



**Submission to the  
Queensland Floods  
Commission of Inquiry**

**April 2011**

## **About Growcom**

Growcom is the peak representative body for the fruit and vegetable growing industry in Queensland, providing a range of advocacy, research and industry development services. We are the only organisation in Australia to deliver services across the entire horticulture industry to businesses and organisations of all commodities, sizes and regions, as well as to associated industries in the supply chain. We are constantly in contact with growers and other horticultural business operators. As a result, we are well aware of the outlook, expectations and practical needs of our industry. Growcom is also the peak industry for the Pineapple Industry and as such has direct experience of the current R and D process and its benefits and limitations.

The organisation was established in 1923 as a statutory body to represent and provide services to the fruit and vegetable growing industry. As a voluntary organisation since 2003, Growcom now has grower members throughout the state and works alongside other industry organisations, local producer associations and corporate members. To provide services and networks to growers, Growcom has about thirty-five staff located in Brisbane, Bundaberg, Townsville, Toowoomba and Tully. We are a member of a number of state and national industry organisations and use these networks to promote our members' interests and to work on issues of common interest.

Growcom had significant involvement in post flood recovery activities. We participated in the DEEDI *Agriculture Flood Control Group*, the DEEDI horticulture flood recovery taskforce and sat on a number of flood recovery committees at a local government level. In addition, we conducted a telephone survey of flood affected growers immediately post floods and have had numerous follow on conversations with affected growers. We have also participated in on-ground visits and local support activities such as growers BBQs.

**UNDER the provisions of the *Commissions of Inquiry Act 1950*, Her Excellency the Governor, acting by and with the advice of the Executive Council, hereby appoints the Honourable Justice Catherine Holmes to make full and careful inquiry in an open and independent manner with respect to the following matters:**

**a) the preparation and planning by federal, state and local governments; emergency services and the community for the 2010/2011 floods in Queensland**

It was our observation that few local governments had disaster management plans or evacuation centres. There was minimal disaster recovery planning processes, and Council officers had received no training in this type of work. There were unsolicited comments from affected growers that councils did not have the capacity to provide a timely and adequate response to this crisis.

**b) the performance of private insurers in meeting their claims responsibilities**

Discussions with growers have highlighted a number of issues relating to the performance of private insurers. The requirement for hydrologists to undertake testing before claims can be decided has caused big backlogs in assessment as there are insufficient hydrologists to meet demand.

Growcom contends that insurers should not be forced to provide flood coverage, but there should be standard, plain language definitions that make it easy for customers to understand if they are covered for floods, and what type of flood. There have been a number of instances where the definitions were confusing and growers were not covered when they thought they were. Standardized training for assessors would also assist in more equal outcomes for insurance holders in the same position.

**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**

The scale of the devastation was significant and different locations felt more supported by the response than others. Obviously the lack of power had significant impacts on communications infrastructure which made the response process difficult.

We understand that this was a difficult period and many people within government organisations worked extremely hard to assist flood affected people. That said, our overarching feeling is that the on-ground response to farmers was too slow and too mired in bureaucracy. Many growers still do not know what their entitlements are. Three weeks after the floods we were getting calls from concerned growers about mental health issues in flood affected areas and there was a feeling that no-one was listening. We contend that a recovery package similar to that provided in Cyclone Larry should have been activated **immediately**. It had been done before with significant success so we are unsure why the process of getting people on the ground to talk through entitlements was slowed down by a multi-level committee process with limited capacity for real outcomes.

It is Growcom's contention that the information on recovery assistance being released by state and federal governments was inconsistent, confusing, and released a bit at a time over a lengthy period. There was no one central source for people to go to in order to find out what they were entitled to. The fact that flood recovery packages were only fully announced weeks after similar packages were announced for Cyclone Yasi affected areas speaks volumes – this was a political problem not one of capacity or understanding of the graveness of the situation.

