

Australia: Queensland floods report covers up government responsibility

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The Queensland government's royal commission into the floods that hit the north-eastern Australian state early this year, killing 35 people and inundating over 29,000 homes and businesses, released an interim report last week.

The report exposes grossly inadequate emergency support and rescue services, serious lack of flood mitigation measures and major problems in the operations of the government-owned Wivenhoe Dam, near the state capital Brisbane.

Yet it fails to indict those politically responsible for these catastrophic failures: the state Labor government, the federal Gillard government and their predecessors. Cost-cutting and market-driven policies by consecutive federal and state governments drastically worsened the situation facing the flood victims.

Much of the 266-page report deals with Wivenhoe Dam, built following the last great Brisbane flood in 1974. Successive governments, local councils and property developers claimed it would protect residents from major flooding. The report confirms, however, that the dam, which is commercially operated by the South East Queensland Water Corporation (SEQW), quickly reached its capacity.

A joint government-SEQW feasibility report in 2007, which called for the height of Wivenhoe and Somerset dams to be increased in order to meet national flood capacity guidelines, was rejected for budgetary reasons. Then, between October and December last year, despite forecasts of heavy rains, Queensland Minister for Energy and Water Utilities Stephen Robertson and SEQW operators rejected calls by flood experts and local irrigators for preliminary releases to lower the dam's water level.

Bureau of Meteorology regional director Jim Davidson also met with Premier Anna Bligh and other cabinet members on January 4, warning of the impending disaster. A few days later, the water pouring into the dam threatened the structure itself, forcing operators to release huge volumes, which inundated Ipswich and Brisbane on January 10 and 11.

According to the report, SEQW flood engineers breached the Wivenhoe operating manual by failing to use "forecast rainfall

information" when calculating water releases from the dam. SEQW management claimed that the forecasts were unreliable, even though a La Niña weather pattern had already produced record rainfall during 2010.

The report states that the operating manual was "ambiguous" and had not been updated for several years, and that SEQW's flood preparations were "inadequate." Subsequent modelling by SEQW revealed that peak outflows from Wivenhoe in mid-January could have been 45 percent lower—and flooding substantially reduced—if the dam had been reduced to 75 percent of its full capacity in advance.

Despite this revealing evidence, the report mildly rebukes Energy and Water Utilities Minister Robertson for failing to clarify "confusion" in his department and other agencies about early water releases. Following the report's publication, Robertson flatly defended his actions, telling ABC Radio: "I believe I did my job and I acted on the advice from my agencies as it was provided to me." Premier Bligh told the media that no action would be taken against Robertson.

This was in keeping with Bligh's overall response to the report. She feigned concern, saying she had "learnt" from the disaster and would act differently "with the benefit of hindsight". Her comments were entirely cynical. It was not a question of "hindsight". The state government was fully aware of the disastrous state of its critical services.

Urgent recommendations were made in the 2009 O'Sullivan review of disaster management in Queensland, calling for "comprehensive interlinking" between state, district and local level disaster management, including a unified communication system.

In September 2010, the government received a further warning from a Flood Risk Management audit. It declared there was "no clearly identified lead agency" responsible for "overall strategic co-ordination of flood management policy across Queensland" and "no consistent approach for flood modelling and planning". This, it warned, could have "a catastrophic impact".

Determined not to increase business tax rates or boost

emergency service funding, the Bligh government did little. The report provides examples of major breakdowns in emergency communications and lack of coordination. It points to serious undermanning in emergency and rescue services, inadequate training and insufficient resources.

Many local councils lacked the financial and manpower resources to develop adequate emergency responses, with tragic results in the Lockyer Valley, about 100 kilometres west of Brisbane where 17 people were killed on January 10. Most of those who lost their lives had no official notification of the flash flooding that engulfed their communities.

The Labor government failed to establish uniform state-wide information and communication technology. Councils, police, emergency services and government agencies were using different systems. SMS emergency warnings systems either malfunctioned, were not initiated, or sent confusing and contradictory messages to residents. Several councils had no back-up power supplies and lost communications during the emergency. The State Emergency Service's hotline collapsed after it was unable to deal with the huge number of calls it received. It also lacked enough personnel and appropriate flood rescue boats.

The Queensland Fire and Rescue Service was not properly equipped to deal with the disaster either. It did not have its full quota of swift-water rescuers—only 203 had been trained, 50 less than the approved quota—and their equipment was substandard or non-existent.

Many fire trucks lacked life jackets for all rescuers, rescue radios were not water-resistant and many crews had to share one radio between four firefighters. Nor were firefighters involved in helicopter evacuations trained in using rescue winches and other equipment. At the height of the emergency, senior officials ignored or rejected desperate calls for off-duty personnel to be made available in some areas.

The helicopter rescue service had no clear lines of command. In some cases, pilots had to deal with seven state, federal and local agencies, resulting in conflicting demands about where, when and who they should rescue.

The report issued over 170 recommendations—many of them already required under existing disaster planning laws—to be implemented before this year's wet season. They include a reduction of Wivenhoe dam levels to 75 percent if the Bureau of Meteorology predicts a heavy rainy season, and unified warning and communications systems.

Bligh pledged to adopt the recommendations but said local councils would have to find their own resources to implement those relating to them. Councils have objected that this will impose onerous costs on residents, who have been hit by flood insurance hikes—up to 66 percent—and the financial burdens associated with rebuilding their devastated homes and properties.

The report is completely silent on the role of federal governments—past and present—and their refusal to provide adequate resources for flood mitigation or emergency response measures. No serious dam construction or water conservation measures have been developed over the past 30 years. Flood, bushfire and other emergency response work remains heavily reliant on volunteers.

Federal funding for disaster management remains all but non-existent. The Gillard government announced last week that it would provide just \$3.6 million this financial year under the National Emergency Management Program to “assist communities better prepare for, respond to and recover from natural disasters and emergencies.”

As for Canberra's \$5.6 billion flood disaster relief fund, the money is not primarily for individuals and small businesses devastated by the floods, or for under-resourced local agencies, but to repair infrastructure for mining and other major business operators. These funds, moreover, came from a tax levy on working people and cuts to education and other social services.

The interim report failed to touch another key issue—the profitable relations between property developers and governments that have allowed extensive development, including homes, in flood plains. The commissioners claim that this and insurance issues will be examined in their final report next February.

As the Socialist Equality Party noted in a statement on January 29, the purpose of the official inquiry is not to initiate measures to protect ordinary Queensland people from future disasters, but to protect the governments that failed to provide adequate flood mitigation and emergency services.

The author also recommends:

Australia's floods: a failure of government and the profit system
[29 January 2011]



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