

Unanswered questions as Australian flood inquiry ends first stage

Richard Phillips
11 June 2011

The official inquiry into the Queensland floods that killed 35 people and flooded tens of thousands of homes, farms and small businesses across the northern Australian state earlier this year completed its first round of public hearings on May 27. While testimony from flood victims and emergency workers exposed the lack of official warnings and inadequate emergency and rescue responses, many questions remain unanswered.

Queensland Labor Premier Anna Bligh established the \$17 million inquiry to dissipate the anger of flood victims and deflect attention from government cost-cutting and corporate-driven decisions on dam operations and land-development that worsened the disaster.

A major focus of the inquiry has been management of the government-owned Wivenhoe Dam, 80 kilometres northwest of the state capital, Brisbane. Since its construction in the early 1980s, Brisbane residents have been assured by government authorities that the dam would prevent major flooding.

Wivenhoe Dam and the associated Somerset facility, however, proved incapable of dealing with the torrential downpours in December and January. Wivenhoe quickly reached its storage limit, compromising its structural integrity and forcing operators to make massive water releases that ensured the inundation of almost 20,000 homes in Brisbane and the satellite city of Ipswich on January 12.

In 2007, a government inquiry had noted that Wivenhoe and Somerset failed to meet national guidelines on acceptable flood capacity. That investigation proposed several options to boost storage capacity but these were rejected as too expensive.

The inquiry has released submissions from six hydrologists—most of them commissioned by various water authorities, including South East Queensland Water (SEQW), which manages the dams. Predictably, the majority insist that the facility was operated “according to the manual”, and that earlier water releases would have done little to stop flooding in Brisbane. Any finding that Wivenhoe operators failed to follow the operating manual could result in multi-million dollar damage suits by flood survivors and insurance corporations, an outcome the state authorities are anxious to prevent.

Submissions by some expert witnesses, however, were critical. WMA Water hydrologist Mark Babister said the manual had “limitations” and failed to account for the “natural inclination” of operators to withhold dam releases for legal reasons. Babister said modern hydrology modelling systems were not being used. The more than 20-year-old manual should be “updated” because its release guidelines did not take into account weather forecasts.

Environmental engineer Max Winders, who also made a submission, told the media that the manual was “hopeless” and narrowly focused on river flows, rather than the river heights. He claimed that there was “very little professional support for the terms of the manual and no support for its efficiency”.

The inquiry was told that officially predicted river levels on January 12 in Ipswich, which is on the confluence of the Brisbane and Bremer rivers, were suddenly increased by 10 metres, with little warning from authorities. More than 3,000 Ipswich properties—homes, shops and local businesses—were devastated.

One of the many examples was Gables Caravan Village in Goonda, which was home to 120 people, most of them aged or disabled pensioners, or unemployed. It was totally destroyed when the river rose 19 metres in a matter of hours. Most of the residents remain homeless.

Caravan village owner Jennifer Beattie told the inquiry she had developed a flood evacuation plan with the State Emergency Service (SES) but by the time she received an SMS disaster alert, her property was already inundated.

Beattie said her assistant manager was unable to reach the Ipswich SES on the two phone numbers provided. She then phoned Ipswich Council and was told that “there was no real emergency” in the area, and to “leave the line free for people in more serious situations.” Beattie said the caravan park residents had no time to empty their vans of belongings and lost everything.

Brisbane’s *Courier-Mail* has reported that the Department of Environment and Resource Management, SEQWater, and local councils are currently reviewing the dam operating manuals. But even if management procedures are modified, this will do nothing

to address the systemic problems—including the lack of serious flood mitigation measures and the real estate development on flood plains.

On May 24, the Brisbane City Council released the findings of its own investigation and submitted it to the state inquiry. The Liberal-National Party dominated council, like the Bligh Labor government, is anxious to cover-up its political responsibility for the social disaster.

Initiated by Campbell Newman, the city's mayor from 2004 until April this year, the council inquiry held no public hearings. It praised the council's floods response as "highly creditable", even though more than 14,000 homes were inundated along the Brisbane River. The city's major food market and river transport system were also seriously damaged and millions of dollars were lost by small businesses.

The inquiry also took evidence on flooding in central Queensland, including Rockhampton and the regional towns of Emerald and Theodore. Rockhampton city mayor Brad Carter testified that he had experienced major problems securing assistance from the state government, which delayed establishing flood barriers to protect the local airport. The city was isolated for several weeks from January 4.

Theodore was inundated during December and January. All its residents had to be rescued in early January, making it the first Queensland town in history to be entirely evacuated. Cotton grower Fleur Anderson told the inquiry that there was no official monitoring of flood-prone creeks near Theodore. Her entire cotton crop was destroyed and the family forced to abandon their property when the floodwaters peaked.

A submission by farmer Max Mayne from Rolleston, about 190 kilometres north-west of Theodore, explained that his crops and machinery were destroyed. The only flood warning he received was a phone call from a neighbour. People were "left to fend for themselves," he stated. Mayne used his farm helicopter to rescue victims, including of a group of people trapped in their car for two days. He was denied access to aviation fuel by state authorities and had to rely on supplies from local farmers.

Long-time Emerald resident Alan Mann made clear that changes to the natural flow patterns of the Nogoa River by the local council seriously worsened the flood's impact. More than 1,000 homes and 95 percent of local businesses were engulfed when the river reached a peak of 16 metres on December 31. Emerald was cut off for the next three to four weeks.

Mann told the hearing on May 24 that a council-approved industrial development had filled in natural water courses. He wrote to the Central Highland regional council in 2008 warning about the consequences of the development. These concerns were rejected. Last December, the local mayor issued a press release denigrating residents who had begun to voice fears about the

impending flood disaster. Their unease, the mayor declared, was not based on "official reports" and residents should take a "chill pill".

Mann's submission noted that the nearby Fairbairn Dam, which is operated by the government's Sunwater company, had overflowed in 2008 but that residents' calls for the facility to be upgraded had been dismissed out of hand as "too expensive".

Mine-related earthworks led to the Theresa Creek and the Nogoa and Mackenzie rivers systems overwhelming levees, according to a submission from state opposition National-Liberal MP Vaughan Johnson. The local MP, who is attempting to capitalise on the anger of flood survivors, declared that the current system of floodplain management "cannot cope with the resources boom".

The inquiry has adjourned, pending the release of an interim finding in August. Future hearings are scheduled to investigate land-use planning and development, and the response of the insurance corporations. It is already clear that the state and federal governments will not do anything that affects their budgetary bottom lines or corporate profits, including those of the mining, real estate and insurance industries.

Federal Attorney-General Robert McClelland last month told a seminar organised by the Institute of Actuaries of Australia that people should "stop viewing the taxpayer"—i.e., the government—"as the default insurer against disasters". Even as thousands of flood survivors remained in makeshift accommodation, McClelland declared: "Put simply, it is counter-productive if government assistance acts as a disincentive to people taking steps to build their own resilience, such as taking out insurance."

Insurance companies have provoked intense public anger by refusing to compensate many policy-holders. Many other victims were either under-insured or uninsured. McClelland's statement was music to the ears of insurance executives, and was another clear signal that the Labor government will not lay a finger on the major corporations.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact