



10 March 2011

Queensland Floods Commission of Inquiry
PO Box 1738
BRISBANE QLD 4001

Submission to the Queensland Floods Commission of Inquiry

This submission addresses matters relating to the major flooding event that occurred on Tuesday 11 January 2011 in the catchments of the Pine and Caboolture Rivers and other creeks and streams within in the Moreton Bay Regional Council area.

This submission addresses matters that fall within the scope of the Terms of Reference set out in *Commissions of Inquiry Order (No.1) 2011*, specifically:

- a) *the preparation and planning by federal, state and local governments; emergency services and the community for the 2010/2011 floods in Queensland,*
- c) *all aspects of the response to the 2010/2011 flood events, particularly measures taken to inform the community and measures to protect life and private and public property, including*
 - *immediate management, response and recovery*
 - *resourcing, overall coordination and deployment of personnel and equipment*
 - *adequacy of equipment and communications systems; and*
 - *the adequacy of the community's response.*

It is submitted that the Queensland Floods Commission of Inquiry should undertake, as part of its inquiry into the floods, an examination the following matters:

- The adequacy of the preparedness of the Moreton Bay Regional Council to respond to the major flooding event that occurred on 11 January 2011.
- The response and immediate management of the Moreton Bay Regional Council to the major flooding event that occurred on 11 January 2011, in particular the measures taken by the Moreton Bay Regional Council to inform and provide leadership to its community before, during and after the major flood event.

Background

The headwaters of the Pine and Caboolture Rivers are the eastern slopes of the D'Aguiar Range which is located between 20 and 30 kilometres in a straight line to the west of the major urban areas located between Caboolture and Strathpine. The consequence is that flooding events in these catchments that impact major urban communities occur over a matter of hours rather than over a period of days.

In this respect, the flooding that occurs in the Pine and Caboolture Rivers is very similar to the flooding that occurs in the Noosa, Maroochy, Mooloolah and Tweed River catchments

and is in contrast to the Brisbane, Bremer, Fitzroy and Mary River catchments where larger catchments provide communities with more time to prepare and respond to a flood. It is not an unusual situation. (The Pine and Caboolture River catchments are also analogous to that of Myall Creek which flooded the town of Dalby twice in recent months as a consequence of heavy rain falling in the Bunya Mountains, some 30 kilometres to the north of Dalby.)

That flood events in the Pine and Caboolture River catchments happen very quickly is a matter of fact that is widely understood as floods of this nature have occurred regularly in these catchments in the past and many events have been well documented since white-settlement occurred in the mid-nineteenth century.

Where the nature of river and stream catchments result in flooding events occurring over a matter of hours rather over a period of days the ability for local government and emergency services to respond quickly is critical. It should be obvious in these circumstances that preparation for flooding should involve planning for a flood response well before the event occurs and putting measures in place to ensure the rapid and effective dissemination of information to the public, including providing some information well before the flood season. To be at all effective the response to a flood must run like clockwork as time in such events is clearly always of the essence.

The flood event of 12 January 2011

Very heavy rain fell in the already wet catchments of the Pine and Caboolture Rivers on 11 January 2011 with heavy rain commencing in the early hours of the morning and continuing to fall through until the early afternoon when it rapidly eased. As would be expected in such a short catchment a major flood impacted a large number of urban communities across the region beginning in the late-morning and continuing through until the evening.

By the time a major flood impacted the communities of Caboolture, Morayfield, Burpengary, Petrie, Lawnton and Strathpine and cut road and rail connections late on the morning of 11 January 2011, very heavy rain had been falling in the catchment for about six hours. Given the presence of a number automatic rainfall stations and stream gauges in the upper catchments of the Pine and Caboolture Rivers (and the public availability of this information on the Bureau of Meteorology website) it would have been expected that a full-scale flood response, including the dissemination of information on evacuations to potentially affected residents, would have been delivered by the council by no later than mid-morning.

The response of the Moreton Bay Regional Council to the flood event

The response of the Moreton Bay Regional Council to the flood event of 11 January 2011 was in fact an abject failure. No emergency information whatsoever was given to residents by council in the in the hours leading up to the flood and when Emergency Management Queensland released an urgent evacuation message by SMS around 11:20am, efforts by panicked residents to garner any information from council were met with a stunned response from council call centre officers that they knew nothing of any evacuations.

The residents of these communities (and those people who were in the area on the day of the flood) quite rightly feel they were effectively abandoned by the Moreton Bay Regional Council at a time of crisis. Facing fast rising waters the thousands of people caught in this flood were given no information on what areas would flood, how high the water would climb, where to go to get help or sandbags to protect their properties and most importantly where to go to evacuate and how to get there safely. Residents and business people from Elimbah to Strathpine were left to fend for themselves in the flood and it is testament to their collective common sense and more than a modicum of good luck that no lives were lost.

In contrast to what occurred across Queensland over the summer of 2010/11, residents and business owners did not see or hear the elected representatives or senior council officers from Moreton Bay Regional Council on television and radio providing them with information, directions and reassurance, before, during or after the flood on 11 January 2011.

