

**Summary of
Strengths, Issues & Suggestions from
Farming Communities**

Re
Preparedness, Response and Recovery
before, during and after
Flood Events on the North Coast

**Compiled from data collected at
various community / farmer forums during 2013.**



Macleay River in flood February 2013

Overview

This document summarises feedback from several community / farmer / stakeholder forums convened by NSW DPI and NSW SES during 2013. The contents have been sorted under the following headings

- 1. Most Common Themes**
- 2. Strengths**
- 3. Issues and Concerns**
- 4. Suggestions**
 - **For government**
 - **For industry stakeholders**
 - **For SES / other local agencies**
 - **For Farmers and Community**

Where sensible to do so (parts 2, 3 and 4) the data under each heading has been further sorted under the following headings reflecting (mainly) the phases before during and after a flood event.

Preparedness

Response

Recovery

General

Sub-headings cluster the material around particular topics or themes. All sub-headings in each section are in alphabetical order and do not necessarily reflect priority.

It is anticipated that this information may be useful for stakeholders interested in building resilience on farms and in farming industries and communities in the following ways:

- to assist local agencies planning and providing services related to flood events to understand the experience and viewpoints of local farmers
- for government planners and policymakers to prioritise, advocate, plan, budget and decide based on an awareness of local issues, concerns and suggestions
- as a basis for discussion and action in local industry and community groups
- to assist farmers themselves to plan, taking account of the risks of flood events

1. Most Common Themes

Animal welfare

- Feeding, milking and transporting cows
- Preventing and/or treating disease or illness
- Planning ahead, investing in infrastructure, preparing

Business health

- Cash flows, financial planning, productivity, confidence
- Capital and investment in farm infrastructure to mitigate impacts
- Costs and prices of product
- Contracts with processors
- Insurance

Farmer / Community education and preparedness

- Education about planning, preparation, warnings and evacuation orders, recovery issues and services available
- Providing industry specific tools for planning, mapping and preparation
- Sharing local information, experience and knowledge
- Local/individual triggers for uplift or evacuation
- Targeting awareness and knowledge of new and younger residents
- Attracting people to community education events about preparing for floods
- Community understanding of importance of viable local farms

Government financial support, investment and grants

- Damage assessment tools - matching impacts and needs
- Match contributions to works
- Taxation
- Collecting and collating data
- Advocacy for local dairy industry
- Addressing local and farm infrastructure needs
- Timing of applications
- Timeframes to complete Works
- Duration of financial support

Health and well-being of people

- Physical and mental health of farmers and families
- Disposing of dead livestock
- Personal management and resilience
- Access to services

Industry voice

- building relationships and influence
- increasing community understanding and support
- obtaining appropriate priority services, funding, community infrastructure and support

Information and communication

- Access to local flood management plans
- Printed and on-line resources (e.g. guidelines and tips)
- Utilising local information and experience
- Key players: The Bureau of Meteorology (BOM), Councils, SES, DPI/LLS
- Important channels: SMS messages, websites, doorknocks, live to air local radio updates and community/farmer meetings and forums
- Priority information: river height updates at critical locations, weather / flood forecasts, flood warnings, evacuation orders, intended road closures and current or emerging hazards.
- Accessing local information gathered from flood damage assessments
- Communicating and following through on results of forums

Infrastructure

- Sealing of important road/s
- Maintenance of levees, drains and flood gates
- Maintenance of gauges and manual backup
- Damming the river
- Power outages, generators, telephones, Internet
- Mobile phone services
- Evacuation centres – purpose built or adapted

Safety and security

- Keeping sightseers out of hazardous areas
- Access to essential services
- Medical supplies and services
- Educating people about risks and hazards
- Evacuation centres

Transport and access to properties

- Moving cows, fodder, product and people
- Permission to go in and out of properties (e.g. when moving stock)
- Managing road closures, load limits and repairs
- Communicating intended changes

Warnings and evacuation orders

- How decisions are made – quality of data, triggers and timeliness
- How they are communicated (message, media channel)
- Knowing what they mean
- Compliance / policing

Working together

- Actively supporting local agencies, e.g. SES, involvement and volunteering
- Cooperating to get tasks done e.g. sandbagging, clearing waterways
- Community self-reliance - involvement of all in the community
- Farmers helping each other before during and after a flood
- Identifying and supporting vulnerable persons
- Collaboration across all agencies
- Clear roles, responsibilities and contacts
- Ongoing forums for support, action and coordination

2. Strengths

At times the aspects listed below may act as strengths; however this is variable depending on the situation and location.

