Recovery Coordinators Summary Report
East Coast Storm and Flood – April 2015

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Executive Summary

During 20-22 April 2015, an intense East Coast Low (the storm) caused loss of life and major damage to highly populated areas of the central New South Wales (NSW) coastline, including the Sydney Metropolitan, Central Coast, and Hunter regions. The storm brought extreme hourly rainfall rates of between 100 to 150mm at a number of locations in the lower Hunter Valley, including Dungog and Maitland, resulting in flooding along many local creeks and major flooding of the Paterson and Williams Rivers in the Hunter Valley.

In addition to widespread heavy rainfall, sustained gale force winds were experienced along the coastal fringe for a 30-hour period. Destructive wind gusts of up to 135km/h were reported at Newcastle and Norah Head on the Central Coast, the highest ever recorded for NSW in April since records began.

While over 250 houses across the region suffered major damage or were destroyed, this event had a particularly devastating effect on the Dungog community, where three lives were lost and extensive damage occurred to homes, businesses, infrastructure, and the local environment. A further life was lost in the Gillieston Heights community in the Maitland City Council area. The Insurance Council of Australia is currently estimating the costs of the storm to be in excess of $800 million.

The storm caused considerable damage to road, rail and water supply infrastructure and resulted in widespread power and telecommunications outages, leaving some communities isolated for extended periods. Tens of thousands of fallen or damaged trees created a major cleanup task giving rise to some 100,000 tonnes of green waste that needed to be collected and dealt with.

As with many similar storms, one of the most severely impacted industries was primary production. Initial estimates of the cost of impacts on the agricultural, aquaculture and fishing industries in the Hunter and Central Coast regions put the figure at over $105 million. Impacts were felt across multiple sectors, though the dairy and beef cattle, poultry and oyster sectors were most severely impacted.

Natural Disaster Declarations were issued for 22 Local Government Areas (LGA). The Commonwealth and State Governments made available disaster assistance in the form of Disaster Recovery Payments, Disaster Recovery Allowance, and subsidies and grants under the National Disaster Relief and Recovery Arrangements.

This report describes the storm event in terms of impacts on the affected communities and the recovery activities undertaken. It describes particular issues of interest and makes recommendations for improvements to better enable future recovery operations.

Regional recovery arrangements were established across ten LGAs in the Hunter and Central Coast regions with a Regional Recovery Coordinator appointed on 27 April 2015. The Recovery Coordinator, Deputy State Emergency Recovery Controller (DSERCON), and recovery team deployed to the Hunter and Central Coast region to support the recovery effort.
A Regional Recovery Committee, chaired by the Recovery Coordinator, was established to provide support to local authorities in managing the recovery process. The first of its eight meetings was held on 5 May 2015. The Committee met on a weekly basis with the final meeting held on 24 June 2015. The Regional Recovery Committee formed three sub-committees: wellbeing, industry and business, and infrastructure and environment, to enable closer focus on specific recovery themes.

Four Recovery Centres were established in the areas of most need (Dungog, Raymond Terrace, Cessnock, and Wyong), supported by outreach programs.

Over 150 individuals were left homeless across the region, with the majority in Dungog, creating a need for temporary and long term accommodation solutions. The Dungog LGA was the most visibly affected by the storm event. The flash flooding and loss of life in the township of Dungog are well documented and the town will take time to heal. The small community of Torryburn, in the Dungog LGA, was cut off after the only bridge into the locality was washed away, requiring the development of alternate access arrangements.

Following the storm event 89 households immediately presented in Dungog as being flood affected. These households were made up of individuals, couples, or families with children. At the time of this report, many of the displaced people are still residing in storm and water damaged houses, with friends or family, or in emergency accommodation. This includes several Alison Court residents (a 20 unit aged persons social housing community), who experienced the trauma of the storm water rising rapidly in the dark, and the deaths of their neighbours.

The opening of the Dungog Recovery Centre on 29 April 2015 was a major milestone in the recovery effort, bringing multiple Commonwealth and State agencies and support services together in one place to provide support to the community. The Dungog Council is small but with a large area of responsibility, and in the aftermath of the storm, the Council was supported in the recovery function by other Hunter councils.

The individuals and families in the community of Dungog face major loss, psychological distress and decision-making demands over the immediate, medium and longer term period. In response, the Wellbeing Subcommittee formed the Dungog Working Group to consider specific issues of accommodation, housing and psychosocial needs of the Dungog community.

A major challenge in this event is the clean-up and disposal of the vast quantities of storm debris, which is primarily green waste from fallen trees. Councils have advised that the cost of this clean-up will put significant pressures on Council budgets. While some of this cost is reimbursable under provisions of the Natural Disaster Relief and Recovery Arrangements (NDRRA), much of it applies to Council assets where eligibility is unclear. Police and Emergency Services (PES) is working with Councils and other State and Commonwealth agencies to develop options to address this issue.

Due to the nature of the storm event, there was a significant overlap of the Response and Recovery Phases. The combat agencies, NSW State Emergency Service (SES), NSW Rural Fire
Service (RFS), NSW Police and Fire and Rescue NSW (FRNSW) should be commended for their actions in the Response Phase. This report identifies opportunities for improved coordination between combat agencies and the Recovery operation and makes recommendations for amendments to relevant Emergency Management (EM) policies.

At the time of the preparation of this report, three key issues remained outstanding:

- **Torryburn Bridge.** Restoration of access, including the maintenance of interim arrangements and provision of the replacement bridge, remains a priority. The Dungog Council has the lead for both activities, with close support from the regional office of Roads and Maritime Services.

- **Dungog Housing.** Resolution of the Dungog housing situation, including confirming temporary accommodation arrangements for residents displaced from Alison Court remained a critical issue as at the time of the report. The Department of Family and Community and Services (Housing) NSW has the lead in progressing this matter.

- **Green Waste.** As noted previously, the volume of green waste arising from the storm was unprecedented. At the time of this report, Councils continue with the cleanup and disposal of green waste from council lands, at significant cost to their budgets. Options for addressing this challenge are under consideration by Councils with Government.

The Recovery Coordinator wishes to acknowledge the cooperation of all agencies, local governments, non-government and volunteer organisations involved in the recovery process. Particular recognition to the members of the Regional Recovery Committee who brought a positive, can-do attitude to all meetings and activities. The recovery was undertaken in a collaborative and collegial manner with all individuals involved providing their services and support without complaint whenever needed.

**Recommendations**

**Recommendation 1: Planning for Recovery Centres**

Recovery Centres are a proven means of providing support to affected communities. More comprehensive recovery planning is needed at local levels, including the identification of potential Recovery Centre sites in Local EM Plans to help facilitate streamlined establishment of the Centres in future events.

Consideration should be given to developing a clear set of standard messaging regarding Recovery Centres to ensure community members are aware of the Centres, the areas they are servicing, and the support people can expect to receive at the Centres. Consideration should also be given to the preparation of a generic Recovery Centre infrastructure requirements statement to complement the Recovery Centre Guidelines, which would serve as a baseline requirements document to which site specific needs could be added.
Recommendation 2: PES External Surge Program

The success of the PES External Surge Program and the willingness of participants to deploy at short notice to support the recovery effort is commendable, as is the readiness of their supervisors to release them from their duties to enable deployment. The Program, supported by an appropriate training program, is one that should be sustained as part of the whole of Government recovery readiness effort.

Recommendation 3: Media Engagement

Consideration should be given on future recovery operations to adopting a more structured approach to media engagement, with regular media briefings undertaken at a frequency dependent upon the phase of the recovery activities and the level of media interest. These briefings could be conducted at different locations around the region, if appropriate, and would provide the opportunity for communication of key messages and provide journalists with the opportunity to ask questions regarding the recovery. This could be complemented by media coverage of community engagement visits. For all recovery operations, consideration should be given to the identification and secondment of a dedicated media advisor to manage the media messaging.

Recommendation 4: Government Communications Coordination

In future events, a more coordinated communications structure across Government, where planned Government announcements relevant to the region in recovery are developed in conjunction with the recovery team, would be beneficial to ensure recovery teams are aware of, and can plan for, decisions that impact on the work of the recovery team.

Recommendation 5: Impact Assessment Data Sharing Project

There is a clear need to train and raise awareness amongst Local and Regional Emergency Management Committees (LEMC / REMC), as well as community and non-government agencies about how important impact assessment data is to recovery planning. The Impact Assessment Data Sharing Project should continue in development, exploiting opportunities to improve efficiency and effectiveness of response and recovery decision making.

Recommendation 6: Planning for Access to Potentially Isolated Communities

The challenges faced by Dungog Council in resolving the Torryburn access issue resulted in extended delays that impacted adversely on the Torryburn community. The issue arose because the community is accessed by a single access route. The challenges faced by Dungog Council could well be experienced again in future events for similar communities with single means of access. Emergency access options for such communities, including alternate routes or transport means to be utilised in an emergency, should be considered in local emergency plans. In addition, the criteria, likely requirement for, and means of re-supply during the recovery phase should be clarified.
Recommendation 7: Coordination of Volunteer Support

A key challenge for recovery staff is the coordination across community volunteer groups and individuals to ensure support provided is complementary and directed to the areas in most need. This is an important activity that should be considered in future recovery planning. Establishing formal working partnerships with key volunteer organisations that outline expectations during recovery operations is recommended.

Recommendation 8: MP Recovery Reference Group

The creation of the MP Recovery Reference Group enabled a separation of operational recovery activities, managed by the Recovery Coordinator through the Regional Recovery Committee, from the discussion of issues at the strategic level by elected representatives. It also provided a forum for local MPs to raise issues directly with the Government, either via the Chair, or directly with Ministers. Accordingly, this is a model of engagement that should be considered for employment in future recovery operations.

Recommendation 9: Streamlining NDRRA Grants Processes

Noting the need for financial oversight in assessing NDRRA determinations, these grants are important to the community and opportunities to streamline the approvals process should be explored with the Commonwealth in order to minimise delays in the future.

Recommendation 10: Improvements to the Targeting of Government Support to Build Primary Industry Resilience

In a climate where Governments at all levels are seeking to maximise the effectiveness of Australian businesses, including primary production, there would seem to be some benefit in exploring available options to ensure those enterprises that exhibit the industry improvement behaviours sought are not excluded from disaster support. The Recovery Coordinator supports the intent of measures to ensure disaster relief support only goes to *bona-fide* primary producers, but believes there would be benefit in identifying a more elegant means of determining eligibility than is in place currently. The Local Land Services (LLS) work in this area should continue.

Recommendation 11: Farm Management Deposits

The Farm Management Deposit Scheme appears to be a well-structured framework for building rural resilience, however its uptake is low. Recent Commonwealth Government announcements regarding this scheme should be applauded, but more work appears to be needed to understand why the scheme is not more widely used, and to promote its use as a means of building enterprise resilience.

Recommendation 12: Improving Community Preparedness and Resilience

Noting work ongoing to improve the quality of planning at LEMC level, communities should be encouraged and assisted where possible to make simple assessments of their risks and take simple measures to support themselves in the immediate time after an event. This may include identifying potential isolations and preparing supplies of food and water; backup
communications options; proposing possible community meeting places and / or identifying community members who may be able to assist others.

**Recommendation 13: Transition from Response to Recovery**

The management of the transition from the Response Phase of an emergency event to the Recovery Phase is important to ensure the continuity of effective management of the event. The NSW Recovery Plan should be amended to provide more specific requirements for handover and (ongoing if necessary) intelligence sharing between lead combat agencies and Recovery at the regional / local level. To support this improvement, MPES should identify and train additional internal and/or surge staff to take up roles as Recovery Information/Liaison Officers and pro-actively embed these officers into Incident Control Centres at a Regional and State level. This would augment recovery operations by allowing not only information collection and analysis but participation in decision making.

The NSW Recovery Plan should be amended to provide more specific direction on the role, responsibilities and location of Recovery Information/Liaison Officers.

**Recommendation 14: VIP Visits**

The value of visits by senior Government members and Vice Regal representatives to disaster affected communities cannot be overstated. On all occasions, the visits lifted community morale, reminding people that their welfare was important and that they were not forgotten. Accordingly, they should be encouraged in future recovery operations, but organised in consultation with the affected communities to ensure that they are not “over-visited”.

**Recommendation 15: Telecommunications and Power Infrastructure**

Noting the high reliance within the community on power and telecommunications infrastructure, there would be benefit for Governments at both State and Federal level to work with power providers and telecommunications companies to better define disaster response and recovery responsibilities, and to identify options for increasing redundancies in networks in order to improve surety of service.

**Recommendation 16: Corrections Volunteer Labour Teams**

The employment of volunteer Corrections inmates in community support cleanup work was well received by the community and should not be overlooked in future recovery operations.
Recovery Coordinators Summary Report
East Coast Storm and Flood – April 2015

1. The Event

Background

During 20-22 April 2015, an intense East Coast Low (the storm) caused loss of life and major damage to highly populated areas of the central New South Wales (NSW) coastline, including the Sydney Metropolitan, Central Coast, and Hunter regions (see Figure 1). Some of the most significant weather impacts on the east coast of Australia are associated with East Coast Lows. These very intense low pressure systems can bring torrential rain, gale force winds and phenomenal seas\(^1\) to NSW coastal regions.

