

20<sup>th</sup> September 2023

To Senator the Hon Murray Watt

Minister for Emergency Management

Thank you for the opportunity to inform the potential long-term options to uplift the Commonwealth's capabilities, which will be provided to the Commonwealth Government for consideration.

***In context of this submission***

I am based in the Clarence Valley in northern NSW, the southern gateway to the Northern Rivers of NSW and the eastern gateway to Australia's food bowl on the Liverpool Plains.

Our LGA covers the traditional lands of the Yaegl, Bundjalung and Gumbainggirr nations. 54,662 residents live, work and play here in 46 towns and villages while 4,254 operate a business.

The Clarence River is the largest coastal river system, is the largest catchment and has the largest coastal flood plain in NSW. The Clarence River travels just over 400 kilometres from source to sea and is the lifeblood of our region.

Her water catchment area is 22,716 square kilometres much of which is linked to the great eastern escarpment. The catchment is bound in the west from Stanthorpe to Glen Innes by the Great Dividing Range and in the south by the Doughboy Ranges and the Dorrigo Plateau; and in the north it's by the MacPherson Ranges, which forms part of the Queensland.

The eastern boundaries are defined by coastal ranges from Coffs Harbour to Yamba, where the river enters the ocean and the Richmond Ranges north of Iluka.

The Clarence floodplain consists of low lying, flat alluvial plains, intersected by lagoons, channels and creeks. The 800 square kilometre floodplain supports the largest combined offshore and estuary commercial fishing fleet in NSW as well as significant heritage primary industries of sugar cane, timber and beef cattle.

There are over 2,200 registered farms, one in four Clarence Valley businesses are directly related to the agrifood economy while more people are employed in this sector than any other sector making us the food bowl of the Northern Rivers region.

The catchment is cocooned by five national parks (20%) and state forest (30%).

The Clarence Valley was named in the top five worst impacted NSW regions in the 2019/20 black summer bushfires.

There was also a natural disaster declaration during the 2022 floods which saw the coastal village of Yamba record its highest rainfall since 1877 with a cumulative total for February and March being 1267 millimetres.

The Clarence River manages to flood biannually, and, in most cases, it is usually comes in three. The Clarence, Richmond and Tweed Valleys have been named in the top 10 regions for the worst impacts of flooding with climate change.

### ***In context of this submission***

My name is Debrah Novak, and I am making this submission as Chairperson of Clarence Valley Food Inc (CVFi), a NFP who advocates and networks for Clarence Valley primary producers and as a member of the Clarence Valley with lived experience in numerous natural disasters.

I have been a resident of the Clarence Valley for 40 years and I have covered natural disasters for 25 years in my previous role as a media journalist and press photographer.

I am also an elected local government Councillor to the Clarence Valley Council and in my second term. (These views are my personal views and are not that of Clarence Valley Council).

I am the chair of the Clarence Valley Floodplain Management Committee and the council representative on the Bush Fire Management Committee.

I have always taken a hands-on approach to support my community in times of need and have many years of lived experience as a previous volunteer with surf lifesaving and with the Clarence Valley mental health and well being committee. I also have a background as a nurse aid, event co-ordinator and farmers market co-ordinator.

During the past 40 years I have been supporting my community during natural disasters behind the scenes and sometimes on the front line.

This support included mobilising and organising food, cooking, tools, IBC tanks, fodder drops and rescues as well as playing an active role in sourcing and disseminating information across my digital platforms.

### ***In the context of this submission***

CVFi made submissions on behalf of our primary producers to the Royal Commission on fire and flood and natural disaster inquiries.

On the back of these submissions CVFi also applied for two grants to support our primary producers during times of natural disasters. Unfortunately, our local knowledge, lived experience and vision fell on political deaf ears.

