

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

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Author: Miriam McGregor and Cate Martinez

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INTRODUCTION

As part of our process writing this submission we asked volunteer team leaders, regional staff and community members in the field for feedback on what they are seeing, hearing and experiencing as community members and Red Cross (RC) representatives. We acknowledge the ongoing tireless work, and struggles that those in flood impacted areas face every day and give thanks to them for taking the time to speak with us.

In February 2022 a major storm cell moved south across the Queensland border into Northern NSW. What followed was one of the most destructive weather events seen in the history of NSW. Initial impact assessments estimated 2,834 houses were inhabitable, and more than 9,200 damaged. 7 lives were lost and hundreds of rescues were carried out. Lismore community resident Wally McGregor spoke to us about his experience during this event.

'In the first flood we lost everything, [...] we were rescued off the roof in the morning by family. I felt great terror as the black water raced down the road outside our house. It was something I have never felt before [...] I feared for our lives, although it was fairly warm that morning, the lack of shelter and pelting rain had a chilling effect on my four-year-old daughter, and I was terrified she would become hypothermic'

Wally McGregor – Lismore Resident

Throughout this event the Red Cross activated over 384 unique Red Cross personnel, working a total of 15,576 hours over the duration of the event. Red Cross undertook work in evacuation and recovery centres, meeting, greeting and registering arrivals. They performed psychological first aid with survivors of the flood in these centres, in the community and over the phone in the public information inquiry centre. Volunteers across the state committed hours to entering data from the field, completing reporting and undertaking rostering to support our operations. Red Cross worked with a number of corporate partners and raised \$40.4 million to support those effected by the floods. To date¹ 41,713 relief grant applications have been approved for NSW totalling in \$20,856,500. Nationwide \$500,000 has been granted to next of kin to assist with bereavement costs. Initial calculations suggest that Red Cross had contact with up to 19,000 people over this time.

Throughout the event major structural disruptions affected our ability to respond. Communications were poor, roads into the Northern Rivers and Richmond were closed, or collapsed. As a smaller response team, our ability to use alternative ways of accessing hard hit areas, like helicopters, relied heavily on relationships with private enterprise. For volunteers and community members the days following the first flood was described as *'the closest thing they*

¹ As of Monday 16th of May 2022

have seen to anarchy'. ATMs were down and looting and crime was reportedly increasing rapidly.

Volunteers and regional staff have been dealing with the impacts of this flood on their own homes, as well as trying to support community members. They have spoken at length about the disruption that this has caused to a life which was only just returning to normal after years of major disasters including the 2017 flood, the drought, Black Summer, COVID and now this.

'They (the community) have so much compound trauma that it's difficult to know which event to focus on.'

Tammy Jones – Tweed/Byron Volunteer and Recovery Officer

Our need to do things differently is becoming increasingly obvious. The ongoing pressure from this sustained event amplified the cracks in an emergency response and recovery system which is struggling to find its feet in a world which experiences a major event every 12 months. We know that the combination of natural and social hazards compiled with economic and biological shocks severely challenges domestic and international response mechanisms.

Three major stressors are contributing to a complex and protracted recovery from this event which are outline in more detail below:

MAJOR STRESSORS

1. Economic

The cost of living has risen 5.1% in the last 12 months and 2.1% in the last quarter². The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC)³ released an investigation which cited CoreLogics latest data on the cost of construction in March 2022. The results were that the cost of construction rose 2.5% during March 2022, and 9% in total for the year. The impacts of the floods were expected to further increase pressure on the construction industry and have raised a number of concerns:

- Those who have lost work due to the floods will struggle to afford the cost of living and the cost of repairs, forcing them to choose one or the other and protracting displacement while they wait for grant money or for employment to recommence.

² Australian Bureau of Statistics Consumer Price Index, Australia Data – release date 27.04.2022 access via Google Chrome - <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/economy/price-indexes-and-inflation/consumer-price-index-australia/latest-release>

³ Terzon, Emily (2022) 'Building Crisis Could Lead to DIY boom as repairs and renovations stall for lack of tradies, materials' Australian Broadcasting Corporation accessed online on 18/05/2022 at <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-04-13/building-industry-storm-damage-diy-inflation-costs/100984598>

- The availability of trades people and materials will slow down the rebuild process
- An increase in DIY projects will be seen across the region resulting in dwellings which are not in line with building regulation, and potentially unsafe from future floods, and other hazards.

