

Australian audit report reveals severe housing shortages after 2022 floods

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The New South Wales (NSW) auditor-general last week delivered a revealing report on the severe and ongoing shortages of housing after major flood events in the Australian state's Northern Rivers and Central West regions in 2022.

Nearly two years on from the Northern Rivers floods, the report found that the amount of temporary housing provided fell far short of the demand. Moreover, no plans were in place to transition people out of the inadequate temporary housing such as caravans and modular "pods."

The report focussed only on housing and attributed the post-flood housing failure to a lack of government "planning" for such disasters. Nevertheless, it shed light on the wider government indifference, and broken promises, to the thousands of victims of the floods.

It also pointed to the continuing failure of the federal and state Labor governments to address the underlying issues of climate change-related catastrophes, the lack of critical infrastructure and the broader profit-driven housing crisis.

The report noted the scale of the disaster in the Northern Rivers, which left 4,055 properties uninhabitable and damaged another 10,849, according to government estimates.

"The flooding in the region was extensive, affecting towns including Lismore, Coraki, Woodburn and Ballina. Between late February and early April 2022, 13 lives were lost in the Northern Rivers floods... Approximately 4,000 people had to be evacuated from Lismore alone during this period, with thousands displaced from their homes across the region."

After residents spent months living in campervans or other poor housing, almost 550 dwelling units were eventually established on 11 temporary "pod" and caravan housing sites across the Northern Rivers in the

year following the floods. The report found that these "did not meet the forecast demand."

The "pods" villages and caravan sites "progressively became available throughout late 2022 and were all constructed by the end of March 2023." That was more than a year after the floods.

"This number of dwellings did not meet the demand for temporary housing, which exceeded 1,100 households by November 2022." In addition, "as at 10 July 2023, 1,021 people were in the temporary housing villages and 257 caravans were on people's property."

Last November, 724 households remained on the official waiting list for temporary housing in the Northern Rivers. They were essentially homeless. "These households were in a variety of housing situations when they applied for temporary housing. For example, 156 were staying with family and friends, 24 were in emergency accommodation, and 136 had no accommodation."

The worst crisis existed in Lismore, the main regional city, where only one "pods" village was established, housing just 52 households. That was "significantly short" of the forecast need for over 600 dwellings in the city. As a result, many Lismore residents were forced out of the city to try to find accommodation elsewhere.

The report admitted that many people living in the government's temporary housing were unlikely to be able to move out within the legislated five-year time frame for the closure of the sites because of the lack of affordable housing across the region. "The current housing supply gap in the Northern Rivers is estimated to be upwards of 24,000 dwellings," it stated.

In the anodyne language of the report: "External pressures including broader housing stress in the region which existed prior to the floods, and the limited viability of existing social and affordable housing

options, have placed additional demand on the program, and limit options for residents to secure long-term housing.”

This is part of a nationwide crisis produced by soaring property prices, 13 government-central bank mortgage interest rate hikes since May 2022 and skyrocketing rents. The report disclosed that 70 percent of the flood victims were renters, for whom no government relief has even been promised.

The report said the housing situation showed a government failure to learn “lessons” from the 2019-20 bushfire disaster, when temporary housing was provided, “albeit on a smaller scale.”

In fact, governments largely left residents to rescue and fend for themselves during and after both catastrophes.

The report revealed that despite the Northern Rivers housing crisis, the state government’s Resilience NSW agency used “excess pods” from the Northern Rivers region to reduce the waiting times in the state’s Central West, where floods devastated towns like Eugowra in November 2022.

The report was released just days after the state Labor government of Premier Chris Minns unveiled its latest inadequate proposal for the Northern Rivers. On February 9, Minns announced a yet-to-be detailed plan to set aside supposed flood-free land for about 400 new dwellings in East Lismore.

The land is not expected to “come onto the market” until 2026, too late to help most of the flood victims. In addition, only 20 percent of the land has been designated for “affordable housing.”

This announcement, just one of a long line of betrayals by the federal and state Labor governments, following those of the hated Liberal-National governments that were in place in early 2022.

In October 2022, Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and then Liberal-National NSW Premier Dominic Perrottet jointly visited Lismore to attempt to appease angry residents over the lack of government assistance. Together, they announced a “Resilient Homes” scheme to buy back, lift or repair flood-damaged homes. They promised to provide \$1.5 billion for it if necessary.

Across the six local government areas impacted by the floods, 6,700 homeowners initially expressed interest in buy-backs, but the state and federal

governments, now both Labor, last year effectively halved the scheme to \$750 million. As a result, only 1,100 buy-backs are budgeted for, plus 400 house raisings or retrofits to either lift homes above flood levels or renovate them to supposedly withstand flood damage.

Far from proposing any challenge to this government deception and contempt, the audit report offers several recommendations that could compound the hardships. They include “determine a timeline for demobilising the temporary housing villages” and “develop a strategy to manage the transition of people into long-term accommodation.”

Anger is still simmering across the Northern Rivers. Residents are planning a convoy to the state’s parliament to link up with other communities to demand “a fully-funded flood recovery.”

The situation facing flood victims across the Northern Rivers is not an aberration. It demonstrates the indifference of capitalist governments of all stripes towards the hardships facing working people everywhere as a result of their profit-driven policies.

While refusing to meet dire housing needs, these governments are pouring hundreds of billions of dollars into military spending in preparation to join US-led wars, particularly against China, and into rejigged income tax cuts that still overwhelmingly favour the wealthy.

They are failing to seriously address climate change and approving new gas and other fossil fuel projects, making floods and other life-threatening catastrophes, such as bushfires, rising sea levels and droughts, more likely globally.



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