

NSW flooding highlights growing river management crisis

Richard Phillips
28 November 2000

Last week's flooding in New South Wales highlights years of government inaction over an increasing environmental crisis in the Murray Darling Basin river system—Australia's largest and most vital agricultural production area.

The river basin, which is home to two million people, accounts for about \$9 billion of agricultural production, or over 41 percent of the nation's gross value of agricultural production, per year. North-west and central NSW, the flood disaster zone, forms a large proportion of the Murray-Darling Basin and produces more than half Australia's wheat and cereal crops and over 90 percent of the cotton crop, now one of the country's largest agricultural export earners.

Despite the region's economic importance, consecutive Labor and Liberal-National Coalition governments have done virtually nothing to ameliorate an increasing pattern of flooding, land salination and generalised degradation of the river.

According to recent government estimates, the average annual cost of flooding in Australia is over \$400 million. But between 1984-85 and 1992-93 the federal government spent only \$61 million, or just over \$7.6 million per year on mainstream flood mitigation and floodplain management.

In 1992 the federal Labor government reviewed land, water and forestry programs and established its National Landcare program. This, it claimed, would focus on integrated strategies regarding land, water and forestry. But little assistance was provided to those who suffered in the 1993 floods, which devastated Victoria and southern NSW.

In 1996 the recently elected Howard government insisted that local industries and communities carry out their own flood plain management. Thus, the stated aim of the current National Landcare Program is “to

stimulate activity and acceptance of full responsibility by stakeholders for ongoing flood mitigation and floodplain management”. In other words, local communities have to sort out the problem themselves.

Federal assistance for flood mitigation originally emphasised structural works projects to reduce the risk of damage and loss of life. But according to one government report it would take 25 to 50 years to provide protection against “once in every hundred years” type flooding and therefore “non-structural measures” had to play a “greater role in floodplain management in Australia”. This, it said, was linked to “the adoption of national best practice and specific micro-economic regulatory or institutional reforms aimed at achieving local self-reliance”.

In September 1999, Regional Services, Territories and Local Government Minister Senator Ian Macdonald declared that “flood is as common an event in Australia as is drought” but the federal Government was “not constitutionally responsible for providing a response to, or relief for, natural disasters”. This was a state matter, he said.

The federal government currently provides just \$7 million annually in flood mitigation assistance. In February the Howard government announced that Tamworth, one of the major towns deluged by last week's floods, was eligible for only \$990,000 for a levee upgrade and construction.

State and federal politicians and the media have constantly referred to the flooding as a natural disaster. Last week, at the height of the flooding, Prime Minister Howard told the media: “There is nothing anybody can really do about a natural disaster of this order except help in the best way that you can.”

In fact, the flood is not simply a “natural disaster” but a direct result of unscientific agricultural planning and

the drive for profit. Land clearance of catchment areas, excessive irrigation, fertiliser and pesticide use, techniques driven by the demands of the capitalist market, are all contributing to the destruction of tens of thousands of hectares of farming land and creating the conditions for even greater disasters.

According to research recently released by Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) scientists, Dr Peter Wallbrink and Dr Jon Olley, over-clearing and heavy grazing have dramatically transformed the Murray-Darling, lifting riverbed heights and creating a system that is now far more energetic and prone to flooding than previously existed.

“Before European settlement,” Olley said in a CSIRO press release announcing the research in January 1999, “the picture is of a relatively stable landscape, well-vegetated, with lots of swampy meadows in the low lying areas to trap the sediment and nutrients and filter the waters slowly.

“The river systems at that time would have been largely clear-flowing, generally slow and dominated by organic material. We went in effect from slow rivers dominated by organic material to rivers dominated by rushes of abrasive inorganic sediment.”

In the same news release, Wallbrink explained that in the original river system vegetation and swampy areas held rainfall back. “Today it rushes downstream in defined channels far more quickly and in larger volumes. It is this new energy which underlines the dramatic rates of change we are starting to see and understand for the first time.”

Using new methods (optically stimulated luminescence) to identify and date flood deposits, the scientists discovered that a third of the mud and sand deposits in the Murray River plain had accumulated in the last 40 years, not over centuries as previously believed.

In addition to silting the rivers, uncontrolled land clearance is causing increasing land salination. The annual cost of salt damage, currently some \$46 million, is expected to rise to \$600 million in the next decade; the amount of salt mobilised to the land surface will double to 10 million tonnes annually; water in many rivers and tributaries will become undrinkable; and the natural ecosystems in areas such as the Macquarie Marshes, the Great Cumbung Swamp and Chowilla

Wetlands will be destroyed.

There is currently no broad-scale farm system or serious reforestation and ground cover program in Australia capable of controlling this ongoing environmental damage. Despite the research, none of the parliamentary political parties has any intention of providing the necessary funding for such measures.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact