Recovery Coordinator’s Report on the Mid-North and Far-North Coast Flood Recovery May 2009

Photos supplied by Lismore City Council.
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Foreword and Letter of Transmission

Mr Stacey Tannos ESM
State Emergency Recovery Controller
Level 2, Quad 1, 8 Parkview Drive
SYDNEY OLYMPIC PARK   NSW   2127

Dear Mr Tannos

As you are aware, on the 24 May 2009, I was appointed by the Premier of New South Wales, the Hon. Nathan Rees MP, as Recovery Co-ordinator, North Coast floods (May 2009) in respect of floods which had devastated the mid-north and far-north coastal areas of New South Wales. As this was the first emergency situation since the introduction of the State’s new Recovery arrangements, this Report has been produced to reflect their operation.

This report provides a number of key recommendations which, whilst matters for your consideration in the first instance, are, nevertheless, designed to enhance and build on the overall recovery arrangements.

Doubtless, natural disasters like floods can have a devastating and long-lasting impact on local communities, from the disruption to daily life and business in the short-term, to the shaking of the community’s self-confidence over the longer term.

Germane to the requirements for full recovery in any emergency situation, will be the immediacy with which the government responds, and the credibility of that response which is founded on openness and transparency. Each of those characteristics underlay the community’s confidence not only in the machinery of government, but, perhaps as compelling, in itself.

Over the course of the immediate response to, and the ongoing recovery from the North Coast floods of May 2009, I have worked side by side with individuals, community representatives, government agencies, emergency service agencies and other organisations as they worked to rebuild their communities and their lives. I have been greatly impressed by the resilience of individuals, the commitment to service by the agencies of government and, importantly, their determination to recover and rebuild. It is with these important characteristics in mind that I have formed a range of recommendations and conclusions, each of which are designed to build on the important foundational recovery work of and within these communities.

In my role as Recovery Co-ordinator, there was a range of people and organisations that have assisted me and helped make a difficult job a lot easier.

I extend my appreciation to the Government of NSW for their confidence in me to undertake the role. I extend my equal appreciation to you, Mr Heinz Mueller, Executive Officer of Emergency Management NSW and the staff of Emergency Management NSW for their advice and guidance.

To the Mayors and members of the Recovery Committees and Managers and Staff of the Recovery Centres, I also express my sincere appreciation. Hopefully, I have represented their interests and those of their communities, and met their expectations.

Finally, to Ms Kathy Jones, Ms Sara Neville and Ms Allison Bone of Kathy Jones & Associates, thank you for your professional advice and guidance, for the use of your office, computers (and your computer knowledge), and the countless cups of coffee.

I commend the report and its recommendations to you.

Yours sincerely

K E MORONEY AO; APM; MA
Recovery Co-ordinator
North Coast Floods (May 2009)
31 August 2009
1 Executive Summary

The prelude to the floods and storms that affected the far-north and mid-north coastal areas of New South Wales in May 2009, had its genesis in floods and storms that affected much of the same area of the State in February, and then again in March and April, this year.

Indeed, the Bureau of Meteorology recorded that in February 2009, an equivalent of 188 millimetres of rain fell on the far-north coast, whilst 757 millimetres fell on the mid-north coast. Of equal note is the fact that in March-April 2009, a further 384 millimetres fell on the far-north coast, whilst an additional 805 millimetres of rain fell on the mid-north coast of the State.

These falls of rain were compounded when, between the 21 May and the 23 May 2009 inclusive, some 2103 millimetres of rain fell again on the far-north coast and inland areas, whilst 1685 millimetres of rain fell on the mid-north coast and inland areas of NSW.

Figure 1. Total Rainfall across the North Coast Region (Rainfall data has been supplied by the Bureau of Meteorology)
As a consequence of the February, March and April events grounds were totally saturated and in some locations localised flooding and inundation of public roads, homes, businesses and other properties occurred. The compounding effects of each of these storms allowed little time for communities, and the infrastructure that supports these communities, to fully recover. Clearly, the May 2009 storms and floods compounded the situation and the consequential impact of these natural events resulted in widespread flooding across the north coast of the State.

As a result of the May 2009 storms, the NSW Premier declared a Natural Disaster. This declaration was followed by a complementary declaration by the NSW Treasurer that 14 Local Government Areas, namely Tweed, Byron, Ballina, Lismore, Kyogle, Richmond Valley, Clarence Valley, Coffs Harbour, Bellingen, Port Macquarie-Hastings, Nambucca, Kempsey, Tenterfield and Glen Innes-Severn, were areas of Natural Disaster. The Armidale-Dumaresq Shire was subsequently added to the list of affected Local Government Areas covered by the Natural Disaster Declaration, taking the total to 15.
As a direct result of the May 2009 flood event, and in accordance with the State Disaster Plan (DISPLAN), immediate priority was given to the response arrangements within each of the affected communities. There are a number of reported incidents during this period where the selflessness and commitment of the responding agencies – State Emergency Service, Police and other supporting combat agencies, together with community and volunteer groups – are worthy of recognition. To this end and where relevant, regional agency heads are encouraged to recommend formal recognition of their personnel based on the particular circumstances of an occurrence.

As crucial as it is to respond to a wide range of emergencies, it is of equal importance for a community to recover and regain its confidence and well-being. The restoration of normality is as crucial to individuals as it is to the wider community. To assist in the overall recovery arrangements, the NSW Government appointed Mr Ken Moroney AO, APM, as Recovery Co-ordinator, North Coast Floods (May 2009) on the 24th of May 2009.

This appointment underlined the importance of the concept and implementation of an effective recovery plan and this report records not only the history of this flood event, but the formal and practical arrangements for recovery.

For the purposes of this report, disaster recovery is taken to mean the way we restore confidence in the affected community, resume services, restore or plan for the restoration of affected infrastructure, and do all of these things by using that great underlying strength of the community, namely, its resilience to get things back to normal. That resilience is an undeniable strength in a recovery environment and is something that cannot, nor should not, be discounted or ignored.

Beyond the importance of community resilience, there is the requirement for the Nation (in this case, the State) to formally move toward a recovery model. This requirement is mandated, amongst other things, in NSW through the requirements of the State Emergency and Rescue Management Act 1989 as amended (SERM Act). Notably, the Act provides for a State Disaster Plan (DISPLAN) which outlines the requirements for the scope, principles and planning for recovery. Contained within the DISPLAN Part 6 (Interim) is the

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**DECLARED AREAS**

- LGAs within the red boundary are the Declared Areas.
- Those shaded were declared after the March Event and again after the May Event.
- 5 LGA’s were Declared Natural Disaster Areas after the March Event
- 15 LGA’s were Declared Natural Disaster Areas after the May Event

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underpinning requirement for the establishment and operation of both Recovery Committees and Recovery Centres.

The requirement for recovery and the transition back to a normal or orderly community environment is understandable. Indeed, previous reports on natural disasters, such as the McNamara Report 2001 “North Coast Floods of June 2001” and the Department of Premier and Cabinet Report 2007 “Central Coast and Hunter Storms 2007”, have also raised the issue of effective recovery management and provided propositions for it to be strengthened. This report seeks to follow a similar path (through its recommendations). This is not to say that past efforts at recovery have failed and this report’s recommendations should not be viewed in that light. Simply stated, each natural disaster will present both new and old challenges with which government, its agencies and the community will have to deal and the report’s recommendations must be viewed in that context.

By any reasoned observation the long-term recovery arrangements on the North Coast will be ongoing. This is not a criticism per se, rather, an acknowledgement that issues such as critical infrastructure replacement or repair (roads, bridges and the like) will, understandably, take time to complete. The report notes that these issues are subject of discussion between each of the affected Local Government Areas and the agencies of the Commonwealth and State Governments. To this end, it is difficult to estimate the total dollar cost of the full impact of the May 2009 storms and floods. Indeed, these latter storms, as has been acknowledged, were compounded by earlier storms and floods in 2009. Whilst no overall or total dollar value or estimate of damages has been ascribed within this report, individual Recovery Committees have reported on estimates of damage within their reports.

On a related note, and with an insurance evaluation context, this report has been advised that as a result of the May 2009 flood event –
- a total of 6850 claims were lodged in NSW, with a total value of $21.2M;
- approximately 16% of the claims related to motor vehicles;
- approximately 84% of claims related to light property damage;
- less than 22 property claims involved over the floor flooding making property unliveable;
- the remainder of property claims were for light damage due to overflow gutters and garages;
- the Insurance Task Force is expected to operate until mid September 2009; and the
- Insurance Hotline (1300-728-228) will continue on a 24x7 basis until mid September 2009.

