood, few would have believed them. As it was,

those who were watching the river rise across the region on the BoM website during the night had difficulty believing what they were seeing.

Ed Bennett, local historian and Lismore City Unit SES Intelligence Office with more than 50 years of local flood experience reported that the February 2022 flood was unique in several aspects as can be seen in the following graph. Over a period of four days there were three rain episodes that under normal conditions would each generate a moderate flood but cumulatively created a disaster.



Risk Frontiers in the article “The Weather behind the Eastern Australian floods – the storm cluster from 23rd February to 2nd April, 2022” by Dr Ian Goodwin (<https://riskfrontiers.com/insights/eastern-australian-floods-february-april-2022/>) gives a detailed hydrological view of what happened.

Following the 2017 flood the National Director of BoM, the NSW Regional Director and Senior Hydrologist came to Lismore and spent many hours with the Lismore Citizens Flood Review Group discussing how the wording of Bureau Warnings could be improved to meet the needs of the community. In the ensuing years there has been intermittent contact as situations arose and following the February 2022 flood

it was recognised by NSW BoM hydrology staff that the wording of possible advanced situational warnings requires improvement.

Since 2017 the NSW SES has built a stronger relationship with the BoM by embedding a representative in the HQ team during an event however due to BoM internal technological processes this benefit does not effectively feed up-to-date information through to the Zone IMT and Local SES Unit level

4. BUREAU OF METEOROLOGY RECOMMENDATIONS

- 4.1 That the BoM liaise closely with the Lismore City Unit Intelligence Team during an event to obtain local rainfall information from areas that are not covered by river gauges
- 4.2 That the local Lismore City SES be enabled to independently monitor rainfall and stream heights and provide current information to the community and relevant bodies for broadcast direct from the IMT e.g. Northern Zone Headquarters, NSW SES Headquarters, BoM, LCC, Police etc. and the media
- 4.3 That from the issue of the first minor flood warning, for the duration of the flood event, hourly updates on weather conditions and forecasts, flood heights (actual, rate of change, predicted heights as appropriate), warnings, etc. be provided to media outlets for broadcast

5. STATE EMERGENCY SERVICES (SES)

5.1 SES OPERATIONS MANAGEMENT

Whilst there has been insufficient time to gather extensive details of the February and March 2022 flood management by the SES HQ, from a community point of view it is disappointing to report that there have been reports demonstrating little improvement to systems that failed in 2017 and continued to fail in 2022. In fact from what we have been able to determine the situation has gotten worse.

It is understood that the SES HQ staff were faced with a dilemma when flooding was occurring from the border down the Coast and into the metropolitan area. However, during our few meetings with HQ staff our group raised this issue several times but the severity of the local situation and the resultant impact of a shortage of staff availability from across the state during a major Northern Rivers flood did not seem to be understood.

No doubt there will be detailed reports that will come from volunteers, members of the community and agencies noting individual incidents that demonstrate management failures. Interagency rivalries and power struggles and ego continue to get in the way of effective decision-making to the detriment of the community.

It is recognised that curtailing SES ability to manage effectively is the fact that there is no common operating picture system (CoP) or similar technology that enables each of the assisting and associated agencies to operate in the cloud so all agencies are connected within the control room and back to their own organisations and the public for speedy transmission.

With several different management systems operating and with no ability to technologically communicate with one another this fundamental factor created considerable organisational and management challenges and impacted negatively on all agencies and the outcomes for the community.

The inadequacies of the Goonellabah SES HQ were well known and the establishment of the IMC during a flood event at the SCU had previously been successfully trialled. It is an example of HQ lack of understanding of the local inadequacies of the site during a major event that the Goonellabah HQs was used. This once again caused the Local Emergency Management Committee (LEMC) to operate separately at the Council chambers creating additional and unnecessary challenges for coordination and communication.

5.1 SES MANAGEMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

- 5.1.1 That a “root and branch” complete restructure of management of the NSW SES be undertaken with reduction in the Senior Leadership and refocus to the Ground Level Coordination and response
- 5.1.2 That the Rebuild of the SES framework be carried out by an internationally recognised disaster management specialist
- 5.1.3 That the key focus of the restructure of organisation management be the needs of the community and coalface delivery of response
- 5.1.4 That policies and procedures seamlessly link all agencies of disaster management from the local level through the State level and on to include the National level into a common framework
- 5.1.5 That the restructure includes the management of relationships with Police, RFS, Resilience NSW, the National Recovery & Resilience Agency, Emergency Management Australia, ADF etc. etc.)

- 5.1.6 That consideration be given to amalgamating the SES & RFS
- 5.1.7 That alternative Northern Rivers Zone HQs be considered
- 5.1.8 That the current critical incident management systems and facilities systems and enablers (Power Back-up / SATCOM /UPS) at the Goonellabah site be made redundant

5.2 132500

The use of the 132500 number during the February 28 emergency once again failed the community. With flooding occurring from the Queensland border through to south of Sydney there was no way that a centralised number could cope. Many could not get through, many waited hours in or on the roofs of their homes with no response.

