

SUBMISSION



NSW Government Flood Inquiry 2022



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The Public Service Association of NSW (PSA) is a State-registered employee organisation representing approximately 39,000 members employed largely by the NSW Government through its Departments and other instrumentalities.

In addition to advocating for the improvement of their conditions of employment, our union is increasingly focused on promoting the importance of the value of the work our members perform in the face of increasingly critical and often unjustified scrutiny.

We operate in a political environment where there is an increasing reliance upon funding models for critical services, where non-government agencies or for-profit corporations are contracted to deliver them and the government's role is a merely one that writes cheques to do so. Our underpinning ideology, and that of our members, is that it is the public sector that is best positioned to provide the services the people of New South Wales turn to in times of emergency. It was so in the bushfires that wreaked havoc in our State in 2019, it was so during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020/21, and it was so during the 2022 flood emergency.

The PSA has members across our State whose professional, and at times personal lives, were impacted by the 2022 flood events. Their involvement varied from incidental to complete utilisation either as part of or a replacement for their usual work responsibilities. We have chosen however to concentrate on two areas of our membership whose involvement in the 2022 flood crisis was pivotal to the emergency response – the civilian officers of the NSW Police Force, and the paid workforce of the State Emergency Service (SES).

The common theme among these workers was the demand for their services was stretched beyond comprehension by the 2022 floods resulting in, and contrary to what may be asserted by the relevant authorities, a standard of response the people of New South Wales would consider inadequate in a time of crisis.

We have been motivated to provide a submission in order to give our members a voice. It is disturbingly telling that even after an event of the level of catastrophic seriousness and collective trauma of the scale of these floods, and with our members possessing valuable and unique insights to share, that so many of our members were reticent to come forward and provide evidence without the protection of anonymity to do so through their Union. Gagging frontline responders like those in our membership we have spoken to only serves to conceal their experiences and imbed the errors made in this response.

From the outset this submission is not about apportioning blame but seeking to make improvements in emergency response. It should most definitely not be construed in any way as criticism of our members, whose valiant and often self-sacrificial efforts in their work during the flood emergency were uniformly over and above what could be reasonably and normally expected. Any failures were driven by structural issues and resourcing constraints, and with that in mind the PSA has made a series of recommendations we hope will deal with the issues that arose in this situation.

It is true the 2022 NSW floods were unprecedented in both their scale and devastation. But rather than being a mere historical footnote or anomaly, they must serve to be a salient lesson on what to do better should a natural disaster in any form strike our State again. If this flood event was so different to those that came before it, so must our response. As one of our members relevantly put it:

“... they [the NSW Police Force] learnt not one thing from the bushfires – they learnt nothing. Not one recommendation from that Inquiry was implemented”.

The PSA and its members cling to the hope that this Inquiry’s work does not meet the same fate.

The PSA would like to thank the Inquiry for the opportunity to make a submission and its important upcoming work in improving our State. A representative of the PSA would be willing to appear in person to provide evidence supporting this submission should the Inquiry consider it necessary.

Swamped and going under – NSW Police Force Communications

“I don’t want to do that again. Something this time has to change. That’s the worst I have been through in my entire career here,” Police Radio Communication Officer

The PSA has within its membership Police Communications, who provide a critical role in our State’s daily emergency response.

Calls to ‘000’ for the police are assessed and given a priority level, with 1 being most serious (usually police in danger), 2 being life-threatening through to 5 which is really file/record only. External agencies such as the State Emergency Service (SES), NSW Ambulance, Traffic Control Centre or Fire & Rescue are then ‘tagged’ on jobs where their assistance is required.

The job is placed on the system and it then becomes the role of Police Radio operators to manage the response of police units in the field, coordinate attendance, monitor progress and liaise with other emergency services at the scene. Police Radio is located at five locations across New South Wales – Newcastle, Penrith, Surry Hills, Tamworth and Oak Flats. They have also been directly responsible for answering approximately 40 per cent of 000 calls since the COVID-19 pandemic saw this incoming work boom.