Extensive consultation was undertaken by the Recovery Co-ordinator, North Coast Floods (May 2009) with Chairs of Recovery Committees, other Mayors within the affected areas, agency heads, National and State Members of Parliament, industry associations, and individuals (Appendix 2). This approach has been central to the information flow to and from these groups, and, importantly, the wider community. To this end, there were also frequent briefings provided to local, regional and state-wide print and electronic media groups.

This report makes a number of recommendations, for the consideration of the State Emergency Recovery Controller, under the broad categories of emergency management arrangements, Recovery Committees, Recovery Centres and other ongoing issues. The recommendations are contained within each chapter and then reproduced as a whole at Chapter 8.

It must be emphasised that the various recommendations provided in this report are not, nor should they be, regarded as criticisms of past recovery efforts. Far from it. The recommendations are provided as an impetus for further discussion and consideration.

Finally, it is the intention of this report to engage the reader in a ‘conversation’ as it were on what happened, when and where, and equally as important, to understand the lessons learned and provide further impetus for future recovery efforts.
2 The North Coast Flood Events

2.1 What is a flood?

The phenomena of floods and flooding are not new to Australia, or those who are principally affected by those floods. Indeed, the records of Emergency Management Australia (EMA) note that from our earliest natural disaster records in 1875 to the present day, floods and storms across this nation have accounted for the loss of some 1,986 lives with 4,292 persons being injured. Indeed, it is also noted that these same floods and storms have accounted for 78,676 persons being made homeless and have cost an estimated $6.665 billion in damages and related costs.

So, to the uninitiated and those who seek to learn more about floods (and their resultant impact on the social fabric of affected communities), the obvious question needs to be asked – what is a flood?

Geoscience Australia notes that “...a simple definition of flooding is water where it is not wanted”. Another more comprehensive and, some might argue, more academic answer would be that a flood is a “...general and temporary condition of partial or complete inundation of normally dry land from overflow of inland or tidal waters from the unusual and rapid accumulation of runoff of surface waters from any source”.

Whatever the causes and whatever the definitions (formal or informal), the indisputable facts remain the same: floods (and on occasions, accompanying storms) cause millions of dollars worth of damage to property, buildings and infrastructure each year in this country. Regrettably, our national records also note the all too frequent loss of life or injury to those within flood-affected areas. Indeed, it may also be said that of all of the natural disasters that impact Australia, flooding is the most costly in human, physical, financial and structural terms.

2.2 The North Coast flood event – May 2009

In February 2009 severe storms and low level depressions saw extensive falls of rain over south-east Queensland and northern NSW. Indeed, Bureau of Meteorology (BOM) records note that in the area bounded by the mid-north coast of NSW (Port Macquarie-Hastings) to the far-north coast of the State (Tweed-Byron) a total of 945 millimetres fell in the catchment area. This situation was further compounded when, in March and April 2009, a further 1,189 millimetres fell across the same area.

The consequent inundation of many of the towns, roads and rural properties bounded by the abovementioned areas, saw a slow run-off of accumulated waters. This situation was further compounded when, between the 21st of May and the 23rd of May 2009 – a mere seven weeks after the March-April floods - a further 3,788 millimetres fell across much of the same, and in some situations, new locations.

Most notably, the May flood had an immediate impact on more than half a million persons residing and working in the 15 affected Local Government Areas.
May 2009 Declared Flood Area

Figure 4. May 2009 Declared Flood Areas, population, location of major centres (Population data provided by Australian Bureau of Statistics)

As a consequence of the May 2009 inundation and floods, and in keeping with past practices, on the 23rd of May 2009, the NSW Government declared 13 of the affected Local Government Areas as having been impacted by a Natural Disaster. This Declaration was followed by an additional two Local Government Areas being included to the original Declaration. The most immediate impact of the Declaration was the ability for Councils, and certain affected individuals to be able to seek funding under the Natural Disaster Relief and Recovery Arrangements (NDRRA).

It is not the intention of this report to provide a “blow-by-blow” description as it were of the physical or structural impact of the May 2009 floods. Indeed, an accurate reflection on the media reports of this time portrays a clear picture that, compounded by the two earlier floods in 2009, further devastation was caused in May not only in a structural and financial sense, but equally, and in a compelling sense, on the psyche of the communities affected by the flood. The reader is also directed to individual Recovery Committee reports (Appendices 5-8 inclusive in Volume 2) to gain a detailed comprehension of the flood’s impact on local communities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LGA Name</th>
<th>Total Population</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tenterfield</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kyogle</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tweed</td>
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<td>Lismore</td>
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<td>Ballina</td>
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<td>Richmond Valley</td>
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<td>Clarence Valley</td>
<td>48,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coffs Harbour</td>
<td>65,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bellingen</td>
<td>12,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nambucca</td>
<td>18,000</td>
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<td>Kempsey</td>
<td>27,500</td>
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<td>Port Macquarie - Hastings</td>
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<tr>
<td>Glen Innes Severn</td>
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<tr>
<td>Armidale Dumaresq</td>
<td>23,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td><strong>500,000</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It’s an official disaster

Thousands battle with floodwater

By SAFRON HOWDEN

RESIDENTS fill their homes. Windows are sealed with plastic. Sandbags are placed around properties and tapestries are draped across the windows. The scene outside the Knox Centre is a sight to behold.

Damage to cost millions

“Floods in the past have been a big event,” said one of the residents. “This is the worst we’ve had in years.”

North declared a disaster zone

By SAFRON HOWDEN

The local council has declared a disaster zone in the area. Residents are being urged to evacuate their homes.

Grafton residents told to evacuate

Residents in Grafton and South Grafton were ordered to evacuate yesterday as the Clarence River threatened to rush over the city’s levee wall. Midnight. Grafton and low-lying areas of South Grafton were expected to be inundated.

Focus shifts to recovery

Flood damage bill may be in ‘tens of millions’

By PETER WEEKES

The flood hit from nowhere, catching everyone by surprise. The damage is estimated to be in the millions.

Answering cries for help

The Australian Red Cross Headquarters was dispatched to Grafton to assist with evacuation efforts. Sandbags were delivered and residents were advised to stay indoors.

Isolated: Waters from the flooded Maclean River inundate the streets of Smithtown on Sunday. Pic: Tyler Smith/SF
2.3 The transition from response to recovery

The formal Natural Disaster Declaration referred to previously, allowed for a variety of financial assistance mechanisms to be activated. Just as importantly, was the activation of the local community in making the transition from responding to the floods (and their impact on the community) to recovering from the phenomena. There was a demonstrable requirement to move quickly and draw on the resilience and strength of affected communities on the one hand, and at the same time, restore confidence within those communities.

On the 24th of May 2009, the Premier of NSW, the Hon. Nathan Rees MP, announced the appointment of Mr Ken Moroney AO APM, as the Recovery Co-ordinator. In this role, Mr Moroney was required to report to the State Emergency Recovery Controller (SERCon) Mr Stacey Tannos ESM. The following diagram explains these arrangements.

On the 25th of May 2009, Mr Moroney and Mr Tannos, together with Mr Heinz Mueller (Executive Officer, Emergency Management NSW), travelled to Lismore, Grafton and Kempsey and met with the Mayors of these communities, together with senior officials of each Council. The primary purpose of this visit was to view at first hand the impact that the floods had had in these areas, and the equally compelling impact they had also had in terms of the social, built, economic and natural environments of these communities.

This visit also provided the opportunity to note with appreciation the job that had been performed by the combat agencies in responding to the flood situation during May 2009. We heard many reports of selflessness, commitment and dedication by emergency service personnel and community members in coming to the aid of their fellow citizens. Indeed, as this report notes, it is hoped that local agency heads provide formal reports to their respective departmental heads where more formal acknowledgement may be afforded to those personnel who are worthy of community and organisational recognition.
3 Emergency Recovery Arrangements

3.1 The NSW framework – setting a context for recovery

The State Emergency and Rescue Management (SERM) Act, 1989 as amended, provides the legislative basis for emergency management in NSW. In succinct terms, the Act specifically provides for response arrangements to a range of emergency management issues – floods and bushfires amongst others. Overall responsibility for the administration of the Act is vested in the designated Minister of the day. In 2009, the relevant Minister is the Minister for Emergency Services. The specific responsibilities of the Minister are outlined in the SERM Act.