One of our group and his wife was caught with rising waters and their full story is in Appendix 2. They are in their 70's, have lived in South Lismore for many years through many floods. Their floor height is above 1974 level. The following is a brief outline of their hotline experience on February 28.

- 5.30 am Called 132500 - call not answered - water approaching floor level
- 6.00 am Water entering house - Called 132500 again no answer so called 000 Police station - told would contact SES and phone back - no return call
- 10 - 12 pm Continually trying 132500 still no response - contacted family and friends - climbed into house loft as water now chest high
- 3.30 pm Friend of a friend arrived on a jet ski and transported them to safety

5.2 132500 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 5.2.1 That strategies for the management of the hotline 132500 be reviewed

5.3 INCIDENT MANAGEMENT TEAM (IMT)

From discussions with a range of SES and other agency representatives on the ground and in the Incident Management Centre (IMC) it would appear that there are a number of areas that failed or were problematic:

- Staff were overwhelmed with the size and scope of the response requirement
- Effective management was beyond the capacity of the SES staff
- Key Leadership suffered decision paralysis, delaying response
- Poor prioritisation of response assets to events
- Lack of contingency planning
- Lack of training SES internal and with partner agencies

- Little coordination between agencies
- Blackouts occurred throughout the IMT area causing communication issues within and between the IMT, external agencies and the community
- Each agency used it's own information management system with 3 or 4 systems operating within the IMC
- The information management systems did not "talk" to one another
- Considerable time was lost transferring information from one system to another
- Greater focus sending information up the line to the next level and HQ than responding to the needs of the local units and the community
- Too much focus on media requirements at both the IMT and HQ levels
- Local unit requests for assistance were too slow or often ignored

5.3. INCIDENT MANAGEMENT TEAM RECOMMENDATIONS

- 5.3.1 That the Northern Rivers Division be designated a High Risk Zone
- 5.3.2 That management policies and procedures be specific to the Northern Rivers Division
- 5.3.3 That the Northern Rivers Division be managed in valleys each reporting requirements and gaining support from the IMT
- 5.3.4 That local trained SES representatives with detailed knowledge of the catchment be embedded in IMT and gather/translate local information feeds to a Common Operating Picture (CoP)
- 5.3.5 That a Flood CoP system and/or recently developed and tested technological communication systems that operates in the cloud be established to enable all agencies to be connected within the control centre and back to their own organisations and the public for speedy transmission of information
- 5.3.6 That a NSW common information management system be developed implemented for all associated emergency management agencies, with a common information 'plug and play' system.
- 5.3.7 That salaried staff and volunteers at all levels are AIIMS trained both theoretically and practically in all required aspects of emergency management
- 5.3.8 That NSW SES consider practicing 'tabletop' exercises with all partner agencies
- 5.3.9 That regular IMT practical training sessions are held to test all aspects of the emergent management system
- 5.3.10 That only those with demonstrated emergency management skills and abilities be progressed to IMT positions

5.4 RESCUE

It has been reported that there were 17 SES rescue boats of various types and sizes available during the height of the flood at the Lismore City Unit. However, the small number of trained boat rescue staff available restricted the number of crews that were able to go out on the water at the height of the emergency. Additionally, the pace of water in the river also restricted the ability to get to and from North and South Lismore.

In the February flood, in East Lismore, water entered premises across an extensive area that had not been flood affected for 50 years. Boats were being launched from Wyrallah Road Public School into an area that most people did not know were at risk.

Key points are:

- due to the magnitude of the February 2022 flood many volunteers from all agencies were either unable to reach their HQs and/or their homes and businesses were caught in the floodwater
- there was a shortage of trained staff to assist with rescues
- the attempt at exclusion of trained personnel by HQ due to their unvaccinated status reduced availability of trained staff even further
- the flotilla of community owned boats and jet skis saved many hundreds of lives despite SES HQ initially hampering the effort with “do not enter the water” request
- management was policy bound and not able to tolerate risk (ie culturally risk averse regardless of disaster situation)
- during this critical time SES HQ continued with their vaccination policy effectively reducing the number of available trained staff to assist
- many of the unvaccinated trained staff participated in the community flotilla and worked tirelessly saving lives
- insufficient helicopters available until the arrival of the military
- low cloud impacted helicopter ability to get into the air

A member of our group responded to the radio call for assistance and was on the water from 8:30am, 28 February 2022. He reported:

- Volunteering locals arriving to the Lismore SES unit from the east of town, were sent away from the local SES unit location by a Lismore City Council worker to the Ballina road location to launch privately owned boats.
- At Ballina road (corner Ballina road & Hunter street), utes towing boats on trailers were being instructed by a single police officer to go to Dibbs street and unload on any side street (off Dibbs street) and launch themselves.

- The few frontline Police and SES workers at the Ballina road location were overwhelmed by the scale of the event and were mostly focused on attending to people already rescued by civilians & being delivered to the Ballina road drop off location
- Rescued civilians were being lifted out of boats and left for other civilians to organise as the boat volunteers turned back out in to flood water to go and rescue others
- Tinnies with outboard motors had to increasingly navigate power lines in the water and above heads. Motors were lifted mechanically and manually to avoid power lines (presumed to be dead).
- Jet skis with the capacity to carry multiple people proved to be extremely effective on the water with the manoeuvrability and speed with smaller wake critical in the success rescuing many stranded residents.
- Fuel supplies for boats and jet skis working all day were provided privately Petrol reserves and centrally located, flood free supply to emergency vessels must be considered for future emergencies.