These grants were:

- to audit what commodities existed within the Clarence Valley
- identify their logistical needs for continuity of their supply chain
- their critical needs during a natural disaster
- the critical food needs of community and business during a natural disaster
- identify gaps to secure human and livestock food supply chains in and out of the Clarence valley in a local and regional context
- potential for a local/regional natural disaster (food) triage and training centre at Grafton/Yamba Airport

Mr Murray you are absolutely 100% correct when you say “many of the most powerful stories of resilience are generated at the local level, and more often than not, the innovation and creativity of these ideas can be nurtured and adapted from one impacted community to support another.

A comprehensive approach to building our national capabilities and addressing these challenges can be drawn from our collective expertise, knowledge, and unique experiences”. However, this collective knowledge **is always ignored** by external agencies who are parachuted into regions or state government departments who put their interests ahead of local interest.

On the back of the 2022 Northern Rivers flood declarations numerous Lower Clarence people created support groups to help the folk in the Lower Richmond region during their darkest hours when there was no help forth coming from rescue and recovery agencies.

They are still supporting the Woodburn community 18 months later.

It is an appalling disgrace on the back of the 2022 apocalyptic event to see the recovery efforts continue to be so painfully slow in our region because of government bureaucracy, funds, incompetence, and neglect.

“Along with state and territory emergency services, local governments are an integral part of the emergency planning process, and play an important role in risk mitigation, land-use planning and land management”.

**Missing from this risk mitigation and emergency planning process** are the victims directly impacted by these natural disaster declarations. That is **community, business, people of colour or disability do not have a seat at these planning tables**.

Land use planning is governed by state planning laws and zombie developments approved 30 years ago are now being activated creating nightmare scenarios for emergency services who do not have the manpower to deal with rescues.

However, the elephant in the room truly is the lack of funding not forth coming from the state government to fix, maintain or renew flood mitigation that has not increased with CPI in over 30 years.

Adding to this nightmare scenario are the layers of red tape bureaucracy from external agencies, Crown Lands, DPI, EPA and Fisheries who appear to not understand the concept of quality customer service in a timely manner.

The barriers that should be removed is the level of power plays between rescue agencies, the volumes of red tape bureaucracy and the external incompetence of chain of command which should come from the bottom up not top down.

Incentives that could generate and grow key sectors across the spectrum of capabilities needed for local and regional emergency response and recovery is to train and pay local people to stand up in an emergency corps rather than parachuting external agencies days later.

To help you address the challenges outlined in this discussion paper, you may wish to consider the below answers to your questions:

1. Acknowledging the primary role of state and territories in emergency response, what longer-term capacities and capabilities does the Commonwealth need to develop to meet the challenges of the evolving strategic environment?
  - *Reverse the primary decision-making role back to the locals across all sectors who are already on the ground making decisions well before anyone turns up.*
  - *Legislate to include community, business and farm sector, people of colour, people with a disability to sit at the local emergency management committee table.*
  - *Establish, train and fund a local emergency corps who can be stood up and then sourced to support RFS and SES or other agencies in time of natural disasters.*
  
2. At a national level, what are likely to be the key pressure points or challenges for the Commonwealth responding to competing and concurrent crises?
  - *Lack of resources across multiple locations during a natural disaster event as in 2022 floods and 2019/2020 bushfires*
  - *Lack of finances to fund resources*
  - *Change of government is a barrier to continuity of emergency supply*
  - *Competition between multiple rescue and recovery agencies*
  - *Lack of crisis accommodation, food for humans, fodder for livestock*
  - *Lack of co-ordinated local/regional natural disaster triage centres*
  - *Water security compromised for both humans and livestock.*
  - *Power shutdown and outages compromising food, water and sewage security.*
  - *JIT logistics model has catastrophic failure/disruption during natural disasters*
  
3. How could the Commonwealth build community resilience and capability, so they are better able to respond to and recover from national-level crises?
  - *Develop a natural disaster template for villages and towns to customise and adopt to support their response.*
  - *Develop, train and fund a local LGA emergency corps (100 people) that is retained and paid like the NSW Fire Rescue. These people would ideally be local sports people aged between 16-40 who are already fit and used to a chain of command and teamwork.*
  - *Develop and fund a Joint Regional Organisational (JRO) natural disaster plan so Northern River's LGA's x 7 can support each other in a regional context and share resources during a natural disaster event.*
  
