

From: [NSW Government](#)
To: [Flood Inquiry](#)
Subject: Floods Inquiry
Date: Friday, 20 May 2022 6:19:14 PM
Attachments: [NSW 2022 Flood enquiry submission.docx](#)

Your details

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Submission details

I am making this submission as	A resident in a flood-affected area
Submission type	I am making a personal submission
Organisation making the submission (if applicable)	I was working with HHUG and Resilient Byron. I was a first responder and was working for 2 weeks in the early response period.
Your position in the organisation (if applicable)	volunteer. I was helping to co-ordinate all of the upper valley areas around Mullumbmby - Upper Main Am, Upper Wilsons creek and Huonbrook areas.
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

I have written out my submission and attached it as a word doc.

Terms of Reference (optional)

The Inquiry welcomes submissions that address the particular matters identified in its [Terms of Reference](#)

Supporting documents or images

Attach files

- [NSW 2022 Flood enquiry submission.docx](#)
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NSW 2022 Flood enquiry submission

Written by
Nicholas Payne

Ph:
Northern rivers resident of approx. 12 years.

I was an early responder in the areas surrounding Mullumbimby. When I heard about the boat rescues I borrowed a friend's small boat and drove it into Mullumbimby upon first light on the Tuesday, just after the flood waters receded. Myself and a friend spent the day ferrying people across the river at the fallen Williams bridge. That night at short notice I assembled a team of I think 9 of us, and the next morning we walked up to the top of Upper Main Arm rds into Mt. Jerusalem national park, conducted welfare checks and gathered intel. For the next 2 weeks I worked non stop with the local community led efforts under HHUG and Resilient Byron.

During this period, I met with the governor general when he visited to meet us, to learn about what we had been able to achieve as a community led response, as well as to assess the situation. One of the most hopeful things I have heard during this whole experience was his words that said 'it's important that we sit down together after this, to have the conversations necessary to find out what can be replicated from what you've been able to achieve, and just maybe roll that out on a national level. THIS statement, I hope, is given the resources and the leadership it needs to follow it through and I hope that this inquiry process will contribute powerfully to that aim.

I will write briefly to empty the various points that are in my head onto paper.

I was told just recently that the current flood indicator level warning is placed on the down river side of the bridge coming into town. It used to be on the beach/ up river side and there is a metre of difference between the two warning indicators, so my understanding is here, that the indicator is inaccurate by a metre and this is what is sending information to the bureau, which then informs SES services etc. This requires investigation and moving/improving.

I saw aerial footage, circulating on facebook, of the coastal northern rivers area, which showed that the new highway construction has actually dammed up and prevented water run off, which if correct was a MAJOR failure in planning, resulting in an increase of flood damage for much of the region. It certainly did look that way looking at the photograph. If this is the case, how on earth did this happen, what protocols do we have or not have in place for adequate planning/engineering? This area is known to flood. This was a MAJOR mistake.

I have seen photos of old drainage systems that have become neglected, filled up with silt and rubbish, and even built up with landscaping works building over large drainage systems. If this is true, again this points towards a real lack in planning. I think the whole area needs to have audits conducted into the state of its drainage systems and to their

efficacy. This needs to be done at every council area that has any record of flood events. With the climate crisis looming it should be forward thinking enough to cover areas that have not yet, but are close to flood recorded areas.

I hope and advocate for policies of being over generous when it comes to warnings and preparations made, planning protocols written.... It is always better to be safe than sorry.

During the first 2 days after the flood waters receded in Mullumbimby, we met 2 different RFS volunteers who both told us that when they asked their supervisors in the next door Byron Bay region (15mins drive away), 'is there anything we can do to help?' that they were told "no, it's not our jurisdiction, there's nothing to do, don't worry." Both of them came to offer help where they could anyway and spoke of how disgraceful that response was. There were just so many reports and experiences witnessed of the breakdowns of communication and response and information sharing, etc. etc. etc. between various government departments/ services.

When the army finally came to help with road access in upper Huonbrook/ wilsons creek areas, they came with no local knowledge of area, only a tourist map that didn't even have the upper road areas on it. We (HHUG and the community led operations team) supplied them with topographical maps that already had locations of landslides and operational UHF radio areas on it. We supplied them with about 10 A3 laminated maps. Seeing that his UHF radio wasn't working, he asked me if we could supply him with radios.