Preparedness

Resources

- Printed and on-line guidelines and tips e.g. SES Flood Book

Infrastructure

- Some excellent Catchment Management Authority (CMA) projects were undertaken to remediate problem drains, by making them wider and shallower, which allowed better traffic in the paddock.

Response

Information and communication

- The Bureau of Meteorology (BOM) forecasts
- BOM data from gauges about river heights
- some Councils' text messages
 - regular updates
 - information about road closures / access to certain areas
- some Councils' Facebook sites provide a loss of useful information
- some local radio broadcasts - providing continual updates
- SES live to air radio broadcasts are appreciated

Medical

- Medical resupply is effective e.g. insulin to diabetic resident in home

SES response

- where it occurred the door knock was seen as a good way to get information and evacuation orders to people
- sandbag facility where relevant – people pitching in
- SES presence for essential rescue operations has been the to the excellent

Warnings

- Phone warnings were helpful when connections were able to be made
- Evacuation order distributed through door knock and flyer gives the community a clear signal of the gravity of the situation

3. Issues and Concerns

Prevention and Preparedness

Business Health:

- limited cash on hand that can be used to buy emergency feed supplies
- limited funds to invest in preparedness infrastructure e.g. storage for feed

Information, education and awareness

- people, especially those new to the area:
 - not identifying their own local triggers
 - not anticipating flood behaviour (noting that all floods are different) and
 - not planning when to evacuate
- due to a lack of information and awareness, people newer to the area seemed more likely to be slow in response and then take unnecessary risks e.g. driving across flooded roadways
- SES Flood publications are not as user-friendly as they could be
- Council's Flood Management Plan is not accessible on web-site (for at least one Council)

Infrastructure

- drains and waterways that are cluttered with debris
- Council no longer maintains drains and some bridges. This causes problems. When funds are available, works are not prioritized properly and is haphazard. NSW Public Works has the money to fix things, but local government needs to apply for it.
- flood flaps on flood gates are not maintained – debris build up making them inoperable.
- concerns about maintenance of levee bank in some areas. Sewerage?
- alternative roadways are sometimes unsealed, in poor condition and have load limits

Insurance

- insurance premiums are really expensive (\$10,000 plus) and it's hard to get a decent policy
- Some companies refuse to ensure

Response

Access to utilities and services

- essential services e.g. hospitals, doctors and airports in the town can become inaccessible in a major flood
- lengthy power outages create major pressures on a farms and considerable stress is likely timeframes for restoration of power are unknown
- Phones out in a black-out

Animal Welfare

- not able to obtain permission to move cattle
- lost feed on farm and inability to quickly access and transport emergency fodder supplies
- not having enough supplementary feed on hand to be self-sufficient for 7 days or more, and not being able to source more before a flood hits (e.g. grain & conserved fodder)
- blackouts that stop milking
- low flying Helicopters spooking stock

Community response

- many people do not comply with the evacuation orders
- sightseers came into areas after orders have been issued
- People newer to the area with no flood experience not being prepared and/or making poor decisions such as driving into flood waters
- People not evacuating when they should – stretches SES resources further than necessary
- People not taking preparatory action early enough

Family Health:

- stress and the need to work excessive hours in a disaster
- ageing farmers who can't work as hard as they would like
- family roles and responsibilities in a disaster
- Insufficient follow up during and after the event to check that everyone is OK, make referrals etc

Flood gate operation

- In general not closed and opened in time e.g. Belmore / Kinchela not closed early enough

Information and communication

- When contacting the SES the call is switched through to Wollongong and the person you are talking to does not know the location or the issues and cannot answer questions
- SES Contacts for email or sms have not been easily accessible on the website
- Information provided to radio stations not always up-dated as often as needed
 - Frequent bulletins on river heights and rainfall needed to allow people to make their own decisions
- No flood level predictions for certain areas e.g. Smithtown
- BOM not updating its website continually so it is hard to know whether or not information is up-to-date
- Reliability and timeliness of information from upstream- often the upper reaches of streams aren't monitored or monitors not maintained/repaired.
- automatic gauges and computer modelling do not always give the full picture – local data is often not obtained or taken into account
- having to rely on the internet for timely information when there is a blackout
- reception of local radio in some areas not consistent
- some people not receiving SMS messages re road closures.
- concerns about the loss of the DPI staff who provided regular updates by way of phone calls & bulk text messages
- potential duplication between agencies
- a lot of the communication about action being taken is not timely enough to allow farmers to plan

