



# Lismore CWA Day Branch

April 2002

## Lismore Flood Inquiry

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We acknowledge that we live and work on the traditional lands of the Widjabul/Wia-bal people on Bundjalung Country, and that the land was never ceded. We support the Uluru Statement from the Heart.

We pay respects to all who lost their loved ones, their belongings and the place they call home.

We ask that the Premier considers the following recommendations in a manner that is responsive, action orientated and supportive of our communities future needs.



Lismore CWA Rooms, Spinks Park, Lismore CBD

## Key Issue-Area 1

*a. the causes of, and factors contributing to, the frequency, intensity, timing and location of floods in NSW in the 2022 catastrophic flood event, including consideration of any role of weather, climate change, and human activity;*

We in the Lismore CWA Day Branch accept that the climate is changing and more severe weather patterns are impacting negatively on humans, livestock, economy and infrastructure. We believe that the recent unprecedented high flood levels in Lismore and surrounds are but a small part of what is a global climate emergency.

Climate modelling for the next 5 decades indicates that rainfall patterns will change in the Northern Rivers with more time between rainfall events, but those events will be of a longer and heavier duration.

As a regional community in an agricultural area, we must acknowledge the science and plan for more extreme rain events with a serious study of the sustainability of a regional city built on the floodplain of a large catchment area.

### Recommendations and Considerations:

Acknowledging the science means an acceptance of the necessity to change the way we farm, live and do business across the Northern Rivers. Governments at all levels, emergency services, support agencies and many farmers and agro-businesses will need to make immediate changes to the way they currently operate. Serious consideration must also be given to the preservation and robust enhancement of existing ecosystems in the area to ensure our wildlife corridors are given the protection they deserve.

## Key Issue Area B

*b. the preparation and planning by agencies, government, other entities and the community for floods in NSW, including the accuracy and timing of weather forecasts, current laws, emergency management plans, practices and mitigation strategies, their application and effect;*

Our recent dramatic experience demonstrates that preparation for floods requires immediate attention from all levels of Government. Governments need to demonstrate leadership to all sectors of the community by working closely with them to achieve robust planning and protocols

that is accessible and readily available to everyone. Leadership decisions must be informed by scientific data and networked sources which includes and utilises the community.

Evacuation orders in the first and most severe floods of March 1st were based on BOM data which was inaccurate. This happened again on April 1st when very confusing evacuation orders were given, revoked then re-issued and again revoked.

We now know that our forecasting systems are unable to cope with the complexities of our changing weather systems. This system failure resulted in first response confusion and huge losses to residents, businesses and agencies, like the CWA.

We in the CWA evacuated much from our premises on the Saturday afternoon under instruction from a CWA member who also belonged to the RFS. We placed many items up higher in the building believing reports that the flood would not exceed the 2017 level. A quarter of our members lost their homes and three are still in temporary accommodation. We lost our rooms whose fate is still undecided.



This belief that flood levels would not exceed those in the 2017 floods led to many residents retiring to bed on the Sunday evening unaware of the disaster unfolding as the levee bank was breached. At this stage many roads were cut off by floodwaters. This created incredible pressure and challenges to the first responders, most of them community members in their own watercraft in dangerous conditions who saved hundreds of residents in the early hours of Monday morning and throughout the coming days

Had we as an organisation been given more reliable information we could have saved much more of our equipment, memorabilia, crafts, photo albums and archives, instead we needed to save ourselves. As well as the grief experienced through our loss of place, physical and metaphorical, the cost of repairs to our meeting rooms will be an added burden to our community. CWA members have been unable to find a suitable place to meet. We need to continue our weekly craft, fundraising and friendship groups, so important as we heal and provide support for others.

Up-to-date and well maintained flood warning systems such as creek height gauges meant the SES could have acted sooner to secure the safety of the community and their volunteers.

Inaccurate or non-existent readings of water levels in the myriad of creeks of our upper catchment combined with the refusal of agencies to acknowledge local knowledge contributed to the unpreparedness of Lismore for these unprecedented flood heights. One of our members rang Council on Thursday 26th from Tuntable Creek at the Channon to report a broken flood gauge and to express concern at the huge volumes of water amassing in the creek system heading for Leycester Creek. The receptionist at Council did not take her seriously.

