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Queensland Floods Commission of Enquiry

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Dear Commissioner,

FLOOD ENQUIRY SUBMISSION

HUMAN INTELLIGENCE VERSUS ELECTRONIC INTELLIGENCE

Government agencies responsible for monitoring weather patterns and events over SE Queensland in December 2010 and January 2011 appear to have suffered the same fate as United States of America intelligence agencies in the lead up to the devastating attacks on New York and Washington referred to as 9/11: too much reliance on electronic intelligence gathering at the expense of insignificant human intelligence gathering.

Bellthorpe is a small rural community located in the north west corner of Moreton Bay Regional Council. Bellthorpe is equidistant from both Maleny and Woodford at the southern end of the Conondale Ranges at an elevation of 600 metres. The area is the watershed for both the Stanley River to the east side and the Mary River to the west side. Much of the flood waters causing problems for Brisbane, Gympie and Maryborough began as days of heavy rain in our area.

Year 2010 was the wettest year in the twenty years that I have farmed here with 3.1 metres of rain recorded on my property. Spring 2010 was wet with 811 mm recorded followed by 650 mm in December 2010. How do I know this? The ground was saturated and too slippery to work. Farming activities had been severely curtailed during the September to December period due to WET Weather and emptying the rain guage.

On Wednesday 22 December 2010 I travelled to Hampton north of Toowoomba. Whilst there the local bank manager rang my contact and said that he had just received information from Qld SES warning "all to be prepared for a catastrophic weather event in SE Qld between Christmas and New Year". Everyone thought this was a bit strange and we continued about our business.

I returned to Brisbane (22 Dec 10) over the Wivenhoe Dam to Fernvale as I wanted to see the dam at 100% capacity with water being released. This was big news on this day as this was the major water release for many years. There was warning for down stream flooding and I can attest that the river was 80 to 100 metres wide at Fernvale bridge with a roiling current. There were some spectators at the bridge viewing this rare sight (at that time). I noted that when I crossed the Brisbane River at Jindalee that the water release had not appeared to have reached there at about 1600 hours.

Between Christmas and New Year it rained. Local weather was cool to cold with little evaporation. Local creeks were carrying runoff as the ground was saturated.



From 1 to 7 January 2011 I measured 95 mm with some rain on each day. On Saturday 8 Jan the tempo increased with 130 mm and strong winds. About 0930 hours Sunday 9 Jan I drove down Bellthorpe Range Road to Woodford to gather some supplies as the forecast was not good. I can not say whether this was because of intuition or ABC radio news. Bellthorpe Range Road was already reduced to one lane with numerous rock slides and tree falls. Running Creek had risen to just under the bridge. Stanley River at D'Aguilar Highway had a rising fresh flow visible.

The news in Woodford at about 1000 hours was that the Stanley River had flooded across the Kilcoy Beerwah Road at Peachester and the road was closed (motorcyclists were all grumbling that they could not continue their Sunday ride). When I was able to visit Peachester later in January I estimated that there was about 100 metres of water across the road and over the top fence wire (1m high); one could say that a significant volume of water was heading down the Stanley River at 1000 hours Sunday 9 January 2011.

I returned to Bellthorpe via Kilcoy Beerwah Road and Maleny Stanley River Road between 1100 and 1200 hours during a lull in the rain. These roads were both OK at that time but were subsequently closed due to land slips and washouts later. I rang Moreton Bay Regional Council to advise the state of Bellthorpe Range Road. I was later advised that Council had CLOSED the road at about 1900 hours Sunday 9 Jan 11 as it was completely impassable due to land slips and fallen trees.

The rain really set in from about 1200 hours Sunday onwards. The rain was horizontal due to the very strong wind blowing at about 30 knots. I measured 350 mm until 0900 hours Monday 10 January 2011 but I stress this rain was horizontal and my rain gauge was lucky to catch any at all. A neighbor in a sheltered spot on Campbell Road measured 1200 mm in this same period; he tried to report this to SEQ Water and was told to mind his own business!

Monday was a similar day to Sunday though I only measured 120 mm of horizontal rain with very strong driving winds.

Tuesday 12 January was similar with 150 mm of horizontal rain driven by winds of about 25 to 30 knots. A neighbor on Bellthorpe Range Road measured 1500 mm of rain on this day. He emptied his rain gauge 5 times and sustained five lightning strikes on his residence. There is an automatic weather station on this property installed after the 1974 flood; was this station working? This neighbor is too old and cynical to bother contacting authorities anymore because they have disregarded him previously. Weather events are often trapped in the natural bowl that is Running Creek Bellthorpe dumping huge volumes of rain compared to other local properties. Running Creek flows into the Stanley River.

Before the dramas of Toowoomba, Locker Valley and Brisbane, from midday Monday, Bellthorpe had its own survival problems. Bellthorpe Range Road to Woodford was official CLOSED and remains so. Gap Road / Mears Lane (Gap Road) to Maleny had three landslips and a 50 metre long subsidence crack down the inner lane which motorists were using at their own risk. Stoney Creek Road was impassable as it is a dirt / gravel road in very poor condition at that time. Gap Road was officially closed at midday Tuesday 12 January and only opened one lane to light vehicle vehicles on 21 Feb 11, six weeks after the event. After about \$200000 maintenance repairs Stoney Creek Road is described as an excellent 4WD road!

The weather event which dumped heavy rain on Bellthorpe on Sunday to Tuesday appeared to be moving from North east towards Jimna; from Stanley River catchment to the Brisbane River catchment. This is a largely un-inhabitated area now with the demise of the timber industry. How many automatic weather stations are there located from Bellthorpe to Jimna to Kingaroy? Are these weather stations capable of processing information in a timely manner?

Qld SES issued some form of alert warning on 22 December 2010. What was this warning and what was its basis? Was there any similar alert for the period 8 January 2011 onwards?

Why was water being released from Wivenhoe Dam on 22 December 2010? What did SEQ Water know at that time?

Questions and more questions. The same dilemma faced USA agencies after the attacks of 9/11. Electronic intelligence gathering will only provide so much data and subsequently USA has tried to improve its human intelligence assets in the operational field.

How can a human intelligence network be incorporated into current local government and service provider corporations? Will it be expensive? Will it be reliable, timely and accurate?

This can be achieved really quickly and simply by using existing residents on their properties in important locations through the local council network. In the first instance the property owner would report his findings to local council; council would coordinate this information and pass it upwards to probably Emergency Management Qld (EMQ) for State Govt or to relevant service provider such as SEQ Water. EMQ must then act upon this intelligence in a timely manner as was seen during Cyclone Yasi. Information must be passed by voice message as computer assistance is not reliable nor available in some remote areas. All levels of government must be responsive to citizens local concerns. The network is in place but it needs major attitudes changes.

Hindsight is a great thing. It appears many concerned local residents tried to advise or warn authorities that there was a significant weather event happening in their area to no avail. Thus there is already a network of concerned citizens who appear willing to assist all it will need is for the relevant authority to win back their trust to be part of a human intelligence gathering network able to provide timely gathering of necessary information.

For your consideration.



Bede Mackenzie