A job is also allocated to a channel. Ordinarily the State is split geographically into twenty-one (21) channels, each covering a few police commands. The Newcastle location oversees five (5) of these channels including ‘Papa’ which includes the area from Lismore up to the Queensland border. There are usually two operators (Communications Officers) allocated to a channel with 100 jobs at any one time on a channel being considered very busy but manageable. If a channel is busy beyond this arbitrary point, it may be split into two. Alternatively, where channels are quiet they may be merged. It is the experience of the PSA membership that the latter is undertaken more readily by management than the former.

Where a job is placed on a channel but not acknowledged/accepted by a crew in that area, they are placed in what is colloquially referred to as a ‘broadcast list’, requiring them to be re-broadcast every 20 minutes until picked up or be transferred for action to a local supervisor in the relevant area on the ground.

On the evening of Sunday 27 February 2022, calls for assistance started being received from communities upstream that made it quickly apparent to all present that there would be a problem in Lismore. The Papa channel was split in two – Papa to carry jobs in Lismore itself and ‘Papa1’ for jobs in the Tweed Heads/Byron region. It wasn’t enough and quickly both channels were quickly overwhelmed.

By Monday afternoon the queue of jobs had exploded beyond unmanageable. Papa was carrying approximately 2500 jobs and Papa1 another 900. It was out of control and with seemingly no way of reeling it back, as one member put it: *“I had no idea where to start, just felt ineffective really”*. The volume of jobs was compounded by several factors, including that at least half the police stations in the area were underwater, and there was no internet or power in Lismore. People kept calling for assistance and there was no way to clear the queue; *“Some of the jobs were horrific, with people in life-threatening danger calling back every five minutes ... all we had from officers was ‘we can’t get there’, the SES can’t get there, it’s too dangerous, then getting Police Supervisors to call back*

[members of the public] and say 'we aren't coming'". Police Radio had a quintessential blocked-pipe of workflow.

The broadcast list had even become inoperable due to the sheer number on that list, which members continued to try to rebroadcast with seeming no effect. Instead the focus was on trying to clear the backlog through attrition, including calling people back to inquire if they had been rescued. Most were still waiting. The list of jobs became the problem itself, rather than a management tool, as it meant nothing could be actioned; *"if you can't get jobs allocated, what is the point if it just sits on our system and we can't put it on air or tell anyone about it?"*.

What became clear to PSA members however is that the crisis was not entirely due to external factors. Several members remarked that in the seemingly endless reviewing of a logjam of jobs, it became apparent that the splitting of channels had not been done effectively and they were mixed between Papa and Papa1, adding to the confusion and time blowouts. There is some confusion about who was responsible for splitting the calls into the channels and when this was ordered or actioned, but it was an added and unwelcome distraction from an already impossible task. PSA members remarked that the rigid nature of many SOPs regarding responsibility for set tasks was found wanting in a large scale natural disaster.

Of even greater concern given the nature of the majority of jobs being people needing flood rescue in their own home was the interface between the police and the SES. If a member of the public rang only the SES for assistance, only the SES knew of the job. The SES was quickly and simultaneously overwhelmed with calls for assistance however, and '000' became the only avenue for help. Jobs for the SES that came through this way can ordinarily only be tagged for the attention of that agency by dispatch after assessment, but the number of unattended calls in the queue at this point meant many were not actioned. If a job did manage to be tagged then ordinarily the SES is alerted through a software package that is supposed to interface between the two systems – ICEMS. PSA members were concerned however that these tags appeared to be dropping off, not attached at all originally, or alternatively, if they were actioned by the SES and removed but there was no way of being sure which. This led to more backtracking and cross-checking where this time could have been better utilised allocating new jobs if there was certainty which ones were completed.

Perhaps most remarkably in an age when almost every transaction is handled digitally, is that the system of communication between the police and SES is so distrusted by all concerned that it is dependent upon SES Liaison officers being physically present in Police Radio at times of emergency. Communications Officers reported that in lieu of any confidence in electronic means, they would physically communicate with these Liaison Officers face-to-face to ascertain progress in the field. Again when the workload is already beyond means, this added time which could not be afforded and would have been better invested elsewhere.

