

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

Name: Dr Bruno Ros

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I am a large animal veterinarian of 12 years experience. I have lived on the same farm near Lismore for all my life, less time spent away to study at university. I am the third generation of our family to run the farm and my mother still lives here and works full-time on the farm also. I have been working as a large animal veterinarian in the Northern Rivers area for some nine years now.

Lismore and the wider Northern Rivers area has been subject to a fairly wet season since the drought of 2019 broke towards early 2020, and 2022 started as again pretty wet and many people were gearing up for a flood because history says that we wouldn't escape this wet period without a major flood.

On Sunday 27th February, we woke to minor flooding and the predictions were for the potential of a severe weather system to impact us over the next 24-36 hours but that current modelling suggested it would mostly miss us and could result in moderate flooding. As Sunday turned to night, radar images showed the weather system sitting off our east coast had in fact stalled and was now parked all over our catchment. Late on Sunday evening I began to call other farmers on various creek systems to ask what they were seeing; by about 10pm Sunday night, the consensus was dire and all my contacts were telling me the same as what I was witnessing on our own little creek, and that was a raging torrent of water and yet still a full night and day of rain which was still yet to fall.

The Bureau of Meteorology (BoM) and State Emergency Service (SES) were not saying anything publicly about a catastrophic event, and in fact their predictions at night-fall (approx 9pm) was for possible breach of the Lismore levee bank sometime around 9am from memory. At that same time, we had a severe precipitous weather system stalled over our catchment, and all creek systems upstream of Lismore were in severe and dangerous flooding already. Late into Sunday night/early hours of Monday 28th February, the official warnings changed to that of a major flood but the levee would not be topped until late morning; that was fatally flawed and incorrect and it gave people in Lismore very short notice to evacuate, and lives were lost.

My role as a veterinarian swung into action early Monday 28/2/22, when I began assessing and treating cattle washed up on a nearby farm that I could access by road albeit driving through a large landslip. I was isolated from both Lismore and Casino at this stage. The day was spent doing a quick assessment of our own farm, helping some neighbours, making many phone calls to clients and farmers and making an initial plan to launch a veterinary response to the current catastrophic animal welfare situation we were to face.

On Wednesday 2nd March, loads of hay began arriving to Casino for emergency fodder supply to stranded and flood-affected cattle. There were however, no staff from Department of Primary Industries (DPI) present on the ground and there was no helicopters either on site nor even on their way to our region to deliver this hay to stranded livestock.

There was a hotline number established I believe on this same day (2/3/22). That phone number I believe was a new phone number and unbeknown to anybody so we had to try to advertise its existence and purpose. The issues with this were numerous and dire and its consequences dire for both farmers and the stranded livestock. Those issues included lack

of phone service during the flood, both mobile and landline services were often rendered useless, and there was widespread electricity black-outs, thus how could we communicate to farmers this hotline. Secondly, many farmers were still at this stage evacuated from their farms and were not in a position (both mentally and physically) to assess their livestock let alone phone up for help. As one of the first veterinarians on the ground, I attempted numerous occasions on the 2/3/22 to contact the persons in charge of the veterinary response within DPI; I was repeatedly told that information and person were subject to confidentiality and I could not be told who was in charge. I left my details for them to phone me; not once did I receive a return phone call from anybody within DPI during the catastrophic flood event despite my presence on the ground and relaying the immense and catastrophic animal welfare urgency we were in the middle of. I was desperate to know what resources were coming from DPI and when it was coming, including but not limited to, aerial support by way of helicopter fodder drops to isolated cattle and horses and to do aerial surveillance for potential need of veterinary intervention for severe animal welfare issues by way of sick and injured animals, namely cattle and horses.

By Thursday 3rd March it was clear that nobody from DPI were coming to our aid. Four Local Land Services (LLS) staff arrived to the hay site in Casino on Thursday 3/3/22 (from memory). I recall my relief at the time to see government staff. That was short lived unfortunately. Those LLS staff told me there were tasked from Grafton to unload hay. We had no hay to unload that morning because it was done the night before by a tractor and the next hay was not due until that evening, and again would be unloaded by tractor. So I recall I asked the LLS staff if I could utilise them and I was told no, because their task was to unload hay, of which we had a big tractor to do that! They then went on to tell me their next task was to drive back to Grafton and collect pig feed and take it to a place they were yet to be advised. This pathetic waste of staff in middle of a catastrophic event was both mind blowing and sole-destroying that nobody in government agencies were here to help us and that a hotline that people couldn't phone because they had no power and phone service was not going to cut it!