Recovery officers in the region have already reported that assisting survivors of the floods in accessing structural assistance and tradesman is difficult. The perceived sentiment of those who work in the construction industry in the area is that they are cautious how they approach each rebuild – they want to build with sustainable products which further protect households from future flooding events.

2. Housing

The housing crisis which has long gripped the Northern Rivers has been worsened by this event. Red Cross has partnered with Airbnb and the Department of Communities and Justice to work together to match people who could not be housed by the Department of Communities and Justice, into a registered Airbnb for a maximum of 4 weeks. This was an opt-in option for Airbnb hosts anywhere across NSW. A number of difficulties and complexities go with matching individuals to a home including preferences in regard to location, pets, and current housing arrangements. A large portion of those referred to Red Cross for matching came with a number of social complexities which have not allowed the Department of Communities and Justice or Red Cross to match individuals to hosts. The following outcomes give a clear picture of the success of the program.

- The Department of Communities and Justice has made 131 referrals to Red Cross so far
- Red Cross has made 6 matches, of which:
 - 2 were *not* realised because the guests did not follow up with the hosts, so the hosts withdrew their offers;
 - 1 is currently underway; that is the client is being accommodated by the host in the Airbnb;
 - 1 client was to be accommodated for 1 week only, but the client is still there, with the hosts permission;
 - 1 client will be accommodated as of Friday the 13th 2022; and.
 - 1 client will be accommodated at a later date.
- Red Cross has made 100 return referrals to the Department of Communities and Justice.
- Red Cross is in the process of trying to match another 2 people with properties
 - Of these, 0 matches look likely.
- There are 30 referrals that we are yet to begin to process.

Key Recommendation

- 1. This program changes to a viable option for medium recovery respite**

3. Psychosocial

'[The second flood] ... has caused considerable delays in getting our life back on track. It has re-traumatised me and the community around me, it has condensed our uncertainty around the future of the town as a whole [...] We now consider if we stay or go, all while we continue to work and spend money on a house that may just become part of a ghost town'
Wally McGregor – Lismore Resident

The risk of burn out has passed, our people are burnt out. Red Cross Personnel have spoken about the struggles of seeing their communities so impacted, and the difficult balance between supporting their own family members who were impacted, and working in recovery or evacuation centres giving psycho-social support to those who arrived. Community recovery workers have identified that there has not been time between disaster events for the community to begin the healing process. There is likely a need for psychosocial outreach work, but they are incredibly fatigued, and not sure who will coordinate that work.

Staff have spoken about the vicarious trauma of these events starting to build. They are expressing that feelings of helplessness and guilt are creeping in as the devastation keeps piling up, as one thing after another impacts communities and they feel like can't take it away or help in small practical ways.

Part of the way we support our volunteers is providing independent welfare calls to each volunteer who has been activated. All reports we receive back are that while the work is rewarding our volunteers are tired, and that it is hard to watch people return to recovery hubs frustrated and continually suffering. There is communal frustration the system is not more streamlined, and a feeling that there were so many agencies in the field but no clear way of knowing that you have gotten the proper help from all of them.

Recovery Planning

1. Community Cohesion

We know that some communities bounce back better than others after a disaster. Research has found that communities who do better have prior to the emergency been more resilient and more socially connected than their counter parts⁴. Throughout the response period the strong social cohesion of Northern Rivers, communities assisted combat agencies in minimising the death toll. In a parallel scene to that seen during Hurricane Katrina a number of people pulled neighbours and loved ones to safety in a spontaneous act of goodwill. Unfortunately, in the days following un-verified stories of anti-social behaviour within region begun circulating. We were

⁴ Aldrich, D, (2015) 'Some communities are destroyed by tragedy and disaster. Others spring back. Here's what makes a difference.' Washington Post, access online on 18/05/2022
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2015/12/09/some-communities-are-destroyed-by-tragedy-and-disaster-others-spring-back-heres-what-makes-the-difference/>

lucky that on this occasion unlike Hurricane Katrina those regarded as survivors did not turn into the enemy. However, the challenge during recovery is more complex.

