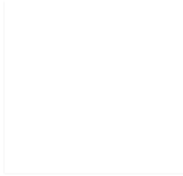


From: [NSW Government](#)
To: [Flood Inquiry](#)
Subject: Floods Inquiry
Date: Thursday, 19 May 2022 11:03:59 AM



Your details

Title Ms

First name Phoebe

Last name Torzillo

Email

Postcode 2480

Submission details

I am making this submission as A resident in a flood-affected area

Submission type I am making a personal submission

Consent to make submission public I give my consent for this submission to be made public

Share your experience or tell your story

Your story

We felt prepared. Thousands of people don't tuck their kids into bed on a floodplain on a rainy night without feeling certain they have nothing to fear. To this day the fact that I put my kids' lives in danger by staying that night sickens me to my gut, and I must remind myself that what went on to happen was unthinkable, at the time.

By this stage you know that the gauges, the visual representations, the measuring sticks posted around town, don't go that high. They stop at 13m, with the highest floods on record being 12.11m. The 2022 official flood height is recorded as 14.4m, but from my floor height to where it reached inside, it hit 14.8m. Modern day Australian culture is one where we have come to expect our government agencies and authorities to overstate all potential harms with litigious-fearing extravagance. During Covid, on the same street where we later ducked under powerlines on a boat, I witnessed a council employee alone on a ride -on in an empty park, wearing a mask. We were lulled into thinking that when it came to flood heights, like with everything else, the authorities would play it safe, that we knew what to expect. The reality was the opposite.

We were 'flood- savvy' 'flood-proof' 'well above the one-in-one hundred' 'high and dry' 'ridiculously high' and blah, blah blah. The week before the flood, we called old-timers for their take ('should be right I reckon, bring stuff up to be safe') and lugged things upstairs – tools and bikes and the like. Up our two-flight staircase to our 4.5 metre above ground level, 13.4 metre above river level house, which is a pain in the arse. We filled up containers of water, charged our solar lights so we could switch off the power and got out a gas cooker so we could disconnect the gas bottles downstairs, 'In case water came up under the house'. The afternoon of, an SES volunteer stopped by to check that we were staying. Yeah, we'll be right- we'll just hang out playing bananagrams with the kids for the day till the water goes down, we said. It was a relaxed, casual conversation. It could be as high as 2017, the volunteer warned us. All good mate, we said. That only got to the bottom landing of the stairs. Piece of piss, and that was only five years ago. We knew our history. 1890's, 1950's, 1970's, 2017. Those were the big ones. You get decades, plural, in between. Or so we

thought.

Early evening, we were getting ready to put the kids to bed - but I was starting to worry about my mum, who lived directly across the river. We'd talked through her flood plan that day and discussed options, we were constantly monitoring the updates, but it hadn't yet seemed necessary to action anything. By the evening, however, the text message warnings were starting. What began with incremental accelerations, that would become mental, and lag behind reality. At 7.45pm I texted mum; 'What's your floor level again?' and the reply; '11.02m (above river level) the lowest and gate is 9.97m'. We put the kids to bed about 8.30 pm. At 9.16pm I texted my mum again. 'Just got text flood may reach 11.5m. Want me to come over and start lifting things?.' I didn't hear back from her straight away, but quickly made a plan with my husband, Avo, and we started getting ready to walk over. We'd already moved our car and trailer to higher ground the day before, and mum's place was 5 minutes on foot. We left a phone so the kids could call us if they woke up. When we arrived, mum was sitting at the computer, my brother was cleaning up after dinner, the house was absolutely as is on a normal day. Shit. Mum lives on the ground floor, but there was a vacant, gutted flat above. We proceeded to move basically the entire 2 bedroom apartment up two flights of stairs, in the rain, in the dark, in two hours. Beds, fridges, computers, the works. We raised the rest to the top shelves and the tops of tables. My husband left at a certain point to get back to the kids. We were knackered. At 11.27pm, after walking home in the pouring rain, I texted my mum again. 'I'm safe home. Make sure you have drinking water.' Literally 2 minutes later I received a renewed river level warning text message; 'Exceeding 10.6m, may reach 12.5m later in the morning. Further rises are possible.' The things we had put on tables inside my mum's flat were now no

