

Submission to 2022 Victorian Flood Inquiry

We would like to thank the Legislative Council of the Victorian Parliament for the opportunity to present our submission to the Inquiry into the 2022 Flood Event in Victoria. The wide reaching and long term impact of the October 2022 flood has been felt by many.

Background.

We are presenting this submission based on our direct experience as farmers and community members located within the Undera district of the Goulburn Valley, in the name of the Undera Flood Group, taking into consideration the impact on our immediate local area and considering the consequences on the broader area from Undera to McCoy's Bridge downstream of Shepparton on the Lower Goulburn River system.

Summary of impact:-

- Total area of land inundated 6500 hectares
- Farming enterprises
 - 10,000 head cattle
 - 4,500 head sheep
 - 200 plus horses
 - 3300 hectares crop
 - 1000 hectares hay / silage
 - 4000 bales fodder existing, lost to inundation
- Homes / Infrastructure
 - 25 homes surrounded by flood water
 - 6 homes inundated
 - Associated farm infrastructure, sheds, fencing

This submission is based on the following:-

- a. Lead up to flood and preparedness.
- b. During the flood event – function of levee banks, operation of Loch Garry.
- c. After the flood – recovery and repair.

a. Lead up to flood and preparedness.

The farmers of this district have extensive knowledge of land management and river systems of the Lower Goulburn and have experienced the challenge of floods on previous occasions. Some local families have five generations of experience, back to the mid 1800's. Consequently, many were well prepared and conscious of the seasonal circumstances leading to the flood event. The good seasonal conditions in the preceding months were contributing to a great yield potential and productivity, which would later be lost to the floods. With the River at minor flood levels for months and limited capacity in Lake Eildon, the picture was very similar to the previous large flood of 1993. Community meetings were conducted 2 weeks prior to the flood. Locals were encouraged to move livestock, attend to valuable assets and prepare homes. The community raised \$8000 which was used to purchase sand bags of which 3500 were purchased in Melbourne and used as a preventative measure to protect lower areas of levee banks. Multiple loads of sand were supplied. The community activity was undertaken independently, no assistance was provided by emergency services or the local shire, who were advised of the actions to prepare for the

flood. This was to be the pattern throughout the emergency. It was one week after the event before we heard back from the City of Greater Shepparton.

b. During the flood event.

During a flood event, some 180,000 plus ML of water pass through Shepparton and 80,000 ML pass through McCoy's Bridge downstream at the Murray Valley Highway.

Therefore, 100,000 ML of flood water need to "find a home" on the north and south sides of the Goulburn River. Naturally there is enormous pressure on the surrounding infrastructure, levees, property and community in this stretch of the River.

Our community acknowledges the preparation in the critical lead up to the event placed them in better stead for what was to come.

Levee banks were a priority as the first line of defence. We continued to attend to the "weak points" of the levee system. These low points on the banks are a result of wear and tear from vehicle access along public access roads for entry into the Lower Goulburn National Park ie into Crown Land.

It should not be the responsibility of the local landholders to attend to this. There is a lack of willingness and inconsistency amongst authorities to act on the issue of access and consequent damage to these structures.

Loch Garry – reflecting on the floods of 1993 it seems that history was repeating itself in the 2022 event and we ask what has been learned from the previous experience.

Past events should tell us what is likely to occur, the significance of timing in the removal of the bars and the action by Goulburn Murray Water to achieve the best possible outcome under the circumstances. The application of the current policy and procedures for the operation of Loch Garry does not allow for flexibility, local observations and knowledge of the specific circumstances of that event. The failure to remove the bars in a timely manner results in enormous consequences including the pressure exerted on the levee banks and Loch structure, the impact on the local community, on farming enterprises and on roads, bridges and public structures.

For example McCoy's Bridge is believed to have moved during the flood and consequently, a 20 tonne limit has been placed on the bridge and remains in place many months after the event. One farming enterprise is known to have driven some 9000 kilometers to access their property via an alternative route during harvest due to load limits on the bridge.

c. After the flood.

In the days following the flood, local people were anxious about returning to their properties to survey the damage and commence the recovery process.