Uslaner (2016)⁵ reflected on literature relevant to community trust and outlined that the trust communities have in government, emergency response and welfare agencies is dependent on if it is perceived that the response was immediate and helpful, if there is a clear enemy, and if people perceived that agencies responsible for preparedness had done enough to build resilience to shocks, and finally if they are doing enough to assist with rebuilding. Volunteer team leaders have recently reflected that most people in the field felt government agencies and the Australian Defence Force had been too slow in their response. In one instance a council worker likened the experience in Coraki in the initial days after flood to the novel 'Lord of the Flies'. They felt if the Defence Force had arrived sooner in a more practical way, they would be better off now. Red Cross personnel spoke about communities becoming insular, Lismore, Casino, Coraki, Woodburn, Evans Head, Broad Water and Kyogle all looking out for their own, and not collectively being concerned about how to recover as a region.

'These people have suffered enough. Through recent drought, fires, COVID, and floods. They have survived, they will struggle, but their strength, courage, and support for each other will see them through.'

Margaret Baker – Red Cross Volunteer

2. Immediate Recovery

The sheer scale of this disaster has collectively overwhelmed volunteers and staff within Red Cross. The transition into recovery is slow moving, and communities who are isolated and will continue to be hard to access for months to come are particularly challenging.

A perceived lack of big picture coordination has been observed by locals and leadership. Initially Red Cross was requested to sit physically in the centre to act as a liaison for community and community partners. As the centre grew and moved, we lost our seat at the table. Our observation was that there was a room full of staff well equipped to run a combat agencies incident management team, however there was not a recovery coordination centre considering the short and long term needs of the community. In the end we quietly bowed out of the centre – feeling our time and energy could better be focused on other things.

The general operations of the recovery centres has been extremely challenging for staff and volunteers present in that space. In many instances we have seen an inconsistent approach from government agencies who were bringing in unspecialised and untrained staff. Our volunteer team leaders described every Monday as 'ground hog day'. New staff would come in from Resilience NSW and Service NSW and Red Cross or other community partners regularly had to take on the role of explaining how things worked and doing some basic training in the

⁵ Uslaner, E.M., 2016. Disasters, trust, and social cohesion. *Ritsumeikan language culture study*, 28(2).

centre operations. In the field, personnel often felt micro-managed and that government agencies were de-valuing the extensive training, experience some volunteers and staff have in PFA, MHFA, Suicide Training and Domestic Violence training. There was a perception that Centre Managers appeared so focused on the 'business side of things' that recovery centres became cold and unwelcoming. What appeared to be in-experience or a lack of understanding of this space meant that those who had been impacted by floods were not listened to and their experience was not validated.

Three key difficulties in the transition and ongoing recovery space were identified:

1. The difference in approach by Resilience NSW as a new lead agency has had a major effect on the way Red Cross and other welfare agencies have transitioned into recovery. Particularly the delayed establishment of mobile recovery hubs resulted in impacted communities travelling up to 1 hour to crowded recovery centres.
2. The Northern Rivers Recovery Coordination Unit which was established has missed its target. Resilience NSW, Service NSW, and Services Australia were reported to have arrived in different towns on different days. A coordinated approach we feel means that impacted community members are not constantly missing the opportunity to receive the help they need. As the event progressed people were repeatedly returning to recovery hubs and retelling their story multiple times.

Key Recommendations

- 1. The establishment of mobile recovery hubs in conjunction with the establishment of major recovery centres.**
- 2. Ensure community has a voice in recovery planning**
- 3. Response incident management teams' transition into a recovery coordination unit with the appropriate agencies represented.**
- 4. A consistent recovery centre management plan across the state.**
- 5. The re-establishment of regular interagency evacuation and recovery centre training exercises to ensure government has an understanding of the critical roles of community partner agencies.**

A First Nations Perspective

Despite First Nations people's connection to country, they are more susceptible to the risks of natural disasters. The United Nations Recommendations on Engaging Indigenous People in Risk Reduction gives a series of points to consider when engaging Indigenous risk reduction. Most notably the document states that '*Indigenous peoples must have a voice in order to reduce disaster risk and vulnerability. The practice of imposing centralized solutions to local problems (many of which already have successful local solutions) can lessen the community's*

capacity to reduce risk and save lives. They must have opportunities to develop their own strategies as well as participate in the development of national and international policies.’⁶

In line with our commitment to ensuring First Nations inclusion and understanding is applied to our Emergency Services practice, the NSW/ACT team consists of a dedicated First Nations Emergency Services Teams. This team comprises of 5 First Nations Recovery & Resilience Officers within New South Wales.