![Mean Sea Level Pressure chart for 10:00am 22 April 2015](source: BOM)

The storm brought extreme hourly rainfall rates of between 100 to 150mm at a number of locations in the lower Hunter Valley, including Dungog and Maitland. 48-hour rainfall totals in excess of 200mm were experienced over a wide area with maximum recorded falls of 509mm in Woodville, 435mm in Maitland, and 348mm in Dungog (see Figure 2).

The intense rainfall exceeded the 1% Annual Exceedance Probability (AEP) (1 in 100 year) resulting in flooding along many local creeks, major flooding of the Paterson and Williams Rivers in the Hunter Valley, and moderate flooding in the Hawkesbury/Nepean and Georges Rivers in Sydney.

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\(^1\) The Douglas Sea Scale defines a ‘Phenomenal’ sea state as wave heights of greater than 14 metres.
In addition to widespread heavy rainfall, extended periods of sustained gale force winds (over 63km/h) with damaging wind gusts (over 90km/h) were experienced along the coastal fringe. Norah Head on the Central Coast averaged gale force wind speeds for a 30-hour period. Destructive wind gusts (over 125km/h) were experienced along the Hunter coast, with 135km/h gusts reported at Newcastle (Nobby’s Head) and Norah Head, the highest ever recorded for NSW in April since records began.

The Sydney wave-rider buoy\(^2\) measured average wave heights of 8.1 metres, with maximum wave heights up to 14.9 metres - the highest waves recorded since records began.

The Australian Weather Bureau's weather records show that over the past 50 years, systems of comparable severity have affected the populated areas of Wollongong, Sydney and Newcastle about once every 10 years on average. Not since the 2007 East Coast Low, when the Pasha Bulker cargo ship was grounded off Nobby’s Beach Newcastle, has NSW’s East Coast experienced such widespread damage.

**Impacts**

**General**

The storm event resulted in almost 22,000 requests for assistance to the NSW State Emergency Service (SES), making it the largest response requirement in the 60 year history of the NSW SES. 171 flood rescues were required. Numerous communities were left isolated

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\(^2\) Operated by Manly Hydraulic Laboratory
with extensive loss of telecommunications across the region and up to 370,000 people without power for extended periods of time.

The SES deployed over 2,000 members from across the State. Personnel from FRNSW, NSW Ambulance, NSW RFS and the Volunteer Rescue Association assisted the SES in their local areas and in the high impact areas throughout the response phase. Interstate support was received from the SES from the ACT, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania and Victoria. Additional support was provided by the National Parks and Wildlife Service, the Victorian Country Fire Authority, Metropolitan Fire Brigade, Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, and Emergency Management Victoria.

While over 250 houses across the region suffered major damage or were destroyed, this event had a particularly devastating effect on the Dungog community, where three lives were lost and extensive damage occurred to homes, businesses, infrastructure, and the local environment. A further life was lost in the Gillieston Heights community in the Maitland City Council area. The Insurance Council of Australia is currently estimating the costs of the storm to be in excess of $800 million.

![Figure 3. House damage - Stroud](image)

**Public Infrastructure**

At the height of the storm and flood event there were over 450 road closures across the Hunter and Central Coast regions, with at least 23 of these due to bridge damage. At the time of this report, 12 roads remain closed, with nine bridges damaged and in need of repair or replacement. Damage to state and local road networks is initially estimated to be in the order of $40 million ($10 million state, $30 million local). Significant damage was also experienced on sewerage infrastructure including flooded pump stations and treatment facilities. Early estimates indicate the cost of damage to community buildings and facilities to be at least $4 million, however this is expected to rise as repairs are completed.
Railway Infrastructure

The Australian Rail Track Corporation (ARTC) reported multiple point machines submerged and signal locations flooded with damage to signaling system components. Multiple trees fell across the rail corridors and there were many instances of washed out ballast, land slips, and damage to access roads. The most significant damage incurred was a major washout of ballast across a 70m section of the North Coast Line at Tocal College. Repairs to this line alone required the reinstatement of some 50,000 tonnes of ballast at a cost of approximately $7 million. ARTC repair crews completed the repairs in 10 days, which is an extraordinary effort.

Water Infrastructure

For Hunter Water, this storm event was arguably the most damaging and operationally significant incident faced. In addition to significant damage sustained to water infrastructure,
Dam Safety Alerts were issued on the Chichester and Grahamstown Dams, and the Winding Creek Detention Basin. The Dam Safety Alerts were issued due to concerns regarding potential infrastructure (dam wall) failure due to water levels. Peak inflow to the Chichester Dam during the event was greater than its entire volume in 24 hours, with more inflow recorded into the Grahamstown Dam than the entire volume of Chichester Dam in 36 hours.

Two significant failures, including the washout of a 50 metre section, were experienced on the Chichester Trunk Gravity Main (CTGM), which supplies 80 ML per day (about 40%) of the Lower Hunter’s average daily water supply. These were the worst failures on this pipeline since the 1955 Maitland floods. Both failures necessitated shutdown for repairs, which took 11 days.

At the peak, 5,500 customers were without water. This was reduced to 50 customers by 24 April (within four days of the storm event), less than ten by 28 April, and all customers were back on network supplies by 8 May. Dungog experienced intermittent water supply over several days due to CTGM failures, Water Treatment Plant unavailability, and re-zoning of the town distribution network (to maximise availability and attempt to maintain critical customer supplies). Clarence Town, Martin’s Creek, Paterson, and Vacy townships in the Dungog Shire received alternate supplies during this time, including:

- re-zoning from alternate supply zones where possible,
- water carter deliveries to local reservoirs, or
- bottled water delivered to local staging points (or delivered directly to vulnerable customers).

Over 50,000 bottles of water were delivered during the event.

Storm water and catchment run-off into the Grahamstown Dam caused high turbidity of the stored supply, requiring activation of contingency plans to restore water quality to required NSW Health standards.

Approximately two-thirds of Hunter Water assets were unavailable at the peak of the storm. This was mainly due to power and/or communications outages, and in some cases lack of access through road closures or flooding:

- 5 of 6 Water Treatment Plants (WTP) unavailable.
- 12 of 19 Wastewater Treatment Works (WWTW) unavailable.
- 283 of 425 Wastewater Pumping Stations (WWPS) unavailable, compared with 70 WWPS unavailable during the Pasha Bulker Storm.

At the peak, the Hunter Water Control Centre was dealing with over 800 alarms per hour. Approximately 5000 customer faults or request for assistance calls were received in the first week and the Hunter Water website received over 80,000 hits in the first week (10 times normal load). Hunter Water resourced an Incident Management Team for 19 days from Tuesday 21 April through until Saturday 9 May. Approximately 260 employees were involved in the response, augmented by numerous contractors. Hunter Water received inter-utility
support from Sydney Water, with generators and electrical and mechanical tradespersons. The total cost of repairs is estimated at approximately $5 million.

**Telecommunications Infrastructure**

The storm caused significant damage to the Telstra communications network. In the immediate aftermath of the storm, Telstra had numerous services off the air, including approximately 100,000 fixed line and 30,000 ADSL services, a large number of 2G, 3G and 4G mobile sites, as well as BigPond cable, Foxtel and Telstra Voice and data services on the NBN. The majority of the outages were due to a loss of power to network sites.

As power was restored to network sites, service faults were reported by customers. These service faults were the result of water damage to network infrastructure and downed aerial cables.

Over the course of the recovery effort, Telstra repaired 1,100 network cables, including over 530 aerial cables. Over 24,000 customer-reported faults related to network damage were restored, mitigating service impact to more than 340,000 services.

Telstra brought in more than 200 people from across the country to supplement its own local workforce of some 700 staff to help restore customer services in the affected regions. Normal service levels were returned across the region towards the end of June.

During the recovery, Telstra contacted more than 12,426 retail customers to keep them updated on their service restoration and provide advice regarding interim services available to them. Telstra issued around 2,149 interim data devices to keep customers connected while they waited for their service to be permanently restored.

**Power Infrastructure**

Advice from Ausgrid, the region’s principal power supply authority indicates that a total of 370,000 customers experienced a loss of power, with 240,000 customers experiencing service interruptions at the peak. The graph below shows the rate at which supply was progressively restored. Several customers were without power for extended periods (over four days), with the majority of services restored after eight days.

Approximately 50,000 calls were received at the Ausgrid contact centre, leading to some 21,000 emergency jobs completed across the network at a total cost of approximately $40 million. More than 800 Ausgrid field staff were deployed across the region to make the network safe, repair damage and restore power. An additional 700 field staff were brought in from throughout NSW, Queensland and Victoria to assist with the repairs.
Figure 6. Ausgrid Customers off supply - Monday 20 April to Thursday 30 April 2015. (Source: Ausgrid)

**Primary Industry Impacts**

One of the most severely impacted industries was primary production. Initial estimates of the cost of impacts on the agricultural, aquaculture and fishing industries in the Hunter and central Coast regions put the figure at over $105 million. Impacts were felt across multiple sectors, though the dairy and beef cattle, poultry and oyster sectors were most severely impacted.

Livestock losses included over 1,000 beef and dairy cattle, 114,000 poultry and 37 horses. Extensive damage occurred to farm machinery and infrastructure including farm roads, sheds and over 7,000 kilometres of fencing needing repair or replacement.

Figure 6. Damaged oyster farm infrastructure, Port Stephens. (Photo: DPI)
Agricultural Damage Assessment

Figure 7. Agricultural Damage Assessment prepared by DPI and LLS
Economic Impacts

The storm event had a significant impact on the economies of the Hunter and to a lesser degree the Central Coast. The Port of Newcastle was closed during and immediately following the storm event. Shipping was halted for almost 48 hours resulting in significant delays and costs for shipping companies. Additionally, the flood waters increased the rate of sedimentation in the harbour and shipping channels, requiring significant investment in dredging activities.

The full value of the economic impact of the storm on the Hunter and Central Coast regions will take some time to fully assess. However, a study undertaken in early May 2015 by the University of Newcastle determined the losses suffered by the Hunter tourism industry alone to be in the order of $110 million. Much of this was due to cancellations of travel bookings, not only during the storm event, but also during the early weeks of the recovery effort. Extended power disruptions experienced by many businesses resulted in significant stock losses (frozen and refrigerated food), particularly noting the event occurred in the week leading up to ANZAC day with many businesses holding extra stock in preparation for ANZAC Day activities.

![Figure 8. Maitland, NSW. (Photo: SES)](image)

Natural Disaster Declarations

Natural Disaster Declarations were immediately declared for 12 Local Government Areas with a further 10 LGAs declared subsequently:

- Cessnock
- Dungog
- Gloucester
- Gosford
- Great Lakes
- Hawkesbury
- Ku-ring-gai
- Lake Macquarie
- Lithgow
- Maitland
- Mosman
- Muswellbrook
- Newcastle City
- Pittwater
- Port Stephens
- Randwick
- Singleton
- The Hills
- Warringah
- Waverley
- Wollondilly
- Wyong
Initial Disaster Assistance Provisions

On 22 April, 2015, the Commonwealth Minister for Justice, Hon Michael Keenan MP, and NSW Minister for Emergency Services, Hon David Elliott MP, announced the availability of a range of assistance through the jointly-funded Commonwealth-State Natural Disaster Relief and Recovery Arrangements (NDRRA). Assistance was initially activated in the LGAs of Cessnock, Dungog, Gosford, Great Lakes, Lake Macquarie, Maitland, Newcastle, Pittwater, Port Stephens, Singleton, Warringah and Wyong.

Assistance was provided to alleviate the personal hardship and distress of individuals impacted by the storms and flood from 20 April 2015. This included providing services and support to meet the immediate needs of disaster affected people e.g. food, clothing, personal items and emergency accommodation. Assistance in the form of grants toward the replacement of damaged essential household contents (e.g. bedding and household goods) and structural repairs to the home were provided to eligible applicants.

Access to reimbursement of eligible expenses was also made available to councils for counter disaster operations such as sandbagging and repairing damaged essential infrastructure, thus helping ease the financial burden on councils associated with undertaking essential infrastructure repair.

Additional Commonwealth Support - Disaster Recovery Payments (DRP) and Disaster Recovery Allowance (DRA)

On 24 April 2015, the Acting Prime Minister, Hon Warren Truss MP, announced that additional financial assistance in the form of Disaster Recovery Payment (DRP) and Disaster Recovery Allowance (DRA) would be available to Australians adversely affected by the storm event in the Cessnock, Dungog, Maitland, Muswellbrook, Port Stephens, Singleton, Upper Hunter, Newcastle, Lake Macquarie, Gosford, Wyong, Gloucester, Great Lakes, Greater Taree and Port Macquarie-Hastings LGAs.

The DRP is administered by the Commonwealth Department of Human Services (Centrelink) and provides payments of $1000 per eligible adult and $400 per eligible child. It is available to people who were seriously injured, lost their homes, or whose homes were directly damaged by the storm. They were also available to immediate family members of those persons who were killed by the storm event.

The DRA provides income support payments to employees, primary producers and sole traders who can demonstrate they have experienced a loss of income as a direct result of the NSW East Coast Storms and Flooding. The DRA has been made available to individuals in the affected local government areas.

The DRA provides fortnightly payments for up to 13 weeks equivalent to the applicable rate of Newstart or Youth Allowance, depending on the person's circumstances.
Additionally, under the DRA people who have lost income as a result of the disaster may be able to access income assistance for up to 13 weeks, equivalent to the maximum rate of the Newstart Allowance or Youth Allowance. This assistance is designed to help employees, primary producers and sole traders impacted by this disaster to get back on their feet.