Because of continued high river levels, local landholders constructed ring banks around existing wash outs. They commenced surveying the extent of damage on levee banks, aware of the vital importance to repair the damage.

Historically, these levee banks were constructed in the 1890's under a government unemployment work scheme. There has been a precedent set for the repair of these levee banks following flood events on many occasions, including 1993 following a significant flood and the last time major works were required.

We have counted 18 breaches totaling 450 lineal meters along 30 kilometers of levee banks.

The integrity of the levee banks is critical and without such, the community cannot return to “normal”. Over very many years properties have been bought and sold, business enterprises have drawn investment and the community has functioned and families have lived with the confidence and knowledge of the protection offered by these levee banks.

Given the risk the breaches pose, the high level of storage in Lake Eildon and the stress local people would continue to endure, our district made approaches to local Councils, State and Federal Members of Parliament and relevant authorities seeking a constructive approach to progress the restoration of the levee banks. We have received little to no response to our formal requests.

We are now aware of the document Victorian Floodplain Management Strategy, 2016 which deals with the restoration.

Section 17 refers to ‘beneficiary pays’ and ‘private benefits by protecting agricultural land’, determining it is easier to demonstrate the case for “these community benefits” (levee banks) in urban areas than it is for rural areas.

Farmers of our district were astonished to learn of the change to the previously applied restoration of levee banks, which according to the Strategy notes a purpose of the levees is the protection of human life and safety.

We strongly object to this policy which discriminates against rural people, families and communities and their safety and agricultural enterprises and is dismissive of the community / public assets also at risk and does not recognize the district for its productive capacity as food producers.

As the community has been unable to acquire funding to repair breaches we have been forced to privately fund the repairs. This is a considerable cost to those who have already experienced enormous loss and financial impact from the floods. This only exacerbates the anxiety, physical and mental stress experienced by rural communities in times of emergency and disaster.

Summary of recommendations:-

1. Flood plain management review – considering broad issues including long term vision for managing flood before reaching Shepparton, the point of greatest pressure.
2. Review Flood Plain Management Strategy regarding the return to Government shared responsibility for funding of levee banks to ensure they are repaired and reinstated following serious flood impact.
3. Review of Loch Garry management, operation and funding.
4. A coordinated system for the supply of sand bags in sufficient numbers based on local knowledge to achieve best outcomes.
5. A method to capture and respectfully recognize local knowledge and experience pertaining to flood and emergency management.
6. Systems developed within GMW to ensure information is captured and recorded to inform and educate future policy development and staff knowledge.
7. Greater emphasis on the role of planning in Local and State Government in relation to floods/natural disaster and the impact on river flow and systems as farming land is converted to development land.

8. Develop a strategic approach to disaster management through local network structures which optimize local knowledge, community coordination and communication with authorities and Local government through their role in Emergency Management and which genuinely encourages and supports resilience.

Conclusion.

Farmers are generally resilient by nature.

Emergency management research and policy refer to the significance of resilience as a major factor in a community's ability to prepare for, deal with and recover from a disaster. We have been practical, well prepared and pro-active in facing the flood and the aftermath. Importantly, we have been resilient in preparedness and in the face of the flood event. However, resilience and recovery is challenged when farmers and rural communities are left not only to fix, but also fund the recovery to be able to move on.

It is very difficult to be resilient when the previously applied, expected norms are changed ie levee banks. There is a distinction between rural/farming communities and urban communities and in the interpretation and application of support.

A business entity within an urban setting receives the benefit of levee banks where a business entity in a rural setting is left with the full financial burden to repair levee bank infrastructure which was not built by them or owned by them.

Given our location and proximity to the Lower Goulburn River we understand that flood events are an expected natural occurrence from time to time and that major flood events will occur, fortunately infrequently.

However, we believe there is scope to improve circumstances, before, during and after the event, to result in a better outcome for people, business, environment, economy and our Nation.

We appreciate the opportunity to provide this submission about our experiences and hope this can contribute to changes in operation, management, policy and procedures to achieve a better outcome for all and for future generations.