

Australian cyclone contributes to renewed flooding in Victoria

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4 February 2011

Severe thunderstorms in the wake of tropical cyclone Yasi, which left a trail of destruction through the north-eastern state of Queensland yesterday, have started to cause heavy rains and flooding in already flood-hit parts of the southern state of Victoria. The town of Seymour, in central Victoria, recorded 35 millimetres of rain in 30 minutes yesterday, while Kerang, in the state's north, had 20 millimetres of rain and some local flash flooding.

The Bureau of Meteorology has predicted three further days of downpours, with up to 120 millimetres of rain expected on Victoria's north-east ranges tomorrow. The storms, which also originated from an earlier smaller Queensland cyclone, have arrived as an "inland sea" remains spread out over northern Victoria from floods in mid-January. A body of water about 95 kilometres long and 50 kilometres wide has been advancing slowly on the Murray River town of Swan Hill, 340 kilometres northwest of the state capital Melbourne.

The latest rains will also feed into the swollen Murray, Australia's longest river, as well as flooded tributaries, such as the Campaspe, Avoca and Loddon Rivers. Sandbagging continued for days at Swan Hill, where the Murray is now thought to have peaked at 4.56 metres, just below the height of the town levee. Earlier, on January 19, signs of a partial levee breach led emergency authorities to warn residents of nearby Kerang, a town of 4,000 people, to evacuate quickly or face days without electricity, water, sewerage or telephone connections. About 1,000 people chose to remain and were isolated by floodwaters.

Outlying communities between Swan Hill and

Kerang have suffered levee problems and failures. More than 100 houses have been damaged in the region. Emergency services have focussed on the areas around Benjeroop, Koroop, Lake Charm, Murrabit, Mystic Park and Lake Boga, with a number of rivers and creeks breaching their banks, isolating residents for up to two weeks. Residents around Kerang have begun returning to their homes, to start counting the cost to livestock, fodder, machinery and houses. Some could only access their homes via boat due to low-lying water. Numerous roads remain closed.

Since the Victorian floods began on January 12, an eight-year-old boy, Lachlan Collins, has drowned, 83 towns and hamlets have been inundated, and 5,000 people have been forced to evacuate. About 1,800 rural properties have been affected, with 250 buildings destroyed, and 22,000 sheep, 300,000 poultry and 600 cattle lost. The Victorian Department of Primary Industry estimates the damage to agriculture—livestock, fruit and grain—at \$1.5 billion to \$2 billion.

All the towns affected by the floods across the north-west and west of Victoria face huge clean-up tasks. At Rochester, on the Northern Highway, 80 percent of the town was under water and 80 families have not been able to return to their homes because they were so badly damaged. Other towns such as Charlton and Beaufort were swamped, as were parts of Horsham, Dimboola and Warracknabeal.

Government assistance for flood victims is grossly inadequate, and subject to stringent means tests. There are emergency grants up to \$1,067 per household, and up to \$26,000 for temporary accommodation costs and for structural damage and loss of household contents.

For flooding between August 2010 and January 2011, primary producers and small businesses can apply for grants of up to \$25,000.

Just as evidence is emerging in Queensland that much of the flood damage was caused by government cost-cutting and neglect of flood mitigation, land planning and warning systems, signs have surfaced of similar culpability in Victoria. This week, the *Sunday Age* revealed that the former state Labor government refused to provide funds for a flood management system recommended to it by the public emergency agencies in October 2007.

The new system was proposed by the State Emergency Service, Melbourne Water, the Bureau of Meteorology, the State Flood Policy Committee and the emergency services commissioner, following extensive flooding in the east of Victoria in 2007. By baulking at an investment of \$11 million for the new web-based system known as Floodzoom, the Labor government left ordinary people without timely warning of flooding, and hampered the co-ordination of prevention measures.

According to a Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development report at that time, Victoria had “significant deficiency” in its flood emergency response. Emergency workers had few tools to issue accurate flood warnings, resulting in “confusion and uncertainty”. It was also difficult to provide a clear depiction of the extent, severity and movement of a live flood situation.

Residents of the small town of Wickliffe in western Victoria have spoken out, calling for a better warning system, after they were forced to make hasty evacuations due to flash flooding in the early hours of January 15. Eight of the village’s 12 residences were inundated. Like some residents in Queensland, they had no warning that they were at risk. General media warnings of flood peaks made no mention of the rising waters in the Hopkins River, which hit the township.

The present Liberal Party state premier, Ted Baillieu, has joined his federal party leader Tony Abbott in opposing the Gillard federal Labor government’s

proposed flood levy to cover part of the cost of rebuilding damaged infrastructure. Baillieu has cited concerns about the “inflationary impact” of the levy, and doubts about how the money would be spent.

It remains unclear how much of Gillard’s planned \$5.6 billion fund would be earmarked for Victoria. Visiting a flood response centre in Bendigo on January 28, Gillard said \$1 billion would be needed for flood relief outside Queensland, but gave no details. These tensions highlight the inadequacy of the package, which is directed toward restoring the economic infrastructure required by major mining and other companies, not aiding the working people and small farmers made destitute by the floods.

Local councils, some of which have suffered three floods in five months, face extreme difficulties. Mayors from 14 affected municipalities have appealed to the Gillard government for aid to repair hundreds of kilometres of damaged roads and bridges. Neil Pankhurst, the mayor of Campaspe, which covers the towns of Rochester and Echuca, said September floods and late November floods had already left his shire with a \$750,000 clean-up bill.

Flood modelling conducted for Melbourne Water has predicted that parts of Melbourne’s aging drainage infrastructure would be overwhelmed by flooding once every three years by 2030, as rainfall events become more intense due to climate change. More of the city would be vulnerable to inundation, as the drainage system struggled to cope with storms that were expected to drop 30 percent more rain by 2030.

These are just the latest revelations. Last month, the *Age* reported that a new version of Victoria’s flood management strategy was running two years late. All the conditions are being created for another catastrophe.



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