![Figure 10. Debris, Stroud](image)

**NSW Natural Disaster Assistance Arrangements**

A Natural Disaster Declaration makes several supportive schemes available under the NSW Disaster Assistance Guidelines (NSWDAG), which is supported by the NDRRA. These arrangements are made available through the NSW Department of Justice, Police and Emergency Services Division, and address the provision of assistance to individuals, primary producers, small business and non-profit organisations.

The range of assistance measures available in the impacted Local Government Areas include:

- Personal hardship and distress assistance for families and individuals affected by the storms and floods, such as food, clothing and accommodation.
- Concessional loans for small business, primary producers and not-for-profit bodies, freight subsidies for primary producers and grants for voluntary not-for-profit bodies that have suffered physical damage are also available.
- Financial assistance for local and state government authorities to assist with the restoration of damaged infrastructure and the provision of counter disaster operations.

More information on these assistance measures can be found at [www.emergency.nsw.gov.au](http://www.emergency.nsw.gov.au)

**NDRRA Category C Primary Producer Grants**

On 15 June 2015 the Commonwealth and NSW Governments announced NDRRA Category C grants to primary producers. Grants of up to $15,000 for clean-up and recovery are available to eligible primary producers recovering from damage caused by severe flooding and storms.
Grants are available in the LGAs of Dungog, Great Lakes, Maitland, Newcastle, Port Stephens, and Singleton; the parishes of Branxton, Heddon, and Stockrington in the LGA of Cessnock; and the aquaculture sector in Brisbane Waters, Gosford.

**NDRRA Category A Dungog Community Support Worker Project**

On 15 June 2015 the Commonwealth and NSW Governments announced the allocation of NDRRA Category A funds of $145,000 to establish the Dungog Community Support Worker Project to provide practical and emotional support to families and individuals who experienced significant damage and distress.

**NSW Disaster Welfare Assistance Line (DWAL) and NSW Disaster Relief Grants**

The Disaster Welfare Assistance Line (DWAL) is a 1-800 telephone contact point that provides information about disaster relief grants and a point of information for individuals suffering loss as a result of natural disasters. The DWAL 1-800 access line was widely shared on social media by various media outlets significantly increasing call volumes. As at 31 July 2015, over 32,000 calls were made to the line.

Many calls received by the DWAL were related to business outside the usual remit of the assistance line. For example, the public enquired about assistance available for food spoilage due to the power outages and information about how to access the DRP.

The unprecedented volume of calls received on the DWAL overloaded the system and resulted in a transfer of the line to other providers with infrastructure better able to handle the volume of calls. This support was provided by Service NSW in the first instance, scaling back to the call centre services of the NSW RFS and eventually transitioning back to Disaster Welfare Services.

Following the overwhelming call volume, there was a significant amount of follow up work required in affected communities to determine eligibility, and process applications for Disaster Relief Grants. Disaster Welfare Services Alumni teams were deployed to the most affected communities of Dungog, Maitland, Cessnock and Wyong with additional outreach in Newcastle, Lake Macquarie and Gosford.

As at 31 July 2015, over $1.03 million has been paid in disaster relief grants. This includes immediate assistance to individuals and families and grants for essential household contents and structural repairs. Work continues on complex applications for assistance for structural repairs.

**2. Regional Overview**

Significant features of the Recovery Operations for the region included:

- Natural Disaster declarations were made across 22 LGAs state-wide.
Regional recovery arrangements were established across the Hunter and Central Coast regions, including ten LGAs with a total land area of almost 17,000 square kilometres and a total population of approximately 900,000. This presented challenges in ensuring recovery services were available to all residents in need and was a key consideration in the decision to establish four Recovery Centres.

Outreach programs were undertaken, including support to individuals, primary producers and small business owners.

Over 150 individuals were left homeless across the region, with the majority in Dungog, creating a need for temporary and long term accommodation solutions.

The small community of Torryburn, was cut off after the only bridge into the locality was washed away, requiring the development of alternate access arrangements.

Thousands of kilometres of farm fencing were damaged or destroyed across the region.

Significant stock losses and productivity impacts for primary producers.

Tens of thousands of fallen or damaged trees created a major cleanup task giving rise to some 100,000 tonnes of green waste that needed to be collected and dealt with.

A NSW Storms public appeal was established by the Salvation Army with support from the Daily Telegraph, the Commonwealth Bank and a number of other prominent corporate entities. The appeal raised in excess of $500,000.

The Dungog Shire Community Centre established its own storm appeal which raised approximately $110,000. The Community Centre also ran a clothing bank and food bank from where donated food and clothing was distributed to community residents in need.

The assistance of volunteers, both in formal groups such as BlazeAid and Habitat for Humanity, as well as individuals, provided significant support to the recovery efforts.

3. Regional Recovery Structure

Ministry for Police and Emergency Services

In NSW, the State Emergency and Rescue Management Act 1989 (SERM Act) requires the appointment of a State Emergency Recovery Controller (SERCON) and a Deputy State Emergency Recovery Controller (DSERCON) and details their responsibilities and functions. The SERM Act specifies the requirement for a state emergency plan in NSW.

The NSW State Emergency Management Plan (EMPLAN) details emergency preparedness, response and recovery arrangements for NSW. It ensures a coordinated response to emergencies by all agencies having responsibilities and functions in emergencies.

The NSW Recovery Plan is a supporting plan of the EMPLAN. It outlines the strategic intent, responsibilities, authorities and the mechanisms for disaster recovery in NSW.
The State Emergency Recovery Controller

The SERCON at the time of the event was the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Ministry for Police and Emergency Services (MPES). Under new administrative arrangements for the NSW public service, effective from 1 July 2015 MPES was transferred into the Department of Justice (Justice) to become the Police and Emergency Services (PES) Division of Justice. Within this report, references to PES relate to both the former MPES and PES as it is today.

The SERCON is assisted by the Deputy SERCON (DSERCON), the Director Response and Recovery Branch, PES. In disaster response and recovery actions, the SERCON and DSERCON are supported by the Response and Recovery Branch (RRB) of PES.

The SERCON/DSERCON have the authority to engage the support of Government agencies as required and also engage with industry, non-government organisations and Local, State, and Commonwealth Governments as necessary, to address issues affecting the recovery process.

Regional Recovery Coordinator

The NSW Recovery Plan outlines the responsibilities, authorities and mechanisms for disaster recovery in NSW. It provides for the appointment of a Recovery Coordinator to lead the recovery effort. On 27 April 2015, the Premier of NSW the Hon Mike Baird MP appointed retired Brigadier Darren Naumann as the Regional Recovery Coordinator for the Hunter and Central Coast regions.

The Recovery Coordinator’s primary role was to coordinate the recovery process at the Regional Level, working with and supporting local recovery efforts to address the storm’s impacts on the communities, the economy, infrastructure and the environment. The Recovery Coordinator’s Terms of Reference are included at Enclosure 1.

The DSERCON and team deployed to the Hunter and Central Coast region to support the Recovery effort.

Regional Recovery Committee

In accordance with the NSW Recovery Plan and his Terms of Reference, the Recovery Coordinator established and chaired a Regional Recovery Committee to provide support to local authorities in managing the recovery process. Following an initial meeting of affected state and local stakeholders on 29 April 2015, the Regional Recovery Committee held the first of its eight meetings on 5 May 2015. The Committee met on a weekly basis with the final meeting held on 24 June 2015.

The membership of the Regional Recovery Committee included representatives of the 10 impacted Local Government areas, along with representatives of at least 15 State Government agencies along with industry and non-government bodies.
Copies of the structure and Terms of Reference adopted by the Regional Recovery Committee are included at Enclosures 2 and 3.

**Sub-Committees.** In order to maximise the efficiency of operations of the Regional Recovery Committee, three sub-committees were formed to focus on specific recovery themes. Working groups were established within the sub-committees to address specific areas of interest:

- **Wellbeing Sub-Committee:**
  - Dungog Working Group;
  - Outreach Working Group;

- **Industry and Business Sub-Committee:**
  - Tourism Working Group;
  - Primary Industries Working Group;
  - Retail and Manufacturing Working Group; and

- **Infrastructure and Environment Sub-Committee:**
  - Clean-up and Make Safe Working Group; and
  - Green Waste and Civil Infrastructure Working Group.

Each Sub-Committee was chaired by a member of the Regional Recovery Committee. Sub-Committee meetings were conducted as required (both physically and remotely), at the discretion of the Sub-Committee Chairs, with Sub-Committee reports provided by the Chairs to meetings of the Regional Recovery Committee.

Sub-Committee activities supported the development of the Regional Early Recovery Action Plan (the Plan) which was adopted and managed by the Regional Recovery Committee. This Plan did not identify all recovery activities required across the Hunter and Central Coast regions, but rather outlined the key issues in need of management or coordination from a regional level. Progress of activities within the Plan was monitored through regular review at each meeting of the Regional Recovery Committee.

**Local Recovery Committees**

A Local Recovery Committee was established in the Dungog Shire immediately following the storm event. This Committee was stood down during the period of tenure of the Regional Recovery Committee. With the closure of the Regional Recovery Committee, it was re-established on 20 July 2015 to monitor ongoing progress of the Dungog housing challenge and construction of the replacement Torryburn bridge. Membership of the Local Recovery Committee includes representatives of Dungog Shire Council, Family and Community Services, NSW State Emergency Service, Roads and Maritime Services, Local Land Services, Hunter New England Health, Hunter Water, WorkCover, NSW Trade and Investment and other agencies as required.
4. Recovery Centres

Recovery Centres

The NSW EMPLAN specifies that Recovery Centres may be established as a system to centralise services to the impacted communities. Recovery Centres were established in four locations:

- Dungog,
- Raymond Terrace,
- Cessnock, and
- Wyong.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Opened</th>
<th>Closed</th>
<th>Operating for</th>
<th>Physical Attendance</th>
<th>Representing</th>
<th>Total individuals Assisted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dungog</td>
<td>29 April 2015</td>
<td>22 May 2015</td>
<td>21 days</td>
<td>281</td>
<td>395 Adults &amp; 76 Children</td>
<td>483</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raymond Terrace</td>
<td>1 May 2015</td>
<td>8 May 2015</td>
<td>8 days</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>184 Adults &amp; 103 Children</td>
<td>287</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cessnock</td>
<td>2 May 2015</td>
<td>8 May 2015</td>
<td>7 days</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>274 Adults &amp; 117 Children</td>
<td>391</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wyong</td>
<td>6 May 2015</td>
<td>15 May 2015</td>
<td>10 days</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>236 Adults &amp; 69 Children</td>
<td>305</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Recovery Centre Operating Details

In total, the four Recovery Centres operated for a total of 46 days and provided assistance to 1,466 individuals.

The following agencies were represented at the Recovery Centres:

- Disaster Welfare Services
- Legal Aid
- Federal Department of Human Services - Centrelink
- Small Biz Connect
- WorkCover
- Department of Primary Industries
- Rural Assistance Authority
- Family and Community Services – Housing
- NSW Health
- Fair Trading
- Insurance industry
- Australian Red Cross
- Salvation Army

The decision making process employed to determine the locations and duration of the Recovery Centres was based primarily on input from the relevant local council and RRB staff.
on the ground, supported by advice from other agencies including Family and Community Services, DPI and Local Land Services. More comprehensive planning at local levels, including the identification of potential Recovery Centre sites in Local EM Plans may help to facilitate streamlined establishment of Recovery Centres in future events.

Media Releases about the opening of each Recovery Centre, including location and services available were distributed through multiple local media outlets. In addition flyers were delivered to businesses and other services in other communities. The Recovery Coordinator promoted and discussed Recovery Centres during media interviews and for news articles and visited all four Recovery Centres. The Mayors of Cessnock and Dungog visited their respective Recovery Centres, and the Mayor of Wyong was present to officially open the Wyong Recovery Centre. All of these visits drew publicity for the role and services delivered through Recovery Centres.

Despite this, there may be room for improvement in communication with the Community as it is understood from anecdotal evidence that some community members were either unaware of the services delivered at Recovery Centres or were of the view that they did not apply to their area. This is particularly relevant where a Recovery Centre is established in one LGA but is available to provide services for members of an adjacent LGA e.g. the availability of the Dungog and Raymond Terrace Recovery Centres to support individuals in Stroud, Karuah, Tea Gardens and other Great Lakes LGA communities.

Under the NSW Recovery Plan, the responsibility for the establishment and fit-out of Recovery Centres falls to NSW Public Works. On all occasions, NSW Public Works provided excellent support in establishing the four Recovery Centres. To sustain this performance and streamline
the physical establishment of Recovery Centres in the future, consideration should be given to the preparation of a generic infrastructure requirements statement to complement the processes articulated in the existing Recovery Centres guidelines document\(^3\). This would serve as a baseline requirements document, to which site specific needs could be added, such as the provision of private spaces, partitions between work stations, or for the centres to be laid out in a manner that would make community members more comfortable on arrival.

Coordination of the staffing, opening and operation of Recovery Centres falls to RRB personnel. Recovery Centre advisory staff are drawn from across relevant NSW and Commonwealth Government agencies, in addition to philanthropic and community groups, and deployed to the Centre as the need arises.