That the flood in the Pine and Caboolture River catchments occurred one day after tragic flash flooding in Toowoomba and the Lockyer Valley certainly created the potential for panic amongst residents. It also means that the Moreton Bay Regional Council should have been on a heightened sense of alert for the risk of flooding in its own area and if anything better placed to respond to a flood. The facts however demonstrate that it was not.

Why the Commission of Inquiry should examine the response of council to the flood

Whilst no lives were lost in the major flood in the Pine and Caboolture River catchments on 11 January 2011 and property losses were much less than those experienced in Brisbane and Ipswich on the days following, it is submitted that the Commission should devote some time to an examination of the response of the Moreton Bay Regional Council to the flooding event for the following reasons:

- It represents what must be the most serious and far-reaching failure of an emergency response by a local government to the flooding events in Queensland over the 2010/11 summer. It stands in stark contrast to the response of councils across the state including many much smaller western and northern Queensland councils that in contrast did an outstanding job of informing and reassuring their residents at a time of crisis.
- It will provide valuable lessons simply because it was so badly mishandled by the council on the day due to a failure by council to be prepared adequately for an emergency or as a result of a total breakdown in its systems and its response on the day of the flood.
- The Moreton Bay Regional Council is the third largest local government in Australia (only Brisbane and Gold Coast are larger) and so should have had the capacity to respond to the major flood event. If any council was prepared it should have been; it however failed to respond in any effective manner.
- The major flood event in the Pine and Caboolture River catchments occurred during business hours on a normal business day when the council's offices and depots would have been fully staffed and when the council's capacity to respond would be expected to be at its highest. In this sense the flood could not have come at a better time to enable an effective response by council but instead it failed to respond effectively.
- The major flooding event in the Pine and Caboolture River catchments on 11 January 2011 was certainly not unprecedented and in fact followed the pattern of flooding that has always happened in this catchment and would be expected to occur again. The major flood that occurred over a matter of hours should have been the very flood event the Moreton Bay Regional Council had planned for and so measures to facilitate a rapid and effective response should have been in place well before 11 January 2011.
- The residents and the owners and operators of businesses that were impacted by the floods in the Pine and Caboolture River catchments deserve real answers as to why, in stark contrast to other communities across Queensland, they were effectively abandoned by their council to the floodwaters on 11 January 2011.

Matters the Commission of Inquiry should examine

It is submitted that the Commission of Inquiry should examine the following matters relating to the response of the Moreton Bay Regional Council to the major flood event in the Pine and Caboolture River catchments on 11 January 2011:

- the existence of and/or the adequacy of emergency response planning for a major flood event in the catchments of the Pine and Caboolture Rivers and other waterways by the Moreton Bay Regional Council before the flood event of 11 January 2011
- if emergency response planning for a major flood event did not exist or if it did exist it was inadequate, what are the reasons for this state of affairs in what is the third largest local government in the nation
- to what extent was a failure to properly plan for a major flooding event the cause of the failure of the Moreton Bay Regional Council to communicate critical emergency information to residents and business operators before, during and after the major flood event on 11 January 2011
- what was the council's actual emergency response to the major flooding event over the whole 24 hour period from midnight to midnight on 11 January 2011 and how did this measure up against its emergency response planning and any accepted standards
- at what time on 11 January 2011 was it determined to set up an operations room at council to coordinate the council's response to the emerging major flooding event, at what time was this facility operational and at what time did it issue emergency information to its call centre staff and alert the media of the flood emergency and provide emergency information to the media for communication to the public
- how was the response of the Moreton Bay Regional Council to the major flood event coordinated with the responses of other emergency services and what were the critical times effective communication and coordination was established with other emergency services on 11 January 2011
- to what extent was a failure to respond on to the flood emergency on the day the cause of the failure of the Moreton Bay Regional Council to communicate critical emergency information to residents and business operators before, during and after the major flood event on 11 January 2011
- as the Mayor, Allan Sutherland, was on Moreton Island on his annual leave on the day of the floods and did not return from there until 12 January 2011 was the Deputy Mayor, Greg Chippendale, acting as Mayor on the day of the flood, 11 January 2011
- why didn't the Deputy Mayor, Greg Chippendale, or another Councillor step up and take charge in the Mayor's absence on the day of the floods and provide the community with emergency information and reassurance before, during and after the major flood event as occurred in local governments across Queensland over the summer
- what lessons have been learned by the Moreton Bay Regional Council about its level of emergency management planning and its response to the actual flood on the day since the major flood event on 11 January 2011.

The failure of the Moreton Bay Regional Council's emergency response to the major flood event in the Pine and Caboolture River catchments on 11 January 2011 to inform and reassure its community is a matter that has rather curiously received no media attention outside of the local community press. A quick web search will easily confirm this to be the case.

It also stands in stark contrast to the otherwise exemplary response of local governments, small and large across the length and breadth of Queensland, to what have been the most serious floods to impact their communities in a generation, if not in living memory.

While it is appreciated there are many other impacts of the flooding across Queensland that deserve the attention of the Commission of Inquiry, it is submitted that the absence of an effective response by a large urban local government to an entirely predictable flood event where the event occurred during the normal business hours of the local government should be subject to the scrutiny of the commission, if only to learn so that it does not happen again.

Yours sincerely

A solid black rectangular box redacting the signature of P Smith.

P Smith