

Supplementary
Submission
No 27a

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

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Partially
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Addendum to Submission to the Upper House Enquiry into the Response to Major Flooding in New South Wales in 2022

Firstly I'd like to thank the Committee for their invitation to myself to provide in-person evidence to the Enquiry on 31st May 2022 in Lismore NSW. I can confirm that to the best of my recollection, the transcript of my words at that hearing which was emailed to me on the 19th June 2022 is accurate.

Secondly I'd like to thank the committee for the opportunity to submit subsequent evidence by this submission.

The hearing on 31st May 2022 heard only a fraction of what I would like to say and inform the committee of, and I hope my initial submission gave further information. Since the hearing I've had further time for reflection and some subsequent dealings with persons pivotal in the response to the animal and agricultural component of the flooding disaster of 2022 in the Northern Rivers.

During the week commencing 23rd May 2022 I was contacted by the Chief of Staff of the NSW Minister for Agriculture Dugald Saunders. During our initial 60+ minute conversation I was asked to tone down my vocal criticisms of the Minister regarding his response to the floods, to which I politely declined but I did say I would appreciate an in-person meeting with the Minister and to keep an open dialogue with his office, of which both has happened and continues to this day. I met with Minister Saunders on the 2nd June 2022 in Lismore, along with Scott Hansen, Director General NSW DPI.

In that meeting and during subsequent dialogue, myself and colleague Dr Pip Johnston, made it very clear our opinion, with evidence, of the slow response by DPI to the floods, in particular the on-ground presence of DPI staff, the emergency hotline, the animal fodder roll out and the subsequent grants system.

I'll try to mention each individually with my recommendations.

1. Lismore's flood peak was on Monday 28th February. I was isolated for all of that day except very local properties to my home which I commenced some initial animal treatments and assessments. On Tuesday 1st March I was able to access Casino CBD and also commenced treating animals over in that region in the upper parts of the river system where water had already subsided from the previous day's peak. Very late on Tuesday night I was able to access South Lismore to begin treatment of some horses rescued from flood waters there. At that time the Lismore CBD was still flooded and not accessible. On Wednesday 2nd March I went again to Casino to continue conversations with _____ who was a local farmer/rural store employee/ LLS Director who was charged with sourcing hay. The first loads of hay arrived into Casino late on Wednesday 2nd March, for which I have photographic evidence of.
2. A hotline number was made live sometime on 2nd March for affected livestock owners to register for emergency hay/fodder supplies to be either dropped by helicopter to isolated properties or to be collected in person for livestock then accessible by road where waters had already receded. I began phoning that hotline to ask to speak to somebody within DPI who was either the Incident Controller or who was authorised to enact emergency personnel, supplies and equipment I then thought were needed here to minimise an animal welfare catastrophe and human mental health situation caused by a lack of or delayed response to the agricultural/animal component. All of my calls were ignored and not once was my request for immediate escalation of my calls nor my request for a call back from somebody within DPI in command were given. I was repeatedly told that I couldn't speak to the Incident Controller due to privacy rules and that my calls were not returned because obviously nobody within DPI deem they need to speak to me; these were the words of effect from multiple persons manning the hotline call centre.
3. In response to a failure of DPI to respond to my calls for help, I began reaching out to other persons who I believed may be able to help, including the NSW Chief Veterinary Officer, whom I later was told by Mr Hansen was deployed to work on potential emerging exotic disease incursions into Australia; the Chief Welfare Officer of NSW, who told me she believed based on my description of events to date, that she should immediately fly to the area and inspect for herself, she never arrived to my knowledge and I've not heard from her since that one phone call; the then CEO of Animal Welfare League Mark Slater, who was initially and remained an invaluable, selfless, caring and absolute wealth of support to me both professionally and personally; members of parliament from several political parties; and finally the media to draw national attention to the crisis we were in.
4. DPI did not have a significant visible presence on the ground until Sunday 6th March, some six days after the flood peak. In the meantime I had sourced via local contacts, two helicopters from Queensland, to commence aerial assessments and begin emergency aerial fodder drops to known locations based on those assessments. A good friend of mine _____ was instrumental in that initial work along with _____, who had expert local knowledge of the lower river areas, supported by two expert and professional helicopter pilots. It was clear from initial aerial assessments that we had a catastrophic event that was by then into its fifth day and still there were no aerial support from DPI or any government agency. This is highlighted by the fact that upon word of our helicopters being in the air, I had many requests from isolated people seeking human supplies as well as help for their animals. I was told that people isolated in

Woodburn were wading through floodwaters to get bottles of water and drinks from fridges in the convenience stores in that town, because nobody had delivered them human supplies. I was being asked for human hygiene products, female sanitary products, toothpaste etc. I have text messages to prove this fact.