RRB has facilitated after action reviews (or ‘debriefs’) to which all staff who were assigned to each of the Recovery Centres were invited. The outcomes of these debriefs will be reported separately by others, however, from the Recovery Coordinator’s perspective, the establishment and operation of the Recovery Centres appeared to have worked well.

**Dungog Recovery Centre**

From the outset there was a very clear indication that some level of support would be required in Dungog. Initial community response and recovery support was provided by staff of the Dungog Shire Community Centre, who should be commended for their dedication, empathy and willingness to go the extra yard for their community. The Community Centre staff were under resourced and underfunded for the ongoing task, and were exhibiting signs of being overwhelmed by the magnitude of support services required. As the full magnitude of the impact on the Dungog community was better understood, it became clear that there would be a need for establishment of a formal Recovery Centre.

The siting of the Recovery Centre in the Doug Walters Pavilion in Bennett Park proved to be appropriate considering the number of support services in attendance and the number of community members who attended to seek assistance.

**Raymond Terrace Recovery Centre**

The Raymond Terrace Recovery Centre was established in the Senior Citizens Club, 17E Irrawong Road, Raymond Terrace. This was the site of an Evacuation Centre established by Disaster Welfare Services (DWS), and Family and Community Services (FACS) in the immediate aftermath of the storms. The Evacuation Centre was supported by a number of partner agencies, including volunteers from The Salvation Army who were providing meals, food hampers and food vouchers.

A major issue for many residents was food spoilage due to extensive power outages, leading many affected residents to seek assistance to replace perishable foods. As the Recovery

\(^3\) Emergency Management NSW, Recovery Centres - Guidelines for Recovery from Emergencies, September 2010
Centre in Raymond Terrace was established in the same venue used by DWS, there remained an expectation in the community that similar supports would be available, especially the ongoing provision of food vouchers by The Salvation Army. In the short term this was appropriate and provided a genuine service to community members for whom power and road access had only recently been restored. However it became apparent that the service may have been relied upon for ongoing support which is outside the scope of immediate assistance in the wake of a disaster. This led to the Salvation Army withdrawing from the Recovery Centre at close of business 3 May 2015.

Nevertheless, the location of the Recovery Centre in the same facility used for the Evacuation Centre ensured the Community was able to access the services being provided, and provided consistency for community members who had registered with DWS and needed to make return visits.

**Cessnock Recovery Centre**

The Cessnock Recovery Centre was located in the Cessnock Council Chambers, 62 Vincent Street, Cessnock. As with other areas, a major issue for many residents was food spoilage due to extensive power outages, leading many affected residents to seek assistance to replace perishable foods. In the immediate aftermath of the storms DWS, with partners in FACS, established an Information and Assistance Centre in Cessnock. The Information and Assistance Centre was supported by a number of partner agencies, including volunteers from The Salvation Army who were providing meals, food hampers and food vouchers.

As the Recovery Centre in Cessnock was established in the same venue used as the Information and Assistance Centre, there remained an expectation in the community that similar supports would be available, especially the ongoing provision of food vouchers by The Salvation Army. In the short term this was appropriate and provided a genuine service to community members for whom power and road access had only recently been restored. However it became apparent that the service may have been relied upon for ongoing support which is outside the scope of immediate assistance in the wake of a disaster. As with the Raymond Terrace Recovery Centre, this led the Salvation Army to withdraw from the Recovery Centre at close of business 6 May 2015.

**Wyong Recovery Centre**

The Wyong Recovery Centre was located at the Wyong Grove Community Hub, at the corner of North Road and the Pacific Highway, Wyong. In addition to media notifications, Wyong Council promoted the Recovery Centre through local channels, and in some cases made direct contact with local community members in more isolated areas, to ensure the community was well informed about available recovery services.

Despite there being a strong desire expressed by Council and other partners to establish the Recovery Centre, attendance numbers were reasonably low for the duration.
Outreach

In response to needs identified through the Wellbeing Sub-Committee, an Outreach Working Group was formed to develop a suite of services which were specifically targeted to different communities. Working Group membership consisted of representatives from PES, Red Cross, Department of Primary Industries and Small Biz Connect, through the Office of the NSW Small Business Commissioner. A program of services and activities was developed and updated, providing workshops for small business providers, door knocking and personal support / referral, and community events.

![Figure 12. Tree removal, Wyong](image)

**Recommendation 1: Planning for Recovery Centres**

Recovery Centres are a proven means of providing support to affected communities. More comprehensive recovery planning is needed at local levels, including the identification of potential Recovery Centre sites in Local EM Plans to help facilitate streamlined establishment of the Centres in future events.

Consideration should be given to developing a clear set of standard messaging regarding Recovery Centres to ensure community members are aware of the Centres, the areas they are servicing, and the support people can expect to receive at the Centres. Consideration should also be given to the preparation of a generic Recovery Centre infrastructure requirements statement to complement the Recovery Centre Guidelines, which would serve as a baseline requirements document to which site specific needs could be added.

**5. External Surge Program**

Recovery Operations of long duration can require extensive personnel support, beyond that which can be provided from PES staff resources. The External Surge Program was established to provide a source of additional personnel seconded from across NSW State Government
agencies who could be mobilized to support the Disaster Welfare Services Functional Area staff and RRB staff in the management of Recovery Centres.

This storm event was the first time the External Surge Program was activated. The Surge Program was activated on Thursday 23 April 2015, with a total of 19 individuals mobilised from across NSW, providing a total of 100 days of additional resources.

External Surge staff were engaged to undertake administrative and coordination functions at the Dungog, Raymond Terrace, Cessnock and Wyong Recovery Centres.

External Surge staff participated in Recovery Centre activities from the following agencies:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agency</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NSW Health</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Finance, Services &amp; Innovation:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office of State Revenue</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WorkCover NSW</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Education</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service NSW</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Primary Industries</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSW Office of Water</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Land &amp; Natural Resources</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Planning &amp; Environment</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Premier &amp; Cabinet</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Industry</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>19</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. External Surge Staff

The activation of the Surge Program was invaluable in providing recovery services to communities in need. Feedback from Surge staff was positive, and the value of the Program in providing the additional required resources to manage the four Recovery Centres has been confirmed by RRB staff. The willingness of the Surge staff to deploy at short notice to support the recovery effort is commendable, as is the readiness of their supervisors to release them from their duties to enable deployment. The Program, supported by an appropriate training program, is one that should be sustained as part of the whole of Government recovery readiness effort.

The activation process for Surge staff appears to have worked well, with surge staff reporting a good experience of deployment activation in terms of timeliness, passage of information, and wider communications.

External Surge staff reported their belief that the work they undertook at Recovery Centres benefitted the community and that they would do it again. Further, Surge staff reported consistent and high praise about the support, direction and advice provided by RRB Staff.
Recommendation 2: PES External Surge Program

The success of the PES External Surge Program and the willingness of participants to deploy at short notice to support the recovery effort is commendable, as is the readiness of their supervisors to release them from their duties to enable deployment. The Program, supported by an appropriate training program, is one that should be sustained as part of the whole of Government recovery readiness effort.

6. Media & Communications

The widespread nature of the storm event, across multiple LGAs and impacting on numerous small and isolated communities, combined with the ongoing lengthy delays in restoration of power and telecommunications infrastructure caused widespread concern across the regions regarding the management of the recovery. Initial community feedback indicated that the appointment of the Regional Recovery Coordinator was widely well received, and an early objective was to ensure as many affected people were made aware of the appointment as quickly as possible. This led to a concerted focus on media engagement during the early days after the Recovery Coordinator’s appointment.

Media and Communications staff from Justice formed part of the larger Recovery team, supporting the work of the Recovery Coordinator, the Regional Recovery Committee, and the Recovery Sub-Committees. A media and social media strategy was employed to ensure direct communication to affected communities about support services available to them, and providing relevant contact details as appropriate. In addition to this, a Community Engagement and Communications Plan was developed to support the work of the Regional Recovery Committee and Sub-Committees. This Plan was also provided to all affected councils to assist in their community messaging activities.

During the early period of the recovery, key messages included:

- Safety reminders to community members not to enter flood waters, and to take care of their health when dealing with flood and storm affected property.
- The Recovery Coordinator was not simply another layer of bureaucracy but rather a facilitator to cut through red tape and ensure the recovery effort was focused and effective. The appointment of the Recovery Coordinator was a clear indicator of the NSW Government’s commitment to ensuring an effective and timely recovery response.
- The recovery effort would not be a “Sydney solution”, but rather would be community led and delivered by local government authorities with support as necessary from State and Commonwealth bodies. This message was reinforced by messaging that the Recovery Coordinator had relocated to Newcastle to ensure local issues were understood and considered in recovery planning and execution.
• The storm and flood impacts were significant with effects felt across a wide area. The full scope of the impact would not be known for some time and recovery would not be a quick process for some affected communities and individuals.

• Mental health messages advising individuals who were feeling overwhelmed and distressed that this was a normal human response to an abnormal stressful event, and people should not be afraid or embarrassed to ask for help.

As the recovery proceeded and parts of the region started to return to business as usual, the communications activities focused on advice of support services available and ensuring those members of the community still in need remained aware that recovery activities were continuing. A key communications objective during this period was to ensure the Recovery Coordinator remained visible across the two regions. Numerous meetings were held with farmers, community representatives and other affected people to provide them with the opportunity to raise issues of concern and be updated on recovery progress. These meetings were often reported through the local media, to further reinforce the message that the Recovery Coordinator was there, was listening to the community, responding to community concerns, and managing the recovery process.

While the media engagement process was effective, arguably it was not as efficient as it might have been. In-location media advisor and communications officer support was only available for the first four weeks of the recovery phase, and was provided by staff rotating through these positions. The approach to encouraging media attendance at community visits worked well and was an effective means of maintaining the presence of the recovery in the media news cycle. However, the *ad hoc* approach to media interviews was not as efficient as it might have been and resulted in the Recovery Coordinator often undertaking multiple interviews in a day, frequently addressing the same issues.

A more structured approach with regular media briefings undertaken at a frequency dependent upon the phase of the recovery activities and the level of media interest may have been more effective. These briefings could be conducted at different locations around the region and would provide the opportunity for communication of key messages and provide journalists with the opportunity to ask questions regarding the recovery. This could be complemented by media coverage of community engagement visits. This approach may also have allowed more effort to be directed to forms of communications other than media, such as newsletters, community forums and so on.

As a further means of communications, during the recovery phase the communications team made active use of social media to increase the reach of messaging. This proved to be very effective with Facebook and Twitter posts being read and re-tweeted regularly.

A recovery operation such as this has implications across Government with impacts and actions affecting multiple agencies and Departments. Understandably, each of these affected areas will be undertaking their own initiatives in response to impacts in the affected area. However, in order to ensure maximum effectiveness and efficiency of the recovery effort as
a whole, the development and public announcement of these initiatives should be undertaken in conjunction with the recovery team.

**Recommendation 3: Media Engagement**

Consideration should be given on future recovery operations to adopting a more structured approach to media engagement, with regular media briefings undertaken at a frequency dependent upon the phase of the recovery activities and the level of media interest. These briefings could be conducted at different locations around the region, if appropriate, and would provide the opportunity for communication of key messages and provide journalists with the opportunity to ask questions regarding the recovery. This could be complemented by media coverage of community engagement visits. For all recovery operations, consideration should be given to the identification and secondment of a dedicated media advisor to manage the media messaging.

**Recommendation 4: Government Communications Coordination**

In future events, a more coordinated communications structure across Government, where planned Government announcements relevant to the region in recovery are developed in conjunction with the recovery team, would be beneficial to ensure recovery teams are aware of, and can plan for, decisions that impact on the work of the recovery team.

7. **Situational Awareness**

**General**

The widespread nature of this storm event brought significant challenges to the response and recovery operations. The sheer volume of requests for assistance received by the response agencies and the nature of the damage incurred across the Hunter and Central Coast regions meant that at the time of deployment of the Recovery Coordinator, the response activity was still well underway. The operational situation remained quite fluid with widespread flooding still evident and communities isolated and needing assistance. As flood waters receded and residents returned to homes, the full extent of the damage was becoming evident. To complicate matters further, more adverse weather events were forecast, giving rise to concerns of further flooding and storm damage.

Important in these circumstances is the situational awareness of decision makers. In the response and recovery phase this situational awareness is based on information built from data addressing two key subjects:

- General Situational Awareness. Awareness of the current operational situation on the ground, in terms of the location and extent of floodwaters, road closures,
communities isolated or under threat, response agencies deployed, response activities underway, limitations on movement, and so on.

- Impact Awareness. A developing picture of the impacts of the storm on the community, such as infrastructure and environmental damage and associated risks (E.G. roads, bridges, rail, water, power, telecommunications), psycho-social impacts such as housing losses and dislocated people, and economic impacts on businesses and the community as a whole.

In the recovery phase, the focus is on understanding the impacts of the storm event and dealing with those impacts in order of relative need. An awareness of the operational environment (general situational awareness) is also important as this will influence how the recovery activities are planned and undertaken. Experience from this recovery event is that there is room for improvement in data capture and information availability in both areas.

