

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

**Organisation:** Surf Life Saving New South Wales

**Date Received:** 18 May 2022

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18<sup>th</sup> May 2022

**Surf Life Saving New South Wales (SLSNSW) Submission  
Inquiry into the response to major flooding across New South Wales in 2022**

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**Background**

Surf Life Saving New South Wales (SLSNSW) is the peak coastal water safety, drowning prevention and rescue organisation in NSW boasting **76,000** members located along more than 1,200km of NSW coastline to protect 6 million beach visitors each year. We are one of the largest volunteer-based community service organisations in Australia.

SLSNSW, through its professional services (Australian Lifeguard Service and Australia UAV Service) also boast more than **650** fulltime and casual staff across the breadth of NSW. Both professional entities are the largest lifeguard and coastal uncrewed aerial vehicle (UAV) surveillance programs in Australia, offering a unique and responsive significant surge capacity to our volunteer lifesaver cohort in the event of major events such as those experience in 2022.

SLSNSW has the largest operational capability and capacity of any emergency service involved in aquatic (coastal and inland) responses, with over **21,000** active frontline responders, **129** Surf Life Saving clubs geographically dispersed across the NSW coastline, **480** x inflatable boats, **250** x UAVs and a state-of-the-art State Operations Centre (commissioned in 2021) for central coordination.

SLSNSW has evolved from a traditional lifesaving entity renowned for patrolling between the red and yellow flags, to now the most recently commissioned emergency service in NSW. SLSNSW was formally recognised as an Emergency Service Organisation on 7<sup>th</sup> December 2018 having been being written into *the State Emergency and Rescue Management Act 1985 No 165 ('SERM Act')*.

SLSNSW also was formally elevated as a full member of the NSW State Rescue Board (SRB) in 2021.

SLSNSW involvement in flood response is something that is not new to the organisation. Historically SLSNSW has responded in support of the NSWSES since the devastating 1955 floods of Newcastle.

Since, being gazetted an emergency service, SLSNSW has been heavily involved in supporting other emergency services in natural disasters including floods and bushfires and the most recent tsunami threat.

SLSNSW is listed within the NSW Flood Plan as a Supporting Agency.

Prior to 2021, SLSNSW involvement under the New South Wales State Flood Plan has been ad-hoc and very localised, however, there has been an increased expectation on SLSNSW assistance since our involvement in the March 2021 flood event and the capability evident in our response.

During the March 2021 flood event, SLSNSW received widescale requests for assistance from the State Emergency Service (SES) which occurred again in the November 2021 (including a request for ongoing assistance in Western NSW) and the February/March 2022 floods.

In each of these events SLSNSW deployed for extensive periods throughout the Far North Coast, Hunter, Hawkesbury, Western Sydney, and Shoalhaven regions.

### **Surf Life Saving NSW Response to Western Sydney and North Coast floods 2022**

SLSNSW acknowledges the enormous response effort and dedication of the NSWSES volunteers in leading the NSW response to what undoubtably has been the most catastrophic floods in the state's history.

SLSNSW's involvement began on the 28<sup>th</sup> February 2022 and concluded 11<sup>th</sup> March 2022.

On day 1 of SLSNSW involvement, there were **17** specialist personnel in the field and within 24 hours of first being activated, SLSNSW scaled its personnel to over **100** operational members. At its peak, SLSNSW had **232** members active in the field on a single day. The total number of members that were deployed in the field across the period outlined was **1,084**.

SLSNSW ensured that as each relevant Incident Control Centre and Emergency Operation Centre was activated that a Liaison Officer was sent to ensure that SLSNSW capability could be communicated, and relevant intelligence gathered. SLSNSW executive also ensured that relevant representation was available for all SEOC briefings and meetings.

Across the state, SLSNSW provided personnel and/or assets to 29 separate geographic locations. Many of the locations were staffed for multiple days by SLSNSW personnel. Overall, SLSNSW received **224** Request For Assistance (RFA's), with many of them leading to multiple people being rescued or evacuated. In total, our formal records indicate **880** members of the public were assisted by SLSNSW personnel in the field, however, we are confident that the actual number of members of public rescued and evacuated was far greater but due to immediacy of actions, these were not formally captured.

SLSNSW received multiple requests for assistance from the NSW State Emergency Service (SES), and where our members attended there was an obvious lack of available assets to assist, thus provided immediate and tangible benefit and value to their activation.