Unfortunately at approximately 9:30am on 28th February the local ABC North coast radio station lost electrical power during the critical stage of regional rescue and was unable to broadcast until a back up generator was sourced to supply power to the local bureau.

At the height of the crisis, the SES initially requested community boat assistance and later advised the community to keep their boats out of the water until they were registered with the SES by filling out forms and having their boats checked. Whilst understanding the risk, this shows how far removed from the reality of the situation some decision makers were; a clear demonstration that the structure and decision making for flood management in the Northern Rivers needs to be locally managed with support and immediate response from all layers of bureaucracy through to HQ as it is requested.

5.4 RESCUE RECOMMENDATIONS

5.4.1 That detailed plans be drawn up for future mass rescues

5.4.2 That there be a provision for SES to accept risk during a catastrophic event

5.4.3 That dedicated boat access/egress routes for future floods be identified with consideration to electricity risks, electricity lines and potential to convert

above ground transmission lines to below ground along identified access/ egress routes

5.4.4 That jet skis be included as valuable rescue SES assets

5.5 SES VOLUNTEER UNITS

The local volunteer units are the backbone of the NSW SES organisation. Their commitment and attendance at the unit for training, maintenance purposes etc on a weekly basis is greater than almost any other community organisation.

There is insufficient training and resources made available to the units. By far, the majority of the members (about 80%) join the organisation because they want to offer practical assistance directly to the community in time of need. It has been reported that as the SES has become more bureaucratised with information centralised, in recent years more and more administrative requests are coming to local units from HQ . Administration is not the key interest or expertise of the vast majority of volunteer members.

It is recognised that the magnitude of the event on February 28 that inundated previously unaffected homes meant that from the outset there was a shortage of front line staff from all locally based agencies. This severely restricted the help that was available within the units and to the community requiring assistance.

It has been reported that there were many issues within the SES IMC that hampered the local unit volunteers ability to carry out their tasks. There was very poor of communication and support provided to all the units from the IMC. The smaller outlying units were left to their own devices and to manage alone with no support.

The Lismore City unit managed a huge area covering North and South Lismore, East Lismore and the CBD and are to be congratulated on the way their team ran. The failure of the Emergency Warning System provided an extra challenge. The Lismore City Unit set up its own local Incident Management Team, accepted all members regardless of vaccination status and many worked for 48 hours straight throughout the height of the crisis and then continued to report every day for the next four weeks.

Meanwhile in most instances the salaried staff rotated 8 hourly shifts.

It is evident that the Northern Zone is too large and should be broken into smaller sectors. The Northern Rivers Division of the Northern Zone should be broken into smaller valleys sectors. Each smaller sector requires an appointed link from the unit to the IMT to ensure that their needs are met as required and communication works well.

5.5 VOLUNTEER UNIT RECOMMENDATIONS

- 5.5.1 That the Northern Rivers Division of the Northern Zone be broken into smaller valley sectors
- 5.5.2 That during an emergency the Lismore City Unit has sole responsibility for decisions and operations within the Lismore LGA
- 5.3.3 That a Division delegate in the IMT be assigned to the Lismore City Unit during an event for fast distribution and coordination of information, resources and support
- 5.5.4 That a Division delegate in the IMT be assigned to smaller units during an event for fast distribution and coordination of information, resources and support
- 5.5.5 That an infallible Emergency Warning Sound System be developed for Lismore

6. COMMUNICATION

6.1 COMMUNITY INFORMATION SYSTEMS

The communication systems currently in place are failing to meet the needs of the community. As reported in previous reviews there are a plethora of websites and social media sites with a range of information for the community some accurate and some inaccurate. There is need for a directed network communication plan.

The community requires a single source of truth.

Currently each associated emergency information service in NSW has it's own communication system forcing the community to access multiple apps and sites to garner the required emergency information. In the February 2022 event the electricity went down across a large area of Lismore for several days leaving the car radio and telephone as the only connection many in the community had to gain information. The car was also the only place to charge the telephone.

However, it needs to be recognised that during a flood event data bearer for the 4G/5G network will cut out, especially when towers revert to back up of only 3G voice and text msg capability. Rescuers found they were unable to use their smart phone touch screen mobile devices in wet weather making the GPS sourcing of addresses of those requesting assistance unworkable.

There needs to be an easily accessible information system linked to a telephone app that gives all the required information that the community needs. An example of this requirement is the failure of the Emergency Warning Siren in Lismore that did not work at the height of the emergency leaving no ability to send an instantaneous sound reinforced warning to the community of the impending disaster.

An all hazard integrated common operating picture digital system with an app for the community is required not only in NSW but also nationally as it is not uncommon for there to be cross border cyclones, floods and fires, in particular between southern Queensland and Northern NSW and Southern NSW and northern Victoria.

