

Storm wreaks havoc across Australia's Hunter Valley and Central Coast

By Terry Cook
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People across the Hunter Valley and Central Coast regions in the southeast Australian state of New South Wales are still cleaning up nearly three weeks after devastating storms ravaged the area over a three day period, causing widespread damage and claiming nine lives.

Starting on the evening of June 8, gale force winds and lashing rain carved a swathe of destruction across the region, causing widespread flooding, bringing down power lines and uprooting trees that crashed across roads and onto houses. The NSW State Labor government declared the region a disaster area as the storm continued to rage.

The storm's after-effects were severe. Within hours, more than 100,000 homes and businesses were without power as wind brought down power lines and ripped up trees. One Lake Macquarie resident said she only narrowly escaped serious injury when a power pole carrying live wires crashed onto her car.

But some four days after the storm first hit, Energy Australia announced it could be "many more days" before power was restored to around 34,500 blacked-out homes. By mid-last week hundreds of severely water-damaged homes across the region were still without electricity.

During the three-day storm the State Emergency Service (SES) was swamped with calls for assistance. It was more than a week before it could report having attended to around 92 percent of 17,532 jobs. Further rain and high winds last week, however, continued to hamper SES efforts, adding new problems.

Thousands of people were badly caught-out by the coastal storms, which struck mid-afternoon with drivers confronting roads and highways engulfed by swirly floodwater. While official reports predicted gale force winds and heavy rain, there was little to distinguish these warnings from past alerts of approaching bad weather, which had nowhere near the same ferocity.

At the same time, stormwater drains in highly populated areas and in major centres were completely incapable of handling the torrential downpour that dumped more than 300 millimetres of rain in many areas.

Main roads in the suburbs and CBD of the Hunter Valley's large regional centre, Newcastle, were transformed into raging torrents that poured into business premises and swept away cars forcing many drivers to abandon them.

One police report compared the Newcastle CBD to a scene from an old war movie "with abandoned cars all over the streets". Local man Wayne Bull, 44, was drowned when he was swept into a stormwater drain after escaping from his car after it began to float down a street in the Newcastle suburb of Lambton.

Scores of cars left by commuters at the rail station in the Newcastle suburb of Waratah were completely submerged, as were many others

in one underground car park. To date over 5,000 vehicles have been written off by insurance companies, but many more claims are in the pipeline.

In the Newcastle working class suburb of Wallsend, shops in the main street were devastated when a 1.5 metre wall of water burst through the back of the buildings and poured onto the road.

One resident said the water literally "exploded" out of stormwater drains, causing a current strong enough to wash away parked cars. One Wallsend shopkeeper not only lost his business and his car in the flood but returned home to find a large tree had collapsed on his house, resulting in extensive damage.

Other fatalities caused by the storm included couple Robert (62) and Linda Jones (50) whose four-wheel drive vehicle was washed away in floodwaters at Clarence Town in the Hunter Valley, and a 29-year-old man who died when a tree fell on his utility vehicle in Brunkerville, Lake Macquarie,

Even as weather conditions eased on the second day, more than 6,000 people still had to be evacuated from the lower-Hunter region town of Maitland when the Hunter River rose to 10.7 metres (35 feet) just 70 centimetres below its peak overflow level. Another 5,000 were evacuated from Lorn and South Maitland.

The inland town of Hinton was completely cut off by floodwater. In Cessnock, homes and business were badly flooded and fallen trees blocked roads and damaged buildings. Cessnock Mayor John Clarence said the damage was enormous, with household items floating down flooded creeks. He slammed Prime Minister John Howard and NSW State premier Morris Iemma for not visiting the town during the disaster.

The Insurance Council of Australia initially said insurance claims had topped \$240 million, but insurers received 30,000 more claims in the days that followed. The cost of damage is expected to be above the \$1 billion mark.

Only two major insurers have so far publicly declared they will pay all claims, but this is yet to be tested. Claims to other insurers, whose policies cover only storm and tempest but not flood damage could be contested and rejected.

Symbolic of the storm's ferocity, the massive coal carrier Pasha Bulker was driven aground on June 8 by 18-metre high ocean swells and gale force winds. It remains stranded on Newcastle's main surfing location, Nobbys Beach.

There are now renewed concerns that battering waves could cause further damage to the ship's hull, leading to a spill that could produce an ecological disaster. The ship has 800 tonnes of fuel, 38 tons of diesel and 40 tons of lubricating oil on board.

While there is no questioning the ferocity of the storm, evidence is

emerging that a lack of spending to upgrade and maintain essential infrastructure by federal, state and local governments added to the devastation.