Finally, the workforce management processes themselves appear to have compounded rather than cleared the challenges faced by Police Radio during the flood crisis. Notwithstanding that there had been some forewarning, which was initially downgraded but returned, there had been no planning in the week prior about increasing staff capacity. It was not until the morning of Monday 28 February, in the midst of the crisis itself, that staff were being contacted for overtime or call back. PSA members have harboured concerns on this front outside emergency periods stating that *"staffing has not been adequate for some time"* and that there has *"never been any fat there...when something happens out of the blue, [there is] no room to move"*. On the numbers of calls that were

trying to be managed at one time, it is evident to anyone that this could have only been resolved by a significant surge in workforce.

Unlike other natural disasters such as an earthquake and the 2022 flood event did not come without some warning. Staff have been advised by management that *“we don’t staff for a plane crash – but this time we knew this plane crash was going to happen”*.

The human cost of this crisis cannot only be measured in terms of impact on the public, but also via the toll on workers in the midst of it. As one put it succinctly they; *“walked away that morning and thought f*ck, there are going to be some deaths out of this”*. The burden of their judgements has left several PSA members second guessing what they did that day to a degree no one should be left to question; *“some had to be written off or closed without comprehensive evidence...I made a lot of those calls which kind of weighed on me heavily afterwards”*.

Recommendations

1. That Police Radio, in consultation with their employees and union, develop comprehensive SOPs for large scale natural disasters that override procedural processes in times of the greatest emergency.
2. That Police Radio develop a larger pool of trained employees to draw upon in time of large scale natural disasters, and that procedures be developed to ensure these employees are on stand-by at the earliest possible notice rather than during the emergency itself.
3. That the communication system between the NSW Police Force and the State Emergency Service be reviewed and alternative software or other means be developed that can clearly alert, prioritise and track rescue jobs during large scale natural disasters.

Reaping what you sow – the State Emergency Service (SES)

“We want our public servants working for the people of New South Wales, and if the Government can't find three per cent in savings, I think that's a problem” – Dominic Perrottet, 20 June 2018

The 2018 NSW State Budget was announced with great fanfare and warmly received in the media as one demonstrating competent fiscal responsibility. But buried deep within its thousands of pages was a policy that received little attention but carried a huge impact. The ‘efficiency dividend’, essentially a cost-saving imposed on public sector agencies by government, was to increase from two per cent of budgets to three per cent. It has remained at that level every year since.

A savings increase is essentially a spending budget cut and few departments or agencies were exempt. The SES was not one of them, and for an organisation already struggling with increasing demand and spiralling technology costs, the imposition of this dividend meant rather than expanding operations to better meet this demand the only solution was to restructure.

The effect of these Budget ‘efficiency dividends’ has been stark on the Budget of the SES. A review of the Annual Reports of the Organisation reveal that despite the Budget of the organisation increasing almost 50 per cent between 2018 and 2021 (from \$102M to almost \$158M) the percentage of total budget spent on staffing has dropped significantly. Staff costs as a percentage of total budget were 40.3 per cent in 2017-18. In just three years this percentage has dropped to just 29.9 per cent (more than a quarter) of total budget by 2020-21. By comparison, the budget for Other Expenses, which included the costs of actual disaster relief have risen more than 400 per cent, from \$3.2M to \$13.3M. Yet the permanent officers who need to support these operations have shrunk over the same period. What is clear is that the intensity of the SES’s work has increased massively, its workforce has stagnated.

The SES staffing figures demonstrate this impact on the organisation. In the face of increasing demand due to the growing frequency and intensity of storms and flooding on account of climate change, staffing numbers have stagnated both locally on the north coast and State wide.

