

# Reports warned of flood dangers to Brisbane

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13 January 2011

Evidence has begun to emerge that successive governments over the past decade have rejected, ignored or suppressed the recommendations of scientific studies that could have averted or substantially reduced the devastating impact of the flood disaster now being experienced by residents of Brisbane—the state capital of Queensland and Australia’s third largest city.

Government cost-cutting, the commercialisation of water infrastructure and the profit interests of business and real estate developers were among the factors behind refusals to implement two studies in particular—a 2007 feasibility report on raising the flood capacity of two crucial dams, and a 1999 Brisbane River Flood Study of the inadequacy of the city’s land planning and emergency strategies.

Queensland Premier Anna Bligh yesterday defended the performance of the Wivenhoe Dam, built to supposedly flood-proof the state capital after terrible floods in 1974 that inundated nearly 6,000 homes and killed 14 people. “A dam cannot stop the sort of flood that is coming across the plains, the Lockyer Valley and the catchment area into the Wivenhoe system,” she insisted.

The Wivenhoe dam is managed by the government-owned but commercially-operated South East Queensland Water Corporation (SEQW). The dam rapidly reached its limit amid this week’s heavy rains and its huge releases of water contributed to extensive flooding of the state capital.

Contrary to Bligh’s claim, properly-sized dams could have eased the floods. A 2007 joint SEQW-government feasibility study recommended options to increase the capacity of the dams at Wivenhoe and Somerset (which

feeds into the Wivenhoe), stating that neither dam “currently satisfies the ANCOLD [Australian National Committee on Large Dams] guidelines on Acceptable Flood Capacity (2003)”. If these options had been implemented, the flood disaster could have been mitigated.

ANCOLD guidelines require dams such as Wivenhoe to be able to withstand a probable maximum flood. The “Provision of Contingency Storage in Wivenhoe and Somerset Dams” report canvassed a number of options to increase the dams’ storage capacity, at costs ranging from \$5 million to \$333 million.

The cheapest option, estimated to cost \$5 million to \$10 million, would have required operational modifications and changes to several low-lying downstream bridges that restrict large water releases. That option would have been only be a “short-term” fix (“10 to 15 years”) because it would not have allowed for events greater than the official 1-in-1,000 year flood estimate. For that reason, the report recommended a \$63 million project to raise the Wivenhoe Dam by 2 metres. The most comprehensive option would have required spending \$248 million to raise the Wivenhoe Dam by 8 metres, and \$85 million to raise the Somerset Dam by 6 metres.

SEQW has so far refused to respond to media questions about what action it has taken on the report’s recommendations. But the real responsibility lies with the state Labor government, that created and controls SEQW. The corporatised entity was established in 2007, through the South East Queensland Water (Restructuring) Act, as part of Labor’s drive, backed by the federal Labor government, to corporatise or privatise most of the state’s vital infrastructure.

Part of Labor's agenda was to slash spending, raise the price of water and boost corporate profits by shifting to a "user pays" system that penalises ordinary households at the expense of business. According to SEQW's web site, "a market-based pricing framework and regulatory environment will be implemented to encourage efficiency and to use market signals to moderate demand".

In other words, all aspects of water policy are now determined not by social need, but by profit. SEQW is not only in charge of the 25 dams, 47 weirs, 46 water treatment plants and 14 groundwater bore fields across south east Queensland. It is also responsible for flood monitoring services, as well as catchment management services and water quality research. The failure to take action on the recommendations for enhancing the capacity of the Wivenhoe and Somerset dams are the consequence.

The Brisbane City Council-commissioned 1999 Brisbane River Flood Study warned of possible devastation to tens of thousands of flood-prone properties that had been given the green light for residential development since the 1974 flood. The engineers and hydrologists involved in the study warned—correctly—that the next major flood in Brisbane would be between 1 metre and 2 metres higher than anticipated by the Brisbane town plan.

"The flood immunity of properties is less than previously assessed. The average flood damages associated with flooding will be significantly higher. There are potential legal implications for council by allowing development to occur in higher-risk areas. As a minimum, developers and residents may need to be advised of the actual flood risk on their property," the study stated. "The simple option of saying that the current development control level represents the one-in-100-year flood level is not valid."

After receiving the study, however, the Labor-controlled council adopted a "no change, maintain status quo" strategy, despite a further review advising that such a strategy was "poor" because it would reduce flood immunity.

In 2003, a copy of the 1999 study was leaked to the *Courier-Mail*, and it became ammunition for the current Liberal Party Lord Mayor of Brisbane, Campbell Newman, who used it in his mayoral election campaign. In the debate that followed, it became apparent that official claims about the flood mitigation potential of Wivenhoe Dam played into the hands of property developers, who were profitably turning low-lying, flood-prone areas of Brisbane into expensive housing.

Allegations of cover-up of the study were referred to the state Labor government's Crime and Misconduct Commission, which declined to make an adverse finding of misconduct against the Labor-run council. Instead, it largely took the line of the then Labor lord mayor, Tim Quinn, that the study was not acted upon because it was a "draft" only.

Newman came to office in 2004 promising to end the secrecy over the flood danger and overhaul planning policies to alert property buyers of the risk of another major flood. However, the measures taken by Newman and his Lord Mayors Taskforce on Suburban Flooding have been miniscule. By the end of 2006, just four homes had been purchased under a scheme to buy back those residences that flood, on average, once every two years.

In December 2006, Newman announced that the Brisbane City Plan would be revised to require developments to "take into account the safety of all people when planning for flood immunity" and bring real estate standards into line with "State and Federal government policies and guidelines". From the catastrophe that has overtaken Brisbane's residents, those measures have proven totally inadequate.



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