

Unprecedented flooding in Auckland, New Zealand

Tom Peters
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Large parts of Auckland have been flooded after New Zealand's biggest city, home to 1.6 million people, was hit with the equivalent of nearly a full summer's worth of rain in just 15 hours last Friday. More than 25 suburbs have been impacted. Parts of the Waikato, Bay of Plenty, Northland and Coromandel regions have also experienced flooding, slips and damage to roads and infrastructure.

Four people have died so far: one in a landslide that brought down a house in the suburb of Remuera; two people in floods in the Wairau Valley on the North Shore, and another man was swept away by floodwaters in the rural area of Onewhero.

Auckland and other areas in the north of the country experienced more torrential rain today, delaying clean-up efforts and probably causing further damage. The flooding is likely to be among New Zealand's most destructive and costly weather events. The Insurance Brokers Association estimates that the industry will face close to \$1 billion in claims.

Last night, Auckland Transport was reporting 46 road closures or partial closures. Public transport remains severely disrupted. Auckland airport was flooded, forcing it to shut down completely on Friday and part of Saturday, disrupting tens of thousands of people's travel. The Ministry of Education has ordered all schools and universities in Auckland to close until February 7 so they can be inspected; at least 20 have been damaged.

Some food crops in the town of Pukekohe have been wiped out. The local Vegetable Growers Association told the *New Zealand Herald* this would impact on food prices, which already recorded their biggest increase in three decades over the past year.

As of Monday evening, Auckland council inspectors had issued red or yellow stickers to nearly 400 houses

and other buildings, meaning they are unsafe. This is only the tip of the iceberg, with about 5,000 total inspections scheduled. Insurance companies have already received more than 9,000 claims for damage.

Three evacuation centres were set up on Friday and *Stuff* reports that "500 Aucklanders have requested accommodation assistance with more than 80 staying in emergency accommodation." Many people, however, were left to fend for themselves as the disaster unfolded.

David Letele, who runs a foodbank charity in working class South Auckland, told *One News* that he visited a family whose house had been yellow stickered and found "five children sleeping on a wet mattress, the carpet soaked, they're worried about the toilet: the sewage has come up through it." Letele's team had also visited a disabled man who had been "forgotten about... he was on the ground, in pain." South Auckland is one of the poorest areas in the country and was among the worst-affected by COVID-19.

Letele described the official response to the floods as an "absolute disgrace" and called for Auckland mayor Wayne Brown to resign. An online petition calling for the right-wing mayor to step down has received more than 17,000 signatures.

The council has been criticised for waiting until nearly 10 p.m. on Friday before publicly declaring a state of emergency, enabling the central government to support the emergency response. Four people had already died. According to *Stuff*, "By 4 p.m. flooding had already forced people out of their homes. By 5 p.m. emergency services were receiving hundreds of calls." No emergency text messages were sent to residents on Friday, leaving people in the dark about the severity of the situation.

This morning the *New Zealand Herald* published

leaked text messages sent by Brown to a group of his “tennis mates” on Saturday, complaining that he had to cancel a planned tennis match the next day. “I’ve got to deal with media drongos over the flooding tomorrow so sadly no tennis for me tomorrow,” he wrote.

In an interview with Radio NZ on Saturday, Brown defended the council’s response and lack of preparedness by saying “this is an unprecedented event. It will be interesting to see just how well-prepared Wellington is when the earthquake strikes.” Following outrage over such dismissive and arrogant statements, Brown later issued a mealy-mouthed apology, telling reporters “there have been hiccups. I accept our communications have not been good enough.”

Meanwhile, the flooding continues, posing serious risks including water-borne illnesses. Four of Auckland’s ten sewage pumping stations have been damaged, causing wastewater to spill into the harbour. The council agency Watercare says it may be a week before they can be repaired.

While power has reportedly been restored throughout Auckland, about 1,000 homes in West Auckland are still without running water.

The delayed response and the indifference of political leaders have caused widespread and justified anger. It is also clear that the flooding was made worse by decades of neglect of basic infrastructure and planning.

Successive councils and Labour and National Party governments have removed building and environmental regulations, increasing the risk to property and lives. In 2020, Forest & Bird reported that since 2001, at least 20 percent of Auckland’s wetlands (just over 5,000 hectares), which help mitigate floods, had been “partially destroyed.”

Following a major storm in March 2017, the *New Zealand Herald* cited council data which “showed the region has 52,000 properties sitting in a flood plain,” and that “16,000 homes, commercial or industrial buildings were exposed to a flood risk.”

Writing in the *Conversation*, Auckland University planning lecturer Timothy Welch said “the network of basins and pipes is aging. With age, the system’s capacity to capture stormwater significantly declines. Modernising all the stormwater infrastructure will take decades and billions of dollars.” He called for better planning of parks and “floodable infrastructure” to mitigate future extreme weather events.

Welch continued: “The stark reality is the flooding we experienced this week, and arguably the storm itself, are of our own making. We’ve built a supercity covered in impervious surfaces, expanded the built environment across sensitive (and flood-prone) areas, and created massive greenhouse gas emissions destabilising the climate.”

Wellington-based professor of climate science James Renwick also wrote on January 28: “The country’s stormwater drain system was designed for the climate we used to have—50 or more years ago. What we need is a stormwater system designed for the climate we have now, and the one we’ll have in 50 years from now... We also need to stop burning fossil fuels and get global emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases down as fast as we can.”

It is widely acknowledged, including by the Labour-Greens coalition government, that climate change contributed to the record rainfall and ongoing flooding. Internationally, such extreme events, like the recent floods in California and Australia, are more and more frequent.

Despite the government’s empty promises to address the issue, it refuses to take any substantive action that would impact on the profits of big polluting companies. Between 1990 and 2019 New Zealand’s carbon emissions soared by 26.4 percent.



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