The Act also designates the prime responsibility for response to a range of declared emergencies to the State Emergency Operations Controller (SEOCon). In 2009, that appointee is the Deputy Commissioner of Police, Field Operations. Similarly, the specific responsibilities of the SEOCon are outlined in the SERM Act.

To further assist in the discharge of the responsibilities of both the Minister and the SEOCon, the SERM Act provides for the appointment of a State Disaster Council and a State Emergency Management Committee.

As has been noted, the SERM Act requires the preparation and maintenance of a State Disaster Plan, also known as the DISPLAN, to ensure a co-ordinated and functional response to emergencies by all relevant agencies having responsibilities and functions in emergency situations. The DISPLAN also identifies, in respect to each form of emergency, the combat agency primarily responsible for controlling the response to the emergency and provides for the co-ordination of activities of all other agencies in support of the lead combat agency. A response to an emergency, which may include declared natural disasters, may take place at State, District or Local level and is dependent upon the nature and scale of the event. Whilst overall responsibility for emergency management lies with the relevant Minister; so too Emergency Operations Controllers at State, District and Local level, together with Combat Agency Controllers, have specific and mandated roles to play.

In the case of floods and storms, the State Emergency Service (SES) is the lead combat agency designated in the DISPLAN. This was the situation in the case which is the subject of this report – the floods affecting the far-north coast and mid-north coastal areas of NSW in May 2009.

The SERM Act and DISPLAN also establish functional areas to co-ordinate support to Emergency Operations Controllers and Combat Agency Controllers, and provide the basis for establishing Recovery Co-ordination Committees.

Recently, and in order to strengthen the processes of recovery within affected communities, the NSW Government introduced the State Emergency and Rescue Management Amendment Bill 2009. The Bill, with the object of amending the SERM Act 1989, has now been approved by the Parliament and assented to by the Governor. This important amendment to the SERM Act has, amongst other things, provided for the appointment of a State Emergency Recovery Controller (SERCon) and Deputy State Emergency Recovery Controller. The amendment also provided for the SERCon to be appointed as a member of the State Disaster Council and the State Emergency Management Committee.

Provision exists for the SERCon, in consultation with the SEOCon, to appoint a Recovery Co-ordinator to oversight a range of complex and inter-related arrangements, thereby ensuring a smooth transition from response (to the emergency) to recovery and the restoration of confidence within the community. The Recovery Co-ordinator has a direct reporting line to the SERCon. Again the diagram at page 12 provides a ‘wiring’ diagram of these arrangements.

3.2 The North Coast experience – the role of the Recovery Co-ordinator

As outlined in section 2.2 of this report, on the 23rd of May 2009, and following a succession of adverse weather conditions affecting the far-north and mid-north coastal areas of NSW, the Premier made a Natural Disaster Declaration in respect of the affected areas. Consequently, and as a result of this Declaration, the NSW Treasurer, declared 15 Local Government Areas as natural disaster area. These declarations were apart from similar declarations affecting some of the same Local Government Areas as a result of the floods in March-April 2009, and the earlier floods of February 2009.
As mentioned, as a consequence of the May 2009 Natural Disaster Declaration, the Premier announced the appointment of a Recovery Co-ordinator, Mr Ken Moroney AO, APM, on the 24th of May 2009.

The Recovery Co-ordinator’s principal and immediate task was to co-ordinate the overall on-the-ground recovery arrangements in the affected areas. As a result, the North Coast Regional Recovery Co-ordination Centre (NCRRCC) was established at Coffs Harbour (within the offices of the Department of Commerce).

The role of the Regional Emergency Recovery Centre is established within the DISPLAN. This report acknowledges that complementary to the role of the Recovery Co-ordinator, the primary objective of this position is not one of taking charge of the Recovery Committee (nor the Recovery Centre), but, rather, providing advice and guidance to those Committees, in particular, the Chair, on processes that go to aid the overall recovery arrangements.

In a practical way too, the Recovery Co-ordinator is there to ‘open doors’ and seek responses to issues that may be outside of the domain of the Recovery Committee, or, say, be matters that are within the broader responsibility of government. To this end, whilst the report notes the importance of the leadership provided by Mayors (as Chair of the Recovery Committee), so it must also be acknowledged that it is within the domain of government to provide the resources to both respond to the natural disaster, and, equally, to the recovery of the community and its restoration to normality. These requirements are not mutually exclusive, rather, they are complementary.

Beyond the establishment of the North Coast Regional Recovery Co-ordination Centre (Coffs Harbour), the task of establishing Recovery Committees at Lismore (representing the entire far-north coast Councils), Grafton and Kempsey became a priority for the Recovery Co-ordinator. The Recovery Committee at Coffs Harbour had been established as a consequence of the March-April storms and was in operation at the time of the May 2009 storms. The Coffs Harbour Committee remained in situ and became part of the overall regional recovery arrangements.

Crucial to the ability of achieving stability and confidence within each of the affected communities, was the establishment of Recovery Centres at Lismore, Grafton and Kempsey. As with the Committee arrangements at Coffs Harbour, that community’s Recovery Centre was operating and functional as at the May 2009 storms. Indeed, the Coffs Harbour Recovery Centre served as a model for each of the other three centres.

The staffing of the centres was under the capable direction of a Centre Manager, with Commonwealth, State and Local Government agencies being represented in what was to become known as a “one-stop-shop” arrangement of services to the community. Equally, other community support groups such as the Australian Red Cross, the Salvation Army, the St Vincent De Paul Society and Inter-Relate Family Services were to become vital partners in the overall recovery arrangements.

This report acknowledges the selfless support provided both by Recovery Committee and Recovery Centre personnel in aid of the affected communities. A list of those personnel and others who aided in the recovery arrangements is attached at Appendix 3.

Most notably, the delivery of services co-ordinated by the Recovery Committees, and delivered through the Recovery Centres, builds on previous experiences and continues to serve as a model for future recovery arrangements to emergencies and natural disasters. As such, they are vital to the four important pillars of emergency management, namely Prevention, Preparation, Response and Recovery.

### 3.3 The role of State Emergency Recovery Controller and Emergency Management NSW

Underpinning how Recovery Committees and Recovery Centres function from a practical and a legal perspective, is the critically important role of State Emergency Recovery Controller (SERCon). Fundamentally, the SERCon has a critical role, indeed, an ongoing role to promote the education, training and development of both Recovery Committees and key Recovery Centre personnel in their core and functional responsibilities. This observation is further expanded at Section 6.2 of this report.

The SERCon also has a role in educating other government agencies, in particular, those with a responsibility in emergency management, on recovery arrangements and, specifically, agencies’ roles within those arrangements.
The equally compelling and broader role of community-based education on flood awareness, preparation and response within the emergency management framework needs to be aligned with the community-based (flood awareness) programs delivered by the State Emergency Service, which is the lead combat agency in flood situations (see Recommendation 4).

To strengthen the role of the SERCon (within the overall context of recovery) there is the equally important issue of ongoing education, training and development of key non-government personnel involved in the recovery arrangements. In both situations (government and non-government agencies) such programs should be designed to articulate, clarify and remove ambiguity as to individual, and functional and legal responsibilities (see Recommendation 5).

A concluding observation on this issue notes that in preparing for the future (in the context of organisation and community-based education programs), there is merit in the SERCon meeting with fellow members of the State Emergency Management Committee (SEMC), and the principal and relevant Directors General or heads of State agencies, to discuss the role, function and responsibility that those entities play in co-ordinated, meaningful recovery arrangements. This report is of the view that it is critical that recovery arrangements be built or embedded into overall response arrangements of all relevant agencies. To that end, the mandated role of the SEMC is critical (see Recommendation 6). Propositions for ongoing education – at whatever level are strengthened by reference to public safety training package – competency puaemr014-17.

For parallel and related reasons, there exists a fundamental need for the development and adoption of a detailed State Recovery Plan to complement the State DISPLAN. Encouragingly, this report notes that such a plan is currently being developed by the SERCon and concurs with its development, adoption and implementation.

Response to an emergency is not the same as recovery from that emergency. The terms, whilst synonymous, are complementary. The proposed State Recovery Plan should, amongst other things, articulate the roles, functions, and responsibilities of all of those engaged in recovery arrangements, and at the same time, articulate the steps required for restoration of community confidence and infrastructure, and how outcomes will be measured.