Community can play an integral part in this warning system as it has played in every aspect of this disaster. Evacuation orders on the Sunday night when they eventually came seemed haphazard - a fire truck with flashing blue and red lights but no loudspeaker driving quickly past in the blinding rain then a sodden and frantic SES volunteer doorknocking those who weren't asleep around midnight until an official SES evacuation order text message was sent. Evacuation was simply not possible for many people as roads were starting to flood, cars were being washed away. Others awoke to a house rapidly filling with water with no electricity unable to process where the water was and how to get out of it - climbing on their roofs was the only solution.

## Key Issue Area C

*c. responses to floods, particularly measures to protect life, property and the environment, including:*

*i. immediate management, including the issuing and response to public warnings;*

*ii. resourcing, coordination and deployment, including with respect to the Australian Defence Force; and*

*iii. equipment and communication systems;*



The initial and poorly executed response from State Government to Local Government and then to community organisations resulted in people, including agency volunteers, being further traumatised by the lack of information, resources and equipment needed to deal with an event of this size. The Red Cross and Salvation Army were critically important in being the first non-government agencies on the ground to accommodate evacuees in extremely difficult circumstances on the Southern Cross University campus.

The deployment of ADF, RFS and SES from other areas came too late for many, although their eventual contribution was indeed valuable and will never be forgotten. It was many days after the flood until our local emergency services could be relieved and the ADF arrived to assist, initially clearing debris from the streets.

Community volunteers descended en masse to clear the sodden and destroyed goods from our houses as soon as the streets were open. In most cases, items were thrown out of homes with no appreciation that things might be salvageable or wanted. The affected residents need a few days to pick through their belongings. The panic around 'get everything out as fast as you can' has to be discussed.

Many of the well-meaning volunteers believed that everything wet would be contaminated and should be destroyed as a health hazard. Homes were gurnied out, again by community volunteers as soon as they were cleared. In the aftermath of the two days of the community volunteers' or 'mud army's' frenetic clearing of homes, people then had to anxiously search through the piles of rubbish for items they were dear to them. Clothing, shoes, jewellery, trophies, photo albums and pieces of furniture etc. were found and saved by residents rummaging under huge stinking piles of white goods, broken windows, sodden carpets, splintered furniture and spoiled food - a health hazard indeed. Many fridges and small motors can be fixed but they too were discarded as rubbish.

Our catchment being so large and topographically diverse required the deployment of many more ADF personnel to deal with the enormity of the disaster. The ADF were further restricted in what they could offer to the community by the lack of large scale equipment and resources. In the residential areas near the CBD, ADF personnel only carried a folding shovel. They had no tools or equipment to remove damaged kitchen sinks, smashed bathroom basins etc., which remained in cleared houses and had to be removed after the volunteers had done their sweep through.

The removal of Defence Force Personal as we take stock ten weeks out, was premature as residents, farmers and landcare volunteers are still in need of support for their damaged homes and properties.

Communications other than social media were limited. People were unable to charge their mobile phones. Many residents are still unable to access reliable internet and some people do not use technology at all. Older residents rely on radio and television and/or reports from local sources or neighbours. Reliable, local 24 hour radio coverage is imperative for reporting dangerous weather conditions.

## Key Issue Area D

*d. the transition from incident response to recovery, including the roles, structure and procedures of agencies, government, other entities and the community;*



There was much confusion on the ground as to who was ultimately responsible for assisting those affected by the flood. At the evacuation centres, the Red Cross had the primary organisational role for housing and clothing evacuees with the Salvation Army providing catering for evacuees and volunteers, however, the 'community' in its many forms acted immediately to assist via their local networks.

Community organisations, agencies and individuals worked together to help people as they had most of the local knowledge and knew what their neighbours' immediate needs were. This continues to be the case. The Red Cross, Salvation Army, the Koori Mail, Resilient Lismore, Helping Hands, various church organisations and Lismore City Council staff were amongst those individuals and agencies.