4. What changes in the current system are necessary to help Australia have the right capabilities and capacity to handle concurrent crises?
  - *Get rid of all red tape during a natural disaster.*
  - *Increase funding to local governments to build resilience*
  - *Unite rescue agencies (land, air and water) so they can share resources*
  - *Decentralise call centres*

5. What models could the Commonwealth explore to replace or supplement support currently provided by the ADF during domestic crisis?
- a. What does the right mix of Commonwealth capabilities look like?
    - *Commonwealth 50%, Local government 45%, state 5%*
  - b. How could a Commonwealth workforce surge capacity be replicated in a scalable, efficient and effective way?
    - *Train, fund, resource and retain 100 local people to be the surge workforce. Stop parachuting people in who are clueless about our regions.*
  - c. How could we harness the critical role of volunteers and civilian groups under this model?
    - *Develop, fund, train and resource a local emergency corps model like the retained firefighters for NSW Fire Rescue.*
    - *Create and fund an emergency training and management gap year for year 12 students finishing high school so they can gain life and work experience.*
  - d. How do these models supplement, but not replicate, existing models operating at a state and territory and local level?
    - *The emergency corps model supports local rescue and recovery agencies and at the same time provide career pathways for participants to emergency services and management.*
  - e. What role could industry / the private sector play? How can the Government attract increased investment in emergency management from the private sector?
    - *I strongly disagree with privatising natural disaster's so that religious and foreign owned companies make money off the misery and vulnerability of Australians during a natural disaster. I don't support private sector at all as this can lead to corruption and mercenary style culture. Private sector should be kept away at all costs. Government should invest in building capacity and capability of its local people for the long-term benefit of its community and the nation.*
  - f. What gaps currently exist in state and territory emergency management capability? Missing gaps include:
    - *Better maps for call centres so they know exactly where the villages are who are impacted by natural disasters.*
    - *Lack of regional triage centres (cold storage and holding bays alongside the M1) for the co-ordination and distribution of food and fodder*
    - *Greater funding for maintenance and renewal of flood mitigation*
    - *Greater funding for public works*
    - *Greater funding for renewal of assets and infrastructure*

6. Are there sectors that could replicate the capabilities provided by the ADF?
- *Yes invest in building local capacity to establish, fund, train, retain and resource a local emergency corps that can act as a career pathway to the ADF and Emergency Management Services beginning from year 10 at high school and beyond.*
7. What are the critical functions the Commonwealth Government should continue to perform in disaster relief and recovery, in support of local, state and territory governments?
- *Implement all the recommendations from all the bushfire and flood inquiries and royal commissions from over the past 50 years.*
  - *Provide funding to local government for greater involvement, oversee review processes and procedures of crisis functions, include permanent seat for local government in the National Cabinet.*
8. What legislative, regulatory or policy changes could be undertaken to make it financially viable for other sectors to contribute to a Commonwealth crisis response capability?
- *Stop spending money on consultants*
  - *Stop spending money on inquiries and royal commissions – you have all the answers you need*
  - *Streamline and simplify policies so they can be understood and acted on at a grassroots level*
  - *Give greater power to local communities to keep money spent in their local communities*
  - *Offer universal flood insurance*

I feel like this feedback will be an absolute waste of time because all the government stakeholders have way too much vested interest in maintaining the status quo.

At the end of the day when the Northern Rivers apocalyptic floods of 2022 happened, it reminded all of us of this fact, when the s\*#t hits the fan, and all communication channels are down, the only people who will have your back at that moment in time, are your family, neighbours and the hero's you are yet to meet.

No amount of money, government or agency intervention can ever substitute the willingness for someone to step up for their community in times of need. Community spirit is strengthened and born in times like these.

With thanks for the opportunity to put my thoughts in writing

Debrah Novak