The aerial reconnaissance undertaken by the Recovery Coordinator on his first day in the region was facilitated by the RFS and was of significant value in providing an initial awareness of the event and the operational situation at the time. However ongoing general situational awareness was difficult to maintain as the required supporting information was not always readily available. As part of the response, combat agencies gather, analyse and present this information regularly and a more structured information sharing arrangement between the response agencies and recovery teams would be helpful – the Impact Assessment Data Capture Project addresses this.

Impact Assessment Data Capture

Time is a scarce resource in the early days of a disaster event. Much time is dedicated to capturing and assessing impact data to inform recovery planning and execution. Any initiative that will enhance the speed and efficiency of building the impact picture will improve the effectiveness of the recovery.

On 22 April 2015, the Deputy State Emergency Operations Controller (DSEOCON) activated the Impact Assessment Data Sharing Arrangements (the Arrangements) for the first time (the Pilot).

The Impact Assessment Data Sharing Project was initiated by PES in 2014. An inter-agency working group was assembled to determine the Arrangements and activation processes. The Arrangements, which had been the subject of work over time, were finalised and circulated in draft form to the working group for feedback on 17 April 2015, just days before the event occurred.

The Arrangements facilitate Combat Agencies, Functional Areas and Local Governments to carry out damage and impact assessments to identify economic, social, infrastructure and environmental impacts on communities. They create a whole-of-government approach to data collection, sharing and analysis that spans both the response and recovery phases. The
Arrangements supplement current agency-specific arrangements for collecting damage and impact assessment data, to inform analysis and identification of physical and financial resources needed for response and recovery.

The Pilot appeared to work reasonably well in this event considering it was a first attempt at data sharing, but there is room for improvement. An after action review of the Pilot program has been conducted and will be reported on separately by others. However, from the Recovery Coordinator’s perspective, the captured data related primarily to private housing, with little or no data captured in the Pilot on public infrastructure (roads, bridges, culverts) environmental condition, social welfare, or economic aspects. The absence of this data was a major limitation in recovery planning.

It is potentially unrealistic to presume that there can be a ‘one size fits all’ solution to the data collection challenge, however the intent of the Data Sharing Project is appropriate. During the response phase and in the early days of the recovery phase, multiple agencies are on the ground visiting impacted sites and gathering data. It is logical to seek to capture this data and make it available across response and recovery agencies to inform planning.

It is reassuring that agencies are focused on improving impact assessment data collection and collation processes and adopting a whole of government approach. The benefits of the Data Sharing Project could be maximised by considering the following improvement opportunities for development:

- Expedite the speed with which data is collected and collated
- Standardise arrangements for interagency teams to be stood up and deployed to assist with this work when the lead combat agency is inundated
- Review and standardise schema that can cross reference information such as number of dwellings fully inundated/destroyed by storm effects or floodwaters, the number of people associated with affected dwellings
- Target currently untapped sources of impact assessment data – e.g. DWAL / Disaster Relief Grants / Outreach
- Embed and further clarify the essential role of Functional Area Coordinators in the arrangements for coordinating impact data collection and collation
- Engage more strongly with local government and in particular clarify arrangements for data sharing between Departments of Public Works, Roads and Maritime Services and Local Government
- Embed into practice new strategies developed for this event e.g. the involvement of the NSW Small Business Commissioner in surveying small business for impact data

Accordingly, there is a clear need to progress and expand the current Impact Assessment Data Sharing Project and Pilot being led by PES. Further, there is a clear need to train and raise awareness amongst Local and Regional Emergency Management Committees, as well as
community and non-government agencies about how important and critical this impact assessment data is to recovery planning, including for example, establishing the overall costs of the event and in justifying submissions recommending that grants and other forms of assistance are made available.

**Recommendation 5: Impact Assessment Data Sharing Project**

There is a clear need to train and raise awareness amongst Local and Regional Emergency Management Committees (LEMC / REMC), as well as community and non-government agencies about how important impact assessment data is to recovery planning. The Impact Assessment Data Sharing Project should continue in development, exploiting opportunities to improve efficiency and effectiveness of response and recovery decision making.

8. Dungog & Torryburn

**The Dungog Shire Council**

The Dungog LGA was the most visibly affected by the storm event. The flash flooding and loss of life in the township of Dungog are well documented and the town will take time to heal. The storm impacted on a Council that was already under some stress. It is a relatively large LGA (in regional terms) with a very small population base of just over 8,500 residents.

The Council has a very small permanent staff of only approximately 65 full time equivalents, across both indoor and outdoor roles. Many of these staff members were personally affected by the storm event. Following the storm, the Council staff were under significant stress dealing with the challenges presented by their community, while also in a number of cases having to deal with their own personal impacts. While the General Manager (GM) and his staff demonstrated outstanding commitment to the service of their community, very early in the recovery process it became evident that support was required if the recovery process was to proceed as necessary.

The opening of the Recovery Centre on 29 April 2015 was a major milestone in this support, along with the secondment of a former GM of the Upper Hunter Council to assist with assessment and planning for recovery infrastructure works. Other support was provided by sister Councils, with the Lake Macquarie Council resolving on 27 April 2015 to provide assistance to Dungog. Communication support, including sending press releases and posting updates on social media was provided, along with support to asset inspections, survey assistance for flood level data recording, and assistance with setting up accounting systems to track and claim storm-related costs under NDRRA Funding arrangements. Port Stephens Council provided on the ground works crews to assist in the Clarence Town area of the shire with road infrastructure repairs.

RRB staff facilitated meetings of the Dungog Working Group. Needs assessments and housing options considered by the Working Group are addressed later in this report.
Myall Creek

As Leigh Sales of the ABC’s 7:30 Report noted on the evening of 22 April 2015, “Of all the images we’ve seen of flooding and cyclonic winds in New South Wales over the past couple of days, it’s a house floating down the street that’s come to signify the scale of the disaster.” The shattered remains of that house, along with three neighbouring houses, several cars, and other assorted debris came to rest along several kilometres of the Myall Creek, which runs along the north and east of the town of Dungog.

On 17 June 2015 the Minister for Primary Industry, Lands and Water, Hon Niall Blair MP, announced the commitment of $480,000 of environmental program funding for the clean-up of Myall Creek. This was a welcome announcement that saw clean up works commence on 22 June 2015 under management of the Soil Conservation Service of the Department of Primary Industries (DPI), in partnership with the NSW Environment Protection Authority (EPA) and Dungog Council. Clean up activities are expected to be completed by October 2015.

Figure 9.3. Clean up of Myall Creek, Dungog

Dungog Housing

As noted earlier, this event had a particularly devastating effect on the Dungog community with three lives lost and 130 persons being displaced immediately. Across the Dungog Shire nine houses were destroyed with a further 121 being damaged, many severely. Many affected residents also lost their cars in the storm, with several of those cars being uninsured.

Immediately after the storms and flooding impacted Dungog and surrounding areas, Dungog Shire Council along with local services such as NeighbourCare, Carrie’s Place, Dungog Shire
Community Centre, local hotels and motels, faith and other groups, and individuals have all provided support to this Community and specifically the displaced residents.

Following the storm event 89 households immediately presented as being flood affected. These households were made up of individuals, couples, or families with children, and included the residents of the 20 units from Alison Court, an aged persons social housing community.

Many of the displaced people (including children) are still residing in storm and water damaged houses, with friends or family, or in emergency accommodation. This includes several Alison Court residents, who experienced the trauma of the storm water rising rapidly in the dark, and experienced the deaths of their neighbours.

Whilst two residents have moved back into Alison Court, there are emerging issues of insurance claims, ownership and tenure of Alison Court and land planning regarding flood zones. Alison Court had never flooded prior to this event and some of the low lying units may now be considered to be unsafe. Therefore at this stage no decision has been made regarding whether more residents may be allowed to return.

An important factor in addressing the housing issue is that prior to the storms the Dungog area had very limited availability of housing stock (particularly affordable options) and this shortage is now severely exacerbated. The overwhelming majority of displaced people want to remain living in the Dungog local community and want to maintain their children at the local schools. The nature of the small town and long history of existing family, social network, and country connections to the Dungog area create barriers for people relocating out of the Shire.

An initial Community Needs Assessment, conducted by the Wellbeing Subcommittee of the Regional Recovery Committee, identified that the community was experiencing significant challenges in finding transitional and longer term housing solutions. The Needs Assessment also indicated that the range of vulnerabilities across the communities are significant. Apart from the physical damage, there have been psychosocial experiences of isolation, separation, financial pressure and emotional distress. This has especially been the case for elderly residents living alone.

The individuals and families in the community of Dungog face major loss, psychological distress and decision-making demands over the immediate, medium and longer term period. In response, the Wellbeing Subcommittee formed the Dungog Working Group to consider specific issues of accommodation, housing and psychosocial needs of the Dungog community. On closure of the Regional Recovery Committee, the role of the Dungog Working Group has transitioned to the re-formed Dungog Recovery Committee.
Community Support Worker Project

Under the provisions of NDRRA Category A, joint Commonwealth and State funding of $145,000 was announced on 15 June 2015 to establish the Dungog Community Support Worker Project, to be based within the Dungog Shire Community Centre and provide practical and emotional support to families and individuals. The service has commenced and provides additional community support similar to a case management approach. It is designed to provide personalised assistance to individuals who have been directly affected by the storm and flood event.

The service is modelled on the principles of the successful support services established in response to bush fires that affected the Warrumbungle Shire in January 2013 and the Blue Mountains in 2014 to assist disaster affected households.

As the service aims to facilitate affected individuals’ adjustment, recovery and in some cases rebuilding, highly skilled support workers are required to engage with individuals and families as they make plans and work through the recovery process. The Support Worker model is designed to strengthen individual and household capability to meet recovery needs (including housing), assist in decision-making and promote wellbeing. The service will be funded for a period of nine months.

The service has commenced with two full-time workers to meet initial needs, and will scale back to one full-time worker after three months. The support worker will ensure that appropriate transition plans are created for service users requiring ongoing support.

Torryburn

The community of Torryburn is situated to the west of Dungog. It is a small dispersed locality of rural properties, rather than a township as such, with a population of approximately 120 residents. Prior to the storm event, the sole access route into the community was from the west via Torryburn Road, off the Gresford Road. Torryburn Road crossed the Allyn River, on the western boundary of the community, over a 60 metre long timber bridge supported by timber piers. During the storm this bridge was swept downstream and completely destroyed, leaving the community isolated. The Telstra telecommunications cable fixed to this bridge was also lost, leaving the community without fixed line communications and limited mobile service (mobile service was limited at best before the storm).

During the response and the first two weeks of the recovery phase, food and fuel resupply flights were flown into the community by RFS helicopter. Initially some residents would move to and from the community crossing the river by swimming or by row boat. One enterprising young resident used a bow and arrow to establish a flying fox across the river at the bridge site, enabling the delivery of small quantities of mail, food and so on. On one occasion, the Recovery Coordinator witnessed a Meals on Wheels food pack for an elderly community member being delivered via the flying fox. As a further means of immediate access, the
community was able to develop a very rough track through the grounds of the local thoroughbred stud, Torryburn Stud, and various other private land holdings. These tracks were however, only suitable for use by four-wheel drive vehicles in dry weather. This enabled some community members to move to and from the community by vehicle when conditions permitted, but for two weeks the community remained effectively isolated for the majority of residents.

Aside from the inability of community residents to leave the community to go about normal business, such as to attend work, school, or medical appointments; the isolation also impacted heavily on the thoroughbred stud, which was unable to transport livestock, and the local Brennan family dairy farm. The inability of the local milk tanker to access the community resulted in the dairy farm having to dispose of its daily milk production.

An immediate priority for the recovery operation was the restoration of access for the community. Council and NSW Roads and Maritime Services (RMS) considered the option of a temporary Bailey-type bridge, but decided this was not feasible due to the size of the gap, embankment erosion, and cost; and commenced development of a temporary road linking the community with Clements Road to the north. Concurrently, RMS with Council assistance, developed and installed a pedestrian bridge at the destroyed bridge site. Both of these access means are planned to remain in use until a new bridge can be constructed.

![Figure 104. Torryburn pedestrian bridge](image-url)
A decision to replace the bridge with a new permanent concrete structure was made quickly by Council in consultation with RMS. Due to significant erosion of the river banks, replacement of the bridge will be a significant exercise and will take at least 12 months to complete.

The unsealed access road was constructed first to four wheel drive standard and then enhanced to all-weather two-wheel drive standard, with the first milk tanker making a collection from the dairy on 6 June 2015, some six weeks after the storm.

Council faced significant challenges in establishing the access road as it was required to cross four separate private land holdings. Although a Crown or ‘paper’ road existed over two of these holdings giving Council access for road construction, Council had to negotiate a realignment of these road easements which was dealt with quickly. For the remaining two properties, Council had to negotiate road access licences. These licence negotiations proved difficult as the landholders sought to protect their interests in the agreement. These difficulties delayed the opening of the road by two weeks, further aggravating the already somewhat distressed Torryburn community.

Figure 115. New temporary access track under construction, Torryburn

The Recovery Coordinator supported by members of RRB, Council, RMS, DPI, LLS, FACS and others, conducted three community meetings in Torryburn between mid-May to late June 2015 to assure the community that their needs were understood and were being addressed. This proved to be a very worthwhile activity with feedback from the community indicating that the open communication was very much appreciated. The last community meeting concluded with a barbeque hosted by the community. An interesting outcome of the consultation activities was that several community members noted that the event, and
subsequent community engagement, actually served to build a sense of community with residents meeting their neighbours, often for the first time.

