

11th March 2011-03-11

Beryl Spencer,

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Kilkivan Qld 4600

Queensland Floods Commission of Inquiry

SUBMISSION to Part (a):

Background Information:

I have for many years been a community volunteer working with various sectors in community, farming, and business. I have also worked on various forums and committees across all levels of Government.

We have been involved in farming for many years and then diversified from farming into both small business and commercial shops to maximise our business returns.

My husband Ray and I spent several years in Business in the flood prone Mary Street, Gympie and have therefore experienced flood evacuation from our own property and trust we have learned from each flood and in particular the need to minimise loss and damage to stock and also to building structure.

A key issue when doing business in flood prone areas is to be able to emerge from floods as quickly and safely as possible and to be back in business in a minimum of time. In business times equates to dollars and every “none trading” day compounds the losses.

OUR FLOOD STORY:

Some years ago, we suffered a major financial loss to our Mary street shops due to one young business man (tenant) who followed an incorrect directive from a Council staff person. The young business man was told he’d have time to shift the polystyrene cartons, that he had stacked under the front of our shops, later in the morning, and that he may as well go home and have a rest. The flood did come as had been predicted and the polystyrene cartons were forced back under the whole building. A picture appeared in the Gympie Times and sent around the world at the time, with the caption “more like a bomb disaster than a flood.” Literally it was! All that was left standing were the outside shell.

This disaster and the loss could have been avoided but we paid the price and with no insurance! We learnt the hard way from another person’s complacency. PS we took the “gamble” and rebuilt through many challenges and sheer determination BUT the young business man lost his business! When we re-built, we used suitable building materials and floor coverings that could withstand flooding, paints that could easily be washed down and our tenants in the cafe business had heavy equipment on wheels or rollers for ease of evacuation and trolleys ready to shift tables and chairs.

Flood damage CAN be minimised with innovative flood planning!

Background History : Gympie has a long history of flooding. Mary Street was built over Nash Gully and in the flood plain of the Mary River.

In 2000, following many years of losses due to flooding and with no specific plan for flood intervention, evacuation or recovery, the first flood plan was compiled by members of Gympie Business Association

IN 2004/05 the Cooloola Shire requested the Chamber to revise and work on a plan that would then become is part of the Counter Disaster Plan. This Plan is now available on www.gympie.qld.gov.au
www.gympiechamber.com.au

As V/P and later Chair, of the Chamber and with the assistance of my husband, Ray I commenced the work of updating the plan, filling in the gaps etc.

The Scope:

1. To ensure the orderly evacuation of Gympie Business in flood prone areas
2. To supply relevant information to these same businesses.

We brought together a very supportive committee drawn from Business, Police, SES, Ambulance, and the CRDB info centre (no longer in operation). Data was drawn for BOM and mapping of the area from the Council.

Prior to launching the plan in December 2005 we held several meetings to discuss needs and improvements and possibilities for future flood evacuation. This was then presented to Council for ratification and it became part of the Counter disaster plan for the Gympie Region.

The Flood Plan is a holistic plan and is not simply about preparedness but also evacuation and recovery. I am aware the second part of this is actually not included in you Part (a) terms of reference, however I will cover it in brief here and will submit a more detailed submission to parts (c) and (d) of the Terms of Reference. While this plan was compiled specifically for Gympie, I believe that it does have broad application across much of QLD if not Australia. It could be easily adapted to each business „area”, particularly in cities like Brisbane (whereby each business node would develop and apply the plan under the authority of their particular Council ward or division.

Some Key points of the Flood Plan and explanation:

1. Personal Evacuation Plan. (This part of the Flood Plan and included in Councils Counter Disaster Plan) This Personal plan is to be researched and attended to in a precautionary way (prevention) long before floods cause inundation. It is intended to be regularly up dated in and out of flood season. This plan includes compiling lists of volunteers, vehicles, storage, equipment etc “A Plan in itself cannot deliver good outcomes ... the process of following the plan will deliver positive outcomes.”
2. Checking Flood reports at Bureau of Meteorology website. Keeping a small radio for when power has to be switched off. Understanding the geography of the area.
3. Flood passes to Business and their teams to be operated by Authorities and allow for safe and orderly evacuation of businesses and minimise stock losses and damage.
4. Orderly and safe clean-up with assistance of SES.

Further Explanation:

While I felt confident that we had compiled an effective Plan that would meet the Scope, still issues remained:

Key issues of operation: flood readiness and orderly evacuation to minimise losses. The other issue NOT included in the official plan is that of „re-building to minimise flood damage to property.” I will further address in Submission (c) and (d) of the Terms of Reference.

- Plan limitations and our approach :
 - This plan is only limited by complacency! How do we fully inform businesses? We invited business people to meeting to inform them on how to be “flood ready” and to

facilitate the “orderly evacuation” for their businesses. This revealed a disappointing level of complacency.

- The next approach was personally visiting the individual business owners. This met with some success when the priorities were explained. A few hours in preparing a personal evacuation plan may well minimise stock losses and damage.

SUMMARY and RESPONSES:

- **Evacuation Plans.** The only limitation of the plan is in the complacency of both community and business in their approach to floods.
 - **Response:** Personal Evacuation Plans to be a part of the “Workplace Health and Safety” operation of every Business. All people entering Business in Flood Prone areas to undergo education in Personal Evacuation Plans.
- **Flood Passes.** The inability to enforce safe and fast evacuation. Un- authorised persons can be a huge challenge and impediment to evacuation, as can vehicles causing “waves” to and breaking shop windows.
 - **Response:** Empower an authority to implement the Flood Passes in times of flood crisis. Police, SES, and Council to patrol these areas and escort unauthorised persons off flood inundation areas.
- **Community:** Re-building the human capacity. While communities generally have displayed a high level of generosity and care, this needs to be developed in a long term and sustainable way. In Gympie over the years while a wonderful community spirit existed during and for some time following a flood disaster, it often dwindles and sadly “it is almost like you need another disaster to bring people together again” This is about rebuilding our Nation from the grass roots. There exists an „opportunity of a lifetime” to rebuild our Nation on the “goodwill” that exists. BUT it needs to be captured, nurtured, and led forward into the future. This is about building community capacity. It is about vision and seeing the bigger picture, it is about possibilities and innovative ideas developing into projects with real outcomes. While rebuilding the bricks and mortar, and transport infrastructure is vital to the future, it is of little value if peoples’ lives are not re-shaped and re-established into communities capacity.
 - **Response:** Initiate community led forums for the sharing of ideas and vision. This MUST not follow some of the past efforts of using highly paid facilitators etc. I believe there are many capable leaders within our communities who could lead these. Governments could be involved initially by providing costs of meeting halls etc and secretarial support to initially compile data from meetings. These forums could follow the pattern of Premier Anna Bligh’s Rural Women’s Symposiums BUT MUST be genuinely community led.

Recommendations:

I ask that the Queensland Flood Commission Inquiry strongly consider the summary and the actions that I have proposed and work towards implementation of same in a genuine effort to minimise future flood damage and the cost to the state, and to re-build the fabric of our communities. There must also be close collaboration between Local, State and Federal Governments to minimise financial outlay while maximising the benefits to communities.

*Yours Sincerely
Beryl Spencer*