Following the Royal Commission into the Black Saturday Fires in 2009 a world search by Vic Emergency found a system developed by Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) for the US military to manage front line troops. Following development, this was tested and improved by the Californian Fire Service and further improved and implemented by VicEmergency into EM-COP. The VicEmergency improvements were subsequently integrated into the MIT US military system. In Victoria, this is now in place with approximately 200 agencies integrated into a single platform with an app for the community so that everyone can receive accurate information and see what is occurring in real time from one single site.

As the most flood affected region in the nation the NSW Northern Rivers is suitable to be the pilot site to test a NSW single source information app that is linked with the CoP and EMS Management System. In 2019 following our approach and discussions with senior Vic Emergency staff, an offer was made to assist with developing a pilot for our region. It is understood that a visit by SES and associated agency HQ staff was made to investigate the system but this was not taken up by NSW due to interagency and interstate rivalry.

EMCOP BENEFITS

- provides timely, tailored and relevant emergency information for communities, individuals and families enabling them to make effective decisions before, during and after emergencies.
- enables emergency services to work better together, with the community, government, not for profit and private organisations
- reduces management overheads and information replication / recycling through levels of command in the SES.
- has the community as the centre focus for information distribution and aid provision
- delivers information to communities before, during and after emergencies
- enables communities themselves to contribute information to improve situational awareness for all
- provides a common operating picture and enables effective decision making for emergency management
- enables the sharing of information pertinent to an emergency and the creation of tools for combining, processing and analysing this information in order to provide decision makers with added insight
- takes full advantage of modern day and developing technology
- the ability to add modules and
- to evolve with technological advances
- to be cloud based with fully scalable infrastructure
- is open source and not locked into any one vendor, in order to serve an infinite number of users
- encourages global innovation
- Allows for ground command to react and respond to evolving situations at the coalface and keep management informed and updated
- All agencies, the media and the community have access to the same information at the same time

6.1 COMMUNICATION RECOMMENDATION

- 6.1.1 That the VicEmergency EMCOP or equal quality system be implemented in NSW and nationwide to inform the community in real time and reduce the impact of emergencies on human life, communities, essential and community infrastructure and the environment.

6.2 SES FLOOD BULLETINS

The process of only linking SES Bulletins to the public from BoM Flood Warnings is insufficient to meet the needs of the community across the Tweed, Richmond and Clarence catchments where the rate of rise is far quicker than other regions of the state.

In the February 2022 flood the escalation in the rate of rise from late on Sunday night through to Monday morning meant the bulletins were not up to date with what was happening on the ground.

The SES Flood bulletins need to be locally produced with the local unit feeding information received from their approved gauge readers throughout the catchment to the ABC and local commercial radio stations. This can be updated on an hourly, or even half hourly basis dependent on the situation and should continue until the river system reaches it's peak.

Having the ABC as the designated agency works as long as they are broadcasting locally as there can be input from local SES units and IMT direct to the on duty broadcaster. Once the ABC transfers broadcasting to the next jurisdiction then the Bulletins lose the local connection with out of date information based on BoM Warnings continuing to be broadcast to the community.

6.2 SES FLOOD BULLETIN RECOMMENDATIONS

- 6.2.1 That from the time that the BoM Flood Warning is issued the catchment community be directed to listen to ABC and Commercial radio broadcasts for locally produced SES Flood Bulletins which will take place hourly following the news
- 6.2.2 That clear and concise Bulletins containing verified and accurate up to date Lismore City SES intelligence to be broadcast on the hour after the news.
- 6.2.3 That every hour the community be informed of the developing flood threats and timing of critical events such as when the water would overtop the Levee and enter the CBD
- 6.2.4 That the predicted river peak is broadcast as soon as it is calculated.
- 6.2.5 That hourly Flood Bulletins be sent through all traditional media and digital media platforms of all relevant government agencies.

7. EVACUATION CENTRES

The Department of Community and Justice (DCJ) is tasked with running evacuation centres. The facilities were not functionally able to effectively support large numbers of evacuees, and all of centres suffered from a lack of integration with the regional response.

As the floodwaters rose very quickly and the magnitude of the event was being experienced capacity was reached at the Southern Cross University (SCU) Evacuation site very quickly. This required a second site to be established at the Goonellabah Swimming and Aquatic Centre (GSAC). When GSAC reached capacity Summit Gym opened up their premises as an evacuation centre.

7.1 SCU EVACUATION CENTRE

The SCU evacuation centre location is often problematic when Lismore is flooding. During the February event, the closest access to the SCU for North, South and East Lismore evacuees was from the Wyrallah Road side. However this access was blocked due to flooding in East Lismore.

The alternative access coming down from Ballina Road along Kellas Street and onto the University Loop was very dangerous as the heavy rain over the catchment caused a waterfall effect over the steep windy road. This access from Ballina Road in Lismore Heights is one of the three ways to get to the SCU Evacuation Centre but due to the dangerous situation should have been closed and warning signs erected.

It has been reported that the SCU centre was poorly staffed and resourced with the DCJ supervisor required to stand down due to personal flood issues. No back up supervisor was nominated to take over. As a result many evacuees left to relocate to the better run and cleaner GSAC Evacuation Centre set up by council staff.

