

Floods deluge Australia's most populous state

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Over 30 percent of New South Wales, Australia's most populous state, or 240,000 square kilometres across 40 shires, was declared a natural disaster area last week following record floods in the north-west, Hunter, northern tableland and Murray River districts.

The floods, which have isolated over 2,000 people and affected an area larger than the United Kingdom, came after 14 days of continuous heavy rainfall. Hundreds of homes were inundated, crops destroyed, major roads, rail links and telephone lines cut and over 450 people evacuated when 12 river systems—the Namoi, Hunter, Macquarie, Edward, Macintyre, Gwydir, Paroo, Belubula, Lachlan, Castlereagh, Bogan and Murray rivers—burst their banks.

Many districts, including parts of the state of Queensland, recorded between 200mm and 300mm of rain, three to four times the November monthly average. Five weeks earlier the region's farmers faced serious drought.

The volume of floodwater is so great that NSW's State Emergency Service (SES) estimates that large parts of the state will be under water for three weeks. Health authorities have warned that the floods could produce a serious outbreak of mosquito-borne diseases.

Some of the worst flooding occurred along the Namoi and Peel rivers where roads and bridges were destroyed, towns cut off and hundreds of houses damaged. Emergency food and medical supplies had to be airlifted to some areas.

The towns of Narrabri, Gunnedah, Tamworth (a major regional centre), Nundle, Woolomin, Ashford and Yetman and surrounding districts were particularly affected as well as Dubbo, on the Macquarie River, Wee Waa and Coonamble.

Tamworth was badly hit when the Peel River rose to 6.8 metres, more than double the minor flooding measurement level. The Taminda industrial estate, which had no levee protection, was inundated when the

river swept through it unhindered causing extensive damage to plant and equipment. The town's business district, which did have levees, was left unscathed.

At Gunnedah, town residents, assisted by voluntary workers from the SES, worked in a vain attempt to erect sandbag walls. Scores of houses were flooded due to the lack of levees. Nundle, a small town 60 kilometres south-east of Tamworth, lost six bridges—either washed away completely or badly damaged, while over 200 homes were surrounded by floodwaters at Narrabri.

Farming in the region, the centre of Australia's wheat and cotton growing industries, has been devastated. Over 4,000 farms have been affected and an estimated \$1 billion in crops destroyed. According to current estimates, approximately 60 percent of the state's winter wheat harvest, valued at over \$600 million, has been wiped out, 50 percent of the cotton crop worth \$20 million destroyed and at least \$100 million lost in corn, barley, oats and other cereal production. Thirty percent of the state's cherry crop has been ruined.

This is the third bad year in a row for farmers in the region. According to the NSW Department of Agriculture, grain farmers have lost a combined total of \$1.16 billion since 1998, with more than 1.8 million hectares of crops destroyed by flooding in the last two years alone. In 1998, floods hit while the wheat was still growing and in 1999 rain destroyed much of the harvest.

The latest floods mean that most farmers will receive no income until December 2001. This, when combined with the closure of local banks, government services, mines and small factories, is having a disastrous effect on communities already suffering high unemployment and growing poverty.

Hundreds of farmers, who face crippling debts and bank interest payments, have said that the flood damage will force them into bankruptcy and off the land. In

1997-98, Australian farms owed a total of \$21.6 billion, or \$208,000 per farm business, to the banks, a 5 percent increase on the previous financial year and double the amount owed in 1986-87. The average annual interest payment per farm business is currently \$15,000.

NSW Farmers Rural Affairs Committee chairman, Mal Peters, said farmers had invested heavily in new technology in order to compete on the world market. "You can't handle too many years of failed crops and keep all that going," he said.

Ted Sutton, a wheat farmer who lost his entire crop, told ABC Radio's *AM*: "For the people west of Gunnedah, the floods could mean the end. Most of them are into their fifth year of crop losses and that's a long time to go without a pay cheque. We've had floods and then a drought and then we've had disease, and then a flood again. A lot of them are going to be very badly hit."

Tony Cliff, a wheat and cotton farmer from Gunnedah, said: "In the 1998 floods we lost our winter crop but at least it dried out enough for us to plant our summer crops and salvage some sort of income for the year. This time the flood has taken out both summer and winter crops... My family has had this farm since 1832 but we want to give our kids a good education. We want them to have options with what they'll do with their futures because there's a saying that the worst form of child abuse is to leave your kids the farm."

State Labor Premier Bob Carr and senior federal government officials, including Prime Minister John Howard and his deputy John Anderson, visited flooded towns offering sympathy, but little else.

Last Friday, state and federal government officials, who met with Australian bank chiefs, announced a \$200 million assistance package. The package, which is expected to include welfare payments, interest subsidies and some finance to help farmers plant new crops, is well short of what is required.

The banks only offered a 12-month moratorium on loan repayments and refused to waive the 30 percent of interest payments not covered by government assistance. National Australia Bank agribusiness manager Mike Carroll claimed that waiving interest payments was "unprecedented anywhere" and that the banks could offer no other assistance because they were already taking a greater risk by extending loans at existing margins.

Premier Carr described the situation facing the flooded communities as "extraordinarily serious," but rejected state opposition calls for motor registration, payroll and other taxes to be waived for victims as "unrealistic". That sort of assistance, he said, "would open up expectations on uncapped assistance wherever there is a disaster".

Last Saturday in Gunnedah, Prime Minister Howard was met by protesting residents who demanded that the government provide funding for a town levee. "We need a levee bank here," one angry and determined resident told Howard. "If the money had been spent on a levee bank in Gunnedah, then you could use money we now need to help farmers." Homes and small businesses in Wee Waa, a neighbouring town with a protective levee, suffered no flood damage.

Trying to curry favour with an increasingly hostile electorate, Howard offered his sympathy and then made a rather belated attempt to tap into the well-known and deeply felt hostility towards the banks. He told the media entourage that the banks had a "moral responsibility" to assist.

These phrases, however, will ring hollow for rural communities. In 1998 the government rejected an application by local farmers and residents for Exceptional Circumstances Assistance funding when the region was hit by serious flooding.



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