We had ample supply of hay sitting in a yard in Casino and only a few early uses of it by a small number of farmers who lived in the upper system who could by now access their cattle and who had road access. We still had the entire lower river country under record major flooding and not one helicopter from DPI was here. I made some local enquiries and found a gentleman from Qld but who was a previous local, who was coming to our area with a private helicopter for the purposes of supplying food and supplies to his family and friends who were isolated near Woodburn in the lower flood plain. Those people along with hundreds of others had been left isolated and no government agency whatsoever were going to their aid. I spoke to a horse owner who was stranded on the Woodburn bridge for almost a week with her horses, and they were drinking water from bottles that had floated out of the food shops in Woodburn, which was still well in flood.

I met Adrian with his helicopter on Friday 4th March when he arrived in Casino at about midday. He also had organised at our request a second helicopter to carry out aerial fodder drops to cattle. On Friday, Adrian and a local friend of mine went up and did aerial

surveillance over the lower flood plain. Their words to me upon their return shall stay with me forever and it was to the polite effect of “it’s a bloody disaster down there and you have to do something about it”. They had in a short time logged by GPS at least 30 cases of livestock requiring urgent fodder drops. We were now some five days after the flood began and DPI were nowhere to be seen nor heard of. Our private aerial fodder drops began Saturday morning just on daylight after I travelled to Qld the night before to get aviation fuel to supply them because we could not access more local supplies despite reaching out for desperate help from both state member Saffin and federal member Hogan.

All our initial work was done by some special local heroes banding together as mates and just making things happen. To any problem we encountered we had a team of locals who tried to find solutions and just get the job done under immense pressure and with limited resources. Throughout Saturday, one helicopter went non-stop doing aerial fodder drops while the other helicopter carried a vet to begin the immense job of livestock assessment and treatment. By this stage there was also a team of vets and volunteers accessing horses by boats. They had difficulties in sourcing fuel and again we relied on locals helping locals; government agencies were absent and useless to their mission. Over the coming days our two private helicopters and a band of local volunteers treated hundreds of cattle and horses and were euthanizing animals that were in desperate need of such.

On Sunday 6th March was when the DPI finally arrived on site in Casino with an incident bus and reception staff to manage hay supply. At no point did anybody from those DPI staff attempt to make contact with me despite me being the first vet on the ground and already having done aerial surveillance and having extensive local knowledge of this flood event, along with our local guys passing on information to me first hand. I found this to be arrogant, poor organisation, rude, and demonstrable of typical government agencies thinking they know everything but not even asking locals what they thought we needed and how to go about making that happen, given they were already a week late to the event. A second DPI helicopter arrived later in the week and worked initially in conjunction with our private helicopters dropping hay to stranded livestock.

Over a period of approximately two weeks, a vast team of volunteers (and later DPI) was mobilised and delivered hope to farmers and livestock owners, they provided stock destruction where it was long over due and I have videos and photos of extreme breaches of animal welfare that is a direct result of slow and pathetic inaction by DPI. This team of people delivered supplies to people, hay to animals, vets to treat animals and ultimately hope as I keep stating because it’s hope that our citizens here needed and still need and hope is shown by action.

I have so many points I can mention it’s difficult to put them all on one submission but I’ll try.

- DPI have the vast resources (including aerial support) required to respond to these events; in my opinion they were oblivious or outright ignored just how catastrophic the flood event was, despite me trying numerous times to notify them.

- when DPI did arrive, they were arrogant to my presence at least, presumably because of my early public criticism of them and I have no intention of ceasing such when I know their response failed our farmers and livestock.

- the system by which DPI operates is that a person must phone the hotline to register their need for fodder supply to feed stranded or flood-affected livestock. This assumes the owner of the livestock know their location, know even if they're alive or not, and that they can actually phone in. Bearing in mind the reality of the situation on the ground; many farmers were displaced because of evacuation, cattle and horses were found on crown lands, roads, on buildings, on isolated paddocks completely cut off by water, and the fact phone service was absent or limited on a daily basis and there were widespread power outages. So how on earth could a farmer phone up and register for cattle he didn't know existed at a location he didn't know using a phone he had no service with! This is the reality of the situation on the ground we were dealing with and to this day the department all the way to the Agriculture Minister Dugald Saunders has failed to accept as fact. The current system and processes are flawed, impractical, arduous and do not provide timely and effective assistance when and where it's needed.

