

From: [NSW Government](#)
To: [Flood Inquiry](#)
Subject: Floods Inquiry
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Attachments: [Flood submission TNB.pdf](#)

Your details

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Submission details

I am making this submission as	Other
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	Submission to the NSW Flood Inquiry From Susie Russell, Trees Not Bombs Community Recovery Cafe, Lismore May 20, 2022
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my views on a number of the issues on which the Inquiry is reporting and recommending.

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This gave me the opportunity to hear the stories and see the impacts on hundreds of flood impacted people.

As various disaster responses have shown, it is the self-organising of communities that has saved countless lives and properties. This is often done cooperatively with local RFS or SES. They are part of the community, they know they can't save it on their own, they are grateful for the assistance and annoyed by the top down command and control style that doesn't seem to have learnt how communities actually respond to disasters.

This community organisation is often done spontaneously and not through official or formal networks. It usually gets no financial support other than grassroots fundraising via crowdfunding, and usually gets no recognition or acknowledgement post emergency either. In some situations, the official 'services' move in to shut down the local operation seeking to replace something that is functioning with their own idea of what 'support' should look like. Where communities garner experience from helping each other during a disaster, they are better able to quickly and effectively re-mobilise. This is clearly apparent from the brilliant work done by Resilient Lismore- established after the 2017 flood, and quickly reactivated in 2022.

Recommendation: that grassroots community support networks be encouraged, recognised, and supported with resources, and where

possible developed into longer-term community resilience organisations.

In dire situations, communities need assistance from outside. The call to 'bring in the army' rings out, when what is meant is: bring in able-bodied people, supplies and equipment. As various military experts have pointed out the army are not trained for disaster response. Indeed the 2020 Royal Commission into Natural Disaster Arrangements, held after the Black Summer fires, found there was a public perception the ADF was always readily available to be deployed in a crisis and concluded that: "This is not, in fact, the case. Nor is it a reasonable expectation of the ADF."

What is clearly needed and has been articulated by disaster experts, is that Australia needs a civil support service, with surge capacity capable of rapid deployment. Not a militaristic, hierarchical structure but an organisation that trains people to do a variety of tasks, including training others, problem solving, lateral thinking etc. With equipment that enable communities to care for each other.

Recommendation: that a taskforce be established to seek community input and look at international models and develop options for a civil support service.

It is clear to most of us, and there is plenty of science to support the view, that the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events is on the rise. This is not unexpected. It was the mid-1990s when CSIRO reports predicted significant increases in frequency and intensity of extreme weather events as a result of global warming. The Pacific Ocean is the warmest on record, there has been a massive amount of evaporation and no surprise that in some places this has led to rain bombs and atmospheric rivers... new terms that have been developed to describe

extreme events. No doubt there will be more.

Recommendation: That the Inquiry emphasise the need for strong action on climate change and the need for major emission reductions.

Recommendation: That the development of local and regional climate change adaptation plans is urgent and should be prioritised by all levels of government.

The impact of the extreme event was more destructive because of the lack of multi-layered vegetation across the catchment. This lack is the result of decades and ongoing land-clearing, logging and more recently, fire. The protections for stream-side and gully vegetation are almost non-existent. Regulation and prosecution for illegal clearing is sufficiently minimal to not be a disincentive. Where there was intact vegetation, the fast-flowing waters did not dislodge massive amounts of soil, and upstream waters were slowed.

Recommendation: That the Inquiry call for strong extant native vegetation protections and for prohibitions on clearing within 20metres of the top of a gully or stream.

Recommendation: That massive and strategic revegetation programs be implemented as a matter of urgency.

In order to have a realistic picture of the dangers to communities from climate related events, the Australian Government needs to act on the recommendations of the Bushfire Royal Commission, to fill the knowledge gaps about the science.

Recommendation: That the Inquiry call on the NSW Government to champion a process for data sharing on climate threats. This data should be accessible to the public.

The response to the flood was woefully inadequate. No secret there. No doubt there will be dozens if not hundreds of firsthand accounts that will illustrate this in frightening details, particularly with respect to the immediate response of rescue and evacuation. Radio and communications systems failed, the nominated rescuers had minimal human and physical resources to deal with such a disaster, there was no provision for evacuees to be sheltered, fed and cared for. These problems didn't just endure for a matter of hours. In some places the vacuum existed for days. As far as providing food to people who had lost everything, there was no provision whatsoever. Maybe there were thoughts and prayers that various good samaritans would step in... but the capacity of those locals who had previously been able to fulfill that role was much diminished, as many of them had also been impacted, losing homes and vehicles.