This report also believes that consideration needs to be given to mandating the requirements for community-based recovery arrangements. Therefore, any proposed State Recovery Sub-Plan should be included as an amendment to the DISPLAN. Such a process removes ambiguity and further clarifies the position of individual and organisational accountability (see Recommendation 7).

This report is of the view that the SERCon should have overall responsibility for the further review and implementation of the recommendations arising from the report.

### 3.4 Recommendations

The recommendations arising both out of this report and those of the Mayor’s Communiqué of 9 July 2009 and the Recovery Committees may be considered in isolation. However, to do so would, this report believes, not allow for a holistic approach to improved recovery arrangements.

Therefore, it is recommended that the SERCon consider:

1. The establishment of a body, such as a State Recovery Committee, with responsibility for the oversight and management of emergency recovery operations in general, and in specific instances.

2. That the proposed State Recovery Committee review the recommended considerations arising from this report and those of the Mayor’s Communiqué (2009) (Appendix 9 in Volume 2) and the Far North Coast, Clarence Valley, Coffs Coast and Macleay Valley Recovery Committees (Appendices 5-8 inclusive).

3. That the proposed State Recovery Committee provide an interim report to government on these and related recommendations within 12 months of being so tasked.

4. A review of existing community-based educational programs, with a view to informing the community on flood recovery.
5. Development of an education program for other government and non-government agencies (with particular reference to those within the emergency services portfolio) on flood recovery arrangements, assistance, duties and responsibilities.

6. Meeting with the State Emergency Management Committee, Directors General and agency heads to discuss the role, function and responsibility of individual agencies in recovery arrangements.

7. The continued development of a State Recovery Sub-Plan (including complementary local and district sub-plans).
4 Recovery Committees – the Link to Overall Recovery

The DISPLAN advises that “…those involved in contributing to recovery operations should keep in mind that the whole purpose of such operations is to assist the affected community to manage its own recovery, while recognising that there will invariably be a requirement for external, technical, physical and financial assistance.”

That role of guiding and supporting communities as they recover is undertaken by locally-based Recovery Committees. The role of Recovery Committees in the wake of a disaster is clearly outlined in the DISPLAN at Part 6 (Interim) as being to:

a. co-ordinate arrangements to make an initial assessment of the impact;
b. establish priorities;
c. identify shortfalls in resources;
d. co-ordinate provision of resources; and
e. keep the community informed of recovery strategies.

Underpinning all of these principles is that of leadership. For the sake of repetition, this report is firmly of the view that those functional issues (as they relate to Recovery Committees) should be further strengthened by the adoption of a State Recovery Sub-Plan (to the DISPLAN), where these duties and responsibilities could be further articulated (see Recommendation 7). In a complementary way proposed education and training programs will also be of valuable assistance.

4.1 Four Recovery Committees to cover the North Coast

One of the great challenges for the North Coast Regional Recovery Co-Ordination Centre (NCRRCC) was the widespread nature of the geography with which they had to deal: from Tweed Heads in the north to Port Macquarie-Hastings Shire in the south, and Ballina in the east to Tenterfield and to the Armidale-Dumaresq Shire in the west. It was critical to the recovery arrangements in these areas, that Recovery Committees be established at a number of key locations.

Consequently, Recovery Committees were established at Lismore, Grafton and Kempsey. In the case of the Lismore Recovery Committee, it was agreed that this Committee would also service the needs of the councils in the far north of the State. A Recovery Committee had already been established at Coffs Harbour as a consequence of the March-April 2009 floods and as noted was still in operation at the time of the May 2009 floods.

The report acknowledges the leadership and support of the Mayor of Lismore Cr Jenny Dowell, the Mayor of Clarence Valley (Grafton) Cr Ritchie Williamson, the Mayor of Coffs Harbour Cr Keith Rhoades AFSM (and his co-chair, Cr Mark Troy, Mayor, Bellingen Shire), and Cr John Bowell, Mayor of Kempsey in the most recent recovery operation. They each chaired their respective Committees in a highly capable and competent manner.

The role of the Recovery Committees, in particular that undertaken by the Chairs, was to provide local leadership and ensure that the community’s needs and expectations for a full recovery were being met by a whole-of-government approach, and, that the restoration of services (and therefore, confidence) was being achieved. There is, this report believes, a reasonable argument for Mayors to be appointed as Local Recovery Coordinators (Recommendation 8).

As outlined elsewhere in this report, the role of the Recovery Co-ordinator, North Coast Floods (May 2009) was to assist (and not over-ride) the Chairs of the Recovery Committees to achieve realistic goals and expectations.

In addition, Mr Phil Blunden, formerly of the NSW Treasury, was appointed to the NCRRCC to assist the Recovery Co-ordinator, Recovery Committees and affected individuals, agencies, industry groups and local government, with advice regarding Natural Disaster Relief and Recovery Arrangements (NDRRA) funding
and application procedures. His advice to Recovery Committees and others proved invaluable to the overall recovery arrangements. Mr Blunden’s independent report is based on his informed observations and extensive consultation, is attached at Appendix 10 in Volume 2. His report contains a number of key recommendations which should be referred to the proposed State Recovery Committee (Recommendation 1 of this report) for consideration and recommendation(s) to State Government (see Recommendation 12).

Further, supportive comments on Mr Blunden’s report are outlined at Section 4.4.

### 4.2 Recovery Committees – their composition and management

To adequately reflect community-based input to the Recovery Committees, the Mayors of the affected communities were appointed as Chairs.

This report notes that to varying levels (and in varying locations) they were ably assisted by agency representatives drawn from the NSW Police Force, Department of the Premier and Cabinet, NSW Rural Fire Service, NSW Department of Community Services, NSW Health, North Coast Area Mental Health, Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care, NSW Department of Education, Catholic and Independent Schools, State Emergency Services, Centrelink, Local Government, NSW Department of Primary Industry, Housing NSW, Office of Fair Trading, Rural Assistance Authority, Department of State and Regional Development, NSW Department of Commerce, Department of Environment and Climate Change, NSW Department of Transport, Telstra, and Country Energy. No less a contribution was made by a number of key industry groups including insurance bodies, Catchment Management Authorities, and livestock and agriculture representatives.

Whilst the report acknowledges that each of the Recovery Committees met the requirements and expectations of the DISPLAN, the report also believes that the role, function and responsibility of the Recovery Committee (and therefore, the overall processes of recovery) could be further strengthened by the inclusion of other State Government agencies whose knowledge and expertise are crucial to both short and long-term recovery arrangements and planning. Such inclusion goes to the very heart of the restoration of community confidence.

This report recommends that the proposed State Recovery Committee (see Recommendation 1) undertake a complete review of Recovery Committee membership with a view to identifying agencies (such as the Department of Planning) for inclusion in future Recovery Committee discussions and decision making (see Recommendation 8).

As important as it is for the relevant agencies of Government to be represented in the Recovery Committee and the Recovery Centre, so, too, this report believes there is a place for the local Member of Parliament, particularly at State level, to be invited as an observer on their local Recovery Committee. Such an invitation avoids the potential for misunderstanding or ambiguity, and reinforces openness, transparency and a collaborative approach to dealing with community issues at times of crisis (see Recommendation 9).

Whatever the final composition is of Recovery Committees (thereby reflecting a true whole-of-Government approach to recovery) there must be a commitment by each agency to provide qualified human resources to both the Recovery Committee and Recovery Centre in accordance with the State DISPLAN, and any proposed State Recovery Plan. This report acknowledges that the very duration and nature of the recovery arrangements can be trying on agencies, their management, and their personnel. Notwithstanding this fact, this report believes it is the community’s expectation that all relevant agencies will be represented across the operating hours of the Recovery Committee and Recovery Centre. In the context of public service nothing less is required and nothing less is expected (see Recommendation 8).

### 4.3 Reports from the Recovery Committees

It is not the intention of this report to reiterate verbatim the contents of the reports of the four Recovery Committees. Whilst each report is unique to the circumstances of the communities for which each Recovery Committee had geographic responsibility, it is noted that there is a commonality to a number of the issues identified.

Each Recovery Committee has reported around a common framework of four identified environmental themes – social, built, economic and natural. Recommendations arising out of each of the reports are
supported by observational comment, evidence and, reasonably, some may argue what will aid their communities in the longer term recovery requirements.

