

**Submission
No 112**

INQUIRY INTO WATER AUGMENTATION

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Submission to NSW Upper House Committee Portfolio No.5 Inquiry into the Future of Water in Rural and Regional NSW

Background:

This submission highlights some of the administrative and operational deficiencies associated with current flood mitigation on the Richmond River in northern New South Wales. It has been prompted by:

- i. damage caused by the recent April 2017 floods on the Richmond River
- ii. the request from the committee 'seeking further submissions about Flood Mitigation in light of the recent floods in Northern Rivers', advertised in the Northern Star Wednesday 26th April 2017.
- iii. the diversion of taxpayers funds away from actual on-ground flood mitigation works to consultants, universities and government agencies for feasibility and academic studies, and environmental impact statements
- iv. the evolution of poor communications in flood emergencies based around:
 - a public service vocabulary that conveys little to an unfamiliar public, and has given rise to a 'cry wolf' syndrome amongst sectors of the community.
 - the effect of media/quasi government organisation generated hysteria and inaccurate unnecessary warnings during this latest flood,
 - the confusing, meaningless euphemisms and acronyms used by 'officials' that have replaced accurate information
- iii. complicated bureaucratic controls on the river that hinder or prevent effective mitigating action
- iv. problems that are dealt with in isolation by individual bureaucratic clusters
- v. the threat to effective flood mitigation systems by governments 'rationalising' expenditure

I am a fourth generation farming resident of Empire Vale on the peninsular of land between the Richmond River and the South Coral Sea at Empire Vale. Our property is on the river approximately 10 kilometres from the river mouth.

There is little doubt that without flood mitigation measures taken after the 1954 flood, more damage would have occurred in all subsequent floods, and without these mitigation measures almost all of the sugar cane land on the lower river flood plain would be unproductive.

We are strong advocates of maintaining and improving the current Flood Mitigation measures used on the lower Richmond.

Addressing Each Point:

i. the diversion of taxpayers funds away from actual works to consultants, government bodies and universities for feasibility and other studies and environmental impact statements

- the number of studies by universities, government bodies and consultants on this river is now legendary and is continuing.
- all these studies are funded by ratepayers and taxpayers. Ballina Shire announcing it will seek a 1.5% increase in rates to 'fix' the river.
- many do not result in effective on-ground works that alleviate flooding or improve the health of the river.

Recommendation 1: Only fund those studies that will lead to effective on-ground works OR that are a legal and mandatory requirement of on-ground works

ii. effect of media/quasi government organisation generated hysteria and 'cry wolf' type warnings during this latest flood, and the confusing euphemisms and acronyms used by 'officials' that have replaced accurate information

- the lack of sufficient professional permanent salaried staff to deal with emergencies and reliance on volunteers has lowered the credibility of emergency management.
- It has simultaneously created fear, concern panic and compliance amongst some members of the public, but has also generated a 'what would they know/I know more than them', and non compliance attitudes amongst many long term residents.
- Inaccurate predictions and warnings for events that do not eventuate have created a 'cry wolf' syndrome amongst an increasing number of residents eg residents in parts of Ballina were door knocked by SES volunteers in bright orange uniforms with warnings of 'inundation' and suggestions to evacuate, resulting in sandbagging of premises and closing of some offices, in April 2017, when all long term locals knew that flooding was not going to eventuate.
- eg 2 reporters from national media outlets stood on the Fawcett Street wharf to tell the nation that Ballina was about to be flooded, when there was no evidence or historical data to suggest that this was the case, and never eventuated.
- we now have words that fail to convey the clear meanings required in emergencies. We no longer have 'heavy rain', 'flood rains' we have 'weather events'. We no longer have 'big seas' 'huge seas' or 'cyclonic seas' we have 'storm surges' - terms that do not convey the meaning nor degrees of danger to the public. 'Inundation', (rather than flooding), is meaningless to many people
- Press officers fronting the media no longer speak in plain everyday English but use a form of 'stilted' bureaucratic language that may be common within their circle but is not used by the general population.

Recommendation 2: Designate one Press Officer for each region fluent in everyday plain English and disseminate all information to media outlets through that person. Use emergency powers if necessary to prevent inaccurate media commentary and alarmist reporting for the 24 hour news cycle by media personalities.

iii. complicated bureaucratic controls on the river that prevent effective action

Too many government organisations have say over the river – they and their policies are often in conflict, and hinder work required to assist river health, protect property and remove flood waters quickly.

- NSW State Government Planning , NSW Fisheries, Department of Industry – Lands, RMS – Maritime Division, NSW Police, Rous County Council (Flood Mitigation), Ballina, Lismore City , Richmond Shire, Casino and Kyogle Shire Councils all have jurisdiction over the river, and other funded organisations with volunteer staff assist in emergencies: Marine Rescue, Jet Rescue and State Emergency Services.
- local NSW Fisheries Officers seem to have power to stop any works associated with the river.
- attempting to get work done eg cleaning drains may involve applications to three or four departments and paying a fee to each. Additionally environmental impact studies are required at considerable cost (a NSW Fisheries Permit Application to clean a drain took 38 pages and over 40 hours to complete – and that was only one department !)

- the application preparation time, paperwork and costs to maintain drains to improve river health and reduce flooding are now becoming prohibitive.

Recommendation 3: Choose one of these government organisations with an office in Ballina or Lismore and make them the ONE 'go to' organisation responsible for all matters pertaining to the river. This would improve efficiencies saving time, money and conflict.

iv. problems are dealt with in isolation by individual bureaucratic clusters

- the government departments mentioned often do not liaise with each other. P Busmanis summed it up well when the NSW State Government gave planning approval to RMS to construct the Ballina Bypass ruining the established drainage systems in sugar cane land at West Ballina *"The flood impacts of the bypass project led to increased flood impacts over and above Council's 50mm cumulative benchmark. Overall this is viewed as an unsatisfactory arrangement where one arm of state government does not recognise the requirements of another"* PREPARING BALLINA SHIRE COUNCIL'S FLOODPLAIN RISK MANAGEMENT PLAN – THE CHALLENGES. P Busmanis
- the same author showed Ballina's willingness to protect itself but sacrifice upstream (Ballina's silted river mouth is a focal point holding back floodwater and restricting tidal flows) *"CRG and Councillor inquiries about the benefits of dredging the Richmond River and improving flood relief were able to be investigated. This showed a worsening of flood height predictions in and around Ballina due to the influence of the ocean storm surge event at Ballina."* (This is strongly refuted and historically inaccurate.)
- each council seems to have its own policies and procedures for flood management. Building height requirements in Ballina Shire have varied over the years and on the flood plain are now excessive.
- ***Recommendation 3: Choose one of these government organisations with an office in Ballina or Lismore and make them the ONE 'go to' organisation responsible for all things pertaining to the river. This would improve efficiencies saving time money and conflict***

v. the threat to effective flood mitigation systems as governments try to rationalise costs

- In effect governments have cut real funding to flood mitigation agencies in this region and continue to do so.
- it is our view that the cost cutting measures applied to the flood mitigation agency Rous County Council has impacted greatly on flood mitigation on the Richmond and the general health of the river
- ***REDUCED REAL FUNDING IS THE GREATEST THREAT TO CONTINUING FLOOD MITIGATION ON THIS RIVER***
- reduction in funding has reduced Rous County Council services to maintaining floodgates
- drains and drainage systems are not being maintained, and responsibility for them has been handed back to farmers with no coordination, policies, standards, timelines etc
- the fabridam at Woodburn has not been replaced nor has an overhead lifting gate system (Similar to those used in the southern irrigation systems eg Stevens Weir) been constructed in its place. This collapsible structure allowed upstream flood water to

rapidly escape out through the Evans River via the Tuckombil canal rather than flow the 50-60 km down stream to the Ballina bar

- Dredging of the river mouth at Ballina has ceased. During my schooling two NSW Public Works bar dredges the H.E.STREET and the HERMES worked in the river dredging the bar and dumping spoil out to sea allowing the northward migration of sand to continue.
- These dredges were put in place when governments realised that the southern breakwaters of all coastal bars stopped the northward movement of sand.
- The accumulated sand blows over the south wall by the truckload each day, in strong southerly winds, and sweeps around the end of the south wall into the river on all incoming tides.
- Department of Soil Conservation work in the late 1950's has stopped the sand drift from south beach into the Mobbs Bay section of the river.
- The sanding up of the river mouth seriously impedes tidal water exchange upstream and impacts on the health of the river.
- Equally important is that this shallowing restricts flood flow out of North Creek and the main river system resulting in longer, and possibly worse, increasing flooding on the plain.
- it is our contention that the silting of the lower river from Pimlico Island to the river mouth has contributed to fish kills by decreasing the amount of seawater exchanging on each high tide, and increasing the amount, and holding time, of deoxygenated water in the river.

- ***Recommendation 4: Reinstate full funding to, and responsibility for flood mitigation maintenance, including flood plain drain maintenance, to Rous County Council IMMEDIATELY***

- ***Recommendation 5: Construct a more efficient system to replace the fabridam at Woodburn***

- ***Recommendation 6: Reinstate a dredging regime and construct a permanent sand bypass under the river mouth after initial dredging of the lower river***