7.2 GOONELLABAH SWIMMING AND AQUATIC CENTRE (GSAC)

At GSAC it has been reported that Council staff were “thrown in the deep end” without a plan or any previous experience or training in setting up or running an evacuation centre. Initially staff struggled to establish appropriate organisation and coordination but it needs to be understood that they were required to manage without a guide or checklist to follow.

Volunteers came from across the area to help and many people donated food and much needed items. Social media networks worked well to request and receive essential goods and services such as food, clothes and bedding. Volunteer sorters, cleaners, nursing staff, and much more was achieved using social media networks.

The DCJ staff did not arrive for several days, and when they did, it has been reported that their skill and understanding left a lot to be desired impacting negatively on already traumatised people. There appeared to be a level of disinterest in providing the required service to the evacuees, such as keeping the kitchen open through the night so those coming in at all hours, or those who could not sleep for various reasons, had something to eat and someone to speak with.

Initially COVID was of little concern but it quickly became a problem because of the very crowded situation with no COVID precautions being taken.

At both these centres there were issues with anti-social behaviour, violence and drug use, including syringes lying around, but the situation was much worse at SCU where Support Services were also lacking in the early days.

Methadone users were a huge problem at both locations, until their doses were sorted by driving them to the methadone clinic each day. Alcohol was also a problem with alcoholics bringing it in and hiding it to keep drinking.

Overall in the SCU and GSAC evacuation centres it was evident that preparation planning was lacking and responsible salaried DCJ staff were ill prepared for a natural disaster.

7.3 SUMMIT GYM

With the privately owned gym closed due to the floods and SCU and GSAC reaching capacity, the Summit Gym owner decided to open his gym facilities as an evacuation centre. Quite a few people were housed in the first few nights. Many people called offering in-home accommodation and others came through looking for friends or family members who hadn't been allocated at this early point in time.

Many donations were received in the form of pre-packaged food, clothes, toiletries, bedding, baby supplies, animal products. Community members cooked meals at

home and brought them in to feed the people who were staying at the gym. Others came through to collect donations or simply to charge their phones and have a hot drink and chat while waiting. Many of the gym staff came in to help look after those who were staying, assisting with the provision of clothes and giving guidance on where to find requirements. Nurses and doctors also attended to help those in need of medications.

The amount of donations was overwhelming. People called from the Gold Coast and Brisbane, asking whether they could drop donations off at the gym, even though Summit was not an official evacuation centre. Donations came in mixed bags and boxes and staff had to organise the logistics of where to store it all.

Many volunteers called in to help sort through the hundreds of bags and assisted staff packing supplies to be taken to Coraki and surrounds by helicopter. Social media was definitely the most helpful tool to let everyone know what was needed and what not. Whilst a challenging experience, at the same time it was incredible to see the support of the community and their selflessness.

7. EVACUATION CENTRE RECOMMENDATIONS

- 7.1 That Evacuation Centres be integrated with the regional response
- 7.2 That DCJ and associated agencies draw up Evacuation Centre Plans
- 7.3 That the plans are detailed covering all management requirements
- 7.4 That the plans are updated on an annual basis
- 7.5 That staff are appropriately trained to provide the required service to evacuees
- 7.6 That there is a post event evaluation of the Evacuation Centre management with input from affected evacuees

8. RESILIENCE NSW

RECOVERY

Resilience NSW is the lead agency for Recovery and has only been in existence for some 18 months. The Director is experienced with fire management but maybe not so experienced with flood events. This does not excuse the failure of leadership and planning that was exhibited by Resilience NSW from the outset.

The following details were given by representatives of several agencies who were directly involved during the initial Recovery phase:

- There was no effective coordination between the SES and Resilience NSW stovepipe operations
- During the transition from from Rescue to Recovery there was more than 48 hours vacuum of Command and Control over the period from Friday March 11 to Monday March 14
- Management investment was lost during this time as a result
- During the hiatus period Resilience NSW was attempting to build basic operating processes and organisational structures for assigned personnel
- All the agencies such as Health, Red Cross, NRRRA etc. had staff and counsellors ready for action but no progression was made by Resilience NSW during the 48 hour hiatus period
- Resilience NSW did not operate as the lead agency for Recovery
- Resilience NSW internal cohesion was low, resulting in a negotiated dual command structure and split functional management arrangement with Police
- Internal friction and dual reporting lines (Police and Resilience NSW), saw the organisation slow to decide and slow to react
- Organisational focus was upwards not downwards ...
- The variety of systems being used by various agencies in the Rescue phase did not enable the automatic transfer of information to Resilience NSW
- In the age of modern technology, at the height of a natural disaster, a spreadsheet was used to lodge all the relevant information for the thousands who were impacted and displaced
- This action caused considerable confusion within and between agencies and delay in decision making
- Inability to decide on the management system to be employed after transition, BEACON / INDIGO ? BLUE PORTAL ...
- The result was defaulting to the Police Management System
- Management lessons learnt from Bushfires not effectively learned or implemented
- there were insufficient Resilience staff numbers to meet the huge number of community members requiring assistance
- the Resilience staff were lacking in people skills
- there were more Liaison Officers present than Resilience staff
- multiple agency representatives described the Resilience NSW performance as “chaotic” “shambolic” “disorganised” to name just a few

- both Resilience and Police senior staff were reticent about making decisions that might impact negatively with their careers
- both agencies had media teams to ensure maximum promotion of their agency
- for the affected community the disorganisation and incompetence was additional trauma
- Lack of follow-up on requests for help from the community
- There was lack of control and coordination of Evacuation centres.
- Logistic management of relief supplies was poor, with limited ability to absorb and disseminate donations (bulk holdings in some locations that were not distributed to the point of need).