## Key Issue Area E

*e. recovery from floods, including: i. immediate housing, clean-up, financial support and community engagement measures; and ii. longer-term community rebuilding support;*

The recovery phase is still not managed effectively on a State level, with many individuals without any knowledge or sense that they may be able to return to their homes some 10 weeks on. There are still so many low income earners, students, retired folk, farmers and micro businesses who do not have a home. The region has 1000's of individuals and families homeless, either in temporary accommodation provided by government or charities or at a loved one's place, increasing the already high level of anxiety about their future and the future of the place they call home.

Initially assessors went from building to building, home to home putting up inappropriate tape that made the tenants or owners believe their properties were condemned. This also contributed to the misinformation amongst the community of what was going to happen in Lismore and surrounding areas and made people afraid for their and their communities futures.

Misinformation has also occurred in that the community has received several messages via Council and local media that empty shops may be made available to community groups but nothing has yet happened. The Lismore CWA Branch is 100 years old in 2024 and we are in dire need of a home in Lismore to plan our celebrations and continue our community support and networking. Work on the ground that benefits the whole community and has done for almost 100 years.

## Key Issue Area F:

*f. any other matters that the inquiry deems appropriate in relation to floods.*

1. Removal of flood debris from affected properties and public areas requires immediate removal to avoid any further contamination to waterways and wetlands. The slow pace of the initial debris collection process resulted in the piles being washed away by the second flood.
2. Door knocking on residents' doors with trained welfare workers is still required to assess and manage the needs of the residents with no other 'place' to go. Many people have moved back to their homes, without services, as there is no viable alternative.

## Recommendation 2

*2.a. safety of all emergency service personnel and community first responders;*

In 2022, the expectation that volunteers will protect and manage our community and infrastructure is outdated and not responsive to the needs of the people. There will always be a

need for volunteers but we believe that emergency service personnel from both SES and RFS should attract 'reserve wages' enabling more people to participate. If the agreement is similar to that of retained firefighters, employers will support this model. We believe that volunteering is for organising the local soccer team or the school fete, not for fighting fires, rescuing people and putting your life on the line.

Government funding for emergency management services does not keep pace with community expectations. RFS and SES volunteers have to fundraise to buy equipment needed to keep themselves and the community they serve safe. The development of a green army or disaster relief army which doesn't have to fundraise by having cake stalls would benefit the whole community.

The emergency services in the Local Government Area of Lismore do not have the resources to manage such an extreme event. Jet skis, canoes, tinnies, kayaks, blow up boats and mattresses working alongside the two LGA Lismore SES boats to save our residents was the only way we saved so many people. The funding allocation to our emergency services is inadequate for this catchment and puts other first responders at risk. We believe that we need to build more fully equipped emergency services quarters on either side of the two rivers - three in total.

## Recommendation 2

### *2.b. Preparation and planning for future flood threats and risks;*

1. It is imperative that community voices are included in all aspects of preparation and planning on a local, state and federal level to get a detailed and responsive action plan for future environmental threats.
2. Resilient practices for survival are necessary, it is imperative that community members stock up on supplies, fuel and other necessary items including medication in the lead up to extreme weather conditions.
3. Planning for communities to have emergency hubs will enable these regional and remote areas to have support until resources can reach them.
4. Citizens need to find alternative power supplies to charge their equipment to ensure emergency items can function including their mobile phones, transistor radios and torches.



5. We believe a “What to do afterwards” fact sheet needs to be created that includes - what is salvageable, how to throw stuff on the street in piles that is more easily separated but most importantly that talks about not rushing in when people are traumatised and taking over this process.
6. Councils create emergency departments that includes community members to act on behalf of regional areas to ensure all catchments are covered.
7. The use of cash needs to be promoted. This obstacle was a challenge for many when there was no phone or internet, increasing demand on community services to provide daily necessities.

## Recommendation 2

*2c. use of flood gauges and other warning systems and/or strategies for improved flood prediction;*

1. Our members have written to relevant ministers with their grave concerns about the impact the broken and outdated flood warning systems are having in our region. We have been assured that this will be actioned and hope the community will be involved to report on these systems in the event of emergencies.
2. It is also imperative that BOM refines its reporting model to adapt to changing weather systems. Again, community input can supplement data and river heights.

