Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association

Submission to the:

Tasmanian Government Flood Review

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About TFGA

The Tasmanian Farmers & Graziers Association (TFGA) is the leading representative body for Tasmanian primary producers. TFGA members are responsible for generating approximately 80% of the value created by the Tasmanian agricultural sector.

Agriculture is one of the key pillars of the economy and, with the current level of support from government, are well positioned to further capitalise on the stature of Tasmania agriculture.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics estimates that Tasmania's Gross State Product for 2014-15 was $25.42 billion. Agriculture, forestry and fishing in 2014-15 was Tasmania's largest industry representing 9.6% ($2.29B) of Tasmania's total gross value added. [1]

TFGAs Role in Disaster Management

Crises in the agricultural sector usually results from weather-related natural disasters, but they can also result from biosecurity incursion, disruption of essential services or structural changes in markets.

As agriculture continues to intensify the impact of disasters is likely to be more disruptive into the future.

TFGA has been involved in recent times with the management of a number of severe natural disasters. Including bushfires (2013 and 2016), the 2006-2009 drought and flooding event in 2012. Our role in these events has been to provide information to government, to assist in and facilitate the rapid and sustained recovery of farming businesses.

Natural disasters can overwhelm even the best managed farms and agribusinesses, impacting on agricultural systems through the loss of livestock, crops, damage to infrastructure, buildings and erosion of land and waterways.

Like other sectors of the economy, agriculture can also be impacted by the loss of electricity supply and communication services and community infrastructure particularly transport infrastructure.

Many of the impacts of natural disaster on agriculture are not well understood and their importance can be underplayed since they may not be immediately obvious or newsworthy. This issue is exacerbated by the fact that management of natural disaster related impacts, for agriculture is spread across a number of Australian and Tasmanian government portfolios – emergency response, health and human services, transport and infrastructure, agriculture, economic development, and environmental management.

Government Response to the June 2016 Floods

In general, TFGA believes the Tasmanian Government did a good job during what can only be described as an extremely demanding period.

Farmers want to spend all their time physically out on the farm, fixing fences, checking /rescuing stock and assessing any damage to crops. Most farmers have little time for paper work let alone after such an event as this. The demand from government enquires needs to be more considered, so the farmer has one point of contact to assist and ask questions.

[1] Tasmanian Government, State Accounts (ABS Cat No 5220.0).

The hotline number is a good idea, however the comments from our members is that they get a different person each time they call, if they can get through to talk to someone. One solution may be to separate urban and rural enquires and then to assign case managers to particular individuals (farmers).

Adequacy of Forecasts

TFGA believes that the floods should prompt a timely review of the State's river gauging stations, which can play a crucial role in helping to predict the scale and timing of floods.

Recent advances in the telemetry should provide opportunities to modernise the network in a manner that can provide valuable real-time information. However, it should be recognised that in many instances by the time flows were picked up by the gauging network, it was actually too late to respond, or the information provided to the landowner was incorrect.

One farmer on the South Esk River found the information sourced off the Bureau of Meteorology (BoM) website was incorrect, which cost the farmer some $50,000 in damages to water pumps. They found out on the Tuesday 7th June that monitoring station measuring equipment had run out of gas and hadn't been recalibrated. This meant that the flood should have been measured at 10 metres plus, not 8m as stated off the BoM website.

However, another farmer said the service provided by BoM is very good. "We make heavy use of their online predictions of flood heights. Their warnings (sent by email, text and fax) are useful too".

It would seem there are some issues with the information received about flood warnings, mainly due to equipment not being checked prior to flooding events.

Since the June event there have been other moderate floods across the state, which have caused additional damage and stress to the agricultural sector. These events have highlighted again that some monitoring stations that were damage by the June flooding event haven't yet been repaired.

To address gaps in the flood warning system network across the state, the following needs to be considered:

- Fix gauges and related infrastructure damaged by floods.
- Assess flood warning systems across each river basin, to identify gaps and areas for improvement.
- Update flood warning systems where there is an identified need.
- Review the technology available for flash flooding warning systems, and identify areas most at risk.

Causes of the Floods

A TFGA member summarises what was happening prior to the flood and the causes to why it was such a massive flooding event;

"The low pressure system coming down from NSW on the 2nd, 3rd, 4th was always going to be a flooding rain. Rainfall of 300mm is a very big flood. Cloud seeding for an extended period certainly had an effect. 400mm was recorded at Drys Bluff. This resulted in a wave on top of a large flood. It also extended the period which the flood was at its peak. To be cloud seeding when there is an existing flooding event in the surrounding catchments is grossly negligent. They failed to monitor their harvesting operation. What comes over the side of the mountain directly affects us down stream" (member statement).

There is no doubt Tasmania was inundated with rain leading up to and on the day of June 5th 2016, with particular regions receiving more rain than others. On top of the weather system cloud seeding was undertaken on the 5th June. To categorically say if this had an effect is going to be difficult to measure, however for Hydro Tasmania to continue with cloud seeding with the forecast being heavy rain is very bad management, to say the least.

Many farmers made comment that the amount of debris that was present during the flood and then after the flood receded was overwhelming. Debris included wood, trees, fencing wire/posts, irrigation pipes, hay/silage bales and general rubble.

One farmer said, "debris caused a lot of damage to my property to power poles, electrical equipment high on those poles, metering equipment and kilometres of fencing. Big piles of debris remain and continue to be a hazard. Much of the debris was cut willows from upstream properties".

Environmental Effects and Effective Mitigation Measures

The Water Management Act 1999 abolished all rights to water previously existing at common law and vested all such rights in the Crown. As a result, water can only be legally taken from a watercourse once a right to take water has been issued by the Crown through Act.