Milk quality & product handling

- sometimes there is enough generator power to milk cows, but not to cool the milk.
- conflict between factory requirements for pick up and Food Authority rules

- inconsistent responses e.g. A bad experience in the past where the Food Authority said that milk could be collected after a couple of days storage but the processor refused and wouldn't pay for it
- issues with milk companies that order milk to be dumped but do not compensate the farmer.
- dumped milk payment (if any) by companies dairy is, for example Norco will pay for dumped milk if the tanker can't get through to collect it, but it won't pay if it is not cool. Insurance for dumped milk is a real grey area.

River gauges

- Stream gauges that do not work correctly
- gauges become damaged – need backups – previously had manual gauges as well but these are no longer in place
- the absence of gauges at critical points e.g. Smithtown / Gladstone

Road closures

- Roads are often closed too early and without prior timely communication to farmers. This can leave cattle trucks and supply trucks stranded.

Sandbagging

- sometimes not as well organised as it could have been:
 - no one in charge coordinating effort
 - the sandbag loader was not organised straight away
 - some bags were rotten
 - cold drinks could have been provided for workers

Transport and access to own property

- Road closures impacting on stock and tanker movements - lack of available trucks when they get cut off
- SES stopping people from moving livestock out
- no tracking of who has gone out or who has come back in
- police not having local knowledge and stopping people unnecessarily
- sightseers getting in the way of cattle trucks
- after moving cattle, some farmers not allowed to go back to their properties, with council and police saying "you'll be fined"

Warnings and alerts

- Centralised control systems that do not always acknowledge local intelligence in a timely manner (Local SES know there is a problem, but BOM won't call a flood warning)
- SES needs to take into account local knowledge and warnings from local people not just waiting for BOM to announce events /developments.
- Often Local SES have the information, but they are not allowed to give it out until it gets signed off and made official in head office. Farmers would prefer to be warned if there is any chance of a flood.
- Loss of local DPI person who used to send out SMS warnings. This system needs to be taken up by someone in LLS or on the LEMC
- SES door knock sometimes started after some people had already become isolated

- Automated evacuation alert (phone warnings) tended to panic some people, especially older people or people newer to the area and some people didn't receive them
- Late flood warning – disappointed with the message and no follow up
 - At present there is no separate warning system for the Lower Macleay and all information depends on Kempsey data
- Some people did not receive sms broadcast messages during the flood
 - Afterwards, on contacting SES and Council no-one seemed able to rectify the problem

Working together

- farmers waste time calling the wrong people for help

Recovery

Animal Welfare

- rapid diet changes leading to metabolic problems
- confined stock more prone to disease
- roles in the management of donated fodder are not clear

Business health:

- Cumulative impact of a series of floods without full recovery before the next one.

Community response

- the wider community doesn't always recognise that the benefits from Disaster funding flow to local shops and contractors in the recovery period. This helps sustain more than the farmers.

Community support and services

- mental health problems can go unrecognised
- are psych services relevant and appropriate?

Government support and grants

- some feel they need to 'cry poor' so that their neighbour doesn't miss out on grants that they may desperately need.
- the processes surrounding damage assessment are problematic.
 - Old LHPA zones (half mid-coast, half North coast) in the subtropical region of NSW make assessment tricky. (more related to drought). Floods need to be assessed on an industry and Local Government Area basis.
 - Ongoing need for individual farm assessment. The surveys for damage must continue to be done.
- Concern that DPI has stepped away from collecting data, shifting it on to others who are already stretched in a flood crisis. Local people are needed to collect accurate local data
- concerns that government support/grants may be reduced or disappear altogether

Livestock movements and access to own property

- Continued road closures and pending repairs impacting on stock and tanker movements
- Delays inspecting and re-opening roads after a flood

Public perception

- Public perception that farmers get money that they don't always need. Blanket declarations can be a problem.
- Don't want to come across as a whinging farmer when the media calls, but also don't want to say that everything will be OK when you don't really know.