longer high enough. I knew leaving my house now meant I couldn't get back until it was all over. The kids had Avo; my mum needed me. I got my gumboots back on and went downstairs. There was ankle deep water under the house, but I still felt confident. It wasn't coming into MY house - but mum was in trouble. I crossed the carpark in town, near the cinemas, and the water was shin deep. It felt hairy but I needed to get to mum. My whole body was aching, especially my back and legs from moving the flat so fast. I was dead tired, but pumping with adrenalin, which made it hard to think. I could hardly see in the dark with the rain on my glasses making them off my face, holding a dim mobile phone torch, and my gumboots too big and filling with water. When I got back to mums we went hammer and tongs grabbing anything we'd already raised from inside her flat and literally running it up the stairs. There were crashes and bangs coming from under the house as the garbage bins and gas bottles started to float and fall over. After about another hour we felt we'd done all we could. We were going to retreat upstairs. I climbed on a chair and grabbed a photo of my grandfather off a high shelf, right against the ceiling in mum's flat, where many of her precious books still were. 'Why are you taking that?' my brother asked. 'I don't know.' I said. 'Cos it won't get up here, will it?' My brother held his hand about 4 foot below the shelf. 'If it gets to here, I'm done. I'm leaving Lismore for good. The town's finished if it gets to here'. Again. If only we knew.

About 12.30 am, before I went inside to try and sleep, I stood on our verandha and watched the neighbour's house, a two-story beautiful old boarding house about 150m closer to the river. A woman came onto her landing and looked at the water, which was only about a metre below her floor at that point. She let out a short loud series of screams. 'ahh! ahh!' the water was flowing very fast. Too late to leave.

I slept fitfully for some amount of time – an hour, three? before waking to wee and coming back out on the deck. Everything after this is confused in the timeline. In my memory, everything happens fast. I saw the water, and instantly got a massive adrenalin dump. It had risen a lot, more than I expected. It was halfway up the window of the top floor of the neighbour's house already. All the lights were on. As I'm watching, I see the neighbour come out again, this time wading onto her front porch, up to her waist. She and another person, holding a big handbag. I later found out it had a cat in it. They start trying to climb onto the roof, awkwardly leaning out from the porch rail, wobbling. They keep trying and trying, failing. I started to cry. I was reaching out my arms to them. Next thing I remember is them calling to me from the roof. 'Can you see us? Can you hear us?' 'Yes! I hear you!' I called back. This woke my mum. 'Call the police!' they yell. I call 000. It rings out. I call again. It rings and rings and rings. I can't remember how long this goes on for. I'm calling to the neighbours "I'm trying! I'll keep trying!" I hang up. I pace. I ring again. Finally someone answers. She doesn't seem to be local. She says she'll try and get me the locals. She rings and rings. 'I can't get them' she says. 'I'll keep trying'. My mum and brother are awake now. The woman on the phone tells me, ok, the police know they're there. Someone is on their way. We relay this to the neighbours. Hours pass. They call out occasionally. 'They're getting cold' says my brother. 'they're getting hypothermia'. It was pitch black and the rain was thundering down, only occasionally pausing enough in intensity that we could communicate by shouting.

In my memory, I receive a text in the middle of the night, in the dark, while calling the police, saying that the river will exceed 14 metres. In my memory, that's why I start calling my partner, telling him to get the kids ready to get on the roof, to keep them dry, warm. But when I look

back that's not the case. I received no updates between 12.56am (another 12.1m reminder, sent while I slept) and 6.20 am, when 'Levee is overtopped. Wilson R reached 12.5m, possible rise to 14m Monday afternoon' arrives. I've already texted my husband to 'keep the kids out of the water', and at 6.02 am, pre any official indication that the water would reach them; 'There's a tarp in the house if you need to get on the roof. Please reply x'. I remember trying to google 'Can you be in flood water with the electricity on? Do you get electrocuted?'. I was afraid the kids would be electrocuted. At a certain point, we see power lines ark into the water, a huge explosion and a flash, and the lights go out.