Figure 126. Torryburn community barbeque

Council’s ability to resolve the access issue quickly was impeded by the lack of any legal access across the two properties, and an inability to make an urgent possession of the land under emergency provisions. This is an issue that should be considered in emergency plans, particularly for those communities which have single access routes.

Recommendation 6: Planning for Access to Potentially Isolated Communities

The challenges faced by Dungog Council in resolving the Torryburn access issue resulted in extended delays that impacted adversely on the Torryburn community. The issue arose because the community is accessed by a single access route. The challenges faced by Dungog Council could well be experienced again in future events for similar communities with single means of access. Emergency access options for such communities, including alternate routes or transport means to be utilised in an emergency, should be considered in local emergency plans. In addition, the criteria, likely requirement for, and means of re-supply during the recovery phase should be clarified.

Tocal Field Days

The Tocal Field Days are a three-day agricultural field day event held annually at the Tocal College, Paterson. The event attracts hundreds of exhibitors and thousands of visitors on each of the three days. The 2015 event was planned for the weekend of 1-3 May.

Over 500mm of rain was recorded over five days at Tocal during the week of the storm. The area suffered significant flooding and major damage to road and rail infrastructure. A culvert on Tocal Road at Mindaribba, just to the south of Tocal, suffered significant washout damage and was at risk of possible collapse. Additionally, forecasts of further adverse weather
increased the risk of the Paterson River rising again and making Gresford Road to the north and Paterson Road to the east unpassable again. This could have resulted in many thousands of people being isolated at the field day site for a number of days.

Accordingly, the Tocal Field Days Association and the college determined after consultation with council, the State Emergency Service and police, that the field days should be cancelled for the first time in 32 years.

9. Donated Goods & Appeals

A number of appeals were launched independently to support disaster affected communities. A NSW Storms public appeal was established by the Salvation Army with support from the Daily Telegraph, the Commonwealth Bank and a number of other prominent corporate entities. The appeal raised in excess of $500,000, the distribution of which was managed by the Salvation Army.

Other appeals were organised and run by St Vincent de Paul, the Samaritans and the Dungog Shire Community Centre. The Dungog Shire Community Centre storm appeal raised approximately $110,000 in donations.

The National Australia Bank (NAB) announced a number of relief measures to help support customers and staff, including donating up to $300,000 through the NAB Community Relief Fund, a recovery grants program available to a range of not-for-profit organisations in affected areas, helping them clean-up and support communities in the aftermath of the storms.

The Dungog Shire Community Centre also ran a clothing bank and food bank from where donated food and clothing was distributed to community residents in need.
The Department of Premier and Cabinet (DPC) and RRB staff liaised with local branches of the non-government agencies managing the appeals. While the commitment and objectives of these groups and their appeals was respected at all times, the Recovery Coordinator was concerned to ensure that best use was made of available appeal funding to ensure it was directed to the areas and individuals most in need. Discussions with management agencies centered on eligibility criteria, timing for release of funds, target groups/areas, and an overall aim to ensure broad and equitable access to the community and are ongoing at the time of preparation of this report.

10. Green Waste

From the outset, it was clear that the combination of heavy and persistent rain and cyclonic winds had caused significant tree damage throughout the two regions. As recovery activities progressed, the full extent of the tree debris became apparent. It is difficult to develop a firm estimate of the number of trees felled by the storm, however conservative estimates put the figure in the tens of thousands across the regions, generating close to 100,000 tonnes of green waste. In addition, with time it became apparent that potentially there were as many as 10,000 additional standing trees on public land that had been rendered unstable and would need to be dealt with to ensure public safety.

On 22 April 2015, the EPA announced that the clean-up efforts of residents and businesses affected by storms and flooding in the Hunter, Lower Mid North Coast and Central Coast areas, would be exempt from waste levy charges for 30 days. This exemption applied to green waste, such as fallen trees and branches and water damaged bulk waste, such as carpet and furniture, in the Great Lakes, Dungog, Port Stephens, Maitland, Newcastle, Lake Macquarie, Cessnock, Wyong and Gosford LGAs. Considering the enormous volume of storm debris, on 12 May 2015 this exemption was extended to 30 June 2015.
On 30 April 2015, the EPA approved the use of council depots and former licensed sites by Councils for the temporary storage of green waste provided that the environmental risks were managed. The long term plan for dealing with the green waste was to be further developed by Councils in conjunction with the EPA.

Councils report that the cleanup task for such a significant quantity of storm debris is placing a significant financial burden on them. The anticipated cost of removal of storm debris from public assets is expected to be over $20 million. Of this, over $12 million relates to debris on assets classed as Essential Public Assets, for which the NDRRA provides opportunity for financial relief. The balance relates to assets classed as non-Essential Public Assets, for which relief under the NDRRA provisions is less clear.

Councils are progressing the clean-up works and the public safety risks arising from unstable trees across their areas of responsibility. However, the financial burden on Councils to undertake this work on non-Essential Public Asset sites without reimbursement will impact...
adversely on Council budgets, diverting limited resources from other maintenance and works programs. Considering the nature of this storm event, the volume of tree waste and number of unstable trees that potentially present a safety risk to the public, and the fact that a precedent exists with a similar situation in Queensland, the Recovery Coordinator considers a case could be made for financial assistance under NDRRA. At the time of this report, options for dealing with this matter were being considered by Councils with Government, as the clean-up work is progressed.

**Natural Disaster Relief and Recovery Arrangements (NDRRA)**

A provision of the NDRRA Determination is the limitation on reimbursement of the costs of Council day labour resources for disaster recovery works. The result is that Councils must perform the works outside of normal working hours, as overtime, or utilise contracted resources. On 16 June 2015, the Commonwealth Government agreed to a Queensland Government proposal that would allow Queensland Councils to use their own workforce to undertake disaster reconstruction works on local government owned essential public assets, in circumstances where it is clear that using council labour will be better value than utilising external contractors. This is a welcome development and the Commonwealth Government should be applauded for its adoption.

To ensure national consistency in disaster recovery arrangements, the Commonwealth Minister for Justice, Hon Michael Keenan MP, intends to extend the arrangement to LGAs in the other states and territories subject to those states and territories also agreeing to the same audit and oversight conditions as Queensland has. At the time of preparation of this report, the extension to other states and territories was yet to occur. Accordingly, existing NDRRA provisions continue to apply to recovery actions for this storm event.

**Green Waste on Private Properties**

Throughout the regions there were widespread instances of fallen trees and associated debris impacting private property. Unless the tree has fallen from public land, the removal of these trees is a matter for the private landholder, through insurance arrangements or by other means. As the recovery progressed, anecdotal reporting indicated a potential emerging issue where certain landholders were unable to undertake the required tree removals from their properties. Consultations with Councils indicated there could be some community benefit to establish a short program of support to specific landholders (those who are aged or infirm) to remove tree debris from their properties.

A very rough initial plan proposed the formation of teams from SES, RFS and FRNSW who would respond to priority task lists developed by Councils. The leadership of all three agencies were supportive of the proposal, however the proposal did not progress beyond the broad idea stage as Councils ultimately determined there was insufficient need.
11. Non-Government Organisations

During the immediate aftermath of the storm a number of community volunteer and non-Government groups mobilised to provide support to the affected communities. Chief among these were the Dungog Shire Community Centre, Red Cross, The Salvation Army, Samaritans, the Disaster Recovery Chaplaincy Network, and various local church and community groups and individuals. As the response transitioned to recovery, the majority of these groups and many individuals continued providing support and were joined by groups more focused on recovery activities. These included BlazeAid who established a base camp at the Dungog showgrounds on 9 May 2015 and provided assistance to landholders throughout the area.

The assistance of these groups in both the response and recovery phases was invaluable and should be commended. The support of the Dungog Shire Community Centre, Red Cross and Salvation Army in providing welfare support to affected individuals was of particular note. Similarly, the BlazeAid model of support proved particularly appropriate in that not only was physical assistance provided to farmers in the restoration of damaged fences and infrastructure, but the BlazeAid volunteers also provided a valuable wellbeing service by engaging with affected farmers and helping them to deal with the stress caused by the disaster event.

Coordination across the community volunteer groups and individuals to ensure support was complementary and directed to the areas in most need was a key challenge for recovery staff. This is not always a simple task, and is an important activity that should be considered in future recovery planning.

Recommendation 7: Coordination of Community Volunteer Support

A key challenge for recovery staff is the coordination across community volunteer groups and individuals to ensure support provided is complementary and directed to the areas in most need. This is an important activity that should be considered in future recovery planning. Establishing formal working partnerships with key volunteer organisations that outline expectations during recovery operations is recommended.

12. Residual Issues

At the time of preparation of this report, three key issues remained outstanding:

- **Torryburn Bridge.** Restoration of access, including the maintenance of interim arrangements via Clements Road and provision of the replacement bridge, must remain a priority. The Dungog Council has the lead for both activities, with close support from the regional office of Roads and Maritime Services.

- **Dungog Housing.** Resolution of the Dungog housing situation, including confirming temporary accommodation arrangements for residents displaced from Alison Court...
remained a critical issue as at the time of the report. The Department of Family and Community and Services (Housing) NSW has the lead in progressing this matter.

- **Green Waste.** As noted previously in the report, the volume of green waste arising from the storm was unprecedented. At the time of this report, Councils are continuing with the clean-up and disposal of green waste from council lands, at significant cost to their budgets. Options for addressing this challenge are under consideration by Government.

At a 30 June 2015 meeting of the Hunter Regional Leadership Group, chaired by DPC and attended by the Recovery Coordinator, it was agreed that PES would retain responsibility for progression of resolution of the green waste challenge, with the Regional Leadership Group taking responsibility for oversight of the other two issues, to be managed via the reconstituted Dungog Recovery Committee.

### 13. Members of Parliament Recovery Reference Group

The storm event in the Hunter and Central Coast regions impacted 14 electorates of the NSW Parliament and seven Federal Parliament electorates. Understandably, many of these Members of Parliament (MP) were actively involved in providing support to their communities through the response phase and were keen to remain engaged as the recovery progressed.

In recognition of the important role that local MPs have in the process of community recovery, there was a need to ensure MPs remained informed of the status of recovery activities and had the ability to bring issues from their constituents to the recovery team for action. Noting the widespread nature of the storm event and the number of electorates impacted, a structured approach to MP engagement was required. This was achieved through the establishment of a Recovery Reference Group with membership open to all affected State and Federal MPs, along with mayors of the affected LGAs. The MP Recovery Reference Group (the Reference Group) was chaired by the NSW Parliamentary Secretary for the Hunter and Central Coast, Mr Scot MacDonald MLC.

The Reference Group met initially in the Hunter and on the Central Coast, with subsequent meetings conducted at the NSW Parliament House on weeks that parliament was sitting. Not including the two initial regional meetings, the Reference Group met on four occasions. The first Sydney meeting of the Reference Group was held on 7 May 2015 and was attended by the Premier and the Minister for Emergency Services, along with the mayors of Gosford and Wyong, and Federal Senator Arthur Sinodinos. Subsequent meetings were attended by the Minister for Emergency Services or his Chief of Staff, with staff from other ministerial offices attending as required. At each meeting the Reference Group received a status update from the Recovery Coordinator, PES, and other agencies on specific issues as appropriate, which was then followed by a discussion of any key issues arising at the time. At each meeting, all
members had the opportunity to raise issues of concern with the Recovery Coordinator, the Parliamentary Secretary, or directly with the Government, either via the Chair, or directly with Ministers who were in attendance. These issues were then actioned as necessary. The final meeting was held on 25 June 2015.

Attendance at these meetings was generally high from State MPs, who universally provided feedback that the Reference Group model worked very well and that all were satisfied that the process enabled them to remain abreast of recovery activities and to raise, and have addressed, issues of concern when necessary. Federal MPs and mayors were less engaged in the formal Reference Group process. However, meeting notes and papers from each meeting were distributed by the Department of Premier and Cabinet, on behalf of the Chair, to the offices of all mayors and State and Federal MPs, and all had the opportunity to follow up should any issues arise.

The key outcome of this model of engagement was that it enabled a separation of operational recovery activities, managed by the Recovery Coordinator through the Regional Recovery Committee, from the discussion of issues at the strategic level by elected representatives. It provided a forum for local MPs to be updated on the progress of the recovery effort and to raise issues directly with the Government. This model of engagement proved successful and should be considered for employment in future recovery operations.

**Recommendation 8: MP Recovery Reference Group**

The creation of the MP Recovery Reference Group enabled a separation of operational recovery activities, managed by the Recovery Coordinator through the Regional Recovery Committee, from the discussion of issues at the strategic level by elected representatives. It also provided a forum for local MPs to raise issues directly with the Government, either via the Chair, or directly with Ministers. Accordingly, this is a model of engagement that should be considered for employment in future recovery operations.

**14. NDRRA Category C Grants**

**Primary Producer Category C Grants**

A key milestone in the recovery process was achieved on 15 June 2015 when the Commonwealth and NSW Governments jointly announced the approval of NDRRA Category C grants for primary producers in the LGAs of Dungog, Great Lakes, Maitland, Newcastle, Port Stephens, and Singleton, and the parishes of Branxton, Heddon and Stockrington. Oyster growers in Port Stephens and Brisbane Waters were also declared eligible for assistance as part of this announcement.