At the Lismore City Council (LCC) level the Recovery Committee becomes active after a disaster. The LCC LEMO had experience but was on holiday when the flood occurred. The General Manager and most senior executive staff were new and had not lived through a Lismore flood event. This became evident very early on.

8. RESILIENCE MANAGEMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

- 8.1 That there is a complete restructure of Resilience NSW carried out by an internationally recognised recovery expert
- 8.2 That the primary reconstruction goal be to have the community as the primary focus in all policies, procedures and decision making
- 8.3 That policies and procedures seamlessly link all agencies of recovery from the local level through the State level and onto the National level.
- 8.4 That the Recovery Reconstruction includes the management of relationships with Police and ancillary agencies such as the National Recovery & Resilience Agency, ADF, DCJ, Red Cross, Salvation Army, EPA, Telco's, Wildlife Services, Volunteer Organisation, Local Councils, Federal Agencies etc.

9. DONATIONS

As previously mentioned the generosity of the Australian public was truly amazing. All sorts of goods arrived in Lismore from all across the nation. Unfortunately, this created a logistical nightmare as due to the extensive damage across all normal storage facilities throughout the floodplain there were limited places where the donations could be stored.

There needs to be a plan developed by Resilience NSW denoting how this issue can best be managed. This needs to be well coordinated to ensure that the items needed by the affected community are available and stored in a logical manner and distributed efficiently so that the donated items reach their target audience as quickly as possible and are not wasted.

9. DONATIONS RECOMMENDATIONS

- 9.1 That a Donations plan be developed by Resilience NSW
- 9.2 That Donations be properly coordinated
- 9.3 That this include the storage that is required
- 9.4 That Storage facilities be investigated and built into the plan
- 9.5 That a list of priority items be drawn up and broadcast widely throughout the disaster affected state and the nation as soon as a disaster occurs
- 9.6 That distribution plans be developed
- 9.7 that the focus be on requirements at the point of need as opposed to the warehousing of donations
- 9.9 That coalface coordinators be appointed

10. TRAINING

It is evident that there is a lack of effective leadership training across all levels of the the emergency management and recovery sectors. The current AIIMS management online training is inadequate and ineffective. It would appear that there are insufficient “real life” training exercises at all levels to evaluate and improve processes. All the policies and procedures should be regularly tested to maintain standards and make improvements to different scenarios likely to be experienced in a disaster setting.

10.1 EMERGENCY AND INCIDENT MANAGEMENT TRAINING CENTRE

In the February 2022 event the Fire, Ambulance, Police stations, Lismore City SES Unit and Westpac Helicopter Service were all inundated with flood waters and had to relocate. These units are currently situated on the floodplain in or near the Lismore CBD. Most are inundated by floodwaters at moderate and major flood level requiring staff and vehicles to be evacuated to higher ground as floodwaters are rising in order to continue operating the required service to the community. This can and has happened several times in a single year.

Following the 2017 flood the Owen's Review into the NSW SES operations reported the Northern Rivers SES HQ was inadequate and a new regional SES HQ was required. Subsequently the South Cross University was approached and plans were drawn up for a multi story multi agency headquarters on the SCU grounds. Each agency would be separately and permanently accommodated and the building would include a state of the art regional incident management centre. The proposal was seen to be of considerable benefit to all agencies and SCU.

An Emergency Management degree course was also discussed with the on ground headquarters being available for agency and student training with students gaining practical experience by assisting during emergencies.

BENEFITS:

- All agencies would be out of flood area
- All agencies could support one another during a major incident
- All agencies would have access to appropriate training
- SCU has the data capacity to support the requirements of a major incident
- The development of an Emergency and Incident Management degree course would ensure that there are sufficient trained emergency and incident managers to support all hazards (police, fire, floods, terrorism, etc.) throughout the nation
- Trained and experienced incident managers would be onsite to deliver lectures
- Students would obtain practical experience on site during the degree course

10. TRAINING RECOMMENDATIONS

- 10.1 That a purpose built Emergency and Incident Management Training Centre be established at Southern Cross University in Lismore to service agency training needs for NSW
- 10.2 That theoretical and practical training at all levels be front and centre of emergency management agencies
- 10.3 That all policies and procedures be updated and tested on a regular basis

11. CONCLUSION

This Submission is produced for the sole purpose of improving the management of disasters in NSW and particularly in the Northern Rivers. It covers the key issues that require resolution as a matter of urgency if NSW is to manage natural disasters

effectively. It is disappointing that despite many reviews over the years there has been little attempt to address the issues that are important to the community that have been repeatedly mentioned in multiple Reports and Coronial Inquiries.