5. A team of private veterinarians, animal rescue personnel and co-ordinators were eventually put together to participate in a mammoth roll out of veterinary services (assessments, triage, treatments, euthanasia where necessary) and animal rescues and fodder supplies that saved animals' lives, reduced prolonged animal suffering where indicated and brought hope to a community of people ignored by government agencies and politicians in our hour of need. I will make mention of one story that summarises my entire feelings of government failure. It is a story of a farmer, in his 70's who lives in Coraki. He has been there for about 30 years and has embraced many floods and prospered after such until this flood. In his hour of desperation, upon return by boat to his isolated farm, to learn he had lost about half his livestock, he made a sign of corrugated iron in the paddock that read "HAY". This bloke was in desperate need for help, he made a sign so somebody would see it from the sky and drop his cattle some hay. Our helicopter crew seen that sign, they landed to tell this farmer that help was on the way and that we were mobilising fodder drops and much other veterinary support. This was late in the week well after the flood peak and not one government helicopter was in the air doing anything of use. In my opinion and I believe the opinion's of most people, this was a pathetic response by government.

My recommendations I hope will address most of my criticisms and hopefully lead to change for future responses by governments and their departments/agencies to subsequent floods at least.

1. Direct, active, immediate and unfettered communication between private veterinarians and government agencies in real time during a disaster. This may involve a private veterinarian acting on their own such as I began, or perhaps via the Australian Veterinary Association liaising. Whatever the method, there must be absolutely no delays caused by bureaucracy and departmental chains of command. The local knowledge and experience on the ground must be fed directly and urgently to the persons in command who can enact actions and outcomes. Perhaps a permanent veterinary position within DPI directly responsible for and able to command actions and responses to events that involve animals and agricultural assets.
2. The relationship between private and public personnel must be streamlined and freed of bureaucratic processes and hindrances. Public personnel are too hamstrung by processes and procedures rather than just doing the job. I can only assume this is due to legal issues or concerns. They are generally too risk-averse and as such don't get jobs done in a timely manner in critical situations. This is where private persons, as in this flood event, stepped up and made things happen. Our limiting factor was money, of which some has since been reimbursed by relevant agencies however nowhere near covers our costs incurred. Perhaps moving forward a mechanism could exist where private persons operate in the field in a co-ordinated and safe manner like we did, and have better more comprehensive ways of cost recovery. In this way, governments divest their liability but compensate private persons so outcomes are assured.
3. Aerial assessments involving a skilled veterinarian, I believe a combination of a local private veterinarian and DPI veterinarian, to assess animal welfare and determine locations and stock requiring aerial fodder drops. This must occur such that livestock are offered hay within 72 hours of an event which is the requirements set out in the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act. Early provision of quality hay to stressed/displaced/shocked/injured livestock improves their chances of survival. It helps restore energy, helps with thermoregulation which is important given the fact stranded animals have been in cold water for extended times and have often either swum or floated for many kilometres in cold water.
4. Subsequent on the matter of aerial fodder drops, DPI must have legal rights to drop hay on any location/farm/road where it is deemed an animal requires hay. At the moment I am told that DPI don't have legal authority to drop hay without invitation by the landowner. This must change for several reasons. In large scale flood disasters like we experienced, many farmers were evacuated from their farms. Hundreds of cattle we estimate were displaced onto other farms different from their original farm. Many cattle were isolated in areas not visible by anybody except from the air. Many cattle were isolated on roads, on crown lands, on buildings. Nobody would register those cattle for fodder drops if not seen by surveillance in the air. Aerial assessments are needed to commence within 24 hours of a flood, to prioritise fodder drops, assess the scale of needs, and to quantify the response needed. Once an animal is deemed in need of fodder then an aerial drop is logged and enacted. Further to this, the criteria used to deem an animal in need of fodder must always err on the side of caution towards fodder being dropped rather than not. During the second flood event in our region I was asked to accompany DPI staff in aerial assessments for that event and I witnessed too many assessments made that excluded cattle for fodder drops because of too many reasons and this was done not even by a veterinarian in the air. A veterinarian skilled in livestock medicine must be the person in charge of aerial animal assessments and in my opinion that assessment should favour an aerial fodder drop in any circumstance of debate or equivocal criteria. During the big flood event when we used private helicopters and I was directly involved in the initial assessments, I used a criteria that was based on the following: an aerial fodder drop was needed for any animal found isolated and where that animal would not likely be accessible by road within the mandatory 72 hours in line with Animal Cruelty legislation. Where an animal was deemed to be likely accessible by road then they were marked for follow up and re-assessment. Any cases in question were marked for aerial fodder drops.
5. Stock destruction by skilled persons under guidance of skilled veterinarians where animal welfare is priority. I recommend a similar approach used by me in the initial veterinary response which was as follows: any animal which had obvious injuries not likely or possible to be treated successfully should be urgently euthanased (eg limb fractures, severe body wounds such as open body cavities); any animal in immediate stress which is unable to be remedied in a timely safe manner; any animal whose injuries although treatable, are severe enough that if a veterinarian can't access that animal for