## Recommendation 2

*2.e. land use planning and management and building standards, including: i. the instruments, policies and programs applying to existing development in flood prone locations across NSW; and ii. the instruments, policies and programs applying to proposed future developments in flood prone locations across NSW;*

1. Buy back programs on floodplains including the option for relocation is essential for the wellbeing of the community.

2. Relocation of whole communities should be well planned with community input.
3. Development of flood prone areas should be prohibited to provide safe and sustainable communities and to enhance biodiversity.
4. Immediate action to relocate existing petrochemical companies and other industries using oil and other hazardous materials to areas with buffer zones and state of the art emergency spillage procedures where flooding will not impact on the environment and residents. Manufacturing licence removals for breaches of safety standards should be rigorously enforced after a company's first breach.
5. Buy back of riparian land for revegetation and eco-system services. Private land in strategic flood mitigation areas and any agricultural land not being managed in a sustainable way should be requisitioned by the government and revegetated to mitigate the effects of climate change.

## Recommendation 2

*2.f. appropriate action to adapt to future flood risks to communities and ecosystems; Zoning of land needs to be reviewed to take into account properties that are less than 100 acres. Current zoning rules restrict the growth of communities and prevent opening up of land for residential communities.*

Our ageing population is unable to maintain large landholdings, many are unable to subdivide. They have no choice but to sell rather than stay on their land on smaller more manageable blocks. Having new neighbours and communities around them as they age will enable people to stay longer on the land, freeing up our aged care facilities.

Many of our villages need a new flush of energy revitalising schools, preschools and supporting the economic growth of the region. Increasing the housing density in villages will support them to flourish and will increase land availability for new homeowners.

We think that opening up land development is key to strengthening our region's sustainability. This can only be done with clear environmental guidelines in place that make village living conducive to the current environment and which takes into account our natural wildlife corridors.

Razering the land and putting McMansions in is not what we are suggesting. Smaller housing with sustainable landscaping needs to be encouraged.

## Recommendation 2

*2.g. coordination and collaboration between the NSW Government and the Australian Government;*

This was a National Catastrophe on the scale of Cyclone Tracy. As described by Resilience NSW to us, this is a Humanitarian and Environmental Disaster.

The State and Federal Government with all due respect, do not know the terrain or its people. It's the local government, agencies and community members who are on the ground that know how to effectively manage situations as they arise. This on the ground work and collaboration between community and all other agencies is imperative for safe and effective outcomes to such disasters particularly given that no one disaster is the same.

The ADF should be on standby and be deployed by the nominated head of the Local Area Disaster Committee. As the climate emergency worsens, these Local Area Disaster Committees should be national, meeting regularly and include members of the Defence Forces in each state and territory.

*2h. coordination and collaboration by the NSW Government with other state and territory governments and local governments; and*

As above

*2i. public communication and advice systems and strategies.*

We would like to see a structure set up where the pyramid is flipped on its head. Where the community (active local hubs) is surrounded by the organisations that are already here on the ground that then reports to councils and ultimately State Government agencies. Where the community and those on the ground dictate what we need when. Having a disaster department in all local councils is key to developing this idea. These key hubs with their identified contacts across the region need access to UHF radios for communication during disaster events.

A non-partisan Office of Climate Change should be enshrined in our Constitution to assist the population to adapt to and mitigate the effects of the climate emergency in every area of human endeavour.

Public conversations should take place Australia wide about the federal government's responsibility to keep its citizens safe and the role of the individual in a civil society to keep themselves and their neighbours safe in this time of climate change. These conversations should include the provision of recurrent funding for all climate sciences including the Bureau of Meteorology with the resultant advice used to create strategies to protect both the population and the environment.



We thank you for reading our submission to the Flood Inquiry 2022.

We trust that the Premier will support the people in the Northern NSW Region once the inquiry puts in place recommendations from all spectrums of the community and agencies.

It is imperative that the matters are dealt with quickly, land use planning and options for rezoning to rebuild our residents' lives requires prompt, responsive and resilient planning.

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President

Vicki Boyle  
Member

Robyn Kelly  
Secretary

Lismore CWA Day Branch