

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

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Submission to the Select Committee on the response to major flooding across New South Wales in 2022

Thankyou for the opportunity to make a submission to this committee regarding the major flooding across NSW in 2022.

Phenomenal lack of foresight, planning and mitigation by our NSW and federal Governments, and still complete denial of the climate crisis led to the Black Summer Fires and now these disastrous floods.

There is a common denominator here with our Government propping up industries that are destroying our planet, such as oil and gas industries, animal agriculture and mining/Forestry/extractive industries leaving a denuded land which is now showing how easily it can be ravaged. Hills once held together by trees that protected our creeks and water now collapsing along with the ecosystems they supported. And it all started with the colonial thinking of establishing towns like Lismore and Murwillumbah on the flood plains so harvested logs could easily be sent down the river.

Animals now used and abused on these cleared lands for their flesh are left to drown or shot in the street if they dare enter our territory and no doubt farmers will be helped yet again to just replace them with more animals so they can continue killing them.

The human victims of the flood were left to fend for themselves or be rescued by friends and neighbours. Our social systems were also in collapse after the flood with no banks, no eftpos, no money in atm's, no fuel, shortages of food and supplies, no post office and to top it all off no communication with no phones and no Internet. And then no help or assistance given with many in the community being left homeless and nowhere to go.

I find it staggering that Government can still fund these harmful industries causing the climate crisis along with weapons and nuclear submarines yet cannot fund proper social or emergency housing and basic human needs in the state of an emergency.

Personal experience

I live in the Tweed Valley in the Northern Rivers area of NSW which was heavily impacted by 2 consecutive major flooding events. I live on a rural property half an hour away from the town of Murwillumbah and whilst my house was safe situated on a hill the access to my property was destroyed during the flooding events and the kilometre long road from my front gate to my house is still only just barely accessible by 4WD.

I was flooded in for 9 days on my property due to the flooding but even when the water subsided I was unable to leave my property without paying for an excavator to come and clear a path for me to be able to leave my property by 4WD. Due to unavailability of operators (some of which lost machinery in the floods) this was only temporary and emergency repairs to enable me to leave my property to access food and supplies. My situation has not changed to this day, 10 weeks on, with very difficult terrain to cross to leave my property still. I am still unable to get service deliveries, tradespeople, or even emergency vehicles to access my house if needed. And since the floods we have had constant rain making the situation even worse and no chance to even make temporary repairs. As I write this the access to my property is flooded once again and with all the rain I may not

be able to leave the property again once the creek has gone down as there will likely be further damage.

During the time of the floods I had no internet or phone for over a week, and after that only had intermittent service occasionally for another week. The lack of communication was a major safety risk, disruption and concern as there was no means of calling for help if needed. As a woman living on my own on a rural property and with animals to care for this was a very difficult situation.

When I was finally able to make it into town (Murwillumbah) there was no bank, post office, ATM or petrol station. There was only one supermarket who had just commenced operating and they could only accept cash. So I had no means of buying any supplies, all of which were very scarce anyway.

However on getting into town and seeing the devastation to the local roads, creeks and rivers and hearing of the devastation in the community with the numbers of houses lost and people left homeless and also the huge loss of animal lives I consider myself relatively lucky.

When I was finally able to leave my property and go into Murwillumbah to shop I had to take an alternate route into town as Tyalgum Road had a major landslip and has now been closed indefinitely due to safety issues and Tweed Shire Council have said this could take a year or more to fix. The alternate route also has at least 3 landslips on it where the narrow winding road is now reduced to one lane traffic in many parts but due to the other road closure has triple the increase of traffic on it. Heavy vehicles including trucks from water mining continue to use this road. With these landslips still moving there is still a great risk of this alternate route being rendered inaccessible and leaving thousands of residents stranded.

Non-human animals

The loss of human life was tragic. But so too was the loss of non-human animal lives including our precious wildlife. As an animal lover I am particularly devastated by the unnecessary loss of so many non-human lives with so many farm animals and also animals kept as pets on known floodplains left to drown whilst they are imprisoned in sheds, enclosures or kept behind barbed wire fences. What a terrifying death for these poor innocent cows, horses, sheep, donkeys, goats, pigs, chickens, ducks, dogs, cats, birds and other animals who were subjected to being wet and cold with the water rising around them and then being swept to their deaths mostly in the dark of night. The very sad reality is this cruelty is mostly perpetuated with every flood event. Farm animals in particular are left without any means of escape and continue to drown with each flood event and are merely replaced like they were just a tin of beans, rather than living breathing sentient beings.