Utilities and Services

- Delays in getting power restored

General

Community / farmer forums

- apparent lack of coordination between agencies in
 - convening forums,
 - collating results / commitments,
 - following through and
 - communicating obstacles, progress and outcomes

4. Suggestions

For government

Preparedness

Animal welfare

- educate hobby farmers about their responsibilities in emergencies including making a plan to manage the welfare of their stock and pets e.g. a letter sent out with every rural landholders rates notice from LLS

Funding grants

- Establish a fund that would match farmer investment in preparedness measures. Pool money usually granted individually (\$15,000 Category C grants) and use it to match dollar for dollar. The money will be sitting there ready to go when it is needed.
- Grants may be better spent on proactive mitigation works before floods e.g. fix drains so laneways don't wash out again.
- Don't always know when grants (especially NRM related) are available to conduct on ground mitigation works
- ATO should allow for the following:
 1. Dollar for dollar flood grants- farmers should contribute
 2. Accelerated depreciation on mitigation works – e.g. you can write off a laneway repair but not build a feedpad.
 3. FMD type scheme to allow farmers to invest in preparedness. Money in the fund gets taken off the taxable income.
 4. more items that are tax deductible

Infrastructure

- establish local evacuation centres in consultation with farmers/community well in advance of need and communicate to all
- Local Government often restricts preparedness by limiting flood mound construction and feed storage areas

- Council take responsibility for drains and regularly check and maintain drains and waterways so that they are clear of debris
- upgrade (seal) secondary roadways that provide access to and from farms during floods and undertake works necessary to remove load limits that restrict use of such roads to transport stock and/or product
 - work with road owners e.g. Rail Corp to achieve this
- Council review and upgrade signage e.g. “Residents Only”, “Stock Movement”
- Dam the McLeay River – e.g. the Carrai Plateau across the Georges River – and control the flows

Planning

- ensure each local Council has a Flood Management Plan which is easily accessible on its web-site
- identify suitable and safe alternative roadways where possible and communicate these - limit restrictions that could inhibit farm operations
- MPES provide funding to revise Macleay river height action targets (from the SES). Local hydrologist with council should already have this information

River height gauges

- put in place extra gauges where needed as a high priority (BOM) e.g. need a telemetric gauge located at Smithtown/ Gladstone networked to BOM
- regularly test and maintain stream gauges at least once a month
- ensure data from new gauges installed by RTA since the bypass works is shared

Response

Support

- Councils showing support for farmers, not just the CBD, especially when roads are closed

Transport

- Relax load limits on trucks when transporting stock or fodder in an emergency.
- Limit restrictions that could inhibit farm operations

Recovery

Advice and support

- maintain and enhance services that provide personal and business advice and support

Animal welfare

- formalise arrangements to manage donated fodder and communicate to farmers
 - NSW Farmers used to do it; DPI is not responsible

Funding grants

- scale of grants often does not match the farm scale e.g. \$15,000 is barely a load of feed on 400 cow farm
- revise assessment targets to be more industry specific – generic criteria don't account for what really hurts the dairy business like for her fertility and herd health issues like mastitis

- target government assistance to where needs are greatest, on a case by case basis, to address negative public perceptions. There need to be more checks and balances.
- Look at industry wide funding or tax breaks to sponsor the installation of generators
- there needs to be more flexibility on the time to launch paperwork e.g. with Centrelink, especially in cumulative events. The effect on farms business recovery is more long-term than cleaning up immediately after a flood. It can take 12 months to recover lost income.
- review Centrelink's three month cut off period
 - follow up whether will determine the severity of damage and the ability to recover – often income is still being lost well after three months
- timelines for works to be undertaken need to take into account local conditions e.g. blocked roads etc

Health and well-being

- Can Councils help with disposal of dead stock
 - the dead pit needs to be kept open longer

General

Community/farmer forums

- with local agencies, convene/facilitate/participate in forums for farmers to debrief experiences, share information and learning and continue to improve recovery and preparedness
 - document and communicate after each session and ongoing what has been learnt, commitments made, obstacles, progress and outcomes

For industry stakeholders

Preparedness

Animal welfare

- engage with the power companies to detail to them which properties are dairy farms and why they need priority for reinstating electricity as this is an animal welfare issue.
- Dairy Groups maintain local stock and feed requirements registry
 - can information collected by DPI and DA in flood damage assessments be made available?
- assist in identifying alternate arrangements to milk cows where dairies are submerged

Funding

- sponsor critical infrastructure e.g. power generators

Working together

- collectively work with services and farmers to advocate for and address industry needs
- clarify roles of key stakeholders and communicate to farmers e.g. for milk companies DPI, RFCS etc.