It is obvious that there needs to be a complete reconstruction of the NSW SES and Resilience NSW. Serious consideration should be given to the amalgamation of the SES and RFS agencies similar to other states. In regional NSW the agency volunteers are often the same people; they just change uniform dependent on the emergency. The fiefdoms of the various agencies at all levels also need to be deconstructed and incorporated and designed with the singular focus of meeting the needs of the community.

The reconstruction should be considered as a pilot project with all policies and procedures designed to create a seamless transition from the affected individual local community member through local, State and national government agencies.

The community is not interested in who manages each sector of disaster management. They just want it to work. With the taxpayers of the nation covering all the costs, it is incumbent on every involved staff member of every department of every agency across the nation to work together to achieve the best possible outcome for the community.

It is time for NSW to develop a new ‘State of the Art ‘ Emergency Management and Recovery System that works!

12. APPENDIX

1. Lismore Citizens Flood Review Group
2. Graham & Judy's Story
3. Recommendations

APPENDIX 1

LISMORE CITIZENS FLOOD REVIEW GROUP

Graham Askey	South Lismore Resident; 32 year representative on the Lismore City Council Floodplain Management Committee
Ed Bennett	Retired high school teacher, 56 years Lismore City SES Unit - Flood intelligence officer and Richmond River Historical Society Flood historian, North Lismore representative on the Floodplain Management Committee
Austin Curtin	3rd generation Farmer
Bill Moorhouse	Retired Engineer Rous County Council 2004 - 2019 Lismore City Councillor 2012 - 2020
Peter Thorpe	Engineer/Planner Tintenbar & Ballina Shires 1967-82; Managing Director Hepburn & Thorpe Pty Ltd 1982-2010; Constructed Stage 3 of the Lismore Levee including the Gasworks Pump Station
Beth Trevan	CBD Family business 1910 - 2005; South Lismore business 2005 - present; Health Educator, Health Service Director and Consultant 1974- 2010;
Richard Trevan	Problem resolution and distressed business consultant

APPENDIX 2

GRAHAM & JUDY'S STORY

Graham and Judy, both in their mid 70's, have lived in high two storey home in South Lismore for very many years and are very experienced in preparation for floods. On February 27 in line with BoM predictions, relevant belongings were raised to above the 11.4 m level as was predicted by the BoM to occur by the following morning.

When the river started rising again in the early hours of February 28 there was no access to leave their property other than by boat as by 2 am their street had become an island.. The timeline of their rescue is as follows:

- 3.00 am Selected possessions brought up from under the house
- 5.30 am Water approaching floor level of their raised house
Phoned 132500 but could not get through
- 6.00 am Water entering house - Tried 132500 again no response
Phoned 000 put through to the Police who took their details and said they would get back to them - nothing more heard
- 6 - 10 am Continued to try to get through to 132500 to no avail
Water now over table height so moved into loft below the ceiling
Texts to family and friends
Friend tried to respond with a boat but could not cross the river as the rush of the water was too dangerous.
Another friend tried but with the height of the flood at that time, the railway embankment was an impassable wall.
- 12 noon Looked at online media Lismore app and found name on a published SES list - presumed listed by the 000 Police call
- Granddaughter then living in Thailand, alerted friends on social media that her grandparents were stuck in a loft in South Lismore asking for assistance

- 1.30 pm Graham thought he heard a noise outside but by the time he got down from the loft and into the above waist water and waded to the front door dodging unable to be seen overturned furniture - he discovered there was no one there - so returned to the loft. (The SES now listed their street had been “cleared”).
- 3.30 pm In response to their granddaughter’s social media plea from Thailand a friend of a friend who had brought his jet ski up from Lennox Head to assist with rescues after texting ahead arrived at the house.

The rescuer tied the jet ski to the submerged landing railing but could not get in the front door from the outside. Being forewarned this time Graham had climbed down from the loft into chest high water taking a torch with him which he was able to shine at the front door. Thankfully the light was seen by the rescuer and Graham went back for Judy, the two waded through chest high water to the submerged landing, and somehow managed to get onto the jet ski.

Both were given life jackets (their hero having given up his own) and then taken from South Lismore across the water covering the Ballina Street bridge and then on a “scenic tour “ where Graham could hardly believe what he was seeing (Judy had her eyes shut the whole way!) They travelled along Ballina Street, left into Keen Street, right into Woodlark Street and on to Uralba Street where they were dropped off near the Seventh Day Adventist Church. Here they were greeted by church volunteers with hot soup and dry clothes.

During the course of their loft stay Graham maintained his sense of humour. He was in constant contact with family and friends. His daughter in Brisbane is a Johnny Cash and Beatles fan so when the water was swirling about a metre in her old bedroom he called her and sang the Johnny Cash number “.. rising 3 feet high in your bedroom” and when it went higher he called and sang the Beatle ‘s number “She came in through the bathroom window” to make light of what was happening.