State Emergency Service- Richmond Tweed and Mid North Coast FTE

Year	Mid Nth Coast	Coffs Grafton	Tweed Richmond	Staff in Region	Staff overall WFP FTE
2011	NA	NA	NA	20.19	250.94
2012	NA	NA	NA	17.92	267.45
2013	NA	NA	NA	18.99	293.66
2014	5.52	4	7	16.52	277.97
2015	7.03	5	8	20.03	293.38
2016	7.4	5	7.6	20	326.7
2017	5.52	5.46	6	11.52	324.04
2018	6	NA**	8	14**	289
2019	4	6	8	18	279.5
2020	6	6	8	20	319
2021	6	7	7	20	305.5

Source WFP Tab 2 EFT per region

The notable dip in 2018 is directly attributable to the increase in the 'efficiency dividend' required by the Budget that year. Just as important as the figures themselves in the above table is what the yearly changes represent, each dip represents a loss of continuity and/or experience within the organisation. The 2018 restructure in particular accentuated this problem.

Prior to this date the SES had divided the State into 17 regions for operational purposes. This was a model that had been developed across the organisation's 50-year history and established as the most effective means to meet the challenges the diversity of our vast State presents. Importantly these regions were based around river systems, which meant planning for natural disasters was guided by specific local knowledge. The restructure merged these 17 regions into a mere five – Metropolitan, South-East, Southern and Western. The fifth region which is relevant to the Inquiry's considerations is Northern Region, which spans the vast distance from Gosford to the Queensland border.

Regional Offices in the SES are responsible for, *inter alia*, tasks such as asset management and volunteer recruitment and training. Most importantly however is the function of hazard planning, including flood response plans. Where these would be previously done at a local level in consultation with local communities and with a thorough knowledge of the topography, population centres and evacuation plans now they are often designed remotely. A total of three Hazard Planning Coordinators now service the entire Northern region with all the bodies of water that are prone to flooding across those hundreds of kilometres. PSA members have advised us that flood planning is now done to a far lower standard if at all as a result.

A similar resourcing restriction impacted the response on the 27-28 February 2022. The SES operates its own contact line, 132 500, for members of the public to call when they require assistance with flood or storm damage and other issues.

This line is answered by five teams of five people, who between them cover 24 hours a day, seven days a week from the State Operations Centre (SOC) at Wollongong. The total of 25 core, permanent staff is barely enough to fill the roster in quiet times with leave to be covered. In times of crisis the SES is dependent upon contingent staff employed casually via labour hire to support the increased demand. Once jobs are received through either the public directly, which is not ideal, or from the police, then the local unit is activated ... via pager.

PSA members believed a number of factors influenced a cautious approach in the lead up to 27 February 2022. There was a wet weather warning with likely calamitous outcomes for days in the lead up, however an evacuation order was not issued earlier because "*if we evacuate and nothing happens, we get in the sh*t for it*" as one member put it. Similarly, the contingent workforce that would be desperately needed to support operations in the flood event was not engaged too early for fear of burning them out before the crisis truly begun.

One PSA member stated they were greeted at the start of their shift on the morning of 28 February with an ominous warning; "people are going to die today – and it is not your fault". The 132 500 line quickly became a flood rescue line, with "people screaming for their lives". Normally operational calls would be transferred to the rescue pod but this too was quickly overloaded beyond capacity with 50 odd jobs at any one time. To top it all off, the local SES HQ in Lismore itself was flooded.

There were anecdotal reports of more than 300 unanswered calls, “a lot of processes broke down ... no-one took breaks, it was never ending”. The local response in Lismore was stretched and also limited by the absence of a Community Engagement and Education officer – another essential proactive role that has largely been removed from local offices. Finally, SES operators noted the same problems with iCEMS, which is a peer-to-peer electronic communications system between Emergency Service and Public Safety Organisations. Police were observing on the other end ... jobs were either not tagged, not marked as completed or not received at all.

The impact on the staff involved in the emergency cannot be under estimated but the official debrief was not until May, some 10 weeks after the event “I hope they manage the debriefing of volunteers much better than ours...”

Recommendations

1. More permanent staffing at the State Operations Centre (SOC). There is simply not enough operators to manage emergencies and the reliance on contingent labour leaves the whole service exposed.
2. The SOC need to debrief with the NSW Police Force to identify systematic failures in technology between the agencies and develop solutions for them as an immediate priority.
3. The SES regional model has failed. Regions are too large to be serviceable. A return to 17 regions based on river systems with the necessary staffing adjustments is essential.
4. Debriefing employees after critical incidents needs to occur as a priority and not an afterthought.