Notably, the key features of each of the four key themes are:

- **Social** - safety and well being; health and welfare;
- **Built** - residential housing, commercial and industry property, public buildings and infrastructure assets, rural farmland assets and utilities;
- **Economic** - individuals, businesses, primary industry and infrastructure; and
- **Natural** - natural resources, river and coastal systems and waste pollution.

This report, as mentioned, notes both the commonality and uniqueness of each of the issues raised by the Recovery Committees. Notwithstanding this fact, this report recommends that each of the issues raised be the subject of more detailed examination. Accordingly, this report refers the four Recovery Committee reports to the proposed State Recovery Committee for further consideration and recommendation to Government (see Recommendation 10).

Crucial to any proposed review (as outlined in Recommendation 10) will be the need for the obvious inclusion of Finance and Treasury officers whose input will be essential to any informed outcome.

To further underscore the issues and recommendations raised in each and all of the Recovery Committee Reports, attention is drawn to the Mayor’s Communiqué of the 9 July 2009. That Communiqué is attached at Appendix 9 in Volume 2. Its contents and recommendations should form part and parcel of the consideration of the proposed State Recovery Committee as an adjunct to the Recovery Committee reports (see Recommendation 11). The Communiqué represents a consensus view by the Mayors and provides, amongst other things, a broad complementary blueprint to each of the Recovery Committee reports.

### 4.4 Reports from other agencies

A number of agency-based reports have been provided (Appendix 1 and Appendices 5-8 inclusive). As with the Recovery Committee reports, the contents of these agency reports are provided to Government for further consideration both by agency heads, and in a concurrent way by the proposed State Recovery Committee (see Recommendation 13).

By way of reiteration of the issues raised at Section 4.1, notable amongst the reports provided is that of Mr Phillip Blunden, formerly of the NSW Treasury, on the Natural Disaster Relief and Recovery Arrangements (NDRRA).

The NDRRA are the mechanism for the provision for financial assistance in the aftermath of a natural disaster. The philosophy of these arrangements is to ensure that communities and individuals receive basic relief as soon as is both possible and practicable, and to support the recovery from natural disasters of the communities’ economic base.

In NSW, the assistance is for personal hardship and distress, restoration of public assets, concessional loans to primary producers, concessional loans to small business, freight subsidies for fodder and stock movement, and loans or grants to non-profit organisations.

As noted, Mr Blunden’s report is attached at Appendix 10. Its contents, in particular, its recommendations, should be a matter for ongoing consideration. Indeed, and subject to those considerations, the NSW Government may seek to raise any or all of the issues and recommendations arising from Mr Blunden’s report at COAG level for national consideration - given that the nature of natural disasters in this country, the NDRRA, its policies and application have national implications (see Recommendation 12).

Finally, natural disasters such as floods are not unique to Australia. Indeed, much work in terms of response and recovery from such situations has been the subject of analysis and research at the international level. I am indebted to Mr Oscar Apodaca, Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery, World Bank (Washington DC) for both his time and advice on these critically important issues. Comment is made elsewhere in this report on this body of work and the important issues of early warning systems.
4.5 **Recommendations**

It is further recommended that the SERCon consider:

8. A review of the organisational composition and functions of Recovery Committees and Recovery Centres be undertaken, with a view to providing communities affected by natural disaster with access to more holistic Government services. Further that consideration be also given to having local Mayors appointed as Local Recovery Coordinators.

9. That Local State Members of Parliament be invited as observers on their local Recovery Committees where established.

10. That the reports provided by the local Recovery Committees (Appendices 5-8 inclusive) be referred to the State Recovery Committee, for further consideration and recommendation to the SERCon.

11. That due consideration be given to the Mayor’s Communiqué (Appendix 9) of 9 July 2009 as a parallel reference to the Recovery Committee Reports on the May 2009 floods.

12. That the report on the effectiveness of the Natural Disaster Relief and Recovery Arrangements during the North Coast Floods (May 2009) (Appendix 10) be considered in light of any current or future reviews of the NDRRA at State/National level.

13. That the reports of Government and non-government agencies (Appendix 1 and 5-8 inclusive) be referred to the State Recovery Committee, for consideration and appropriate referral.
5 Recovery Centres – the Key to Community Satisfaction

It became crucial to the overall requirements for recovery (and, importantly, the restoration of community confidence) that the public face of that recovery be through the establishment of Recovery Centres – local people working to aid local people.

Relevant to the May 2009 flood event, each of these Centres were designed to provide a one-stop-shop approach to government and community-based services that those affected by the storms and floods could readily access. Subsequently, and as reported, Recovery Centres were established at Lismore, Grafton and Kempsey. A Recovery Centre had already been established at Coffs Harbour as a consequence of the March-April 2009 floods and was still in operation at the time of the May 2009 floods.

It is worthy to note that the Recovery Centre established at Coffs Harbour served as a model for the other Centres. It is also important to note and acknowledge the work of Ms Raechel Squires, of Coffs Harbour Council, whose personal drive and commitment was instrumental not only in the establishment of the Recovery Centre at that location, but who was also instrumental in establishing and providing ongoing assistance to each of the other Centres. Her work is both worthy of formal recognition and the highest commendation.

As important as it was to establish the Recovery Centres at each of the nominated locations (together with appropriate telephony and IT-based resources, and office equipment), it was of equal importance to ensure that those who staffed the Recovery Centres were qualified in their respective fields, could work harmoniously in what was a charge-filled atmosphere, and at the same time (and for many) make the speedy transition from the task of responding to the flood situation in their community, to one of assisting their community to recover from the event.

Whilst the Coffs Harbour Recovery Centre served as a model for the establishment of the three other Centres (Lismore, Grafton and Kempsey), what was of greater importance for those local communities was those who were particularly selected to manage these Centres. This report acknowledges the unstinting contribution made by Ms Isabel Perdriau (Lismore), Mr Brian Lane (Grafton), Ms Leonnie Harrison (Coffs Harbour) and Mrs Marg Mottee, (Kempsey). Notably, and sensibly, each of these officers was drawn from the affected local government area. Their tirelessness and selflessness on behalf of their respective communities was, and remains, a reflection of an equally strong commitment and dedication to the task. They, too, are worthy of the highest commendation.

Those who staffed the Recovery Centres showed remarkable commitment and dedication on behalf of affected communities. Equally as important, they were credible ambassadors for the respective government agencies. A detailed list of Recovery Centre staff who contributed to the recovery arrangements is at Appendix 3.

Such was the nature of the contribution of so few in support of so many, that formal recognition at Government level is recommended (see Recommendation 14).

The report also expresses appreciation to Directors General and agency heads for their commitment in providing staff to the overall recovery arrangements.

A clear sign of community acceptance of the Recovery Centre model is demonstrated that between the 28th of May 2009 and 10th of July 2009, more than 6,500 persons attended the four Recovery Centres, whilst more than 1,600 made telephone inquiries to the Recovery Centres. Specific centre details are outlined in the reports of the Recovery Committees.

The report also notes the many supportive comments of community leaders and the community regarding the service provided by Recovery Centre personnel. Indeed, that same service has provided a new bond between the agencies of Government and the community they serve. Of equally commendable note was the visit by Her Excellency, the Governor General of Australia, Ms Quentin Bryce AC, to the Lismore Recovery Centre on the 13th of June 2009. Her supportive comments (directed toward all Recovery Centre personnel across the affected region) were warmly received and appreciated by all staff.
5.1 Operationalising and Improving Recovery Centres

Following the initial meeting of Mayors from the affected areas on the 25th of May 2009, a requirement was established that the processes of recovery needed to be formalised through the establishment of Recovery Centres by no later than the 28th of May 2009.

Doubtless, this was a formidable task because it required the identification and leasing of suitable premises, the outfitting of those premises (including furnishings, telephony and IT networking), and, most importantly, the staffing of those centres by qualified personnel drawn from across the agencies of Federal, State and Local Government. In addition, and as was subsequently proven to be the case, there was a strong reliance on the professional and caring skills of volunteer agencies such as Australian Red Cross, St Vincent De Paul Society, Salvation Army and InterRelate Family Services.

As mentioned, it was important that the Recovery Centres acted as one-stop shops as it were, where those who were affected by the floods could seek the advice, counsel and guidance of relevant agencies. Indeed, underpinning the fundamental operation of the Recovery Centres were the requirements of the DISPLAN. Such an approach avoided fragmentation of advice by not referring affected community members from one physical location to another, and most notably in this particular situation, from one country location to another where these various agencies were normally headquartered.