The approved grants allowed reimbursement to eligible primary producers of up to $15,000 for clean-up and recovery costs incurred, which is short of the maximum Tier 2 level ($25,000), but in excess of the Tier 1 level of $10,000. The Recovery Coordinator is aware that even
though this amount falls well short of actual costs likely to be incurred by many of the affected primary producers as they make repairs, the grant is still regarded by the majority as a significant action in supporting their recovery, as well as demonstrating State and Federal Government support for agriculture in times of distress.

There was some commentary in the media and the wider community regarding the time taken for approval of the Category C grants (some 8 weeks post the event). Noting the importance of the grants to the community, these concerns have some merit, however should be considered in the context of the overall event. Collection of supporting data to the required level of detail to support the grant application process does take significant time. DPI and LLS staff should be commended for their efforts in collating the data in a timely fashion, while concurrently working with landholders to deal with specific issues such as the need to euthanise a large number of flood impacted livestock and coordinate the collection and disposal of deceased livestock. In this event, supporting data was collated into NDDRA claims within three weeks of the event, and subsequently submitted by PES to NSW Treasury within one week of that. It then took a further four weeks for the claims to be processed by NSW Treasury and the Commonwealth’s Attorney General’s Department (Emergency Management Australia) for approval. Noting the importance of financial oversight in these decisions, these grants are important to the community and there is potentially some opportunity for streamlining the actual approvals process, to minimise such delays in the future.

Targeting of Assistance – Building Resilience

A peculiarity of the form of the grant available to eligible primary producer landholders is that the grant is approved as a single maximum amount ($15,000) applied universally to all eligible landholders, with no acknowledgement of the relative extent of losses suffered or the degree of investment undertaken by the landholder in building business resilience. Within the affected regions, there are many examples of landholders who, with the support of DPI and LLS, have been actively pursuing focused investment in their businesses to improve productivity and build resilience. Paradoxically, it is often these producers who have invested in increased production and efficiencies, and in doing so taken on increased debt, who can be more vulnerable to the costs and disruption caused by significant natural disasters.

DPI and LLS have undertaken a number of case studies of landholders impacted by this storm event to estimate the damage sustained and recovery costs likely to be incurred at the enterprise level. These studies indicate that even those landholders who were relatively well prepared and otherwise robust have incurred significant impacts that align poorly with current NDRRA relief arrangements. As an example, to recondition pastures alone on some larger enterprises will typically cost in the order of $100,000 per property – well beyond the $15,000 made available. These costs must be borne by the producer, and yet the risk cannot be managed effectively under current insurance arrangements.
DPI and LLS is working actively with many local landholders to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the industry as a whole, and a number of participants in these programs have suffered substantial loss. The Recovery Coordinator makes no claim to be an expert in building primary industry resilience or productivity, however it does appear incongruous that those landholders who actively work to improve their industry receive the same level of recovery assistance as those who do not exhibit this behaviour. In a climate where Governments at all levels are seeking to maximise the effectiveness of Australian businesses, including primary production, there would seem to be some benefit in exploring available options to reward those enterprises that exhibit the industry improvement behaviours sought.

LLS has commenced work on defining an alternative approach to address the limitations of the current arrangements. LLS has engaged with primary producers, industry representative bodies, and corporate investors in this endeavour and the work should continue.

**Eligibility Criteria**

A further limitation in the policy is the definition of ‘primary source of income’ as applied under NDRRA provisions. The current eligibility criteria require that the applicant derive more than 51% of their individual income from the primary production enterprise. While it is understood the intent of this requirement is to ensure that assistance is only provided to *bona-fide* commercial operations, in effect excluding a potentially large number of applications from ‘hobby farmers’, it also excludes those landholders who through careful resilience planning build viable off-farm income sources. The Recovery Coordinator understands that Government disaster welfare is a support measure of last resort and landholders are encouraged to support themselves. However, the eligibility criteria as they stand would exclude exemplar (in terms of improving overall industry performance) landholders who otherwise may be eligible for support, had they not sought to mitigate the income risks associated with primary production through income from spouse employment or other off-farm activities.

The Recovery Coordinator supports the intent of the measure to ensure support only goes to *bona-fide* primary producers, but believes there would be benefit in identifying a more elegant means of determining eligibility. These could take the form of, and align with, the quantum of off-farm income eligibility criteria for certain other primary industry support arrangements. Two examples are the Commonwealth’s Farm Household Allowance, which permits off-farm income of up to $80,000 which is then offset against interest payments; and the Commonwealth’s Farm Management Deposit (FMD) Scheme, where to be eligible for support, a primary producer’s non–primary production income must be less than $100 000 in the financial year they make the claim.

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4 It is acknowledged that off-farm income is not the only eligibility criteria for these schemes.
**Farm Management Deposits (FMD)**

The FMD scheme is available to primary producers, but they may not be widely used. The Recovery Coordinator understands that a number of banks offer FMD accounts. These accounts are structured to provide tax incentives to primary producers to build cash reserves in favourable years for use in response to natural disasters. Feedback provided to the Recovery Coordinator from landholders is that this scheme does have merit, but is not widely adopted in the Hunter region. Recent Commonwealth Government announcements regarding this scheme should be applauded, but more work appears to be needed to understand why the scheme is not more widely used, and to promote its use as a means of building enterprise resilience.

**Recommendation 9: Streamlining NDRRA Grants Processes**

Noting the need for financial oversight in assessing NDRRA determinations, these grants are important to the community and opportunities to streamline the approvals process should be explored with the Commonwealth in order to minimise delays in the future.

**Recommendation 10: Improvements to the Targeting of Government Support to Build Primary Industry Resilience**

In a climate where Governments at all levels are seeking to maximise the effectiveness of Australian businesses, including primary production, there would seem to be some benefit in exploring available options to ensure those enterprises that exhibit the industry improvement behaviours sought are not excluded from disaster support. The Recovery Coordinator supports the intent of measures to ensure disaster relief support only goes to *bona-fide* primary producers, but believes there would be benefit in identifying a more elegant means of determining eligibility than is in place currently. The Local Land Services (LLS) work in this area should continue.

**Recommendation 11: Farm Management Deposits**

The Farm Management Deposit Scheme appears to be a well-structured framework for building rural resilience, however its uptake is low. Recent Commonwealth Government announcements regarding this scheme should be applauded, but more work appears to be needed to understand why the scheme is not more widely used, and to promote its use as a means of building enterprise resilience.
15. Summary and Observations

Summary

On the whole, the recovery operation ran smoothly with good community outcomes achieved in most areas. I have been impressed with the positive and collegiate approach adopted by all staff involved in the process, both at state and local level. The willingness of members of non-Government groups, such as industry peak bodies and NGOs, to participate has been commendable. Perhaps the most notable however, has been the willingness of members of the community to give up their time and resources to support the recovery effort, whether that be a simple action to help a neighbour, or the giving of time and resources to be engaged in achieving wider community outcomes. This selflessness has been an inspiration.

The community response to the Premier’s decision to appoint a Recovery Coordinator was overwhelmingly positive. Feedback from the community indicated that this action was seen as a commitment on the part of the NSW Government to ensure the recovery was managed efficiently and effectively without being bogged down in red tape or in debate between levels of government. The presence of the Recovery Coordinator and recovery team in the region and the high level of community engagement undertaken by the Recovery Coordinator and several members of the Recovery Committee, reassured people that their issues were understood and were being considered and addressed where possible.

This reflected by the positive feedback given by Hunter and Central Coast local and state government representatives and community and non-government agencies during the formal debriefs of the Regional Recovery Committee and Sub-Committees.

The Media

The role of media in disasters is a consideration that should not be overlooked. In this event, with the widespread loss of power and breakdown of telecommunications, many people turned to the media for their information needs. ABC Radio Newcastle should be singled out for the admirable role it played in maintaining communications through the storm event and into the recovery phase. Many media outlets relied on crowd sourcing of disaster information, and while this is a valuable way of gathering and passing on information, it can have a negative effect if not managed carefully. There was one instance where a media outlet communicated information regarding a flood threat to the Maitland CBD. Without checking on the accuracy of the information, the outlet went on to promote the evacuation of the CBD area, only for the information to be found to be inaccurate, with the CBD under no threat whatsoever.

Community Emergency Preparedness and Resilience

In major storm events such as this April storm, the effects while widespread are felt most at the local level. There were many instances during this event of small communities becoming
isolated for varying periods of time. The isolation was often magnified by the loss of power and telecommunications, so communities were left to fend for themselves for some time. While many communities were able to deal with this challenge, there were a number that did not have local emergency plans in place.

The NSW EMPLAN notes, ‘resilient communities are better able to withstand a crisis event and have an enhanced ability to recover from residual impacts’ and proposes community education and awareness campaigns to:

- ‘Develop awareness of the nature and potential impacts of hazards,
- Promote personal responsibility for managing risks and preparation for emergencies,
- Develop awareness of emergency management arrangements and assistance measures, and
- Encourage community participation in volunteering and infrastructure protection activities.’

The NSW EMPLAN provides for Local Emergency Management Committees (LEMC) to be established at the LGA level. These LEMC are responsible for development of local emergency response and recovery plans. There appears to be room for improvement on two fronts in this subject:

- Where Local Emergency Management Plans exist, they appear generally to be set at the LGA level, with limited supporting plans that focus at the lowest level on at-risk communities within the LGA (e.g. communities that routinely are isolated during a flood event). To address this deficiency in line with disaster management principles that encourage planning at the lowest levels, there should be scope for communities to take the lead and undertake local emergency planning, addressing their specific community needs within the framework of overarching LGA Emergency Management Plans. There would seem to be a role for LEMCs and Councils to work with communities to develop these plans where they are needed. These plans should include consideration of lessons to come out of this event and address such subjects as what community members can do to meet their immediate health, safety and sustainment needs should help not arrive immediately. The Recovery Coordinator understands that PES is working with REMCs, LEMCs, and Councils to improve the quality of planning at this lowest level, and this work should continue.

- In general, Regional and Local Emergency Management Plans tend to focus on Response requirements, without much detailed consideration of community requirements for Recovery. More work is needed at the REMC and LEMC levels on preparing for Recovery, to ensure that following an emergency, communities are able to easily make the transition from Response to Recovery activities. The Recovery

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Coordinator understands that the State Emergency Management Committee (SEMC) has commissioned a project to review the role of REMCs and this should be progressed.

The program currently under development by DPC to build community resilience is a key element of this preparedness work and should be progressed, drawing on lessons learned from this storm event.

**Recommendation 12: Improving Community Preparedness and Resilience**

It is acknowledged that combat agencies in NSW work closely with communities and provide support to resilience building and preparedness efforts, and that work is ongoing to improve the quality of planning at LEMC level. In this context, communities should be encouraged and assisted where possible to make simple assessments of their risks and take simple measures to support themselves in the immediate time after an event. This may include identifying potential isolations and preparing supplies of food and water; backup communications options; proposing possible community meeting places and / or identifying community members who may be able to assist others.

**Transition from Response to Recovery**

A formal handover from the State Emergency Operations Controller to the SERCON occurred immediately prior to the appointment of the Recovery Coordinator, with the provision of a Response Summary Report as required under the NSW Recovery Plan.

In accordance with the NSW Recovery Plan, Response lead combat agency (SES) representatives attended the early meetings of the Regional Recovery Committee, however there was no formal transfer of operational intelligence at the Regional level. At the Regional level, although regular Sitreps were received it is considered that the content of the Regional Recovery Committee Meeting discussions and action planning could have been enhanced if more timely and complete impact and operational intelligence regarding the changing operational conditions on the ground was provided to the Recovery team as part of daily reporting. The Recovery Coordinator understands that information sharing across combat agencies was reasonably effective throughout the operation, facilitated by strong representation through liaison officers from the relevant agencies. The embedding of Recovery Information/Liaison Officers into Incident Control Centres at Regional and State levels would have assisted the communication of this information to the Recovery team in a timely fashion, but this would impose an additional resource cost.

As discussed earlier, the nature of the storm event dictated that the Response activities continued for some significant time after the storm. These activities continued to be managed within the Combat agency command and control framework with minimal engagement with the Recovery function, beyond SES attendance at the meetings of the Regional Recovery
Committee. There is scope for improvement of this overall Response – Recovery relationship and transition framework as noted above.

**Recommendation 13: Transition from Response to Recovery**

The management of the transition from the Response Phase of an emergency event to the Recovery Phase is important to ensure the continuity of effective management of the event. The NSW Recovery Plan should be amended to provide more specific requirements for handover and (ongoing if necessary) intelligence sharing between lead combat agencies and Recovery at the regional / local level. To support this improvement, MPES should identify and train additional internal and/or surge staff to take up roles as Recovery Information/Liaison Officers and pro-actively embed these officers into Incident Control Centres at a Regional and State level. This would augment recovery operations by allowing not only information collection and analysis but participation in decision making.

The NSW Recovery Plan should be amended to provide more specific direction on the role, responsibilities and location of Recovery Information/Liaison Officers.

**VIP Visits**

Through the period of the initial Response phase and the subsequent Recovery, there were a number of VIP visits to the region. The Premier and State Governor visited the region in the immediate aftermath of the event, providing reassurance that the communities would be supported as they dealt with the impacts of the storm. These visits were followed up by visits of many State Ministers, along with active community engagement by local Members of Parliament, both at the State and Commonwealth level.

