

Queensland Flood Commission of Inquiry
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Balonne Shire Council
Submission to Queensland Floods Commission of Inquiry

10 March 2011
66.9 (336126)

Introduction

The Shire of Balonne is located in Queensland on the New South Wales border some 500 kilometres from the east coast of Australia and has an area of 31,119 square kilometres. A region of surprising diversity and unique attractions, the Balonne Shire is rich in native bird and animal life, wide open spaces, beautiful waterways, and many historic buildings.

Rural industry has created and is supported by the towns of Bollon, Dirranbandi, Hebel, Mungindi, St George and Thallon. Small localities such as Alton, Boolba and Nindigully are places of historic significance and important meeting places for the rural communities and travelling public they serve.

The development of the Queensland Floods Commission of Inquiry is timely as Balonne Shire was significantly impacted in both the March 2010 and January 2011 flood events. The nature of our topography and waterway systems resulted in significant overland flooding as a consequence.

We have prepared the following submission to the Queensland Floods Commission of Inquiry into an examination of the chain of events leading to the floods, all aspects of the response and the subsequent aftermath of the 2010-11 flood events. As per the Terms of Reference, we understand that this inquiry will consider:

1. the preparation and planning by federal, state and local governments; emergency services and the community for the 2010/2011 floods in Queensland,
2. the performance of private insurers in meeting their claims responsibilities,
3. 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
 - a. immediate management, response and recovery
 - b. resourcing, overall coordination and deployment of personnel and equipment
 - c. adequacy of equipment and communications systems; and
 - d. the adequacy of the community's response.
4. the measures to manage the supply of essential services such as power, water and communications during the 2010/2011 flood events,
5. adequacy of forecasts and early warning systems particularly as they related to the flooding events in Toowoomba, and the Lockyer and Brisbane Valleys,
6. implementation of the systems operation plans for dams across the state and in particular the Wivenhoe and Somerset release strategy and an assessment of compliance with, and the suitability of the operational procedures relating to flood mitigation and dam safety
7. all aspects of land use planning through local and regional planning systems to minimise infrastructure and property impacts from floods,
8. in undertaking its inquiries, the Commission is required to:
 - a. take into account the regional and geographic differences across affected communities; and
 - b. seek public submissions and hold public hearings in affected communities.

Response to Terms of Reference

We have prepared our submission in response to the relevant Terms of Reference, in particular the following:

1. Preparation and planning by federal, state and local governments; emergency services and the community
2. Private insurers and their responsibilities
3. The response to the 2010/2011 flood events, particularly measures taken to inform the community and protect life, private and public property
4. Measures to manage the supply of essential services
5. Adequacy of forecasts and early warning systems
6. Implementation of the systems operation plans for
7. Land use planning

1. Preparation and planning by federal, state and local governments; emergency services and the community

Prior to the March 2010 flood event, there was acceptable preparation and planning for natural disaster events by State and Local Governments. Prior to the January 2011 flood event, Council had reviewed and updated the Disaster Management Plan so there was an increased level of preparation and planning for the next event.

Council is in the process of again reviewing and updating the Disaster Management Plan following the January 2011 flood event. Particular attention will be given to the location of evacuation centres, muster points, community evaluation indicators relevant to the disaster event and evacuation routes.

Council is also in the process of updating its Natural Disaster Risk Management Study.

It is strongly recommended that flood mitigation measures be developed for existing communities adjacent to a waterway. Strategies should include construction and augmentation of appropriately placed levees to protect the communities.

Preparation – During the March 2010 flood event, Balonne Shire Council engaged the services of Gentol, a joint initiative of V-TOL Aerospace Pty Ltd and Geogenx Pty Ltd to provide a rapid approach to the capture, processing, analysis and delivery of Hi-Resolution Multi-Spectral imagery (video/still) and other UAV and UGS derived information. The data provided the LDMG with essential information instrumental in making decisions to evacuate health care facilities and develop flood response strategies. This data again proved invaluable during the 2011 flood event.

2. Private insurers and their responsibilities

Following the floods of 2010 and 2011, the insurance industry did not appear to be actively forthcoming in attending to the needs of their clients. We must acknowledge that there are notable exceptions to the previous comment; however, performance was generally not satisfactory.

There has been a range of issues, such as:

- Definitions of storm water and floods not well defined in insurance documents.

- Residents and businesses unable to obtain insurance for natural disaster events.
- Private levees constructed in good faith to protect property comprising insurance cover.

An increased level of involvement, transparency and communication would benefit the insurance industry and communities.