Rivers and waterways through private land are essentially public property.

This means that water and its courses are managed by the Crown and damage by the floods to private land should be repaired and future mitigated to avoid similar events, jointly.

From the Tasmanian Recovery Taskforce activity report for October 2016 it states total estimated losses to agribusiness to date is over $36 million.

It goes on to say that "Impact data is collated from various sources by DPIPWE and assessed by AgriGrowth Tasmania. To date, 468 properties have reported losses (of these, 77 estimates are based on minimal data and 19 require damages estimates). All estimates are based on reported losses. Therefore, the total amounts estimated are expected to be understated due to the reliance on self-reporting by primary producers".

Damage incurred to farmers that is ongoing because of the intensity of the June flood event is riverbank erosion, top soil loss and land degradation issues.

There is an opportunity for government to work with farmers to remedy the riverbank erosion to mitigate for future flooding events. Such measures include:

- Have a targeted and strategic response that everyone is accountable for;
- Working with the local community to have an input into assisting with this issue; and
- For government, community and industry to invest jointly.

Other areas the government needs to identify for risk, from flash or riverine flooding, include:

- Any shortcomings in the flood gauging networks identified and then a focus of remedial action;
- Address as a priority any notable gaps in the total flood warning system by enhancing mapping, gauging and education programs; and
- Seek a commitment from the Bureau of Meteorology to ensure any new gauges installed are utilised to enhance flood prediction capability and coverage.

Community Involvement

For future emergency management strategies, the community, including farmers, can assist to be better prepare events like floods.

The government needs to ensure local knowledge of flooding is captured, and updated flood information is utilised, when undertaking flood studies that investigate and quantify the future flood risk.

Each community/local area is different to another this includes urban and rural communities. An improved system of alerting farmers to the impeding flood event is paramount to give them enough time to move stock or infrastructure. For urban areas door knocking is an option, but in rural areas this may be prohibitive due to the distance to travel. One option is to have a register for farmers, so they are contacted prior to any flood or emergency disaster, be it by SMS, email or UHF radio.

Insurance

For thousands of people whose homes were ruined and possessions destroyed or lost, insurance was an important issue in the aftermath of the June 2016 floods.

It received significant public attention, a great deal of it critical of insurance companies. Some fundamental aspects of flood insurance – aspects which caused many policy-holders considerable stress – were also brought into sharp focus:

- Some insurance policies did not provide cover for damage caused by flood, but did provide cover for stormwater damage – or, in some cases, stormwater damage and flash flood – and other natural disasters.
- Many people did not believe or did not realise that their policies excluded flood from cover.
- Some members said their insurer were not keen to make decisions and stalled the process.

The flood event was a very stressful time for farmers, and for some, to have to go through an additional arduous process with their insurer wasn't needed.

Under the *Insurance Contracts Regulations 1985*, it provides the following definition for flood:

29D Meaning of 'flood' in prescribed contracts etc

> *(1) For paragraph 37B(2)(a) of the Act, the word 'flood' means the covering of normally dry land by water that has escaped or been released from the normal confines of any of the following:*
>
> *(a) a lake (whether or not it has been altered or modified);*
>
> *(b) a river (whether or not it has been altered or modified);*
>
> *(c) a creek (whether or not it has been altered or modified);*
>
> *(d) another natural watercourse (whether or not it has been altered or modified);*
>
> *(e) a reservoir;*
>
> *(f) a canal;*
>
> *(g) a dam.*

The Financial Ombudsman Service Australia says the general view taken by the general insurance industry for defining storm damage; is that flooding of a property by rain water would normally be regarded as storm damage.

Insurers can and should do more to inform farmers on their insurance policies, the natural hazards they face and the indicative costs of rebuilding after a natural disaster.

There clearly is confusion from our members as to whether their policy is covered by flood, or storm or both. From this it is clear that information needs to provide clarity on the differences between a

flood and a storm event, which will give the policy holder the opportunity to make their mind up as to what they require.

Transition from Response to Recovery

Our experiences with floods has clearly shown that farm and business recovery from extreme events is never uniform, and is always complicated by other influences that determine the success or otherwise of business recovery efforts. Based on our experiences over the past decade which has seen variable recovery, TFGA now sees value in advocating for resilience planning, specific to farming and agribusiness. A project to consider improved disaster resilience planning as part of business planning more broadly would be very worthwhile.

Mitigation and Preparedness Measures

Providing assistance to small businesses including primary producers provides a unique conduit to support sustainable recovery of the local economy and communities. In this sense, the assistance addresses the macro-economic or regional economic activity, rather than the micro-economic or individual/businesses economic activity.

Small to medium enterprises (SMEs) are geographically invested in the local region, so much so that most could not relocate following a disaster event, even if they wanted to. Larger businesses are better positioned to respond to a disaster since they have access to a large financial resource base and may be able to focus operations or service delivery on another location. The ongoing regional presence of SMEs and their links with businesses and individuals means their purchasing behaviours underpin demand for regional goods and services.

TFGA would like to see more research on how government interventions to boost natural disaster recovery efforts and how they can assist our farmers further. Our experience is that prompt recovery of regional agribusinesses and SMEs has a strong spill-over to the whole community.

TFGA believes the continuous improvement of emergency management strategies including disaster preparedness and evacuation planning will help to reduce future damages and losses from natural disasters.

Farming Tasmania Article

Attached separately is an article from TFGAs magazine 'Farming Tasmania' that details how one farmer is coping after the floods. This is an insight into what happened following the June flood event.