Response

Floodgates

- Council to open and shut floodgates on time
- obtain Council permission for SES or Community members to check flood flaps when flood is coming

Services and utilities

- work with the power companies to have power restored to dairy farms as high priority
- obtain information from power companies on expected timing of outages and changes that might occur and distribute to farmers

Recovery

Milk contracts

- include NSW Food Authority in discussions to ensure there is a an overarching regulation on life of milk (number of days that milk can remain in a refrigerated vat and still be collected in various regions) that is understood by all processors and farmers
- need to recognise processor role in recovery, working with other agencies
- can milk pricing contracts be negotiated to allow for more money after a disaster?
- Rise and fall payments in milk contracts. Recognise cost of production i.e. can increased costs be passed along to consumers to maintain farm profitability after a flood?

Support and assistance

- help farmers to tap into appropriate funding and other support
- ongoing help from Dairy Australia to get damage surveys done would be appreciated

For SES / other agencies

Preparedness

Community information, education and awareness

- Include email and sms contacts to be readily accessible on SES website
- Council, BOM and other agencies meet with farmers / communities and commit to providing services needed to be flood ready and well informed during a flood event
- farmers share information and ideas with other farmers and community members
- promote Floodsafe business toolkit (available on-line) to farmers help them to generate their own flood plans
- ensure information going to media from SES is consistent
- publish flow time information in the local paper
- SES provide more workshops and information to farmers to be flood ready

- focus ongoing education on people / farmers newer to the area re Floodsafe preparations, warnings, evacuations, risks and hazards etc including how to:
 - access information and knowledge about flood history and hazards in the area
 - identify triggers (e.g. river heights at relevant gauges) for their geographic position
 - anticipate flood behaviour
 - respond effectively to flood warnings
 - avoid taking unnecessary risks e.g. driving across flooded roadways
 - know who to call locally for information and assistance
- flood education program with a welcome pack for new residents
- look at targeting education at young people and younger families
- more community forums to capture / share local knowledge
- document and distribute a hardcopy form of local knowledge on past flood events
- consolidate and revise locally relevant printed information about preparing for, responding to and recovering from floods and ensure this is accessible to all
- relevant agencies convene forums especially targeted to farmers to better inform people about resources and tools available
 - with invitations mailed out to all local farmers
- encourage all farms to have a flood plan
- educate the farm community about how to prepare including:
 - considerations in evacuating livestock if necessary and how to prepare
- educate the wider community about the importance of staying away from flooded areas when there is no valid reason to be there and have police enforce this

Evacuation centres

- Department of Family and Community Services decides with input from the community - ensure adequate information is provided about the pros and cons of proposed locations in advance of the need arising

Planning

- Macleay river height action targets (from the SES) need to be urgently revised now that the Kempsey Bypass works have been completed. New levees have changed the flow patterns and river heights. Could this be funded by MPES?

Property access

- update passes for farms
 - e.g. credit card style with photo ID and password

Road closures

- communicate intended road closures to farmers so they can plan properly.

Warnings and orders

- educate the wider community about:
 - the meaning of warnings and, when they are issued, the importance of preparing for an evacuation order
 - the meaning of an evacuation order (immediate) and the importance of complying
 - the risks e.g. The limitations of levees and what could happen

- educate farmers about flood watches, flood warnings and evacuation orders, especially:
 - what information they are based on
 - history/experience e.g. 75% of Flood Watches eventuate into floods.
 - who issues them and how they are communicated and
 - what action they should trigger
- give people tools and support to evacuate

Response

Access to services

- when power outages occur, communicate likely timeframes for restoration of supply

Information and Communication

- Landlines are a critical means of getting warnings out as mobile reception is often patchy in the region. Need a central point of contact to get flood information as it becomes available.
- Identify the single entity to gather local information and communicate locally following the loss of the DPI staff who provided regular updates by way of phone calls & bulk text messages.