Whilst there was a multi-agency approach to the staffing of the Recovery Centres, some distinct issues stood out in this important approach.

Firstly, whilst each agency provided advice and guidance in accordance with its charter or mission, this report notes, with encouragement, that there was a new understanding and appreciation of the work that other agencies did, and notably, where each agency fitted in to the overall recovery arrangements. This aspect of inter-agency co-operation needs to be further encouraged for the delivery of day-to-day services in any post natural disaster environment.

Beyond the critically important issue of day-to-day harmony within the Recovery Centre (which primarily fell on the Recovery Centre Manager), there are the synergies that can be created (and maintained) by colleagues who have a common thread, namely, public service. Notwithstanding the recovery environment in May-June 2009, such service is at the very heart of the NSW State Plan.

Secondly, whilst the mix of personnel at each of the Recovery Centres was appropriate in terms of knowledge, skills and personal attributes, what was of equal notice were the agencies – both public and private sector - which were not there. Such a statement does not imply that some agencies or groups were excluded or indifferent to the community’s needs at this time; rather, with the benefit of hindsight, they should have been included.

Such groups should include, say, the Department of Planning whose professional advice, particularly, at Recovery Committee level, is instrumental in the formation of judgement based on the best qualified advice.
for both recovery and the long-term future of the community. For equally compelling reasons, agencies such as Legal Aid can do much to clarify issues, and short circuit concerns or complaints that ultimately all go to the restoration of community (and individual) confidence.

So, too, this report believes that there is a place for private sector groups such as a representative of the Insurance Industry Council. Likewise, and given the fact that disputes will invariably arise in terms of insurance policy interpretation, there is a compelling argument for a representative from the Office of the Insurance Ombudsman to also be present. Whilst these agencies may understandably argue that given the situation with the May 2009 floods that their resources would be spread to thin, then a ‘leaf-out-of-the-book’ approach could be taken from Centrelink who had a mobile van in and across the affected area as an adjunct to services provided by their static staff at each of the Recovery Centres. Such an approach was highly valued by community members and was within the true meaning of public service.

Thirdly, the very nature of the recovery arrangements (from a natural disaster), are not matters that are going to be resolved within days or weeks. Would that such were the case. History records that in some situations, recovery arrangements (in all of their manifestations) may last many weeks, or many months. Accordingly, there must be a commitment at Director General or agency head level (through their Regional or agency head representative) to staff both the Recovery Committee and, importantly, the Recovery Centre with qualified staff in both the initial and ongoing phases, however long the journey. Leadership on this issue must come from the top.

The report notes that on occasions some key agency representatives were not present during all operating hours of the Recovery Centres. This may have been because of critical shortage of qualified personnel, the very nature of heavy workloads, ill-health or a myriad of issues that beset the day-to-day workforce. But, Recovery Centres are not a normal workplace. They are the place where a very stressed, emotionally charged community and, in some situations, community members who have lost everything, are looking to go for the very advice, guidance and counsel that Recovery Centre personnel can and need to provide in a face-to-face environment.

In such situations where there are identified staff shortages (and they may occur from time to time due to unforeseen circumstances), advice should be provided to the Centre Manager, who, in consultation with the Chair of the Recovery Committee and the Recovery Co-ordinator, will seek to ameliorate the problem by discussion with local or regional Managers of agencies.

As recommended, the critical issue of staffing, resourcing and operation of Recovery Centres should be the subject of review by the State Recovery Committee (see Recommendation 8). In saying this, the report’s comments should not be construed as criticisms of the recent recovery effort, rather, any system, approach, operational practice or policy should be reviewed and adjusted in the light of identified circumstances.

5.2 The North Coast Regional Recovery Centre, Coffs Harbour

To underpin and strengthen the role of the Recovery Committees and Recovery Centres, the Recovery Co-ordinator and Emergency Management NSW personnel (EM:NSW) located to Coffs Harbour and established the North Coast Regional Recovery Co-ordination Centre (NCRRCC). This approach emulated past recovery arrangements.

The primary role of the NCRRCC was to:

- provide a regional focus for the recovery effort (through the Recovery Committees);
- assess the level of damage across the affected region;
- assess the resources required to manage the recovery operation;
- ensure the effective and seamless transition from response to recovery;
- inform both the NSW Government (through the SERCon) and the community (through media coverage) of the recovery arrangements and effort; and
- identify recovery issues that could be enhanced by additional whole-of-Government effort.

The NCRRCC was formally established within the offices of the Department of Commerce (DoC), Coffs Harbour. The report acknowledges the work of Mr Kevin Plummer, DoC Manager, Coffs Harbour and his staff in both the establishment and resourcing of the NCRRCC, and equally as important, the local Recovery Centres as well. The contribution of the DoC over the period 24-28 May 2009 (opening of the Recovery Centres) was provided in a highly professional and timely manner.
The NCRRCC was staffed seven days a week by Emergency Management NSW personnel, who were available on a 24-hour basis. Acknowledgement must be made of the professionalism of Emergency Management NSW staff, in particular, Mr Heinz Mueller, Mr Rick Stone, Mr Craig Roberts and Ms Jenny Symonds, who worked tirelessly over the entire recovery operation in support of the Recovery Committees and their Recovery Centres. This report further acknowledges their continuing efforts many weeks and months past the closing of the Recovery Centres and Committees. Their commendable service is drawn to the attention of the State Emergency Recovery Controller for suitable acknowledgement.

Not surprisingly, many issues from media management of Recovery Centre and Recovery Committee operations, together with day-to-day public inquiries were directed into the NCRRCC. To manage these issues the NCRRCC developed and maintained an Issues Log where critical matters referred to the Centre could be recorded and actioned. This Log served as a record of key issues – whatever the source - and enhanced the accountability of the Centre.

Some of the issues raised at NCRRC level are by their very nature not going to be easily resolved. Mostly such matters relate to infrastructure (roads and bridges) repair or replacement. With the formal closing of the NCRRCC, and given ongoing community representations, an oversight needs to be maintained over the log by the SERCon to ensure that all recorded matters are properly oversighted and acquitted (see Recommendations 15 and 16).

Strategically, and for sound operational reasons the NCRRC developed a Communications Plan. The principal features of the plan were to ensure effective, timely and clear communication with affected communities, Recovery Committees, individuals and businesses in need of assistance, and with the various individuals, agencies and organisations providing recovery assistance. The Communications Plan (May 2009 Floods) provides a model for future recovery communications arrangements and this report recommends its formal adoption (see Recommendation 17).

This report also acknowledges the important technical advice provided by the Emergency Information Coordination Unit, Department of Lands, and their assistance in providing a range of satellite imagery of the North Coast flood area. A number of those images are reproduced within this report.

5.3 Recommendations

It is further recommended that the SERCon consider:

14. Appropriate recognition be given to all personnel who contributed to the recovery arrangements arising out of the May 2009 floods.

15. That there be governance and oversight of the May 2009 Issues Log, and that all outstanding matters be acquitted.

16. The provision of ongoing information to all inquirers as to the outcome or resolution of their issues.

17. That the Communications Plan implemented by the North Coast Regional Recovery Centre (May 2009) be considered as a model for future natural disaster recovery arrangements.
6 Ongoing Issues for Further Discussion

To this point, the report has sought to inform the reader of the history of the events surrounding, and subsequent to the May 2009 floods on the mid-north and far-north coastal areas of NSW. The report acknowledges the critically important work of the combat agencies in responding to those floods, and equally as important, the transition from response to recovery from those floods.

Within the context of recovery, the report has provided an overview to the legislative framework which underpins the recovery arrangements in NSW, and the accountability framework for that to occur. Comment and recommendations are provided as to how the recovery framework, and equally as important, the delivery of recovery services can be enhanced in the future. As proposed, further discussion is essential on each of these recommendations and the proposed State Recovery Committee is key to further progress in this regard.

This report also notes that beyond the delivery of recovery arrangements, both in prescriptive and practical terms, a range of equally important and compelling issues emerged during the recovery processes, and the report suggests that these matters also be the subject of further detailed work with a view to review and adoption.

These latter mentioned issues are not listed in order of priority, rather, they are provided to stimulate discussion, for each is crucial to how affected communities recover from natural or man-made disasters, and ideally resume a level of normality that they enjoyed prior to that disaster.