timely treatment within 24 hours; and finally the err of decision making was always on the side of preservation of life and animal welfare where possible so that as many animals as possible could be returned to their owners.

6. Aerial asset support. I am told that the Director General of DPI requested helicopters earlier than when they arrived in Casino after flood #1. Mr Hansen told me he does not have direct authority to task a helicopter to an event. This must change such that the DG of DPI who is in charge of animal and agricultural assets in this state, must be able to task a helicopter when deemed needed based on information I've listed previously. The current chain of command via SES and the State Air Command is primitive, arduous, and leaves open to poor decision-making by persons not skilled in and uninformed of, the situation in question. Again there must be elimination of bureaucracy and the numbers of people needed to make a decision. Perhaps there needs to be legislative protections for departmental staff so they fear less for the consequences of decisions they make because I believe this would allow more rapid decisions based on urgent needs and when early decisions are made, even if they need modifications there is usually time to allow this. When poor decisions are made late, there is no time left to remedy.
7. Flood Grants. I actually prefer to call these cost recoveries or reimbursements as that's what they actually are. These are much too arduous, they require far too much documents be produced to prove a claim, and they err on the side of elimination rather than approval which can be audited after the fact by more audits and pay-backs if deemed fraudulent or false. The current system of rigorous scrutiny and necessity of so many layers of proof of a claim delay payments and ultimately wear people down to the point they give up. I know many cases of businesses and primary producers who have been delayed or even rejected despite obvious photographic evidence of their property under water. The grants should be immediately open to all businesses/primary producers upon application and listing of items needed for cost recovery. Rapid payments would give people choice in their urgent needs, give them hope to recover and provide immediate assistance in immediate costs incurred because of the event. The grants should also be open to use for building resilience to future floods by way of purchase of equipment to enable a person to be more prepared for future events which in turn would perhaps reduce that person's need for future grants to repair the same damage of previous floods. An example is a primary producer using money to build a shed or higher ground as a safe haven for livestock. If you provide a farmer with say \$50000, they'll very often match that or better it to make themselves more resilient to future events. Farmers adapt quickly and they hate being caught twice. In the current format, whilst being drastically under-funded in the first place, the grants are not immediately available when people need them, because the time taken to provide the material to prove a claim is not on the person's mind while they are cleaning their flooded property or house or burying dead cattle or piling up flood debris washed onto their farms so they can restore access.

I have a desire to continue my efforts to lobby for drastic change to how governments and their agencies respond to future natural weather events. I am both fortunate and privileged to have been involved in the veterinary and human response to the floods in my community, whilst seeing some of the saddest, heart breaking and cruel cases of animal suffering and human despair.

There must be considerable change in the processes, thinking, and actions by ministers, agencies and their staff so that when the community is in their hour of need, help is rapid and help is what people have asked for, not what a person in Sydney thinks is needed for that person.

The flood of February/March 2022 was an unprecedented event to anybody alive today, with flood peaks some 15-25% higher than ever recorded and it caught many people, if not everybody, under-prepared for such a flood. It is for this reason of extraordinary peaks and flows that the response to the event by government should have likewise extraordinary but unfortunately to date it has been and remains very underwhelming, even for a normal major flood. I am of the belief that agencies did not understand nor believe the scale of devastation and losses we were incurring and this again demonstrates my point of local knowledge driving outcomes and decisions.

I thank the Enquiry's committee once again and look forward to its recommendations which I hope will be the start of the changes needed to force a much more cohesive and rapid effective response to any community who endures such a catastrophic event such as the floods of the Northern Rivers of 2022.

Regards

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