Throughout the floods our First Nations team worked autonomously from incident management teams, undertaking community engagement and assisting directly within the affected areas throughout the Northern Rivers region. The First Nations team was instrumental in creating a culturally safe approach to response. Our Northern Rivers First Nations lead provided vital information & feedback to response agencies at a Regional, State & Federal Level, on behalf of Red Cross and First Nations Communities, highlighting the voice of the community where typically this inclusion is not always present

The NSW First Nations Emergency Services team’s ability to work together with community assisted the response, identifying gaps, barriers and provided a better understanding, and real time information on the impact of the disaster on First Nations Communities.

Feedback and information was provided to key government agencies throughout the response, in a space that would not typically feel culturally safe for community to have a voice.

Whilst on the ground, it was observed a concerning lack of First Nations identified support services/staff in vital agencies, legal services, health, and government sectors. The evacuation centres were not resourced to adequately assist First Nations Peoples. Historically the presence of the Department of Communities and Justice to be the central lead in these centres often acted as a deterrent for First Nations People to present at an evacuation centre. There is an inherent lack of trust and respect between First Nations Peoples and DCJ (formally DoCS) First Nations people do not feel safe to be honest or share crucial information to this service due to the historical intergenerational trauma within most First Nations families. This is direct evidence on the impact of intergenerational trauma, and how that can hinder the response and the ability to ensure First Nations communities have access to the right help at the right time.

Key Recommendations

- 1. Increased representation of first nation’s Peoples on senior committees and reference groups**
- 2. Increased funding to ensure first nation’s teams are available in more regions to reflect**

⁶ World Health Organisation, and Pan American Health Organisations, (2014) Recommendations for Engaging Indigenous People in Disaster Risk Reduction, pg. 28 – accessed online 18 May 2022
https://www.paho.org/disasters/dmdocuments/HemisphericConsInd_low.pdf

the increasing scale of disasters.

A Community Led Approach

1. Community-led Resilience Teams

While the flooding in Northern NSW in 2022 was unprecedented and caused many hundreds of households and communities to be isolated – some for weeks or months – there were also many examples of communities working together in community-led preparedness, response and recovery to reduce the physical and psychosocial impacts of the flooding.

Since Tropical Cyclone Debbie in 2017, Communities applied the Community Led Resilience Team (CRT) model with Red Cross mentoring and support based on their particular strengths and capacities. Other agencies have also supported the development of the model, for example, the Red Cross First Nations Team has linked with Aboriginal Affairs NSW, Resilience NSW, NSW RFS, NSW SES, NSW DPI and Clarence Valley Council to support community leaders and Elders in developing a CRT for the communities of Baryulgil and Malabugilmah in Clarence Valley LGA.

Following the flooding in February and March 2022, Red Cross interviewed a number of community members and representatives from Councils and emergency services agencies to check in on the implementation of CRTs, and their effectiveness during recent events.

Feedback has been overwhelmingly positive. Community members consistently report standout benefits from a trained, prepared and supported local community network linked via a CRT during both the emergency event and early recovery.

BYRRILL CREEK CRT

The Byrrill Creek community activated its CRT during the flooding in February and March 2022. While the flooding from this event was significantly more impactful, the CRT once again proved its strength as a tool for linking residents who had jointly planned and prepared.


Residents were active on Facebook and via their other agreed communication pathways. They shared information with each other and with emergency services, and to support each other in responding to the flooding. NSW SES also connected often with the CRT both before and during the event to update community members. The Tweed Shire Council Disaster Resilience Officer was also in regular contact with CRT leaders during the event, which meant that the community's needs could be relayed immediately to members of the Local Emergency Management Committee.

Building relationships and emergency awareness over time, based on local risks and local knowledge, meant that the CRT became a trusted source of information during the event.