My husband calls. The kids want to talk to you. They're really scared. My 8 year old on the phone. Sobbing. 'Mummy...when. will. We. See. You. Again?.' It's my other son as well, 10 years old. I can hear them both crying. 'We want to see you. We're so scared mummy. What's going to happen? Are we going to die?'. I told them no, everything's going to be ok, Avo's with you, someone will come for you. I tried to sound confident, serene. In reality I didn't know. I called a friend in SES. Can you tell someone my kids are there? I can't get through.

It's morning. The kids are calmer. 'All our stuff's floating around mummy. We're sitting on a table'. I've spoken to a different neighbour, on the phone, from my street- he's looking at my house- where's Avo?. Wait! They can see him. On the back deck. They're going to try and wave down a boat. They're in knee high water inside. They're with friends who are in the roof cavity with a cat and a two year old. 'Please get someone to get my kids if you get a boat.' I beg. Another text message had come through from the official channel; 'if you are below Rocky Creek Dam evacuate NOW. Rocky Creek Dam has reached Red Alert. Please stay safe.' The whole of

Lismore is technically below Rocky Creek Dam. Was the dam going to burst? Was a huge release of water going to come down, a tidal wave, like Grantham in 2011? I remember those stories. This may sound dramatic now but what I was already seeing with my eyes was something that 'couldn't happen'. It seemed sensible to put all possibilities on the table now. I desperately wanted my kids out before the situation got even worse. I felt I would do anything to have them safe. I thought I would vomit or scream from the thought that I left them there. The water was rising, rising steadily and it felt like it would never stop. I would count the steps and they kept disappearing, a step every twenty minutes or less.

I got a call from Avo that he and the kids were on a boat. My mum and I were hugging and crying; 'Thank god, Thank god'. This must have been close to 8am. The kids would tell me later how they grabbed formal dinner jackets when Avo told them to get something warm on, because that's what they could find in the dark. How they sailed a kayak from our back deck to the front, through the hallway of the house. Avo had heard an engine and shouted and waved down the boat. Inside was a week old baby and his mother, recovering from a c-section. It was the prioritising of this family that meant the SES was in our street at all. Just lucky.

Back at Mum's we were still above the water on the highest floor- we were the tallest building on the street. Mum's flat downstairs was almost completely under. All around us houses were submerged. We could see the closest neighbours and talk to them. 'How high will it go?' they were asking, knee high in water, then waist high, then higher, putting their dogs on floating mattresses. Through a window we watched three people climb onto their roof- the water was chest high inside their house. Again it looked difficult. They called out to us to ring the

SES. Concerned about the dam alert, I punched a hole in the ceiling and put a ladder up, though I was worried about how mum, who is in her 60's, would manage the climb. I put the photo of my grandfather that I'd saved earlier, and a handful of family heirloom PNG carvings in the roof cavity, along with some bottles of water and a first aid kit. Forget the rest, I thought, I'm not moving it again- it probably won't be high enough. Let it swim. I was watching animals, furniture, even a big buddha statue float by. A boat arrived. They'll have to come back, as our elderly neighbour, who is up to his chest, won't leave his dog. We try to talk to him. Can't you get the dog in the roof? He weighs 60 kilos, he's a Saint Bernard, he says. There's no way. We're all silent. Is he going to drown while we watch? Christ, this is grim. Even if we could swim over, what could we do? Another boat comes and brings this old guy's flatmate across to our deck. He's shivering and wide eyed. Hours pass. An SES boat arrives for us and the old neighbour, but then they get a call. There's 70 people in South Lismore on Ballina rd bridge and it's about to go under. This boggles my mind. It's my first realisation of how bad this is in other parts of Lismore. We are down by the river bends, on the outside of the levy, but the Ballina Rd bridge is unthinkably high. I spend hours up in the ceiling cavity bolt hole, where there's a little window that opens onto the roof- from there I can watch the water rise like I'm in the eagles nest of a ship. I pick a spot on the neighbour's house and wait for the water to reach it. Once it does, I pick another spot, higher up. And another. And another.

