



## New South Wales state emergency service initiatives to reduce the impacts of flooding

*The Australian state of New South Wales expands its emergency service program to include disaster reduction as well as disaster relief.*

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Australia like many countries around the world has a history of settlement on floodplains, and many major cities and towns are located on river banks. New South Wales (NSW) is Australia's most populous state with nearly 7 million people, more than half of whom live in the Sydney metropolitan area. Serious floods in many of the state's river valleys in 1954 and 1955 convinced the government that a dedicated agency was needed to coordinate community responses to this frequently experienced threat. The NSW State Government's responsibility for managing the risk of flooding is a shared partnership among a number of agencies, including the New South Wales State Emergency Service (SES) as the lead agency.

The NSW SES was born mainly to address flooding. For many years the SES discharged this responsibility by means of 'on-the-day' activities such as sandbagging, doorknocking and

providing supplies to people cut off by floods. Very little of this work was planned beforehand and the benefits of the evolving new hydrometeorologically-based flood warning systems were not tapped. The SES formed few links with other agencies which had flood management roles to play, and little was done to help people in flood liable areas understand how they could act to protect their belongings and their personal safety.



On the day were not sufficient and it was recognized that the large-scale evacuation operations which are periodically necessary as floods approach cannot be conducted successfully without considerable and deliberate planning to ensure that the available time is well spent and that the many warning, traffic management and other tasks are efficiently managed. The same is true for managing property protection and resupply tasks. Preparation also allows efficient response to potential instances of dam failure or of flooding along the coast when storm surge events occur.

Since about 1990, SES has focused more attention on agency partnership development, the strengthening of its client focus, and on advance planning for the flood. The organisation now undertakes numerous initiatives which are preventative and preparatory in nature, in addition to the real-time response activities. For example, it is actively involved with the Commonwealth Bureau of Meteorology (the national flood forecaster) and local communities (principally through

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councils of local government) in the creation and improved functioning of flood warning systems and services. This has necessitated the development of flood intelligence records so that the impacts of a pending flood can be ascertained beforehand and appropriate responses undertaken, including advising people of what to expect and what they should do. A wide range of dissemination techniques have been employed to ensure that warnings will reach in timely fashion and be clearly understood by those who need them.

In addition, the SES leads the preparation of community flood plans which allocate responsibility for the many tasks which must be performed and which seek solutions to the problems which can be foreseen.

Managing floods has led the SES into strategic partnerships with many other agencies and organizations such as the Bureau of Meteorology in the context of flood warning activity; local councils, the Department of Sustainable Natural Resources and various floodplain management consultants on matters relating to flood mitigation and the development of flood intelligence; radio stations on issues relating to information dissemination during floods; and the Floodplain Management Authorities on a whole range of issues dealing with flooding. Most importantly, the SES has sought to mount community education campaigns to ensure that people in flood prone areas comprehend the flood threat and know what they can do to manage it in their own interests. Many of these campaigns, which involve public meetings and displays and the provision of information and advice via local media organisations, are conducted on the anniversaries of significant floods in particular communities. Two such campaigns have been conducted so far in 2003, in the valleys of the Shoalhaven and Camden Haven rivers. In these and other campaigns people have been urged to complete their own personal flood action plans on templates generated by the SES to fit the local context.



The SES is also engaged in dialogue with the Assessors of the Land and Environment Court (the body which settles disputes between councils as consent authorities and those who propose developments on floodplains). These conversations will help increase the understanding of flood risk and create an effective working relationship amongst assessors outside the adversarial moment when particular cases are being examined. The SES also continues to develop programmes amongst its own volunteers to ensure that they have the knowledge and the tools to manage floods effectively. These include workshops on the flood warning task and on managing emergency operations generally.

All these initiatives are aimed at better flood management by the SES, the other agencies involved in flood management and those who live in flood prone communities. There are signs that the initiatives are bearing fruit. SES members, built on a large volunteer base, are more confident about the task they face and the residents of floodplains are beginning their responsibility in managing the next flood.