

12th February 2011

Commissioner
QLD Floods Commission of Inquiry
GPO Box 1738
BRISBANE

Dear Madam,

This account of my experiences with water and floods in a lifetime of 80 years could be of interest to the Commissioner.

About 60 years ago I was at a neighbour's home near Guluguba (a railway siding between Miles and Wandoan). The home was 100 metres from Juandah Creek, a normally dry, flat bed of sand, some 50 metres or so wide. Suddenly we heard a strange noise – this was the phenomenon known as a “wall of water”. The wall was about two metres high, 50 metres wide, and rolling over and over, like a big wave breaking on the beach, and travelling fast.

The cause is a massive rain, probably 150mm or more, falling in a short time frame of an hour or less. When a water course starts running, it may be 600mm deep flowing at 3km/h. The next layer is faster, because as the depth doubles, the speed quadruples. By the time the depth reaches 6 or 8 metres, as in the Lockyer Valley, the speed is phenomenal, but the initial water had an hour's start, and at a certain point the several layers all arrive together, as a “wall of water”. Further down, as the grade flattens out, the speed drops, the width increases, and the “wall” collapses.

Not many people have been fortunate to be in the right place at the right time to observe the event.

Now to the 1974 floods. I was running a property known as “Penlan Downs”, north of Muttaborra. I employed an Aboriginal stockman, and about sundown on New Year's Eve, 1973 we were driving home. The road followed the high bank of Bangall Creek, a major watercourse in the area. Western Creeks have a high bank on one side, and a wide, flat floodplain on the other side, and periodically these features swap places.

The day had been extremely hot - 46°, 47° not a cloud in the sky. Suddenly we came onto about 30 pelicans sitting on the road. The stockman said instantly – “Big flood coming”. “What do you mean Eric?” “Pelicans sitting on high ground, the flood will come to where they are sitting.”

“Aw, come on, this creek would have to be a mile wide.”

He simply shrugged. The clouds rolled in on New Year's Day, 1974, and the Heavens opened that afternoon with a storm of 100mm. We did not see the sun for the next six weeks, and the total rainfall was about 800mm (32 inches). The flood came about ten metres past where we saw the pelicans. This knowledge must have been passed down in Aboriginal folklore for thousands of years.

About 5:30pm on January 25th 1974 the A.B.C. broadcast a special rainfall report. I listened to massive falls in the upper Brisbane valley, Kilcoy, Stanley River etc. As soon as that news was over, I phoned the Roma Street Police Station (our phone line to Muttaborra was still working, despite being flood bound) and advised the police that I had an empty home in Toowoomba, gave the agent's number and address, and 8 or 10 elderly flood victims could have it rent free for a month.

The police reply – “There is no flood in Brisbane.”

“I know that – try 5:00am tomorrow.” The policeman hung up. As they say, “The result was history”.

Sixteen years later (1990) I was on a property “Yandarlo”, between Tambo and Augathella. The homestead was on a sand ridge about a mile from the Nive River, a major tributary of the Warrego River. On the evening of the 18th April 1990, I listened to reports of extraordinary rainfalls in the Carnarvon Ranges – falls of 500mm and more. Half the rivers in Queensland have their start in those ranges – the Barcoo, Nive, Warrego, Maranoa, Dawson, Nogoia, Comet, Belyando etc.

My wife and I started stacking furniture. My son said – “Dad, you're mad. Water will never come up here.”

“You will see something tonight you may never see again.”

Every two hours I took a torch to see where the river had reached. Each time it was 200/300 metres closer. I called the S.E.S. each time, and at 4:00am the tennis court went under – not far to walk. At 5:30am the water was only 300mm below floor level. This was the peak. My last call to the S.E.S. “Expect an unprecedented flood in Charleville tomorrow.”

“Aw, it takes four days to get here” (200km).

“Listen, this river is three metres deeper than it has even been seen. It is two miles wide. When you double the depth, you quadruple the speed. It will be there tomorrow. Do you understand?”

“Yeah. I've got another call. Goodbye.”

I was two hours out – the flood hit Charleville 22 hours later, two metres or more through the town.

At 9:00am I phoned Dalgety's. “Tie down everything that floats”.

“This new shop is above flood level.”

“What flood level?”

“1956.”

“I repeat – tie down everything that floats.”

Dalgety's took no notice, and 150 coils of poly pipe floated out over a two metre chain wire fence, and headed off to the Darling River.

About 10 years ago the Government sold the Brisbane Markets to a company called "Landacq". Since the markets are an essential service, a monopoly, and own 170 acres of land in the industrial area of Rocklea, I thought it is a secure investment for a retiree. I knew it was flooded in 1974, but when the Wivenhoe Dam was built, that risk was diminished.

On December 28th, 2010, I drove past the Somerset Dam. Both valves were wide open, and Wivenhoe had the Brisbane River backed up to the bridge on the Esk-Kilcoy Road, so I knew it was full. The Fitzroy at Rockhampton was in full flood, as was the Darling Downs, so it was London to a brick that Brisbane would join the club.

On 8th and 9th January I was again listening to rainfall reports – I am an avid follower of both radio and T.V. weather reports. In the far west our livelihood and rain were entwined.

On the morning of Monday 10th January I phoned the office of Brisbane Markets. A young man answered the call.

Me – "How are the arrangements going?"

He – "What arrangements?"

Me – "About the flood."

He – "There is no flood here – it is business as usual."

Me – "Try tomorrow."


I was appalled – sorry for the merchants, of whom I know several, and sorry for me, because two year's dividends, on which I relied, will probably go down the gurgler.

I have heard that the engineers in charge of Wivenhoe "played it by the book".

My opinion of the book's author is that he didn't know much. Here I am in Toowoomba 100 kilometres away, and I could see what was going to happen. Hence my call to B.M.L. Had 300,000M/L a day been let go on the 8th, 9th and 10th it would have caused a moderate flood. The delay was nearly catastrophic when the level threatened to go over the top of the wall.

Since Brisbane now needs all the capacity of Wivenhoe for town supply, the only safeguard that I can see is to build another Wivenhoe somewhere about the bridge on the the Esk-Kilcoy Road, and leave it empty for rainy times. In 1893 seventy inches fell in three days, long before global warming, climate change and greenhouse gas boomph. History can repeat itself. I am not an engineer, but predictions revolve around simple arithmetic, not rocket science. I trust that my observations of a lifetime may be of some use to the commission.

Yours faithfully,


Colin Clift

Newspaper cuttings removed here