In the afternoon another boat comes. Some strangers. Not SES. They swim in and pull the boat on a rope to reach the back stairs. The swimmer is shivering. 'Any trees under here?' They ask. Yes. And a roof, and a fence, and about 5 metres or more of dark, cold water. Be careful. The motor sounds like it hits a few things on the way in. They take us about 30 metres

across a strong current, past floating shipping containers, to a little island of land, where we walk to another boat. My mum and I were weeping, just letting out the stress. My brother is saying 'I'm in shock, I'm in shock, what just happened?'. We were in disbelief. We sail across in front of the submerged cathedral. I looked at it and think, Ah, I see. This is Big. This is the Biggest. We sail to the bottom of the hill. A friend comes down the hill and gets us and takes us home. And then that's over and everything else that's happened since begins.

There's so much more to this story – how overwhelming it is to try to throw everything you own over the balcony, how quickly you have to do it, making decisions with teams of strangers, before the stinking mud dries. How we lost as much in the chaos of the clean up as we did in the flood - like our wedding rings. How I lost my kids baby hair, baby teeth, first drawings in the mud. How there's a whole other layer of trauma from hearing your friend's and neighbour's stories. How you get 'survivor' guilt because your kids' friends mum axed her way out of an attic, or the guy you played soccer with was rescuing people in South Lismore who were trapped, and he keeps dreaming of their screams. I walk past gutted houses in my street and neighbourhood and think 'Oh, that family...I wonder where they went? How are they coping?'

Terms of Reference (optional)

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

1.1 Causes and contributing factors

I consider the biggest factor in the intensity of the flood to be local/regional land use (misuse) and broken relationship to country, which is facilitated by national/global economic and social systems that compel and reward that misuse. The river and catchment land has been stripped, compacted, and degraded for hundreds of years. The pacific highway upgrade which has

effectively dam-walled the wetlands/floodplain of the lower Wilson River was the final straw. I love the river and sat at its banks for hours every week, watching the plants and animals and playing with my children. Even this far up the river, on the banks of the mill lane park where I sat, you could see the river running 'up' or inland for hours before switching and running back towards the sea again, in cycle. The Wilson's River at Lismore is TIDAL. What does that mean? It means there's not much fall between here and the sea. It means if you put a bloody great kilometres long and metres high and tonnes wide impediment to the water flowing away at the river mouth, called the pacific highway upgrade, it's going to impact flood heights at Lismore. Then, if you strip and compact thousands of steep valleys and hillsides with cattle and macadamias and housing developments and bushfires that burn rainforests that never burned before, and all that flows into the Lismore bowl at full speed? With an economic system which traps all the poor people in rotting old houses down in that bowl? And meanwhile you've hollowed out the services and institutions which make a nation while pretending they're still there? You get the shitshow that was 2022 floods.

1.2 Preparation and planning

It's time to get real about what living where you do in Australia means now. What's the worst-case scenario for where you live? It's probably going to happen. And soon. Until this event we'd only heard of the '1-in 100 year flood level' NOW we know about 'probable maximum flood height'. It's 16 metres in Lismore, about 1.2 metres above where the February 2022 level reached in my house. It's also important that everyone has awareness that our current national level of preparation for big events is 'Do the best you can where you find yourself and help who you can'.

1.5 Recovery from floods

My house is beautiful. It's from the early 1900's, made of red cedar and hoop pines and other

parts of the big scrub that we'll never see again in many lifetimes. My husband and I spent 6 months of our lives restoring it in 2020.

I love Lismore but I can't settle in my house again. When I sit inside, anywhere my eyes settle I have a super imposed 'water height' awareness that does not go away. The water went just above that painting. This bed was underwater. Any sense of security and the level of predictability required for planning a future is gone. I cannot imagine how I could invest in a full life in that location ever again. I am living in a caravan at a friend's house in Mullumbimby because I can't bear to live in my house right now. My mother and brother are staying in our partially restored house as they were also displaced during the flood. Ideally, I would like to see a land swap that facilitates us and others like us moving our heritage house to higher, appropriate ground. That new ground should not be on Bundjalung sacred sites such as the sleeping lizard (Nth Lismore hill). I would move to appropriate higher ground up to 30kms from Lismore.

Supporting documents or images

Attach files

- [85de369e-5ff4-4255-aef2-93dca575a9d0.JPG](#)
 - [66769210170__48D59BCA-89D8-4305-8F7F-A2909F70E2E8.JPG](#)
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