These issues include:

- mental health within the community, including responders and recovery personnel;
- community-based flood education programs (already the subject of reference in this report);
- flood forecasting and intelligence warning systems;
- effective community awareness at times of natural disasters and the role of the media;
- electricity outage and the impact on the dairy industry; and
- tourism.

6.1 Mental health issues

There are many excellent texts written about the critical need to address the issue of mental health wellbeing within the community, particularly, at times of a crisis such as recovery from a natural disaster. It is not the intention of this report to reiterate or redefine those texts, rather, to draw to the reader’s attention that this is a critical issue that must be both acknowledged and continuing attention provided to it.

For those who have lost family, friends, possessions or other valuables which may or may not have a tangible value, that loss can be devastating and have a lasting impact on the psyche of the individual. In the case of a whole community, the impact can be several hundred or thousand times more palpable.

Coupled with this, the impact that an event such as a natural or man-made disaster has in terms of physical or human loss when it occurs several times over almost boggles human understanding. This phenomenon was the case for some residents of the mid-north and far-north coastal areas of NSW who experienced three substantial storm events and associated flooding in 2009. Indeed, the gap between flood two (March-April), and flood three (May) was only seven weeks.

Whilst some may argue that there is something unique about the Australian psyche that implies a toughness of character and spirit, none in the community are immune from the occasional impact of mental ill-health. This is no more so than in the Australian rural environment.

The report notes the more than occasional comment to (and observation by) NCRRCC staff when travelling through flood affected areas about the impact of mental ill-health on some members of the community. Some, agreeably, sought help through Recovery Centres, whilst others had to be directed toward the provision of mental health services. For some, however, there was the human characteristic of not wanting to burden others, or discuss what must be regarded as one of the most personal of health issues. Some affected community members, the report suspects, have not sought help to this point in time.
Physical evidence of mental ill-health was also evident to staff at the Recovery Centres. Where that was the case Recovery Centre Managers directed individuals to a private area where a representative of the Department of Health (Mental Health Intervention Team) or InterRelate Family Services were present and services were provided on a discreet and confidential basis.

Where community members were unable to attend Recovery Centres, and mental ill-health was an issue to be considered, they were directed to one of six Mental Health Access Lines (within the North Coast Area Health Service) and through their principal number of 1300-369-968.

In parallel terms, and as acknowledged elsewhere in this report many of the staff who were allocated to work in the Recovery Centres, had only a short time before been performing roles in critical response teams and then as members of the recovery operation. Respite between response and recovery, for some, was extremely short-lived. So, too, as with some community members, there were reports of some staff within the Recovery Centres feeling the effects of long hours and the burdensome nature of listening to many examples of people in need of assistance and, in the case of some, who wanted to unburden the grief and loss that they were feeling. Not surprisingly then, and as mentioned, mental health issues were also an issue for some Recovery Centre staff.

Commendably, Recovery Centre Managers noted this issue and again the services of Mental Health Intervention Teams and InterRelate were discreetly applied and assistance provided.

Clearly, two key but inter-related issues emerge: namely, mental health wellbeing programs for the general community (particularly in times of crisis), and identical programs for Recovery Centre and emergency service (response) personnel.

To progress these issues, the Recovery Co-ordinator met with the Director General of Health NSW, Professor Debora Picone and the Deputy Director General, Dr Richard Matthews. They have provided a most comprehensive overview of programs and policies provided by and through that agency (Appendix 1) and the services available within the community (including response and recovery personnel) to address this issue.

Of equal note, the Recovery Co-ordinator also met with Superintendent David Donohue, NSW Police Force, who, in collaboration with the Department of Health NSW, has developed a commendable training package for police officers and emergency service personnel which can be adapted to the workplace. This report recommends further consideration and adoption of these similar programs to the wider emergency service network.

The proposed State Recovery Committee needs to further consider the issue of community-based and employee-based mental health programs, and how, in consultation with agencies like the Department of Health NSW and the NSW Police Force, programs can be further developed, expanded and delivered within the community and the emergency services workforce. The issue of mental health and wellbeing is an important process in overall recovery, not a by-product of it.

6.2 Community-based flood education and awareness programs

Whilst it might be reasonably observed that many people who permanently reside in flood or bush-fire prone areas have an appreciation and awareness of the danger issues, this is not the case for all such residents, nor, it may be said, for those who travel into and through these areas in, say, periods of natural disaster.

Consideration needs to be given by the proposed State Recovery Committee to the importance of a properly structured and focused community-based campaign designed to alert all persons – permanent residents or travellers - as to the dangers of entering or travelling through areas which may be affected by a natural disaster such as a flood. Whilst the old legal maxim of ignorance of the law is no excuse; so then ignorance of the dangers, both obvious and not so obvious, at times of natural disaster can have a devastating impact, including the loss of life or injury.

In one of the three floods that impacted in the north coast area in 2009, there was a reported loss of life. Regrettably, this involved a local person who was drowned in his local community while crossing a flooded creek. Clearly, then, community-based flood awareness programs are not simply for the passer-by who may never have encountered a flood. They can serve as a means of positive reinforcement to all community members.
This report believes that any community-based education program (as referred to in Recommendation 4), should be developed and delivered not solely relying on the resources of Government – important as that may be from a financial perspective. A solution may also rest within the community’s own resources and with the aid of community-based organisations such as Lions, Rotary, and Apex – developed and delivered as a collaborative partnership. Similarly, local government also has a role to play in this regard.

Initially, this matter should be the subject of joint discussion between the SERC on, the Local Government Association and the NSW State Emergency Services (who are the lead combat agency in flood response), with a view to developing proposals for further consideration (see Recommendations 3, 4 and 5).

6.3 Flood forecasting, and early warning intelligence systems

During the course of discussions with Recovery Committee participants, anecdotal comment was made regarding the adequacy and accuracy of flood forecasting or early warning flood systems. This report understands that these early warning systems, or Telemetric Radio Communications Devices, are placed at or near key river systems and provide critical data particularly in times of floods. This report further understands that the devices are provided through the auspices of the Bureau of Meteorology (BOM), and are an important adjunct to the work of the lead combat agency in flood situations, namely, the State Emergency Service (SES).

These systems also inform Local Emergency Management Committees (amongst others) through the SES network, of rising or falling floodwater levels, on which then operational decisions are based, made and acted upon. Similarly, it is these same forecasts which inform the community (via the media), who in turn, make decisions relevant to their own circumstances.

Primarily the concerns raised included the number of devices available throughout the mid-north and far-north coast river systems and their accuracy (which leads to critical decision making). To this end, a paper from the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR), notes “…all early warning systems must satisfy the operational criterion of warning the population sufficiently ahead of time to let people take at least minimum precautions”. (see Recommended Further Reading). Clearly, the message that one derives from this point alone is one of accuracy and timeliness of advice.

This report believes that it is important to highlight the concerns which were raised, albeit anecdotally, if for no other reason than such systems need to be both adequate in number and accurate in their forecasting on the one hand, and equally as important, they need to provide local decision makers and the broader community with the confidence that predictions made are both timely and accurate. Accordingly, this issue might be further considered by the proposed State Recovery Committee and, if relevant, recommendations provided to Government (see Recommendation 18).

In support of the broader debate on the use of early warning systems and better intelligence flow to responders, Mr Tony Sleigh, Director, Emergency Information Co-Ordination Unit, NSW Land and Property Management Authority(formally Department of Lands), observed that flood intelligence is relevant across the prevention, preparedness, response and recovery spectrum. It is suggested that the proposed State Recovery Committee as part of their overall deliberation on early warning systems consider this issue in more detail and perhaps seek input from, Mr Sleigh.

6.4 The role of country radio media in community awareness during periods of natural disaster

Comment has been made extensively in this report on the critical importance of education, in particular, community-based education on the issue of floods and the resultant impact of flooding. Notwithstanding any measures that are taken in this regard, additional and complementary measures (within the framework of community-based education) need also to be considered.

Not surprisingly, the Recovery Co-ordinator noted the comments of various community leaders that during periods of natural disaster they had a strong and almost total reliance on electronic media as a means of communication. This comment was even more evident when talking to members of the community. In almost 100 per cent of cases, comment was made on the role of the national broadcaster, the ABC, as an effective means of communication.
This latter issue is important when considering not only the information needs of the local, affected population, but the travelling public as well. Whilst the local population appear to be well catered for in their information needs, there appears a rationale for reviewing how the information needs of the travelling public might be enhanced, too. This aspect is further highlighted when one considers that in the geography which is the subject of this report, many travellers use the national highway to move to and from Queensland and who may, in some situations, be totally unfamiliar with local terrain, or the dangers of driving in flood situations.

