

Australian flood crisis continues as questions mount over government preparations

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The flood crisis that has hit large parts of south-east Queensland and northern New South Wales over the past week is continuing to affect thousands of people, with floodwaters peaking in the Queensland regional centre of Rockhampton today.

Outlying areas of the city, which has a population of around 80,000, have already been submerged by the slow-moving floodwaters, with the Fitzroy River rising to a level of nearly nine metres, the benchmark of a major flood disaster. Record rainfalls in the aftermath of Cyclone Debbie, which made landfall in south-east Queensland on Tuesday last week, have concentrated in the Fitzroy River catchment.

Over 200 homes in Rockhampton were thought to have been damaged by floodwaters as of Wednesday. The airport, along with schools and many businesses in the city have been closed since early this week.

Authorities have warned that another 300 homes and businesses are likely to be inundated today. Over 3,000 more properties are expected to be directly affected by the flood. Warnings have been issued that the disaster will have a “devastating” impact on the local economy.

The floodwaters are not expected to subside for between 24 and 48 hours, meaning that many residents will be isolated, with the prospect of widespread power outages.

Questions have already emerged over the lack of government action to prevent inundation of the city, which is one of the most flood prone in the country. The current flood is the fourth to have hit Rockhampton in the past seven years, but authorities at the local, state and federal levels have resisted calls for the construction of a protective levee.

In 2011, the city suffered substantial damage in floods that swept over large parts of Queensland. The economic cost was estimated at \$35 million.

Rockhampton was again struck by floods in 2013, and in 2015 it was hit by a cyclone and flow-on flooding.

Calls for the construction of a levee were first made in 1992, following severe floods the previous year. In 2015, proposals were discussed for a \$50 million levee, which would have protected an estimated 1,500 properties, through the construction of a 7.2 kilometre embankment. The plan was scuttled over costs.

Responding to criticisms over the past days, Rockhampton Mayor Margaret Strelow declared that the local council did not have sufficient funds to build a levee. Instead, it has prepared for the current inundation by erecting makeshift structures in parts of the city. The barriers are down the middle of flood-affected streets, meaning that residents on the wrong side will likely suffer inundation.

The council has suffered a number of budgetary crises. Between 2011 and 2013 it reportedly spent more than \$6 million repairing flood-damaged roads and infrastructure.

Questioned about the absence of a levee on a Channel Nine television broadcast this morning, Queensland Labor premier Annastacia Palaszczuk blandly stated that her government was “open to the idea.” Any measures, however, she said, would need to be backed by the federal government, which has also resisted allocating funds to flood mitigation.

Residents have also voiced anger over the impact of power outages. Reg Dummett, told the *Australian* yesterday that his electricity had been off for the previous two days, the first time he has suffered a flood-related outage in 40 years.

“It’s ridiculous. I’m a pensioner and I’m having to run a generator paying, I don’t know how much, for fuel,” Dummett said. As in other areas of the state, those affected by the floods can apply for a government

grant of just \$180.

The dire social consequences of last week's flooding in New South Wales (NSW) are also becoming clear. Damages across the state are estimated at \$200 million. The regional centre of Lismore, in northern NSW, was among the worst hit.

Lismore has a flood levee, but the structure, built in 2005, was only designed to withstand one in ten year floods, and was breached last Friday by floodwaters that were the highest since 1974. The entire central business district was submerged and hundreds of homes were damaged.

On Monday, Liberal-National Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull was confronted by Steven Krieg, a small business owner, during a stage-managed visit to Lismore.

Krieg denounced the state and federal government for offering loans, rather than grants, to small businesses devastated by the floods, and contrasted the response to the hundreds of millions of dollars provided by successive governments to the major car companies, which are ending production in Australia at the end of the year.

Krieg, who said he was already "up to his eyeballs" in debt, commented: "If you come back in six months, you'll just about see 50 to 80 percent of those businesses still not open ... I'm facing the fact that if I don't open my doors I'm going to have to sell my house to pay the rent." Many businesses and homes were uninsured, with some insurance companies charging premiums of \$30,000 a year in flood-prone areas.

The city is littered with piles of debris and mud on front lawns, including severely damaged household items, and material that was scattered by the floods. The local council has declared that it is unable to move the volume of rubbish that has accumulated, and has said that some of it may remain in the city for up to a month.

Greg Bell from the North Coast Public Health Unit warned of the potential health impact of the debris, telling the ABC yesterday: "Whatever was on the land ends up in the water—chemicals, oil, dead animals, septic tanks have overflowed, sewerage plants have been on bypass so they can't pump and it goes into the floodwater. As the water goes down, that material goes into the mud."

The flood crisis in Queensland and NSW has claimed at least seven lives, while three men are still missing in Queensland. On Monday, tragedy struck when a car carrying Stephanie King and her three children slid into the Tweed River in northern NSW. King and two of her children perished.

In the immediate aftermath of the accident, police authorities stated that the road had been closed, before backtracking on the claim amid anger from local residents.

One of King's friends, Sally Fraser, wrote on Facebook: "I hope people keep demanding the truth, that the road was not closed. Even buses were using that road. I knew immediately when I heard, it couldn't have been closed, because I know for a fact you would never EVER put your kids in harm's way." The deaths will be the subject of a coronial investigation.

As in previous disasters, the current floods have underscored the manifestly inadequate character of federal and state government preparations for natural disasters which are a predictable and routine occurrence. Flood-mitigation measures are stymied by governments committed to budget cuts on behalf of big business, while residents in affected areas are often left to fend for themselves.



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