One of the most distressing things I heard after the floods was about the poor cow who had been swept approximately 80 kilometres down the Tweed River and managed to land on a beach near Tweed and ended up walking down one of the streets in Tweed Heads. A farm rescue group had offered to take this poor cow in and it was agreed to but in the process of capturing the poor distressed animal the police ended up shooting her dead in the middle of the street. This poor cow who had been feeding a young calf so no doubt witnessed her calf being swept away in the floods and then managed to survive a horrific 80 kilometre trip being swept in floodwaters in the middle of the night and this is how our society think it is acceptable to treat her. Sadly not with just one bullet but I believe it took a few bullets to kill her. Where has our humanity gone?

Thousands of cattle, many horses and numerous other animals were swept away and it was left to volunteer vets and community members to raise funds for helicopters to go looking for them and to help with rescuing them. Seeing vision of farm animals that had been left for

nearly a month since the floods to fend for themselves and also witness many fellow animals die in the process was just horrific and so unnecessary . If we can fly to the moon, surely we can rescue animals from floods. A new fundraiser has only just been set up locally to do aerial searches to locate any cattle and horses that have been recently sighted still alive.

Many cherished pets were also lost in the floods. But for many others who were able to save their pets they have suffered another severe blow with not being able to find accommodation that allows pets. It is 2022 and most pets are actually better residents than many children, we need laws in place to allow pets in rental accommodation and particularly in emergency accommodation and centres. These poor people are having to give up their treasured family members and some of the only consistent parts of their lives prior to the floods. The numbers of pets and often pairs of elderly dogs and whole families of pets that are being advertised for rehoming by rescue groups due to the floods at the moment is astounding. And again it is all left up to charities to fill this gap and they get no government assistance.

Another very sad case was where there was a large landslip out of Mullumbimby that took out a whole house, The owner was able to get out alive and also to retrieve his injured elderly pet dog from the house. Sadly it took him 2 days to walk out carrying his injured dog to a vet to be put down. This was all due to there being no communication to call for help.

With the climate crisis in full swing and these flooding events continuing to escalate I find it totally unacceptable that animals are allowed to be kept on known floodplains and without any means of escape. It is time for known floodplains to only be used for growing crops instead of causing death and suffering to sentient beings. If this cannot be achieved in a timely manner then it should be legislated that any farmland or property where animals are kept on a known floodplain should have high ground where animals can escape or be moved to in the event of flooding. Putting animals in harms way and just leaving them to die is just barbaric and primitively cruel. I understand that there were many areas in these flooding events that have never flooded before where people would have been unaware of the dangers, but I have seen many properties that are regularly subject to inundation by flooding and with each flood have lost animals and just either don't learn any lessons or are completely lacking in compassion and empathy for others. All lives matter and all lives should be respected and kept safe from harm. Many of these landholders make sure that their house is on a raised area or stilts or safe from projected flooding but don't afford the same luxury to the animals they keep. It is time that animal life, including our precious wildlife is given higher priority than mere artifacts and household or business belongings.

As a volunteer koala rescuer it is so sad to see and hear of so many displaced, injured and dead wildlife from these floods, and with the continued rainfall many species and animals that did survive are doing it really tough and continue to die.

Response from Government

The response from Government and the authorities after the flooding event was what left many in the community speechless and angry with good reason. Official rescue efforts were very short on the ground with most in the community left to either fend for themselves or be rescued by fellow caring community members. The Government were simply missing in action and it was also left up to selfless community members to set up an emergency response centre in town where a volunteer hub and donation centre was set up to not only co-ordinate emergency response teams but to offer help where needed in helping with homelessness, clean-up, replacement of essential items and

services, food and labour needed. It is still operating without any assistance from Government with community volunteers expected to give up their work and time to co-ordinate, fund and provide essential services which the Government should have been providing from Day 1 but are obviously incapable of doing. This even extended to these selfless volunteers having to direct where the Defence Force were needed when they finally arrived to help. Where is all levels of Government in this? Whilst this is not NSW Government jurisdiction you have to wonder if our Defence force is not capable of providing immediate help with rescue, emergency housing, sanitation, fresh water, food, facilities, services and assistance in times of a flood how will we fare in a war.

Environment

Environmentally these flood events have been a disaster with so much erosion and sediment load into the creeks and waterways and unprecedented landslips, taking out houses and roadways like never before. My property is in a biodiversity hotspot, bordering World Heritage Listed National Parks and the erosion and destruction of the waterways is significant as is the damage caused from the 800 acre property adjoining mine where logging (both legal and illegal) has occurred. This property in particular where a Private Native Forestry Agreement was in place and important koala habitat was cleared is now a disaster zone with all the waterways originating on this property and coming into mine now running red with sediment and totally destroying the ecosystem, and water catchment. The flooding events have only exacerbated the totally inadequate protections put in place by Government for our wildlife and their habitat, that continues to erode the biodiversity and water quality in this unique part of NSW. Our endangered and dwindling wildlife have either lost their lives or if they have survived they have lost important habitat like the platypus that live in local creeks.