**Observation 1:** Based on the significant resource deployment and commitment over multiple years to NSW flood emergencies, SLSNSW believe that there is a requirement for lifesavers to receive structured flood rescue training.

SLSNSW volunteers are highly trained in coastal aquatic rescue and first aid, however, have no formal, structured, accredited training in flood response and rescue. SLSNSW have identified the lack of training as a high risk in operational deployments, and therefore a high priority to be remediated to allow for ongoing support to the SES for flood activities.

There is a high risk to SLSNSW from a legal WH&S obligation if it deploys volunteers into flood rescue operations without commensurate training to that which the SES and Fire & Rescue NSW (FRNSW) receive.

SLSNSW have submitted a funding enhancement to allow for the provision of appropriate flood rescue training capability, supporting assurance of SLSNSW volunteer safety.

SLSNSW would welcome the opportunity to further discuss and expand upon this request to ensure SLSNSW can provide that specialist aquatic rescue surge capacity in future events.

### **Surf Life Saving NSW Responsibilities under New South Wales State Flood Plan**

SLSNSW is formally recognised and listed as a support agency in the NSW State Flood Plan (Page 43). SLSNSW role and responsibilities with the plan are:

#### **Preparedness**

- Contribute to NSW SES reviews into plans, policies and procedures as required; and
- Participate in NSW SES briefings, training and exercises as required.

#### **Response**

- Assist the NSW SES with the warning and/or evacuation of at-risk communities;
- Provide accommodation in Surf Life Saving facilities for evacuation centres where required; and
- Assist the NSW SES with flood rescue operations, where training and equipment are suitable.

**Observation 2:** SLSNSW are of the opinion that they met each of their key responsibilities within the NSW State Flood Plan. SLSNSW has significantly matured in both its structure and capabilities since being formally recognised as an Emergency Service Organisation. It is the strong belief of SLSNSW that the organisation and its members can provide greater support and resources in support of the combat agency for future flood events, in a more mature and recognised role.

**Observation 3:** SLSNSW have identified the high risk to members operating in flood waters using the PPE provided specifically for patrolling NSW beaches. While this PPE is suitable for standard lifesaving patrolling operations, it does not meet the requirements to operate in flood waters due to the various risks that are encountered.

NSWSES and FRNSW and NSWPF flood rescue operators are all equipped with appropriate fit for purpose flood rescue PPE to protect their responders from the hazards associated with flood rescue response. There is a high risk to SLSNSW from a legal WH&S obligation if it deploys volunteers into flood rescue operations without commensurate PPE to that which the NSWSES and FRNSW receive.

To date members have sourced their own footwear, wetsuits, and gloves to better protect themselves whilst in floods at their personal cost, which is an arrangement that cannot continue due to the risk associated with inappropriate PPE and financial burden to the members of SLSNSW.

SLSNSW has historically never received a budget allocation to support the procurement and provision of flood rescue specific PPE to allow SLSNSW volunteers to provide the surge capacity to NSWSES and communities in flood rescue and response.

SLSNSW have submitted a funding enhancement to allow for the significant increase and consolidation of flood response capability enhancement in NSW and an assurance of SLSNSW volunteer safety.

SLSNSW would welcome the opportunity to further discuss and expand upon this request.

### **Coordination of Planning and Response by differing levels of Government, Agencies and Community**

**Observation 4:** In the lead up to the flood emergency in question SLSNSW representatives raised that no interagency requests had been received by some Local Emergency Management Committees (LEMC's) on the Saturday preceding the flood event despite weather patterns indicating that significant flooding would occur. SLSNSW requires this confirmation of request to assist in planning, pre posturing and pre-deployment of assets.

**Observation 5:** SLSNSW were not made aware nor participated in initial LEMC/REMC meetings prior to the flood event, especially those that were situated along the NSW coastline where a representative would normally attend.

**Observation 6:** The ability to coordinate responses via road needs serious consideration, especially for events where agency response includes assets being deployed/sent from non-affected regions. The gaps in situational awareness between Local Government and Transport for NSW (TfNSW) presented challenges in obtaining time critical access to some flood affected regions.