"I was managing BC (Byrrill Creek) neighbourhood check-ins, supply order and delivery, reporting to SES, Tweed Shire Council and Police, as well as out in the field, trekking supplies


and getting flood intel.... I had connection with the local SES at least once daily throughout the event to ensure all our needs were met.” Member of Byrrill Creek CRT, 2022.

BYRRILL CREEK COMMUNICATION DURING THE FLOODING EVENT

 **NSW SES**
Murwillumbah Unit
1 hour ago · 🌐

Byrrill Creek Road is still isolated due to flood water. Waterfall Bridge (Otties), Bottlebrush Bridge (The Hamlet) and Cedar Creek Causeway were all flowing strongly this afternoon. We'll be checking in with the Byrrill Creek Community Resilience Team early tomorrow morning to get an update.
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/31548321157>

 **Friends of Byrrill Creek** · Joined

 **NSW SES**
Murwillumbah Unit
14 minutes ago · 🌐

Here's the road closures that we have been told about by our Community Resilience Team members;

- * Nobbys Creek Road (Near Blackwood Road)
- * Byrrill Creek Road, all causeways and bridges after the Byrrill Creek Road Bridge flooded
- * Crabbes Creek Road, all causeways flooded

Drive safe, slow down and if it's flooded forget it.

Feedback included:

1. CRTs offer a valuable communication pathway between local Emergency Services contacts and CRT members in preparedness, response, and recovery periods.
2. Established CRT strategies kept communities informed and connected.
3. CRT members were trusted and known to both their community and to Emergency Services, and were thus able to provide trusted information, make decisions, and coordinate numerous initiatives to provide immediate relief and recovery services when their communities were cut off to outside help.
4. Preparedness actions minimised impact on individuals and property losses.
5. The inevitability of communities being cut off from outside support is now fully acknowledged by community members and agencies. A community lead support structure provides a centralised connection point for response agencies.

Feedback included a strong demand for additional training, particularly in grant writing, PFA and communication contingency planning

Key recommendation

- 1. This model could be implemented across communities in NSW susceptible to isolation following disasters.**

- 2. CRT leaders and community members pointed to wide scale communication failures as a particular challenge during this event. CRTs would be significantly strengthened by access to funded communications improvements.**

2. Community Managed Evacuation Centres

The Community Managed Evacuation Centre (CMEC) model is an additional model when an evacuation centre is needed by a community in instances where regular combat and welfare agencies cannot access the region. This model was developed jointly by Red Cross and Kyogle Council with the collaboration of emergency services and community organisations in Kyogle LGA.⁷

The Kyogle CMEC model was activated during the 2022 floods, with communities reporting better outcomes based on this community-led approach. Communities including Bonalbo, Kyogle, Mallanganee, Tabulam, Wiangaree and Woodenbong had participated in Red Cross evacuation centre training and had also been supported by Kyogle Council with practical resources such as PPE, generators, community hall upgrades and radios. The result was a core of community volunteers, ready to be activated in response, and ready to support other community members in the event that disaster welfare agencies could not arrive. In the 2022 floods, the CMEC model in Kyogle was supported through the early deployment of a Department of Communities and Justice Staff member who worked with the CMEC model for the duration until its transition to recovery.

Red Cross and Kyogle Council are strongly supportive of the CMEC initiative and its potential for expansion in communities across the Northern Rivers. Some lessons have also been learned from the first three years of the model. To strengthen the CEMCs, considerable effort is required within each community to maintain and build on the current volunteer base. Like any other program relying on volunteers, it needs regular maintenance and support to ensure that the volunteer pool remains active and engaged. Annual training and recruitment is fundamental to the model's ongoing success.

In Kyogle, Red Cross and Council are working together to recruit, train and maintain the volunteer base.

Key Recommendation

- 1. CMEC model is acknowledged and offered to communities who regularly face the prospect of protracted isolation.**

⁷ Northern Rivers Local Emergency Management Committee (2019) "Kyogle LGA: Community Managed Action Plan for an Emergency Evacuation Centre – A Supporting Plan to the Northern Rivers Local Emergency Management Plan".

- 2. Ongoing funding is required to meet the needs of each village community. In particular, Council identifies well-funded community hall maintenance programs as central to the model's success.**

Contact Details

Name Miriam McGregor

Address Level 3, 464 Kent Street, Sydney, NSW 2000

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

Website <https://www.redcross.org.au/>



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