- DPI told me after the second flood a month later for which their response was far more effective and timely and for which I publicly give them credit for due improvement and communication, that they are not permitted to drop hay onto farms they are not invited, that is, until a job is logged by an animal owner to request hay. This must change and the rules must allow fodder to be dropped onto any location where livestock are found to be in need of fodder, and the only way to know this is to complete extensive aerial surveillance as we did with our private helicopters and volunteers. The process is really quite simple and rapid. A spotter with local knowledge goes up and looks for animals in need of fodder and they log a GPS location and job number and then hay is delivered. DPI must be able to operate like this and in fact in my opinion it's mandatory for animal welfare standards to be maintained. Our private pilots operated with extreme caution using extensive experience and immense skill operating under difficult and sad times and they carried out their mission with distinction.

- telecommunications. We needed better phone service which is actually required for human safety and this was lacking and made our tasks impossible on some days. Somehow emergency telecommunication capabilities must be initiated during these events.

- interaction between government and local private groups must be improved. In my opinion the former are arrogant towards the latter and as such the latter often become frustrated and angry at the former. This must change such that government ask locals what they need and then go about working together to make it happen with no bureaucratic delays and reasons why things can't be done but rather find solutions to problems together and just getting the task completed in an efficient and timely effective manner.

- the general government response to the flood event is the Northern Rivers has been widely regarded as poor and the community feels forgotten and is without hope. From farmers to businesses in towns, we all need hope by action. And politicians of all

persuasions must eradicate their long-held mantra of denial and lies to protect a false image and perception they constantly try to portray to the community. Local people know the facts and to hear a minister such as Agriculture Minister Saunders constantly fronting media and dismissing my and other locals' version of events and the current dire situation is personally offensive, is morally wrong and professionally inept of them. It only makes them out to be moronic and living in denial of reality which is an affliction many politicians have unfortunately.

Currently right here right now, we have an ongoing animal welfare and farmer welfare critical situation and I can't over emphasise this enough. We have cattle that need urgent agistment to get them out of this prolonged wet weather, because they are losing body condition, many are lame, they are cold from being in cold mud constantly, and they are short of feed. We have farmers on their knees, spending huge amounts of money trying to keep stock alive, paying huge excesses to their usual costs of production and facing a winter without their usual feed. This on top of many of them losing stock, having their farms and homes flooded and suffering immense personal turmoil. Now this is not an exaggeration; this is fact right here right now and the politicians must get out here and talk to these people and look them in the eye and explain why in a country as apparently fortunate as we are, why is our community not getting the assistance locals here are screaming that they need.

The small business and primary producer grants are too rigorous to entitle the people who need them to access it in a timely manner. They are not even grants because only the first portion (either \$15000-\$25000) is granted while the remainder of the insufficient amount is only paid upon receipts of payment for the works. The simple problem is so many business and farmers don't have the cash upfront to spend to get themselves operating again and hence we see the attrition of both and the loss of people from our community. The system needs a complete overhaul to be streamlined, simpler, devoid of impractical requirements to qualify and the only way to learn this and improve this is to ask locals how and why the system is failing them and do not have a minister front the media and ramble some figures trying to spin the actual reality which is that people are on their knees and in desperate need of their own personal assistance.

I can't possibly empty all my professional and personal thoughts of this catastrophic event onto one submission here. It's been the most sad and awesome event and personal experience on a professional level that I've had the privilege being involved with. I've made some great friends. I hope I have helped in a small part of a large team who I believe made a positive difference to many people and animals lives. We didn't save them all, but we damn well gave it a red hot crack and gave hope to those who were in need of hope through action.

I'll leave you with only a few images of the vast amount of cruel and horrible things I seen and was able to render help to.

This flood event won't ever leave my mind and nor will my desire to enact change at all levels to prevent the same failures being repeated. I am very content to be available should it be decided I may be of use to further discussions in this sphere.

Best wishes to all our community and may the sun again shine well for us and better days return.

Thankyou for consideration of my submission based on the facts as I experienced them first hand.

Dr Bruno D Ros BVetBio BVSc (Hons)