The OH&S protocols within the army make it impossible for officers to be away for more than an hour from their vehicles. This makes them unable to respond and help in such mountainous areas. I walked all day with other civilians on day 2. We rescued an older man from behind a landslide and had a great day. I was shocked by this limitation of army personnel's ability to respond.

Across the board over all activities and areas of response civilian response was approx. 90-95% to government services 5-10% There is a lot of anger and frustration and disappointment for the government services failure to respond where community did. Also, it was largely community volunteers that are coordinating government service work. There needs to be investigation into how to enable and support community individuals and groups to respond to emergency situations, as they are always going to be the ones on the ground anyway, and then to facilitate civilian led response efforts with government service resources. There were so many frustrating experiences caused by the top down system of information sharing that occurred – meaning that we (community led operations) would share all our information with council, ADF, SES etc.. but the flow on information would not be reciprocated. This caused so many problems and slowed down or confused response efforts. On this topic there is a wealth of learning and data to be had particularly here in the Mullumbimby and Lismore areas.

"Try to get things organised (helicopter action) by the SES and they talk you out of it, block with red tape, but you talk with a private company and you get straight to chopper and get it done."

The Mullumbimby community is a very strong and resilient and dynamic community area, and as a result we were able to mobilise with great effect. I actually hope someone involved in compiling this inquiry comes to visit the area and talk at length with some of the key personnel here. This would facilitate some incredible learning, which is what this inquiry is about I can only imagine. I can facilitate and arrange such a meeting if you contact me.

Residents wanted to bring in trucks and rebuild roads themselves but council said they couldn't because it's council property. Residents furious and desperate.

ADF were telling people they are coming for them in heli lifts, but then redirect choppers leaving people originally waiting stranded and without contact.

adf and police not helping at all with helicopter help unless it is pulling someone out that's in extreme danger. 100% All the food and supply drops are run and funded by community

Lack of community consultation. The community group that gathered in mullumbimby immediately afterwards (HHUG and Resilient Byron, and all of us volunteers), we were using the Mullumbimby civic hall as a centre for our operations – supply depot, offices, everything, it was a hive of community action and response and the epi centre for everything in those moments. The government came in and told us all that we had to move out in, I believe, it was 4 hours? This was huge and caused such dismay for everyone. Apparently it had long before been designated as an emergency response venue for government service departments – service nsw etc.. The fact that we, the local community did not know about that was very unfortunate, and we were saving lives and responsible for so much in those early times.

This event has impressed upon me the failings of the centralization of power and governance. There is a lot to be learned and I hope actioned upon, in the wake of this national disaster level flood event, not only regarding emergency response and planning but also the benefit and real need for strengthening our local communities. I recall some fascinating and inspiring talks on the localization movement, a particular voice is Helena Norberg Hodge..... The reality of responding to an emergency event is that is the people who live in the area, or are on the scene or nearby at the time are ALWAYS going to be the earliest to respond, they are the best suited to perform the time critical role of early emergency response, AND they will always be the ones to be there for the longer project of recovery. Our national and state systems for response are inadequate. There needs to be a thorough overhaul of disaster response systems that take into full regard this truth. I believe that we need to enable and support local communities to better respond to their own situations, we need to identify and deconstruct all the roadblocks that prevent government agencies working together, as well as that which prevents civilians communicating and working with government.

Re this statement, I again, plead with you that someone from the inquiry team visits the areas of Mullumbimby and holds meetings with some of the key people in these areas that were (and still are) at the centre of all the community led organization efforts. If that's something that you can do, please contact me on _____ or _____

I know that a lot of people who have very important voices to contribute to this inquiry are still so busy attending to their own response/recovery/community response efforts, plus their own personal lives, traumas, etc.. (I have only just come out of 4-5 weeks of mild chronic fatigue following the month of relentless flood response and personal work/activity) I hope that you do a lot of initial work on the inquiry, data collection, building the work, etc.. and then send someone or some people out to the area. I was so deeply inspired and honoured to be working alongside the other members of the community, in how we gathered together, using HHUG and RB as an official/institutional umbrella, worked around the clock, and were able to co-ordinate such an amazing response. Seriously, there are some very intelligent and experienced people in this region, and if you're serious about using this opportunity to make positive change, PLEASE come and visit us. We could set up some important meetings.

Thank you for all of the important work you are doing here.

Warmly,

Nicholas Payne.