There are lots of lessons to be learned by everyone from this story.

RECOMMENDATIONS

4. BUREAU OF METEOROLOGY RECOMMENDATIONS

- 4.1 That the BoM liaise closely with the Lismore City Unit Intelligence Team during an event to obtain local rainfall information from areas that are not covered by river gauges
- 4.2 That the local Lismore City SES be enabled to independently monitor rainfall and stream heights and provide current information to the community and relevant bodies for broadcast direct from the IMT e.g. Northern Zone Headquarters, NSW SES Headquarters, BoM, LCC, Police etc. and the media
- 4.3 That from the issue of the first minor flood warning, for the duration of the flood event, hourly updates on weather conditions and forecasts, flood heights (actual, rate of change, predicted heights as appropriate), warnings, etc. be provided to media outlets for broadcast

5.1 SES MANAGEMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

- 5.1.1 That a “root and branch” complete restructure of management of the NSW SES be undertaken with reduction in the Senior Leadership and refocus to the Ground Level Coordination and response
- 5.1.2 That the Rebuild of the SES framework be carried out by an internationally recognised disaster management specialist
- 5.1.3 That the key focus of the restructure of organisation management be the needs of the community and coalface delivery of response
- 5.1.4 That policies and procedures seamlessly link all agencies of disaster management from the local level through the State level and on to include the National level into a common framework
- 5.1.5 That the restructure includes the management of relationships with Police, RFS, Resilience NSW, the National Recovery & Resilience Agency, Emergency Management Australia, ADF etc. etc.)
- 5.1.6 That consideration be given to amalgamating the SES & RFS
- 5.1.7 That alternative Northern Rivers Zone HQs be considered
- 5.1.8 That the current critical incident management systems and facilities systems and enablers (Power Back-up / SATCOM /UPS) at the Goonellabah site be made redundant

5.2 132500 RECOMMENDATIONS

5.2.1 That strategies for the management of the hotline 132500 be reviewed

5.3. INCIDENT MANAGEMENT TEAM RECOMMENDATIONS

5.3.1 That the Northern Rivers Division be designated a High Risk Zone

5.3.2 That management policies and procedures be specific to the Northern Rivers Division

5.3.3 That the Northern Rivers Division be managed in valleys each reporting requirements and gaining support from the IMT

5.3.4 That local trained SES representatives with detailed knowledge of the catchment be embedded in IMT and gather/translate local information feeds to a Common Operating Picture (CoP)

5.3.5 That a Flood CoP system and/or recently developed and tested technological communication systems that operates in the cloud be established to enable all agencies to be connected within the control centre and back to their own organisations and the public for speedy transmission of information

5.3.6 That a NSW common information management system be developed implemented for all associated emergency management agencies, with a common information 'plug and play' system.

5.3.7 That salaried staff and volunteers at all levels are AIIMS trained both theoretically and practically in all required aspects of emergency management

5.3.8 That NSW SES consider practicing 'tabletop' exercises with all partner agencies

5.3.9 That regular IMT practical training sessions are held to test all aspects of the emergent management system

5.3.10 That only those with demonstrated emergency management skills and abilities be progressed to IMT positions

5.4 RESCUE RECOMMENDATIONS

5.4.1 That detailed plans be drawn up for future mass rescues

5.4.2 That there be a provision for SES to accept risk during a catastrophic event

5.4.3 That dedicated boat access/egress routes for future floods be identified with consideration to electricity risks, electricity lines and potential to convert above ground transmission lines to below ground along identified access/egress routes

5.4.4 That jet skis be included as valuable rescue SES assets

5.5 VOLUNTEER UNIT RECOMMENDATIONS

- 5.5.1 That the Northern Rivers Division of the Northern Zone be broken into smaller valley sectors
- 5.5.2 That during an emergency the Lismore City Unit has sole responsibility for decisions and operations within the Lismore LGA
- 5.3.3 That a Division delegate in the IMT be assigned to the Lismore City Unit during an event for fast distribution and coordination of information, resources and support
- 5.5.4 That a Division delegate in the IMT be assigned to smaller units during an event for fast distribution and coordination of information, resources and support
- 5.5.5 That an infallible Emergency Warning Sound System be developed for Lismore

6.1 COMMUNICATION RECOMMENDATION

- 6.1.1 That the VicEmergency EMCOP or equal quality system be implemented in NSW and nationwide to inform the community in real time and reduce the impact of emergencies on human life, communities, essential and community infrastructure and the environment.

6.2 SES FLOOD BULLETIN RECOMMENDATIONS

- 6.2.1 That from the time that the BoM Flood Warning is issued the catchment community be directed to listen to ABC and Commercial radio broadcasts for locally produced SES Flood Bulletins which will take place hourly following the news
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- 7.1 That Evacuation Centres be integrated with the regional response
- 7.2 That DCJ and associated agencies draw up Evacuation Centre Plans

- 7.3 That the plans are detailed covering all management requirements
- 7.4 That the plans are updated on an annual basis
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10.2 That theoretical and practical training at all levels be front and centre of emergency management agencies

10.3 That all policies and procedures be updated and tested on a regular basis
