

Four dead in severe floods across eastern Australia

By Mike Head
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Substantial floods are currently engulfing areas of Australia's east coast, reviving bitter memories of the disaster that struck Queensland, particularly its capital Brisbane, two years ago.

The latest floods, generated by torrential rains from the remnants of ex-Cyclone Oswald, have so far taken four lives, inundated hundreds of homes, forced thousands of people to evacuate and isolated entire communities in eastern Queensland and New South Wales, from Rockhampton in the north to Wollongong in the south.

Critical essential services have been affected, with about a quarter of a million residences and businesses losing telephone, Internet and electricity services. Many flood victims have been unable to contact the 000 emergency number. In some places, sewers and water mains burst.

While the flooding has not been as bad as 2011, when 33 people died and more than 20,000 homes were swamped in Brisbane and surrounding areas, it has highlighted the lack of any serious flood mitigation work by the federal, state and local governments since that catastrophe.

Little or no action has been taken to tackle over-development in flood-prone areas, fortify public flood defences, reinforce critical infrastructure or address the refusal of insurance companies to cover the costs of rebuilding homes destroyed or damaged by swollen rivers.

In many instances, people had just completed restoring their homes from 2011, often without receiving any insurance payment, only to have them engulfed once more by water and mud.

The worst affected places—where river levels reached new records—were the city of Bundaberg, 385 kilometres north of Brisbane and the northern New

South Wales (NSW) city of Grafton, 640 kilometres north of Sydney. Because ex-Cyclone Oswald moved slowly south down the coast, and stalled several times, the rainfall exceeded 500 millimetres in 24 hours in some locations.

Tragically, four deaths have been confirmed—those of an 81-year-old man whose body was pulled from the water near Bundaberg, a 27-year-old man who tried to cross a flooded creek near Gympie, north of Brisbane, a motorcyclist swept away trying to cross a bridge in the Oxley Creek south of Brisbane, and a 3-year-old boy who was struck by a collapsing tree at Gordon Park in Brisbane's north.

Lives were threatened in Bundaberg, where about 1,000 residents had to be rescued by helicopters from their house rooftops yesterday and overnight after the authorities were caught unprepared by the volume and speed of the Burnett River, which was flowing at about 70 kilometres per hour.

Police invoked emergency powers to order the mandatory evacuation of northern Bundaberg, citing an imminent danger of people being killed and drowned. Emergency services are trying to evacuate endangered hospital patients and nursing home residents.

Some low-lying parts of Brisbane's central business district have flooded, as they did in 2011, despite predictions by Queensland Premier Campbell Newman and other government figures that the heart of the city would not be affected. However, the Brisbane River peaked today at about two metres lower than in 2011, sparing thousands of suburban residents.

Further west and upstream, Ipswich and its suburbs have largely escaped the devastation suffered in 2011, but about 100 properties were thought to be damaged. Many residents, traumatised by the 2011 floods, fled parts of the city. "It's bedlam here," Ipswich's mayor

Paul Pisasale told the *Australian*. “It’s emotional city at the moment, especially after what happened in 2011.”

Two years ago, people in low-lying suburbs of Ipswich and Brisbane, mainly working-class areas, incurred terrible losses because they had been led by governments to believe that they were safe from flooding.

In the Lockyer Valley, about 80 kilometres west of Brisbane, where 19 lives were lost in the 2011 floods, authorities were trying to get emergency supplies to people isolated in evacuation centres. Mayor Steve Jones told reporters: “There’s a lot of damage. There’s broken water mains, broken sewer mains, damaged roads. It’s difficult to get around.”

Major rivers in northern NSW flooded, forcing evacuations and cutting highways. More than 10,000 residents faced evacuation in and near Grafton. Further south, localised flooding caused havoc in parts of Sydney and Wollongong.

Government leaders have feigned sympathy for victims. Queensland Premier Newman said he had “a heavy heart” for Queenslanders, but called on them to “stand up” and face the natural disaster. Prime Minister Julia Gillard declared that the federal government would be “working with you, alongside you as we face the consequences of this wild weather.”

In point of fact, as part of its austerity drive, the Labor government slashed contingency funding for natural disaster relief and recovery from \$828 million in 2011-12 to \$114 million for 2012-13. The payments available to distressed residents who have lost their homes are miserly, with maximum assistance for families of a few thousand dollars, provided they satisfy means and assets tests.

The Gillard government further cut funding for the Natural Disaster Resilience Program from \$30 million in 2011-12 to \$26.1 million for 2012-13 and each of the following three years. That means there is even less money for flood mitigation, or the construction of levees, or buy-back schemes for flood-prone dwellings.

Over the past three decades, federal and state governments have reduced spending on flood control. Large areas of settled Australia are not even flood mapped and governments continue to allow short-sighted, profit-driven housing development. Flood management expert Chas Keys warned in a

comment early this month, marking the second anniversary of the 2011 disaster, that “wilful government blindness” still permitted “ill-advised development” in floodplains, while deliberately minimising flood threats and over-stating improvements in flood management.

In Brisbane, numerous victims of the 2011 floods had bought or built properties on the basis of assurances by governments and developers that the Wivenhoe Dam, completed in 1985, had substantially flood-proofed Brisbane. The authorities had known this to be false since at least 2007, when they buried an official report revealing that Wivenhoe’s capacity failed to meet national standards.

Every aspect of the official response has subordinated the safety of the lives and property of ordinary working people to the profit requirements of the corporate elite.

The Gillard government, for instance, has abandoned its vague promises to do something about insurance problems. Insurance companies rejected many household claims in 2011, insisting that the damage had been caused by the riverine flooding, not torrential downpours. Since then, they have refused to cover homes in flood-prone areas, or hiked their premiums beyond the reach of ordinary people. One Brisbane couple, who had a metre of water through their home in 2011, told reporters they had opted out of flood cover after their insurer raised their annual premium from \$1,600 to \$8,500.

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