

“We could have something far worse developing, something truly horrendous”

Australia: Flood management expert speaks to the World Socialist Web Site

Susan Allan
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Chas Keys, a retired deputy director of the NSW State Emergency Service, spoke last weekend with the World Socialist Web Site about some of the factors behind the Queensland flood disaster.

Keys has authored several books on flood and emergency services management, including his latest, Making Communities Safer in Times of Flood. In this interview he explores the impact of declining state and federal government funds for flood mitigation, unsafe development on flood plains and deforestation. His comments have been edited for length.

Susan Allan (SA): How would you assess the Queensland floods?

Chas Keys (CK): I'm not surprised by the situation. The La Niña weather pattern is similar to what has happened before. Droughts and periods of floods are cyclical. But my feeling is there could be even more severe flooding at any time over the next three to four months. There's another rain event that will hit south-eastern Queensland and the Northern Rivers area of NSW in the next few days. All these areas are very wet and nicely primed for more flooding. Beyond that the La Niña episode is proving to be strong and predicted to last for a while yet.

The weather forecasts have been spot on so far but we could have something far worse developing, something truly horrendous. The problem today is that the floods are so widespread and this flooding has really been going on over the last four months. It started in Victoria in September, NSW has already had more than one bout, Queensland has copped this one, and NSW is going to get some more.

SA: Can you comment on declining government resources for flood mitigation and flood management since the 1990s?

CK: Before raising my concerns let me tell you about what was done previously in NSW, where, during the 1950s, 60s and 70s, some people said, it developed world's best practice in dealing with floods. A lot of lessons were drawn from the experiences of the 1950s and in particular the historic floods in

Maitland.

Flood mitigation used to be about developing engineering solutions to overcome the flood problem. For example, building dams to hold flood waters back, and then, after the rain had gone, letting it out slowly. In some instances, however, this led to undesirable consequences.

We learnt that you can't just fight floods—that's useless—they're natural occurrences like droughts. You can't stop them, but you can manage the worst effects. That doesn't mean you have no flood mitigation, but you have to put in place a whole myriad of tools because many issues come into play.

Tony Abbott [federal Liberal Party leader] and Barnaby Joyce [National Party Senate leader] are now calling for the building of dams. But this is only one part of the solution and not the best one at that. Dams by themselves will not solve the problem—the costs are often enormous and they are often environmentally damaging.

Levees were built in the 1960s that could keep out small and medium sized floods, but not massive floods. At the same time we developed techniques, such as urban zoning, to stop willy-nilly development in seriously flood-prone areas.

We started removing previously unwise development on flood plains and began buying back houses in these areas. These were voluntary schemes and local councils, with a good deal of support from state and federal subsidies, bought out home owners in dangerous environments. The houses were then knocked down and the areas returned to park land and for other non-dangerous flooding use. We also developed warning systems, so that people could be advised of a coming flood and, of course, appropriate education for safety.

I'm appalled by the situation in Queensland at the moment. The large number of new houses that have been flooded proves that land management by the Queensland government is extremely poor and building is still going on in inappropriate areas.

Let me now answer your question on declining government resources. In the 1990s, in the midst of the drought, and

particularly after 2000, government enthusiasm and financial contributions for flood management and mitigation dropped off. Commonwealth contributions to NSW for flood mitigation reached their peak in 1993-1994, at approximately \$13 million in 2008 dollar terms, and then declined to as low as \$4 million in 2006.

During this time, the NSW state government's started to refocus its agenda, and began spending less on flood management. There were lots of flood management projects lined up that had passed the environmental climate criteria and cost benefit standards, but there was no investment. The government became more development focused and previous zoning positions were subtly moved away from.

For example, in Maitland—the flood city of 1955—the council now wants to build hundreds of dwellings on the flood plain in and round the CBD. They want to overthrow a 1955 ban on building in this area and will probably succeed, because the government has dropped its focus.

Maitland Council wants to put a whole lot of development on the flood plain and restore the population in Central Maitland. They want walk-up units and to build floors above the 100-year flood line. This means people will think they're flood free. But they might not be. With a larger flood they could be trapped above the flood waters.

What we have is short-term thinking. The 1955 flood in Maitland will happen again. It's inevitable. We don't know when, but there are 500-year floods and 1,000-year floods. In Europe in 2002, they had the largest flood since 1452 and all of inner Prague was flooded. In Europe they have records that go back centuries, but Australian records only go back a few hundred years, so we don't really know how big previous floods may have been.

There's continual pressure to minimise or cast doubt on what has happened in the past. We have councillors saying, "We haven't had floods for 55 years so why do we have to keep worrying about it, we have a levee". They're trying to soften up the system to achieve their development goals. They want more people, more houses, more money flowing into the CBD, more rates for the council, etc., etc., and to hell with public safety.

Developers have a lot of sway over governments and councils. All governments, including Labor, are more and more preoccupied with development and less and less with public safety and being environmentally sensible. My concern is that they've drifted away from regulation and any public say over how we develop communities.

There's a shopping centre in Wallsend, in the western part of Newcastle [NSW], which is built in the valley of a creek bed. It's a death trap and should never have been built. The best thing we can do is relocate it, but this would be phenomenally expensive and Westfield [the shopping centre owner] is not going to do it.

Governments are focusing on the "now" problems, always

responding to the most immediate. They should be planning for a whole spectrum of environmental concerns, including shortage of water, the potential for fire, and surplus water. Then there's climate change and global warming, which have to be addressed. Governments often set things up and then withdraw from the programs and leave the local councils to deal with them.

SA: What about the impact of de-forestation?

CK: Deforestation is a serious land management problem and contributes to the flood problem—the silting of the rivers and so on. What we need is re-forestation. It's inappropriate development to try and push agriculture on to the higher slopes and to get rid of all the natural forests and grasses. Agriculture is wrecked and then, because the rivers are silted up and flood, the towns are wrecked.

Most of the towns in inland Australia are built on flood plains. Of course, they were built on rivers for good reason—for transport and water supply—but they routinely flood. Today we should not be rebuilding housing on flood plains.

But it takes resources to educate people about the nature of the flood problem. People don't necessarily know what a flood plain is. People aren't stupid—they have all sorts of things to worry about in their lives, so flood plains are for experts that work in the field to worry about. We have knowledge of the past mistakes.

SA: What do you think about the constant government promotion of individual self-reliance?

CK: Individual reliance is not a bad thing—community resilience is important and should be encouraged—but I'd say that a lot of councils are irresponsible when they claim it's okay to build in unsafe areas or if built above the so-called 100-year flood level. This makes people complacent. Of course we need development, farming, towns, industry and all of that, but the problem is the way it's done. It's not necessary to build on flood plains and put people's lives at risk.

We need to focus on the safety of the development and its environmental sustainability. Governments, whether they're Labor or Liberal, have really lost the plot in recent times.

The author also recommends:

Australia: Queensland crisis points to lack of flood mitigation and basic infrastructure

[7 January 2011]

Australia: Queensland floods worsen, with major regional towns cut off

[4 January 2011]



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