

**Submission
No 1**

INQUIRY INTO RESPONSE TO MAJOR FLOODING ACROSS NEW SOUTH WALES IN 2022

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Submission to the Inquiry to the Response to Major Flooding in NSW March 2022

The early part of 2022 saw extreme unprecedented flooding across much of NSW and Queensland. It caused serious material damage to households and communities, as well as threatening many people's lives. Indeed, many more lives could have been lost were it not for volunteers and community members urgently stepping to help their neighbours. There is a heartening story there about community spirit and heroism, but also a sobering thought about how close many people came to losing their lives in this disaster.

The scale of the flooding event was extreme, overwhelming any sense of what the worst-case scenario floods could be (and which people prepared for) before the event. This is a clear demonstration of the extremes becoming more and more normal under the climate crisis, leading to more frequent and more severe natural disasters and weather events. Taken in isolation, these are clearly devastating and often unprecedented events. But as part of a pattern, they display a shocking and scary picture of a changing climate system that is already wreaking havoc upon our communities and environment. With carbon emissions continuing to be pumped into the atmosphere for our carbon-intensive economy, these events will only become worse in the coming decades.

This necessitates a clear and unequivocal recognition of the peril posed by climate change to our health and livelihoods, our natural environment and our economy. With extreme events like these (and potentially worse soon) we need to rapidly increase our disaster response and the resilience of our communities to withstand and recover from natural disasters. Any money that is invested in defence and preparation against disasters, ahead of time, will lead to demonstrable benefits in reduced damage and quicker recovery.

Apart from adaptation, we also need mitigation and a stronger commitment to reducing our emissions and encouraging other nations (by using a positive example) to do the same. Given the

rather poor mitigation or adaptation efforts by the Federal Government, it is something that clearly, they are not taking seriously as a security threat to Australians. The State and Territory Governments across Australia, including New South Wales, are fortunately taking a relatively proactive response and recognising the threat of climate change and need to respond - including committing (much sooner than the Federal Government) to achieving Net Zero emissions by 2050. The lacklustre disaster response is concerning especially given that climate change will make extreme weather events more frequent and extreme. If we cannot have a properly managed and resourced disaster response now, how can we expect to deal with even worse climate impacted floods and other natural disasters in the future?

There were various issues in the response to the floods, including with the emergency response and the recovery relief afterwards (though “afterwards” is tragically an oxymoron when another round of flooding struck some of the same communities within a month). Much of the flood relief payments were made too slow, not enough (especially since many people lost their homes and contents) and wrapped up in bureaucracy. For people impacted by flooding, many of whom could have lost their home contents and documentation, expecting them to have a range of documents safe and ready seems absurd.

Much of the anger and frustration has been directed to the Federal Government. Liberal State MP Catherine Cusack notably resigned from her seat in protest and frustration over the handling of the flood response by the Federal Coalition Government (see Cusack 2022). This includes funding being available (or at least being made available quicker) to one seat held by the Federal Government’s party, while funding was apparently delayed to a seat held by the Opposition. Natural disasters do not strike along political lines, and it seemed extremely poor for the Federal Government to be taking care of their own, so to speak, rather than helping all electorates that needed help. Given the track record of the Federal Government with sports grants and other schemes being targeted for political purposes, this does not inspire much confidence, but political seat-based funding during a natural disaster would be the most egregious example. Whatever the inner-workings of the disaster response and whether this was intentional or not, the optics are terrible and give the impression that the Government is not really taking care of our communities against extreme disasters.

There are many lessons that can be learned from the flood event, which for the sake of our communities need to be learned and acted upon. There are clearly issues with the Federal Government's response (with the flooding, along with earlier natural disasters), though the NSW State Government will also need to reckon with its response and what it should do better. Overall, we need to rapidly and comprehensively expand our natural disaster response, including with volunteer organisations such as the SES or the disaster response capability of the Australian Defence Force. Apart from the immediate disaster response, this also requires us to really reckon with the challenge of climate change and what we need to do with adaptation and resilience, along with mitigation and a move towards a Net Zero emissions economy. Without stronger broader action, even stronger disaster response will only be like applying a Band-Aid to the deep wound that is afflicting our world. It is not limited to flooding, but a myriad of natural disasters such as bushfires, cyclones, drought and more - all of which will stretch the capacity of our communities and disaster response agencies, especially where they overlap or occur in quick succession.

Thank you for considering my submission.

Kind Regards,

Benjamin Cronshaw.

Catherine Cusack. 4th April 2022. "I'm a Liberal MP and I cannot vote for the re-election of a Scott Morrison government." *The Guardian*.

<<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/apr/04/im-a-liberal-and-i-cannot-vote-for-the-re-election-of-a-scott-morrison-government>>.