Later in the Recovery phase the NSW Premier again visited on 15 June 2015 to announce disaster relief grants. The Prime Minister visited Dungog on 1 July 2015, simply to walk the streets and engage with the community members. The State Governor again visited on 4 July 2015, attending the Stroud Christmas in July activity and inspecting damage sustained at the showgrounds area and then visiting Oyster farmers in the Port Stephens area.

The value of these visits to community wellbeing cannot be overstated. On all occasions, the visits lifted community morale, reminding people that their welfare was important and that they were not forgotten, and such visits should be encouraged in future recovery operations. A point to note however, is that affected communities can be over-visited and planning of VIP visits needs to consider this when selecting visit sites.
Recommendation 14: VIP Visits

The value of visits by senior Government members and Vice Regal representatives to disaster affected communities cannot be overstated. On all occasions, the visits lifted community morale, reminding people that their welfare was important and that they were not forgotten. Accordingly, they should be encouraged in future recovery operations, but organised in consultation with the affected communities to ensure that they are not “over-visited”.

Energy / Utilities / Telecommunications

As noted previously there was a significant impact on power and telecommunications infrastructure throughout both regions. In the immediate aftermath of the storm, the combination of power outage and telecommunication failure had wide-reaching impacts on the community. During the height of the event, emergency services communications were impacted as the Government Radio Network became overloaded and backup alternatives such as mobile phones were limited in effectiveness. In some cases, satellite phones and UHF radio communications provided an alternative, but these were not widely available.

The Roads and Maritime Services Traffic Management Centre in Sydney received the highest number of calls for any event, causing it to become overloaded. With no regional back-up system in place, local traffic management response activities were limited in their effectiveness.

Several communities were without communications or power for several days and as noted above, there is scope for more focused resilience and preparedness planning at the local level. This should include ensuring access to communication devices that are not reliant on
communications or power infrastructure networks, such as battery powered radios, satellite phones and so on.

Likewise, there would appear to be value in reviewing the level of redundancy within existing communications and power infrastructure. As noted earlier in this report, both Telstra and Ausgrid assigned significant resources to service restoration activities, however, long service outages were still experienced in many locations. This was particularly notable in the mobile phone network outages, which in many cases arose from loss of power to mobile towers and other network sites. Mobile phones form an important component in community communication networks. They are frequently used for emergency alert systems, plus they are often the sole means of communications for many people and for providing family connectivity – particularly in times of emergencies. Accordingly, the mobile phone network needs to be of sufficient coverage and resilience to be available to provide the service expected and relied upon by the community.

**Recommendation 15: Telecommunications and Power Infrastructure**

Noting the high reliance within the community on power and telecommunications infrastructure, there would be benefit for Governments at both State and Federal level to work with power providers and telecommunications companies to better define disaster response and recovery responsibilities, and to identify options for increasing redundancies in networks in order to improve surety of service.

**Economic Impact**

In recognition of the importance of tourism to the Hunter economy, the State Government allocated $1 million to promote Hunter tourism. The Recovery Coordinator is not aware of the considerations underpinning this investment decision, but notes that there was no similar investment for the Central Coast region. This was a subject of some community concern and the absence of any communication with the Central Coast businesses did little to alleviate the concern felt by businesses in that region that they were being regarded as less important than their Hunter brethren. Consideration should be given to a more holistic approach in future where disasters impact across regional boundaries to avoid similar community angst.

A further note for consideration regarding economic impacts is the role of the recovery effort itself in supporting economic recovery. During the first few weeks of the recovery, accommodation vacancy rates were very low as hundreds of out of area personnel were relocated into the region to assist with repair and recovery activities. As these people spent money in the region on accommodation, food, drink and necessary supplies, the very act of recovery was bringing external money into the local economy. Again, the impact is unquantified, but it should be considered to be an element of the overall economic recovery effort.
NSW Government Capability

Department of Premier and Cabinet

The DPC Regional staff in both the Hunter and Central Coast were invaluable in their support to the recovery operation. Their local knowledge and regional relationships were instrumental in progressing the recovery actions and resolving issues as they arose. Basing the recovery operations in the Newcastle DPC offices after the first few weeks was also appropriate and appreciated.

Small Business NSW

In the very early days of the recovery, the NSW Small Business Commissioner, Robyn Hobbs OAM, extended her support to impacted small businesses. Support was provided through the network of Small Biz Connect advisors and the Small Biz Bus. Advisors were available to assist small business operators to work through the tasks to get their businesses back on track. The Small Biz Buses, two of which were available in the region, made a number of visits to Recovery Centres and commercial centres offering support and advice.

The Office of the Small Business Commissioner (OSBC) also assisted the local Hunter and Central Coast Business Chambers with the conduct of surveys to determine the extent of the impact on business, and determine the level of Government support required.

A key finding of this work was that businesses were faced with multiple requests for impact data from various support agencies, often requesting the same data, with no apparent alignment of objectives. A common survey form was developed by the OSBC with input from PES to ensure data collected supported identification of impacts which would assist determination of eligibility for potential NDRRA Category C support. The survey was piloted in Dungog and has been well-received. It should be adopted as a template for data capture activities following future disaster events.

The OSBC engaged with the Insurance Council of Australia when necessary throughout the recovery phase in support of businesses impacted by the storm event. Engagement will continue as the OSBC seeks to address issues such as the low takeup rate of Business Continuity Insurance by small business owners.

Department of Primary Industries and Local Land Services

The staff of these two agencies are some of the unsung heroes of this storm event. The Recovery Coordinator spent several days with officials from both of these agencies when visiting rural landholders, oyster growers and fishers. The close working relationship between the two agencies and the welcome they received when visiting farmers indicated the strong relationships they have worked hard to foster. Their support to landholders both in terms of disaster resilience building and disaster recovery is commendable. These are people clearly focused on improving the resilience and efficiency of the primary industry sector.
Corrective Services

A small team of inmates from the Cessnock Correctional Centre was engaged in cleanup activities on the storm affected foreshore at Budgewoi. Likewise, a team from the St Helliers Correctional Centre undertook cleanup works in the township of Patterson. These activities followed an offer from Corrective Services to provide work parties to LGAs in need of support. Although the offer was made to other LGAs via the Recovery Committee, only Wyong and Dungog Councils took up the opportunity. In the both cases, the employment of volunteer inmates in such community support work was well received by the community and in the Wyong case received positive media coverage. This opportunity for support should not be overlooked in future.
Recommendation 16: Corrections Volunteer Labour Teams

The employment of volunteer Corrections inmates in community support clean-up work was well received by the community and should not be overlooked in future recovery operations.

NSW Emergency Management Arrangements

The current versions of the State Emergency Management Plan and supporting documentation served as a good basis for planning and conduct of the recovery operation. It is acknowledged that such plans are there to provide guidance for how activities should proceed, and from that perspective they achieved their aim. A point for improvement, as noted earlier, is the management of the transition from response to recovery at regional level, in line with the EMPLAN.

(Ministry for) Police and Emergency Services

PES plays a pivotal role in the conduct of recovery operations. However, it became apparent in the early days of the recovery that their role was not well understood by regional agencies and LGA staff. Consideration should be given to improving regional awareness of the role of PES in emergencies, and what can be expected of them in terms of support to regional agencies and communities.

Notwithstanding the above, the support received from the operations team of the (then) MPES Response and Recovery Branch was outstanding. The professionalism, dedication and empathetic support provided to the communities by these officers was to be admired. No task was too difficult and the team maintained a very firm focus on the objective of restoring communities from the ground up. Special acknowledgement must go to Ms Sally McKay who brought significant recovery management expertise to the team, and the very capable Director RRB (and DSERCON), Ms Rachel Nibbs, for her professionalism and support throughout.

The regard with which the PES team are now held by Hunter and Central Coast local and State government representatives and community and non-government agencies is reflected in the positive comments made and feedback given during the formal debriefs of the Regional Recovery Committee and Sub-Committees.

My thanks also to the Deputy Secretary PES, Ms Vicki d’Adam and Mr Feargus O’Connor, Executive Director, Emergency Management and Counter Terrorism, PES, for their unflinching support and frank advice during my tenure.

Support Staff

Special thanks must go to the very able support team of executive officers, Mr Colin Perry of DPC and Mrs Shellie Blackwell of WorkCover, my communications officer, Mr Ross Smart from Port Stephens Council, and media advisors Ms Georgie Loudon and Ms Melissa Jones from
Justice. Ms Catherine Parker, Director, Strategic Communications, Justice, also deserves special mention for her support and allocation of her team. This was a great team of enthusiastic people, whose support could only have been improved by long term secondment rather than the multiple short term assignments that eventuated. Their willing support allowed me to concentrate on the things that I needed to, comfortable in the knowledge that the rest would be taken care of.
16. **Enclosures**

1. Regional Recovery Coordinator Hunter and Central Coast Terms of Reference
2. Regional Recovery Committee Structure
3. Regional Recovery Committee Terms of Reference
**Terms of Reference – Regional Recovery Coordinator, Hunter and Central Coast**

The NSW Recovery Plan outlines the responsibilities, authorities and mechanisms for disaster recovery in NSW. It provides for the appointment of a Recovery Coordinator to lead the recovery effort. Following the devastation caused by recent severe weather events across the State, the NSW Government has appointed Retired Brigadier Darren Naumann to perform the role of Regional Recovery Coordinator and chair the Regional Recovery Committee.

The Regional Recovery Coordinator for the Hunter and Central Coast:

- Coordinate the recovery process at the Regional Level, working with and supporting local recovery efforts.
- Chair the Regional Recovery Committee
- Produce the Regional Recovery Needs Assessment
- Develop and maintain a Regional Recovery Action Plan (with an agreed transition strategy) that aligns with local assessments and plans;
- Ensure that relevant stakeholders, especially the communities affected, are involved in the development and implementation of recovery objectives and strategies and are informed of progress made;
- Assess the ongoing need for Recovery Centres and make recommendations to the State Emergency Recovery Coordinator (SERCON) accordingly;
- Brief the Premier and other elected representatives on the recovery;
- Report to the State Recovery Committee and the Minister for Police and Emergency Services through the SERCON;

The Recovery Coordinator will provide a report after 3 months on the progress of the recovery.
Roles and Responsibilities:

- **Infrastructure and Environment SC**
  - Flood, wind, power outage and damaged businesses
  - Unstable Trees

- **Wellbeing SC**
  - Flood Damaged homes / Homeless

- **Cleanup, makesafe and asbestos WG**
  - Asbestos – Homes and Businesses

- **Primary industries and farmers WG**
  - Loss of livestock, oysters and fishing industry

Regional Recovery Committee Membership:

- Recovery Coordinator (Chair)
- NSW Ministry for Police and Emergency Services
- Public works
- Environment Protection Authority
- Family and Community Services
- Local Government (3 reps from Hunter, 2 reps from Central Coast)
- Department of Premier and Cabinet
- WorkCover
- NSW Business Chamber (Hunter and Central Coast)
- Office of Fair Trading
- NSW Police
- Small Business Commission
- State Emergency Service
- Department of Primary Industries
- Health/Mental Health
- Community/NGO representation
- Insurance Council of Australia
- Transport for NSW (RMS)
- Local Land Services
- Hunter Water
- NSW Telco Authority
Hunter and Central Coast Regional Recovery Committee

TERMS OF REFERENCE

Purpose
The Hunter and Central Coast Regional Recovery Committee (H/CC RCC) will coordinate the recovery process working with and supporting local and regional recovery efforts for communities impacted by the April 2015, Hunter and Central Coast Storms Event.

Functions
The H/CC RCC will:

- Develop and coordinate the implementation of the H/CC Regional Recovery Action Plan with an agreed transition/exit strategy) that aligns with local assessments and plans
- Identify, pre-empt and manage local and regional Recovery issues and trends
- Ensure that relevant stakeholders, especially the communities affected, are involved in the development and implementation of recovery objectives and strategies and are informed of progress made
- Produce the Regional Recovery Needs Assessment through Sub-Committees reporting to the H/CC RCC
- Assess the ongoing needs for Recovery Centres and make recommendations to the State Emergency Recovery Controller (SERCON)
- Develop and maintain a Regional Recovery Media and Communications Plan

Method of operation

Membership
Recovery Coordinator (Chair)
Deputy State Emergency Recovery Controller
Ministry for Police and Emergency Services
Councils from the Hunter and Central Coast
Insurance Council of Australia
FaCS
Office of Fair Trading
Hunter Business Chamber
Business Chamber of NSW Central Coast
Small Business Commissioner
NSW Police
Meetings
TBC.

Secretariat Support
Secretariat support will be provided by the Executive Officer role to the Recovery Coordinator.

Observers
Observers and presenters to be invited as needed.

Reporting
The H/CC RCC will report through the Recovery Coordinator to the State Emergency Recovery Controller and the State Recovery Committee. The SERCon as a member of the State Emergency Management Committee (SEMC) will ensure that the SEMC is advised of relevant work being undertaken by the Group and specifically brief the Premier and other elected representatives on Recovery.

Local Recovery Committees will report to the H/CC RCC.

Sub Committees and Working Groups
The H/CC RCC may establish sub-committees and/or project/working groups for any purpose consistent with its functions.