In terms of other specifics, information on road closures was patchy. Growcom received reports that ABC local radio was broadcasting tennis matches for up to an hour at a time without updates on road closures. As this was the primary source of information in flood affected areas this was not good enough. Drivers were also advised to contact the SES for information on road closures. This call on the time of the SES was both unfair to SES volunteers and motorists, many of whom had no phone contact..

On a positive note, DEEDI deserves to be congratulated on a good job getting out wet weather fact sheets advising growers on how to manage pests and diseases brought on by the excessive water present about the place.

- **resourcing, overall coordination and deployment of personnel and equipment**

Once the cyclone hit Far North Queensland, emphasis was taken off the flood recovery and people in the flood regions felt abandoned.

It was surprising and disappointing that industry was not asked to assist with the floods as with Cyclone Yasi.

The Flood Industry Recovery Officers (IROs) are only now being put into place – five months after the first floods hit Rockhampton, Emerald, Chinchilla etc. Only now are measures being put in place that industry recommended.

At present, it appears that there is no resource available to producers that would provide all of the information necessary to enable rapid recovery from natural disasters. Producers need assistance to identify the steps required to enable them to rebuild their lives and businesses following natural disasters. A *disaster recovery toolbox* would enable growers to create a customised and prioritised check-list of activities, contacts and resources required to resume production as soon as possible following a natural disaster. This toolbox would ideally be rolled out by industry recovery officers

The state department of Community Services staff were apparently under orders not to visit people on outlying properties after the floods, but only people in townships. This neglected the people most likely to be isolated and in need of help.

- **adequacy of equipment and communications systems;**

The lack of mobile coverage in many parts of the Lockyer Valley hampered relief and recovery efforts, particularly as landlines to properties were damaged and out of action. While Telstra subsequently provided a temporary mobile phone tower, this will at some stage be removed. With at least one producer having been advised it will be 3 years before they have their previous landline service completely up and running again, this badly hampers the ability of their business to recover. It also means that any sort of early warning SMS system, such as is in place in Brisbane, would still not reach many people.

- **the adequacy of the community's response.**

Where assisted and co-ordinated to help, such as in Brisbane, the community response was excellent. However, flood victims did not receive the same level of assistance from volunteers in smaller towns, cities and rural districts.

**d) the measures to manage the supply of essential services such as power, water and communications during the 2010/2011 flood events**

see above under 'adequacy of equipment and communications systems' for comments on communications.

**e) adequacy of forecasts and early warning systems particularly as they related to the flooding events in Toowoomba, and the Lockyer and Brisbane Valleys,**

There was no early warning system. Minimal linkages exist between the Bureau of Meteorology warnings and potential outcomes further down the system. A text message warning system such as Brisbane City Council has may have assisted some people, but mobile coverage would need to be improved for this to be fully effective.

The absence of a system to advise authorities monitoring flood levels that the flood level gauges had ceased working caused trouble in many areas across Queensland. Authorities thought that flood levels had ceased rising because this is the data they appeared to be receiving from the gauges. This information was then issued to the public accordingly. Property owners downstream therefore prepared for lower levels of flooding than were actually the case. In a few cases where landholders realised the gauges must be broken and advised local authorities, their concerns were dismissed. New technology is required that will advise monitoring authorities when their gauges have ceased working.

**g) all aspects of land use planning through local and regional planning systems to minimise infrastructure and property impacts from floods,**

During the flood clean-ups, mining companies were pumping water of unknown quality out of pits and back into the river systems. Expert assistance to mining companies to dewater their mines while ensuring they are not causing adverse impacts on the environment needs to be provided.

The fact that all roads in and out of Toowoomba were cut for a number of days, along with Cunningham's Gap, prevented supplies being transported from Brisbane to the west via road and demonstrates the need for a second Toowoomba Range crossing.

Growers have advised Growcom that levee banks, built by individual farmers, made the effects of the flooding downstream worse. There appears to be little to no regulation by government as to where levee banks can be built. Government needs to manage this based on a whole of landscape basis, and not farm by farm. The raised railway line near Grantham would also have contributed to its inundation, and should be examined to see how water can be allowed to flow under it.