

From: [NSW Government](#)
To: [Flood Inquiry](#)
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Your details

Title	Mr
First name	Tim
Last name	Williamson
Email	<input type="text"/>
Postcode	2480

Submission details

I am making this submission as	Other
Submission type	I am submitting on behalf of my organisation
Organisation making the submission (if applicable)	RDA Northern Rivers
Your position in the organisation (if applicable)	Director of Regional Development
Consent to make submission public	I give my consent for this submission to be made public

Share your experience or tell your story

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

The region has a long recorded history of flood events on or around the time of year of the 2022 flood. While the timing is on no surprise, the severity of the flooding event certainly was. The science is accepted that climate change is the major contributing factor causing less frequent but more intense flood and other weather related natural disaster events, this event has now also been linked to changes in international climate changes by the Bureau of Meteorology.

Given the interrelated nature of all weather systems it is important to develop policies and programs across all agencies to immediately commence carbon abatement measures.

Size, shape, location of built infrastructure must be investigated in detail to understand the impact that certain roads, levees etc had on exacerbating or mitigating damage. Furthermore new flood mitigation infrastructure should be investigated to understand how the consequences of future catastrophic events can be minimised.

The natural environment also contributed to land slips, coastal and inland erosion leading to perilous situations for communities. Agencies and communities should be encouraged to work collaboratively to understand the factors that contributed to these events and, importantly be resourced to reduce the risk of future occurrences as well as to remediate the current impacts.

1.2 Preparation and planning

The size and severity of the flood (“unprecedented”) has been used by agencies and organisations as a primary excuse as to why they couldn’t, or didn’t, do what needed to be

done, particularly during the rescue and response phase. This lack of preparation and planning for the size of this event led to community individuals and groups taking it upon themselves to become involved in many aspects of rescue and response for which they were not trained or properly equipped. While the magnitude of the disaster was not planned for by combat and first response organisations, it begs the question why planning and preparation is not scalable, particularly as Australia has a recorded history of events of a similar catastrophic size eg Cyclone Tracy. Given the prospect of increased scale of natural disasters in future this event is an unfortunate lesson for all agencies to ensure that they prepare for catastrophic events, not just events where planning and preparation is based on historical average level of disasters.

It is often stated that countries such as Netherland spend 90% on planning and preparation and 10% on recovery. Such a mindset now needs to be institutionalised across all levels of government. Up front risk reduction leads to a rapid and more cost effective recovery.

1.3 Response to floods

In the early days of the flood, there was a clear lack of centralised coordination of support for communities, which is surprising given that both state and federal governments have stood up agencies which have a focus on natural disasters and resilience. Community members took responsibility to organise rescues, resources, logistics and more. The media reports demonstrate the disconnect that occurred between rescue agencies which were ordered to stand by, while the local 'tinnie army' undertook hundreds of rescues.

Communication channels also failed as life saving information could not get through due to loss of power, mobile phone and NBN infrastructure transmission services. Local ABC radio provided an excellent source of information and endeavoured to ensure accurate reports

were aired, social media sites were also full utilised by community members and groups although only available where power and telecoms were available. An outcome to be noted for future events is that the community groups will employ greater use of social media which means those that don't use this channel, eg older generations will be excluded from vital information and assistance.

In many instances the community members of the Northern Rivers stood up and led and managed response actions. In almost all instances agencies and combat agencies were found to be unco-ordinated, unable to be communicated with, poorly managed, under resourced or were nowhere to be found at critical times. The ADF had variable relationships with other combat agencies and themselves took some time to understand their own command structure, let alone who and how they were to coordinate with organisations such as SES on the ground.

With respect to the role of the ADF, RDANR recommends that international models are investigated to determine world best practice in force structure and command and control systems in times of disaster. Anecdotal media reporting suggested that some ADF personnel which assisted property owners were not competent in the use of equipment. Therefore a specialist ADF trained and resourced force, possibly based on a reserves unit, should be designated as the commanding operational unit taking supreme command in times of national disasters with a secondary function of assisting in international crises. Most urgently, regular disaster training drills should be held to ensure seamless integration of command, control and communication structures across all agencies and community groups.

Improved communication structures, channels and technology is vital to ensure the critical

breakdowns which were exposed do not recur in future. A telecommunications company stated that subsidised satellite phones were on offer to councils but not purchased. This simple oversight could have overcome many communication issues with more rural areas. Similarly community volunteer groups procured, transported and deployed Starlink services in isolated areas using their own resources. RDANR advocates a two part disaster communication study is undertaken to ensure (i) a robust comms protocol is established between all agencies, LGs and community groups and (ii) a regional review to recommend robust communications systems for all communities for different disaster event. RDANR also encourages greater deployment of advanced technology. For example, drones could be safely deployed to geo-locate people and livestock in perilous situations sending visual and other data back to a command centre which can then initiate rescues in a more efficient and safe manner. Drones can also be used to transport life saving food and equipment to isolated people and communities. Investigation also needs to be targeted at organisations which can perform swift water rescues. For example if SES do not have available personnel or equipment, nominate and train other relevant services such as local SLSC IRB crew to provide assistance. Less technological but simple building solutions to assist egress out of homes onto the roof need to be investigated. During Community enquiries ideas such as 'flood hatches' and accessible ladders were raised

1.4 Transition from incident response to recovery

During previous disasters, RDANR has participated on the Business Industry and Tourism Committee as traditionally led by Regional NSW. In the past this agency has been highly responsive in establishing this Committee. This time there was a noticeable delay which may be attributed to the a lack of communication

between the responsible NSW govt agencies. A pattern which seems to have been repeated time and again during this disaster is that former protocols and structures which were well known and effective were replaced with multi layered structures adding time and complexity to a situation which requires clarity and timeliness of response.

1.5 Recovery from floods

With respect to business and economic recovery, we urge the Commission to investigate and overhaul the disaster payment system across the board. RDANR received many complaints about the delays in payments, the complexity and timing, and the unnecessary requirements of criteria and eligibility of grants and disaster payments, from businesses and community members. These payments are welcomed as they make a real difference in people's lives when they are grappling with very difficult personal situations. However, the granting processes should be designed so that are easy to access and not add more frustration, confusion and worry - particularly to a population that may not have the capacity to deal with high levels of bureaucracy not to mention basic things like identification/ paperwork. It has been said that every disaster can be different to the one before, however the need for prompt and secure disaster payments to affected areas does not change, and an overhaul is urgently required to learn from this disaster to establish a raft of set payments that have been pre-approved (and budgeted) and then released at a given trigger. A further investigation is needed into the cause and extent of fraudulent claims, and whether systems, processes and technology can be deployed to ensure that those that are eligible for payments are promptly paid and not disadvantaged because of illegal actors. The road to full recovery will be different for communities and individuals. For some the journey will be a long one, some communities have shown remarkable resilience in their recovery, while others are now getting back on

their feet. As the news cycle moves on, the still dire situation on the ground has all but disappeared in mindset of many Australians. It is imperative that government attention, funding, resources and assistance is matched to meet the longer term needs of the recovery effort.

Supporting documents or images