Emblematic of poor infrastructure were the circumstances surrounding the deaths of five people from a single family on June 8. The victims Adam Holt, 30, his partner Roslyn Bragg, 29, their children Madison, 2, and Jasmine, 3, and Ms Bragg's nephew Travis Bragg, were killed when the car they were travelling in plunged into the flooded Piles Creek when a gaping chasm suddenly opened in the Old Pacific Highway near Somersby on the Central Coast. Rescuers later found the mangled vehicle 100 metres downstream.

A number of local residents told the media that the section of the highway that collapsed was a "disaster waiting to happen". The section had previously sunk, but they claimed repair work had not been carried out properly. "You can't fix something on top when it collapses, you fix it at the bottom," one man said. Another said that the road had sliced open like a cake and water raged through.

Significantly, responsibility for the upkeep of the road, an alternate route to the main F3 freeway heavily used by locals and large trucks from nearby quarries and an industrial estate, was transferred from the NSW state government to the Gosford Council around three years ago, possibly to offload costs. The initial response of Premier Iemma to news of the tragedy was to immediately declare that the state government bore no responsibility for the road's upkeep.

Further evidence of the poor state of the old highway emerged when police were forced to close an additional section—two kilometres south of the fatal road collapse—just days later when it was reported that the road had dipped and cracked and the edges were visibly crumbling.

In 1991 the Old Pacific Highway was closed due to a landslide and only reluctantly reopened by the state government in 1994, after lobbying by local residents. Even then the government declared it a "low priority road".

Kip Kear from Yattalunga, who has been using the Pacific Highway for more than 10 years, told the local media: "I had to sit down when I heard about the latest tragedy because I knew exactly where it was on the road. I thought, it could so easily have been me... No one who has anything to do with roads, local or state, should walk away from this without a sense of blood on their hands."

Charles Dunlop, the NSW Director of Engineering & Technical Services and responsible for the state's highways said last week that more than 750 kilometres of state roads were now being looked after by local councils but not enough money was being made available for maintenance.

Last year, the Local Government Association warned that essential services in regional areas and centres were at risk of being cut-off because of inadequate funding provided by the NSW government. Association president Genia McCaffery said that regional councils, particularly in high-growth areas, could not afford to finance many essential projects themselves—particularly developments in sewerage and water.

The state of the Old Pacific Highway only reflects the general lack of adequate spending on infrastructure across the Central Coast region, which has failed to keep pace with a massive population increase over the past ten years.

In 1991 there were 240,000 residents in the Gosford and Wyong areas, which account for most of the Central Coast region. Over the last decade this has increased to just under 300,000 and is still growing. The region now holds one-twentieth of the state's population, with demographic projections by the local councils

indicating the population will grow to 422,000 within 25 years.

A recent report in the *Sydney Morning Herald* described the haphazard development along the "coastal fringe", which, it claimed, was being "transformed into a 30-kilometre-wide corridor as the scrub is bulldozed, marshes are drained and developers run up project homes for the newcomers or build townhouse complexes in places like Gosford where once the quarter-acre block ruled".

Similar infrastructure and drainage problems exist in the area of Lake Macquarie, north of Gosford. Flood water poured into homes in the Lake Macquarie town of Wyeec leaving deposits of mud that ruined carpets, furnishings and electrical goods.

One Wyeec resident David Sutton told the media that over many years Lake Macquarie Council had done nothing to improve drainage in the area, and the present system "sent water straight down onto the houses".

Newcastle residents told the *World Socialist Web Site* that there had been little spent on upgrading the city's stormwater drainage system in 30 to 40 years. Despite the widespread flood damage Newcastle Lord Mayor John Tate ruled out upgrading the city's stormwater drains telling the media that it was "impractical" and "too expensive".

The response of both the state and federal governments to the disaster is telling. While Prime Minister Howard declared "we're heartbroken by the loss of lives and the tragic circumstances" he announced the government would establish an assistance fund of just \$500,000, in addition to support provided under the federal Natural Disaster Relief and Recovery Arrangements (NDRRA). (The NDRRA assists states with funding and resourcing response and recovery operations in largescale disasters.)

Access to the new federal fund is highly restrictive, with Howard declaring that applications for payment would be restricted to those who suffered serious injury, lost their principal place of residence or had that residence rendered uninhabitable for a period of 48 hours as a direct result of the storm. These payments would amount to \$1,000 per eligible adult and \$400 per eligible child.

The state premier described the damage he had seen: "Construction sites and scaffolding, debris on roads, abandoned cars, homes that were damaged, trees having fallen on homes, extensive damage. It was quite disbelieving". Nevertheless, when it came to assistance he only committed to matching Howard's paltry amount.

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