

**Submission  
No 75**

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

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Attached is a submission relative to the Select Committee Inquiry.

I gave evidence to the Inquiry in Lismore on 31st May, however due to time constraints there were other matters that I would have wished to present but was unable to do at that time.

My background is:

Active member of Civil Defence and SES from 1964.

Member of Lismore Floodboat group 1964 to 1975.

Flood forecaster/monitor at Richmond-Tweed SES HQ 1975 to 2016.

Flood Intelligence Officer at Lismore City SES Unit from 2016.

Ed Bennett

## **SUBMISSION TO THE SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE RESPONSE TO MAJOR FLOODING ACROSS NEW SOUTH WALES IN 2022**

This submission is concerned principally with Item 1(d) of the terms of reference and includes some references to some other items of the terms of reference.

The following comments are based on two fundamental premises:

1. The community is entitled to be provided with timely, accurate, reliable and regular weather and flood information.
2. The more aware and better informed people are the better they will be able to plan for and cope with flood emergencies and this can be expected to result in less anxiety and less loss and damage to property.

### **SPECIFIC COMMENTS/SUGGESTIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### **Community education and awareness**

There needs to be an ongoing program of engaging with the public to increase 'weather awareness', i.e. the type of weather that leads to flooding, and 'flood awareness', i.e. flood behaviour that affects people in their particular locations. The SES, Bureau of Meteorology (BoM) and local government should play leading roles in such a program.

#### **Early Warning**

There needs to be a better system of giving the public the earliest possible warning that a flood situation is developing. In every flood event there are reports of some people not being aware early enough of an approaching flood. Along parts of the Queensland cyclone coast a siren warning system is used to alert the community. In other places a vehicle mounted loudspeaker alert is used. A siren or loudspeaker alert system could indicate that a radio broadcast is imminent (see later comments on the use of radio).

#### **Roles of the BoM, SES and the ABC**

These organisations play key complementary roles during a flood emergency.

The BoM is the source of official information on weather and stream conditions and provides this information direct to the SES, the ABC and the public via its website.

The SES takes the information from the BoM and tailors it to give it a 'local flavour' and apply to a specific catchment, stream or location. This local information is also passed on to local ABC radio.

The current system works reasonably well but could be improved in the following ways:

- a) BoM bulletins should be sent not only to SES HQ to be 'passed down the line' but sent to relevant local units. In the 2017 flood the Initial Flood Warning was received by Richmond-Tweed SES HQ at 12.38pm but was not passed on to Lismore City SES unit until 2.01pm. This meant that the local unit lost 1h23m of precious planning and preparation time. The BoM has said it could easily send a bulletin to relevant local SES units at the same time as to SES HQ and this would have two advantages – it avoids a possible delay caused by SES HQ being very busy as was the case in 2017, and it affords vital local knowledge that resides in local units to be used in the preparation of local bulletins for broadcast.
- b) There have been instances where there have been time gaps between BoM bulletins. In 2017 there was a gap of four hours between successive BoM bulletins during a critical

time. In such situations the highly experienced and qualified local Flood Intelligence personnel could provide information to the ABC for broadcast. Since 2017 senior SES staff have agreed to this, provided that local SES Flood Intelligence staff supply factual data and do not provide forecasts/predictions as that is the responsibility of the BoM.

c) Currently, ABC broadcasts give information on stream heights and if the level is rising, falling or stationary. Feedback from the community is that more information is needed. In particular, the rate of rise during the development stage of a flood is considered critical information. If the rate of rise is given people can calculate how much time they have before the level reaches what is a critical level for them and this can be vital information that they can use in implementing their flood plan. Until about 1990 flood broadcasts would give stream heights for Lismore and upstream locations and the rate of rise but this level of detail was discontinued. A senior SES member has claimed that people can access rate of rise from the BoM site and broadcast bulletins should not be overly complicated but this overlooks the fact that some people do not have internet access, people who are busy don't want to check the BoM site every half hour or so and people who are unfamiliar with flood behaviour may not interpret BoM site information correctly. Anyway, why should thousands of people do their own information search and interpretation when an authoritative broadcast can be made for the whole community to listen to. Ideally, ABC broadcasts would be made at regular intervals. After the hourly news, at approximately ten minutes past the hour would be appropriate.

#### Single source of truth

It has been a common statement during various inquiries that there should be a 'single source of truth'. The BoM is the official source of information, the ABC is the official emergency broadcaster and the SES also plays a very important role. The concept of the 'single source of truth' needs to be constantly emphasised.

#### Means of communication

Telecommunications can and do fail. This happens all too often, either from power failures or interference by floodwater or wind during extreme events. Thus, the internet can fail. Battery operated radios have proved to be a reliable means of communication when the more hi-tech systems fail. It is suggested that people be encouraged to obtain battery operated radios and the government could consider providing such radios to people in flood affected areas or at least subsidising their cost.

#### Local Knowledge

Recent inquiries into floods and fires have almost universally acknowledged the importance of local knowledge. It is certainly true that in most of the local SES units, e.g. Lismore, Ballina, Murwillumbah, Woodburn, Coraki and no doubt many others throughout the state, there are SES members who have many years of experience and extensive local knowledge.

It is absolutely unacceptable that out of region Incident Controllers are brought in and do not properly liaise and take notice of advice provided by local people with appropriate local knowledge. In 2017 in Lismore a FIFO Incident Controller refused to accept advice from local members and made some disastrous decisions. This has been well documented.

Fortunately, this did not happen in the 2022 floods and in spite of the fact that the magnitude of the February 2022 flood more than tested the local SES unit, the management was done by the local unit which acquitted itself very well under the most trying of circumstances.

In future, should an out-of-area Incident Controller be flown in there should be a policy that requires meaningful consultation with local units.

Better still, local members should be suitably trained to fill any such role.

#### Salaried Leaders of large local SES units

Large local units such as Lismore which has 80 plus members and is often called upon to assist nearby smaller units should have a leader who is a full-time salaried officer. The leadership roles in such large units are very onerous and if done well place an enormous burden on a volunteer leader and it is simply too much to expect of a volunteer, and in the case of Lismore City at present, a leader who has a full-time job.