

Submission
No 25

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

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NSW Flood 2022 Flood Inquiry Submission
Cr Debrah Novak
Clarence Valley Council
15th May 2022

I make this personal submission with the hope that something may finally change and be done to support our communities in a co-ordinated and timely fashion during our natural disasters.

About me - I have lived, worked and played in the Clarence Valley for 38 years and was elected to Clarence Valley Council as a Councillor in 2016 and re-elected for my second term in 2021.

I have covered natural disasters in the Clarence Valley from the ground, in a boat and from the air for the past 25 years in my role as a media professional and visual journalist/digital producer.

I have volunteer experience in surf lifesaving, sport and culture and I am Chair of an agri-food group and co-chair of a local mental health committee.

I am a 1st Aid Officer for the local farmers markets and have worked as a Nurse Aide and been a media first responder at critical incidents.

I actively involved myself and supported my community during the Black Summer Bushfires keeping them informed through Facebook and Insta posts.

I supported cooked food for the front line, replacement tools, CWA sewing teams for burnt animals, coffee for volunteers and fires and sourced new IBC water containers from Melbourne.

I made a submission to the Commonwealth Bushfire Royal Commission and NSW Inquiry in my role as chair of Clarence Valley Food Inc and as an elected Councillor.

I have done the same this time with the floods.

About the Clarence Valley Local Government Area The Clarence Valley was in the top 5 LGA's in NSW impacted by the Black Summer fires. Prior to these fires we were in drought and floods are second nature for us. Clarence Valley has the highest number of natural disaster declarations in NSW and the second highest in Australia.

We are the major food bowl for the Northern Rivers producing over 65 commodities for local, regional and export consumption.

Our heritage primary industries include beef, timber, sugar, seafood and dairy all of which have suffered great losses this time around, again.

The primary industry agri-food sector has more businesses and people employed in this sector than any other sector so is our largest economic driver.

Our region continues to specialise in family owned and operated farms which has been a historical legacy dating back 175 years.

What our flood plains give they also take away.

Recently the Clarence, Tweed and Lismore Valleys have been identified by a report to be in the top 10 regions in Australia to feel the full impacts of climate change.

In Summary

Clarence Valley Council executive staff kept their elected Councillors and community fully informed and briefed about the flood disaster which in turn kept community anxiety levels at bay and informed decisions were able to be made.

Again, there seemed to be a big gap in rescues and responses from state agencies.

I note the Local Emergency Management Committee is not informed by and nor does it have any community or industry experts sitting at the table.

The SES flood plan had not been updated after the March 2021 flood event which saw the impacts of the new Pacific Motorway M1 for the first time not recorded.

Many landholders whose boundaries run along the M1 were impacted with flood waters being held back or sent in a new direction.

Many buildings and properties that had not seen floods through them before now had flood waters including a number of 130-year-old homes.

Again, there was inaccurate information provided by the BOM who was telling residents 12 hours before the major floods it was going to be similar to the March 2021 flood which lulled many into a false sense of security.

Coastal villages of Iluka and Yamba were cut off for 6 days with no co-ordinated transport logistics for food deliveries to major supermarkets.

Chronic housing shortages in the Clarence Valley due in part to Air B&B saw many hospitality and NDIS services disrupted due to staff not being able to get to work for 6 days. This also included shopping for NDIS clients and Meals on Wheels.

There was a chronic shortage of agencies on the ground at the coal face to support a co-ordinated flood response with many in the community stepping up to fill these big gaps.

All these self-help groups have no training, access to insurance or finances, resources, mental health support or assets. All support given was donated through the efforts of local and friend fundraising and or volunteer teams on the ground.

1) CLARENCE VALLEY 2022 FLOOD FB GROUP

Over 2000 group members including flood affected people needing help and joined this FB group within weeks.

50 plus active volunteers were out helping people daily.

Group acted as a triage platform for help requests on FB and people.

Worked with SES who tasked our volunteers to jobs.

Council and the Recovery Centre referred people to us who required help.

75 properties attended including a weekend at Palmers Island where 30 volunteers helped the whole community.

Ulmarra, Calliope, Kangaroo Creek, Southgate, Coldstream and Tucabia all supported with our local volunteers

2) CLARENCE VALLEY FEED FOR FRIENDS

Co-ordinated livestock feed for 4000 head of cattle for the past 8 weeks

Organised logistics, deliveries and pickups to and from venues

Outsourced free hay from across Australia

Spoken with 60 primary producers to access their situation to support them with stock feed and grants Triaged farmers and registered them to other charities eg Need For Feed Hay Runners

Connected farmers to DPI to organise hay drops

Liaised with NORCO to ensure farmers were getting their support

Sourced agistment paddocks to move cattle out, vets and farriers

Weekly welfare checks on farmers

3) CLARENCE VALLEY FLOOD ANGELS FOR WOODBURN/CORAKI)

200 volunteers

Emergency kitchen hub created with round the clock food prep and cooking

2000 people fed every day for 5 weeks

Woodburn collection hub organised to receive donations

Coordinated donations and trucks from the Clarence Valley and Sydney

Coordinated local donation hub in Yamba

Mud army checked in on every house in Woodburn and Coraki

Volunteer food service delivered to homes daily as no one has cars Numerous rescues performed using own watercraft

Daily welfare checks on residents

Volunteers travelled from The Clarence Valley everyday to the impact zone

4) MACLEAN LEVEE WALL ARMY

Combination of local youth, business owners, teachers, River Street residents volunteers and CVC personnel