Recommendation: that mobile 'soup' kitchens be part of the emergency response kit. They can be operated by community groups. That each kitchen come with a shelter big enough to also accommodate tables and chairs to enable a sit-down place for people to eat.

The first response seems to have been to send in pallets of bottled water. Secure water supplies is important. Giving people access to clean water is vital. But in many situations providing refillable water bottles that can be used indefinitely save millions of plastic bottles from being used. The same with most other supplies. In stead of sending single use plastic items, better to supply enamel cups, plates and decent cutlery. By giving people a backpack with basics helps to keep track of personal items, have a means of carrying them from place to place etc.

Recommendation: That personal emergency backpacks with basic toiletries; durable, refillable

water bottle, high energy snacks, enamel plate and cups and cutlery and other useful items (such as phone battery packs) be handed out as part of the first response.

Once the flood waters receded there was undue haste to 'throw everything away'. Many items from electrical goods to tools and furniture and bicycles are perfectly serviceable after being through a flood. I saw a microwave allowed to dry out that then worked perfectly. Similarly a washing machine, dryer and fridge and numerous tools including power tools that for some basic cleaning were up and working within days. Same with hardwood furniture or metal cookware or crockery- all absolutely fine after a wash. Hundreds of bicycles were taken to the tip, nothing wrong with them that couldn't be fixed with a tiny bit of TLC.

For those who could see perfectly serviceable items being discarded it was torture. Removing same from rubbish piles in the street was considered 'looting' apparently. This is absurd.

Recommendation: That following a flood people be encouraged to not discard items that can be easily repaired and cleaned. Special depots for repairable items be set up where volunteers can clean and repair.

Another major problem was the failure of the communications systems. Phones were out for extended periods of time. The power was out. Most people had limited means to communicate their situation. This was far worse in the upper catchment where roads and bridges were washed out and people were physically isolated and then unable to call for help.

Our communications systems should have a back-up. In some places once the power is out, the phone towers and phone exchanges only continue to function for a few hours before they

stop. This is ludicrous. Everyone, including the emergency responders depend on communications. People are asked to heed warnings that once the power is down for a few hours, they are no longer able to access.

Recommendation: Local RFS or SES or other community groups be trained to run emergency generators to keep the communication system functional. The generators and fuel for at least 3 days should be stored locally and regular drills conducted.

Recommendation: That provision is made in disaster response for phone charging and free wifi to be make quickly and easily accessible.

As the magnitude of climate change leads to more and more extreme weather events, Australians, like all global citizens need to change our way of life. We are amongst the most profligate of societies on planet earth.

It will not be possible to stop building on the floodplains, because the flood levels will be getting higher. Eventually there will come long droughts of many years, and people will think floods impossible as rivers dry up. There will be one challenge after another. These are not natural disasters, this is the fruit of the seeds we have sown. Now we reap the whirlwind.

Housing in areas prone to flooding needs to be simple. Materials used need to be able to withstand submersion. Homes need escape hatches and possible life rafts. Community tool libraries and other facilities could be established so people don't each need so much stuff. It's ok to live in a flood zone if evacuation is straightforward and important items can be moved and/or salvaged.

But for those who want houses with carpets and plasterboard walls, then yes, there is no choice

but to move from the flood zone. Assistance should be provided for such including land swaps. Where this happens, the land on the flood zone should be revegetated in order to maximise water retention and water slowing.

The cost to the natural environment of the recent extreme flooding in the northern rivers hasn't been calculated. How many tens of thousands of native animals were unable to escape the floodwaters and drowned? How many lost habitat? How many lost food sources? What is the cost of silted waterways and eroded gullies, creeks and rivers? Hillsides slipping? Decades of poor land and vegetation is now apparent, but the cost is seldom considered and solutions never prioritised for funding. But it can be done. Internationally there are many places where such work is being undertaken on a grand scale. The Sponge Cities program for example.

It is my sincere hope this Flood Inquiry recognise the scale and importance of the changes needed and will be courageous in making recommendations that look to long-term catchment repair, more resilient housing and communication system and more support for local communities to help each other.

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

- [Flood submission TNB.pdf](#)
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