**Observation 7:** SLSNSW deployed Liaison Officers to all requested EOCs. SLSNSW were approached through local contacts to provide volunteers to assist in recovery operations, however requests were ad hoc and difficult to ascertain whether they were official or not. To ensure commitment of SLSNSW resources, this should be centralised and formalised requests.

### **Use of Uncrewed Aerial Vehicle (UAV) Assets in response to the Western Sydney and North Coast floods**

SLSNSW through its professional service, the Australian UAV Service, are the largest coastal UAV (Drone) surveillance program in Australia for number of UAV pilots engaged, number of UAV craft at its disposal and number of operational sites flown. This coastal surveillance program operates across the breadth of NSW. These assets and capability are available to all agencies and had been widely communicated and advertised to that effect prior to the floods, including a presentation at the State Rescue Board (SRB).

**Observation 8:** SLSNSW throughout the response to the flood emergency promoted the capability of these assets to assist in the coordination of intelligence for adequate resource allocation and

response. SLSNSW found that there is a lack of understanding on how such technology and personnel can assist in a large-scale emergency, in particular a flood event as experienced.

SLSNSW operate across a wide variety of airspaces (non-restricted, restricted, military etc.) under its current surveillance program. SLSNSW also operate in conjunction with other manned aircraft for coastal search and rescue on a regular occurrence. Throughout the response to the emergency events in question it was the experience of SLSNSW that those personnel responsible for managing the airspace in particular locations did not understand or have knowledge of the significant experience that SLSNSW and its UAV service could provide in such an event. It is evident that SLSNSW will again need to promote this capability to all the emergency service partners

It is the strong belief of SLSNSW that greater understanding is obtained by relevant personnel on how UAV assets can be utilised in a multifaceted approach for future events such as those experienced earlier this year.

SLSNSW were eventually able to demonstrate the value of UAV surveillance for situational awareness further into the flood emergency when these assets were providing live vision back to the various Incident Control Centres and Local Emergency Operations Centres which then allowed for the forward planning and provision of assets prior to locations experiencing inundation.

### **SLSNSW continuous improvement strategy**

**Observation 9:** SLSNSW currently maintain a MOU with NSWSES which has been under review for a period and will require incorporation of a myriad of additional partnership and capability opportunities, identified off the back of this significant flood response. As part of this review there is an identified and agreed need for the following to be updated:

- A review of the current MOU SLSNSW Capability Statement;
- Utilisation of UAV technology to capture and access data (Rapid Damage Assessments, Flood Intelligence, Coastal Erosion);
- Flood Rescue Awareness for interagency teams deploying into NSW State Operations (as per minimum State Rescue Policy requirements);
- Training/ Capability: On water and Flood Boat Operations (Joint training initiatives);
- Training: Consideration of review NSW SES and SLSNSW qualifications recognition pathways;
- Operations / Capability: Flood Operations & Land Rescue Operations;
- Operations / Capability: Flood Rescue Operations (future state).

SLSNSW and SES have agreed to meet to address the above requirements under a MOU however a number of these critical areas will require enhanced funding for SLSNSW to achieve the desired levels. SLSNSW have submitted funding requests to differing levels of government and would welcome the opportunity to progress this support.

### **Conclusion**

SLSNSW thanks the NSW Government for the opportunity to submit this agency submission.

SLSNSW acknowledged the tremendous and arduous response the NSWSES volunteers provided to what has been a catastrophic event, and we thank the NSWSES for the camaraderie and support to enable our involvement.

SLSNSW is confident that as an aquatic emergency service, it can provide far greater assistance within these flood emergency events, however significant support and uplift is required outside of the current funding that is provided for the delivery of core lifesaving services.

SLSNSW are confident, equipped and well positioned to play a lead agency role in the delivery of UAV services to multi agency events with key assets and personnel deployed along the breadth of NSW.

SLSNSW would welcome the ability to hold discussions with the relevant agencies to ensure that such SLSNSW capability and technology can play a lead role in the future for natural disasters and large-scale emergency events such as those experienced in early 2022.

SLSNSW would welcome the opportunity to address the Committee for further elaboration of any of these observations as required.

**Authorised Officers:**

Steven Pearce ASFM – Surf Life Saving NSW Chief Executive Officer

Brent Manieri - Surf Life Saving NSW Operations Manager, Public Safety

Andrew Cribb - Surf Life Saving NSW Public Safety Manager and SLSNSW Incident Controller