Everyone worked hand to hand in a united effort to save the Maclean levee on the flood peak Sandbagging occurred from the eastern entry to Maclean from the fish co-op to down behind the RSL Multiple teams worked back to back across different sections

Council employee (Raff) had exceptional leadership, was calm and coordinated when speaking to the volunteers

(Raff) provided ongoing support over the following days and taught appropriate techniques for the sandbags

Volunteers with utes ferried sandbags filled by other volunteers working at the SES HQ Efforts were constant and more challenging from 11pm to 3am

Chain gangs formed to pass the sandbags along the levee wall

Minimal night-time vision of levee was rectified by volunteers sourcing hand held lights Water bottles were supplied by caravan park owners and SES HQ

The level of emotional and physical fatigue the following days was unexpected It would have been good to have a debrief and check in and celebrate what happened on the Maclean levee Teacher Chris Kirkland was exceptional during the event supporting his community members

Farmer Ross Farlow and his V8 engine water pump turned the tide

Shane Honeyman advised about the boils along the levee line and how laying plastic down the water side

- 5) WOOMBAAH/GOODWOOD ISLAND EVAC BASE CAMP)
Established an evacuation base camp at Wombah Playground for flooded residents from Goodwood Island Co-ordinated food, medical, tradesman and clothing for residents
Supported residents with sourcing documents and travel
Co-ordinated RFS truck for food deliveries
- 6) ILUKA VOLUNTEERS
Local residents helped sandbag the levy wall on Marandowie Dr during the floods resulting in saving a large number of homes from inundation and assisted other members in their community who were in need at this time.
- 7) TUCABIA
Local residents from Tucabia co-ordinated, paddled and boated to Grafton to get emergency supplies for their village.
- 8) SHARK CREEK REBELS WITH A CAUSE
Paddled in and out of paddocks that had become waterways to get emergency supplies for the neighbours and friends.
- 9) BRAUNSTONE BRAVE HEARTS
Checked in on a farmer mate who had no power, livestock supplies, telecommunication, or food for 8 days. They supported two other farmer friends who were also isolated. Ferried supplies to Ilarwill for the Army which was a 32 klms paddle.

PLEASE NOTE - the above flood responses came from local community members who stepped up, formed their own groups. These people mobilised their networks and friends to assist in this flood disaster using their own money.

Again, our primary producers have felt the full impact on their farms and livelihoods. They carry the burden of having no winter crops due to the continued rains, being unable to plant, have lost assets, machinery and livestock.

Adding to this is the supply chain disruptions for plant and equipment from overseas because Australia no longer is a country that manufactures spare parts, packaging or farm chemicals.

Again, farmers are needing to fix fences for the fourth time in four years but there is a supply chain disruption for labor and wire from overseas to do so.

It gets worse because farmers rarely cover production costs and therefore must earn off farm income. Earning off farm income makes them ineligible for many government grants.

The biggest issue for the farmers was the major lack of timely information, drain maintenance, the ability to triage and hold large numbers of cattle through uncovered saleyards as a central point and access to fodder.

All our primary industries were impacted in some way including the fishing sector which has seen major fish kills from deoxygenated water.

LLS and DPI don't rescue animals and only offer a 3-day supply of feed. These floods have held water for over a month on some farms with many animal welfare issues now coming forward due to access and the duration of the wet weather which brings disease.

In context of the Northern Rivers

The apocalyptic event that happened in Lismore and her villages downstream has greatly impacted our region and the six other LGA's.

Many local businesses in the Clarence Valley have a business relationship with a business in Lismore.

These being around manufacturing, wholesalers, parts, bulk food and packaging supplies and chemical supplies.

A few Grafton businesses rely on Lismore's commercial refrigerated centre to hold products for them because these spaces are unavailable in the Clarence Valley.

Ballina, Casino and Lismore Airports were impacted by flood waters while Grafton's which is positioned on a hill remained assessable at all times.

From a health perspective many patients have to travel to Lismore for health services which are not available in the Clarence Valley, this too has now been impacted.

The villages of Woodburn, Coraki, Broadwater, Bungawalbin and Wardell have been supported from day one by over 200 volunteers from the Clarence Valley and continue to do so today.

What needs to happen

- 1) CVC Resilience Framework needs to include a community and business response
- 2) A Clarence Valley emergency disaster plan needs to be informed by community and the business sector
- 3) The rescue and response to a disaster needs to be informed and triaged by local knowledge and people not SES Headquarters in Wollongong or Lismore
- 4) A regional emergency disaster rescue, response and logistics centre (human and livestock) should be built at Grafton Airport to oversee operations
- 5) Money should be invested in training and building capability in our communities as they have the vested interest instead of parachuting in agencies
- 6) Rescue agencies should be allowed to share equipment
- 7) An amphibian landing craft should be built and housed locally so that livestock can be rescued
- 8) An LGA emergency controller in a paid position should reside in their LGA to co-ordinate a response (this is not a rescue agency position or a LEMO)

Finally, after more than a century of recorded natural disasters, numerous royal commissions, studies and inquiries it beggars' belief we are no better off when it comes to rescue and recovery. Three tiers of government and all their agencies who continue to work in their silos, build their castles, fill it with shiny plant and equipment, waste our taxes and we the community are no better off. Perhaps it's time to reverse the spending to 97% on prevention and 3% on recovery, it might just save a lot of grief.