It is well and truly time for compassion, empathy, respect and priority action to be given to mother nature and all her inhabitants.

Not-for-profits

10 weeks down the track from the floods many in my community are still reliant on not-for-profit organisations like Orange Sky for help with laundry or Oz Harvest for food, or Animal Rescue Co-Operative and other rescue groups for help with animals and of course the invaluable work of the local volunteers at the Volunteer and Donation Hubs. Again, where is Government in helping with basic every day needs that many who have been left homeless need. We seem to be continually reliant on charitable organisations to provide basic and necessary needs. It is almost like Government are helping and subsidising big business whilst the people and animals are left to their own or not-for-profit charities to help out.

The community is also being messed around by Insurance companies often with unreasonable demands, with one local retail business owner having to search for proof of storm water height outside her business at 1am on the night of the flood. She herself was trapped in her own home across town at that time.

There is a lack of tradespeople to even come and give a quote let alone do repair or rebuilding work. Many are waiting on insurance guys to come and start rebuilding. Many are having difficulty even finding a tradie to turn up to give a quote. Or they had someone initially come and haven't seen them since. Whilst there are many grants available from the Government there are also so many hoops filling out forms for assistance with many saying the grant forms are difficult to fill in or they don't have any documents to provide or they are excluded

for some reason. And even after the accountant has filled them in properly, they are still being asked more questions.

10 weeks down the track many are still homeless, staying with friends, living in cars, tents and vans. Many have had to surrender their family pets or can't get accommodation because of pets. Accommodation is almost impossible to get with rental properties being scarce before the floods. Rain has continued almost every day since and the mud and issues with access are very difficult. As is the issue with mould and this is even with houses that haven't been inundated. My house is on a hill with very good ventilation yet the walls, floors, clothes, virtually everything is covered in mould. Just this morning I got my camera out to take a photo but my camera has moisture and won't function. And remember my house did not go under, I just can't imagine what it must be like for those who have lost everything in these floods and there is still no respite from the rain, no shelter, no facilities, everything gone, and even if they have had clothes and household items donated to them they have nowhere to store or keep them. So many are in the situation that they can't accept help with donated items such as furniture as there is nowhere for it to go.

Others who are back living in their homes without walls and cooking facilities find it hard to cook. Some places still have no electricity to their homes. Those living in motel, hotel accommodation who have children would find it very hard indeed to make ends meet. And the psychological strain for young parents and children living in confined conditions is also tough.

There is a need for cooking and bathroom facilities with these newly homeless people needing somewhere to shower and cook. I have seen no evidence of church or community halls being used to house the homeless. And particularly with the continuing rain, people need shelter from the elements. The victims of these floods are struggling in so many ways.

Local councils cannot be expected to fund all the necessary road repair works. Whilst I realise that state Government funding for roadworks has to be done to a time frame, surely in the midst of a state emergency these rules can be relaxed. There is an absurd situation here at the moment where already planned and funded road widening works on a section of Numinbah Road out of Murwillumbah is being done whilst there is a plethora of safety issues on this road with multiple landslips, potholes and cutouts, and a tripling in traffic. Motorists are having to regularly stop for when the road narrows to one lane due to landslips and dodge potholes and are now having to stop for unnecessary roadworks as well. This machinery and these roadworkers could be put to much better use. Some residents like myself due to their usual route being closed are having an extra hour added to their journey to school or work, so this added stop is just a slap in the face for locals.

Conclusion

I surely hope that lessons are learnt from these dreadful flood events. However my concern is that lessons have still not been learnt from past emergencies such as the Black Summer Fires and many other tragedies before that. All loss of life is tragic and we must do all we can to protect all life not just human lives. Homes must not be allowed to be built on known flood plains, and neither should animal agriculture be allowed on them. The Government must act swiftly when emergencies happen and if they can't physically set up volunteer and donation hubs and resources to help the victims of these emergencies then they must fund whoever does actually care. Homelessness must be addressed, regardless of emergencies. I find the statistics of homeless women over 55 appalling, and now there are so many more. Emergency centres and operations must be properly funded and

animals allowed in them. And with the climate crisis in full swing it is imperative that every level of Government act swiftly on Climate Change and instead of subsidising industries that harm our environment we help them to transition to sustainable and earth friendly business models. Apart from mitigating the effects of these disastrous events we must stop the cause and address climate change. We have only had 1.2 degrees of global warming so far, we simply cannot afford to let it escalate further as we know that more extreme and disastrous weather events are the result.