3. The response to the 2010/2011 flood events, particularly measures taken to inform the community and protect life, private and public property

Information communicated to the Balonne Shire community during the 2010 and 2011 floods was a priority of the Balonne Shire Council and Local Disaster Management Group (LDMG). A conscious and deliberate effort was made to keep the community informed using a range of communication tools, such as:

- Community notice boards
- Information updates after every LDMG meeting
- Council web site
- Council Facebook page
- Roadway updates as information was received
- Flyers delivered to each premises where practical
- Factsheets on event preparation and response, health, food and water safety
- Radio

ABC Radio Toowoomba was extremely accommodating in communicating flood updates and community service announcements, which provided essential flood information to the Balonne Shire communities.

An initiative of Emergency Management Queensland in collaboration with Telstra was the delivery of an emergency message to mobiles in a defined geographic area, which proved to be a successful communication tool during the March 2010 flood event.

The Queensland Health, Toowoomba based Population Health Unit is to be acknowledged for the provision of advice and essential factsheets on a range of public and environmental health matters.

Responsibility for communication activities is best placed with the agency who would respond to a major flood event. This would be at the State level the Department of Emergency Services and at the local level the relevant local government. A strategic goal of the communication activities is to enhance community education, flood awareness and preparation.

While the support and assistance of State, Federal agencies and military is enthusiastically acknowledged, special thanks must be given to the Emergency Management Queensland team based in Toowoomba and the Balonne Shire SES.

4. Measures to manage the supply of essential services

Lessons learned in the March 2010 flood event proved invaluable in planning and implementing resupply of affected communities. Ongoing disaster management training exercises should consider resupply of essential services as an important component in disaster event response.

An incident occurred during the January 2011 flood event worth mention. The situation involved an isolated community with only one grocery store for essential goods who allowed

residents to pre-book goods supplied through the emergency resupply system. When resupplied goods were received, they were immediately provided to those who had pre-booked a sale. This had the effect of not equitably meeting the needs of the remaining community for essential goods.

Items defined as 'essential services' should be reviewed as clarification may be required.

Consideration should be given in resupply operations to including mail and other postal services such as banking to isolated communities. Receipt of mail can help assist isolated communities cope with the situation they face, particularly if there is prolonged period of isolation.

5. Adequacy of forecasts and early warning systems

While timing of flood peaks was predicted accurately the predicted heights were less precise.

One incident lead to local confusion when the volume of water quoted by DERM and BOM web sites at a particular gauging station varied by a third. This had a material impact on the effects on private and public infrastructure. The information was corrected after contacting the agencies. The solution to this problem would be more accurate gauging stations.

6. Implementation of the systems operation plans for dams

It is our view the staff member representing Sunwater was an invaluable member of the LDMG.

The interaction and communication with the Beardmore Dam personnel and the LDMG provided a level of comfort and security and was greatly appreciated. The LDMG was kept constantly informed on the dam operations, capacity levels, discharge volumes and collectively addressed information provided to the community.

7. Land use planning

Council's current planning scheme has limited land use planning provisions relating to natural disaster events such as flood level overlays. Council is committed to commencing preparation of a new planning scheme under the *Sustainable Planning Act 2009* in the 2011-2012 financial year.

The inclusion of flood information in planning schemes is appropriate, but is a task of major proportions and cost. The technical content of the individual community overlay and the process for its inclusion in a council's planning scheme should be undertaken as a single task by the State Government.

Serious consideration should be given to the Minister's powers to introduce these planning scheme amendments without observing the process that is normally applicable. It would seem counter-productive for the introduction of this important information and development control into planning schemes for the protection of the community at large to be delayed by an appeals process.

Control of developments outside existing flood prone areas but with the potential to adversely impact flood prone land should reside with local government through their existing development approvals process. The adequacy of these processes and the capacity for developer challenge may require review.

One outcome of a flood study is to identify areas with existing houses subject to flooding and development of appropriate strategies to protect lives and preserve property. In addition, there

are known areas in Balonne Shire vulnerable to flooding. One flood proofing measure is to raise houses to an appropriate level, which will require targeted action by State and Local Government.

There is significant community concern in the Balonne Shire over the development of the Balonne River Flood Plain below St George. Development has taken place over a period of time under a range of regulatory controls and there is concern that while all current development is lawful there is the possibility the combined effect may be to significantly increase the impact of a flood event on particular properties. A hydrological survey of the area would address public concern, identify future flooding threats and assist in regulating future development. The project is beyond the means of the Balonne Shire and as the regulation of development of the flood plain is largely a State responsibility it is suggested such a study should be substantially funded by the State.

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