Property access

- have police enforce the requirement for the wider community to stay away from flooded areas when there is no valid reason to be there

River height gauges

- SES provide manual back up for reading gauges

Safety and security

- block general public access into evacuated or potentially hazardous areas
 - educate people
 - community announcement
 - enforce it

Warnings

- accurate and timely warnings are needed; rather than relying solely on automatic gauges and computer modelling, obtain local data to confirm what is really happening.
- clarify who calls a flood a flood and when and how.
- review the reliability and efficiency of this system for the North Coast of NSW.

Recovery

Debrief

- with local government, convene/facilitate/participate in forums to debrief experiences, share information and learning and continue to improve preparedness
- document and communicate what has been learnt

For Farmers and Community

Preparedness

Information, awareness and education

- promote compliance with evacuation orders – discuss the risks and possible consequences of non-compliance
- help people to know what services are available to them e.g. make sure you are on Council's contact list for SMS messages re road closures
- share information about previous flood experiences, especially with new residents
- educate friends and neighbours about what could happen and how to prepare

Infrastructure maintenance

- clarify how much maintenance / repair / operation community members are allowed to do when Council or other body is not doing it (e.g. checking drains, gauges, flood gates)?
 - Legal and liability issues
 - work with the responsible bodies

Plan

- farm maps- every farm needs a good map showing paddock size and elevations to assist planning
- farm map should include electricity pole location and Number, especially if they have a transformer or switching gear on them. This makes it easier for the energy companies to find a fault if you can give them the pole number!
- document the age structure of the herd as this can be useful for working out fodder needs
- know how to read BOM river heights and what the general triggers are
- identify triggers for own property and plan when to uplift, when to move stock, when to evacuate etc
- make a written flood plan for own farm
- encourage neighbours to get involved and be flood ready
- check insurance coverage

Mutual communication and support

- community organise a "phone tree" where messages are relayed throughout the community
- establish a vulnerable persons list
 - Perhaps with assistance of Health Service
 - Identify support or contact person to check before during and after
- identify relevant bodies to connect with and communicate relevant issues and concerns to the most appropriate forum/body

Support local services e.g. the SES

- volunteer
- donate

Farm health

- undertake financial planning that allows for periodic floods including investment in mitigation infrastructure
- keep up to date with the farm financial position

Farm infrastructure

- build a bigger flood mound, with a feedpad
 - shelter for stock and a dry storage area for feed on flood mounds will increase their effectiveness.
- farmers may be better off getting stock out of the flood zone if possible, rather than trying to manage stock on a mound
- invest in suitable generators that can milk cows and keep milk cold
 - extra capacity to heat water in house is desirable
 - engage an electrician to get the capacity right and the switching wiring done

Feed stores

- build a shed with a mezzanine floor to store feed etc and be able to lift things above flood height
- Keeping feed in a shed in case of flood is a good idea, but it needs to be cycled through and replaced to make sure it is fresh enough to feed out (round bale silage has a short shelf life)

Work together

- collectively work with stakeholders such as power companies to address industry needs e.g. priority to power restoration for farms given potential impact if cows are not milked and / or milk not kept cool
- maintain up to date list of critical contacts and phone numbers for all key agencies

Response

Support the SES

- assist with sand bagging
- support SES decisions and comply with instructions

Recovery

Animal welfare

- Manage mastitis - good feedpad and sound laneways decrease mud & bugs

Community support

- there is a need for ongoing and more community support, especially for mental health
- assess relevance, appropriateness and effectiveness of psych services - are they meeting farmers' needs

Debrief

- participate in forums to debrief experiences, share information and learning and continue to improve preparedness
- document and communicate what has been learnt e.g. severity of damage is not solely dependent on flood height

Funding grants

- Have a good map showing paddock size - this will allow easier calculation of loss pasture and fencing
- Damage surveys should also include the age structure of the herd, especially useful for working out fodder needs.

General

- consider establishing local farm/community reference group's for flood PPRR to:
 - exchange useful information
 - compare experiences and lessons learned
 - implement suggestions
 - promote community preparedness
 - provide a communication channel to relevant agencies
 - advocate to relevant agencies about issues, concerns and proposed solutions