To this end consideration should be given to the use of portable electronic message switching devices (as currently used on major metropolitan roads and freeways/motorways) as a means of advising the travelling public of prevailing road conditions (see image below). In a similar vein, in consultation with the national broadcaster, consideration should also be given to the provision of static signs at or near the entrance of rural towns and which might advise: “In the event of a major bushfire or flood, tune to your local ABC Station at frequency xxx”. Broadcasts over the electronic media are to the best of the Recovery Co-ordinator’s knowledge, delivered as a community service. The provision of static road signs would be a natural extension of that service.

Considerable work in respect of static community-based warning signs has been undertaken by ABC Australia and the Victoria Department of Main Roads. The Recovery Co-ordinator understand that a Memorandum of Understanding has recently been signed between those parties and a similar concept is being considered for South Australia. The Recovery Co-ordinator spoke to Mr Ian Mannix, Manager, Emergency Broadcasting and Community Development, ABC, who is most amenable to discussing this concept with the SERCon. This dialogue is encouraged.

It is recommended that the proposed State Recovery Committee discuss with the NSW Roads and Traffic Authority, and the ABC, the provision and use of portable electronic message switching devices and static road signs, respectively, in rural areas, as a means of communicating with the travelling public in times of natural or man-made disasters (see Recommendation 19).
6.5 The impact of electricity outage on dairy farmers

During the course of the recovery from the recent floods, the Recovery Co-ordinator met with Mr Alan Hoskins, who was representing the Dairy Farmers’ Association, Lismore Branch. Anecdotal comment was made that as a consequence of the May 2009 floods a number of dairy farmers were without electricity for a period of days. As a consequence of this event they were unable to milk dairy cattle over that time. The resultant impact, it was said, was that a number of dairy cattle had developed or would develop mastitis and be of no further use from a milking perspective.

Of equal note, was the report that in some situations milk that had been stored on dairy farms prior to the flood, but not collected by milk carters (due to closed roads), was lost due to the inability to keep the stored milk cool.

Evidence of the nature of the electricity outage is provided in accompanying satellite imagery provided by the Department of Lands. Whilst the impact of widespread outage can be seen on the Far North Coast, it is even more evident when viewing the outage impact in the Coffs Coast area.

Figure 5. Far North Coast Recovery Area – Suburbs Affected by Power Disruptions, May 2009 (Affected Suburbs listings supplied by Country Energy)
Following initial discussions with Mr Hoskins, an approach was made by the State Emergency Recovery Controller and Recovery Co-ordinator to dairy industry associations and a major milk purchaser with a view to seeing whether the dairy industry could assist with a grant or subsidy to affected dairy farmers for the acquisition of three phase generators. Neither of the parties was able to assist. It would appear that affected dairy farmers have been left to address this issue themselves.

In a separate and semi-related meeting with local State Members of Parliament, this issue was also raised by them. In particular, they raised the possibility of a ‘Generator Subsidisation Scheme’.

Whether or not dairy farmers have access to grant schemes or subsidies based on a means test, or some other criterion, there nevertheless remains a legitimate need in the interests of both the dairy farmers and the local economy (and therefore the State’s economy) for this issue to be the subject of further review. It was made abundantly clear by the Dairy Farmers’ Association representative, Mr Hoskins, that nothing was being sought for free, rather, equitable access to a grant or subsidy that would allow them to acquire this piece of machinery. The development of a ‘Generator Subsidisation Scheme’ may be a legitimate option worthy of further consideration at Federal or State level, or alternatively, within a review of current NDRRA arrangements.

As a first point of reference, the proposed State Recovery Committee might consider establishment of industry-specific advisory groups with a view to progressing industry recovery issues, such as a Generator Subsidy Scheme for dairy farmers (see Recommendation 20).
6.6 Tourism

During the course of community consultation with various individuals, business and industry groups, comment was made (not surprisingly), that given the impact of the May 2009 floods – the third to impact the region in five months - that significant social infrastructures such as tourism and business, had been greatly affected. Indeed, it was noted that perhaps an accidental by-product of metropolitan media reporting of the floods, was that the mid-north and far-north coastal area of the State was adversely affected by the floods and was likely to be so for some time. It might reasonably be argued that some of the travelling public avoided the area for all of the right reasons, and some stayed away from the area even once a level of normality had returned to local roads.

The issue is raised within this report for no other reason than to highlight the fact that Tourism NSW needs to be engaged at these critical times and provide professional advice and recommendations to, say, Recovery Committees on maintaining local and regional economies through proper information flows, positive communications and the maintenance or restoration of tourist activities.

This report proffers the further view that a positive information flow to the wider travelling or holidaying community is in important ingredient to the restoration of confidence within regional and local communities (see Recommendation 21).

6.7 Recommendations

It is further recommended that the SERCon consider:

18. Referring the issue of the allocation and deployment of early or advanced flood warning systems (including Telemetric Devices), and other contemporary measures, as a means of accurate and timely forecasting of flood events to the State Emergency Service with a view to identifying areas for improvement.

19. Consultation with the NSW Roads and Traffic Authority and the National Broadcaster, ABC Radio, with regard to the applicability and allocation of temporary signage (portable, variable message switching devices) and permanent signage, respectively, as a means of community-based awareness during periods of natural disaster.

20. The proposed State Recovery Committee, consider the establishment of industry-specific advisory groups with a view to progressing industry recovery issues, such as a Generator Subsidy Scheme for dairy farmers.

21. Having Tourism NSW represented on future Recovery Committees with a view to the promotion of tourism in post-natural disaster affected communities.
7 Conclusion – Toward the Future of Recovery

The recovery of the communities affected by the May 2009 flood is a positive reflection of how the agencies of government – at Federal, State and Local level - can and should co-operate in support of local communities at times of natural disaster. The report acknowledges the bipartisan way in which this was achieved and a list of personnel who contributed to the recovery arrangements is attached at Appendix 3. As also mentioned, in the case of our emergency service responders, they too are severally and individually worthy of the highest commendation.

This report, its observations, conclusion and recommendations are as a result of broad community consultation. The Recovery Co-ordinator and Emergency Management NSW staff travelled extensively across the 15 affected Local Government Areas between May and July 2009. Indeed, a list of individuals, community representatives, agency heads and industry-based organisations that were consulted during this process is attached at Appendix 2.

Recommendations within this report (over and above those made by the Mayor’s Communiqué of 9 July 2009, individual Recovery Committees, agencies or organisations) are provided on the basis on enhancing the community’s preparedness and the ability to recover from natural or man-made disaster events.

As such, the SERCon (through the proposed State Recovery Committee) can and should lead the way in further discussion and collaboration with relevant interest groups and agencies, with a view to streamlining policies, practices and procedures. Equally, this observation applies to a complimentary review of existing legislation. The community expect nothing else – they deserve nothing less.

This report and its recommendations are commended to the Government.

Thank you card from the children of Lower Macleay Preschool in Smithtown who received a $20,000 grant to fix their play area.
8 Recommendations

Emergency Recovery Arrangements

1. The establishment of a body, such as a State Recovery Committee, with responsibility for the oversight and management of emergency recovery operations in general, and in specific instances.

2. That the State Recovery Committee review the recommended considerations arising from this report and those of the Mayor’s Communiqué (2009) and the Far North Coast, Clarence Valley, Coffs Coast and Macleay Valley Recovery Committees.

3. That the State Recovery Committee provide an interim report to government on these and related recommendations within 12 months of being so tasked.

4. A review of existing community-based educational programs, with a view to informing the community on flood recovery.

5. Development of an education program for other government and non-government agencies (with particular reference to those within the emergency services portfolio) on flood recovery arrangements, assistance, duties and responsibilities.

6. Meeting with the State Emergency Management Committee, Directors General and agency heads to discuss the role, function and responsibility of individual agencies in recovery arrangements.

7. The continued development of a State Recovery Sub-Plan (including complementary local and district sub-plans).

Recovery Committees

8. A review of the organisational composition and functions of Recovery Committees and Recovery Centres be undertaken, with a view to providing communities affected by natural disaster with access to more holistic Government services.

9. Local State Members of Parliament be invited as observers on their local Recovery Committees where established.

10. That the reports provided by the local Recovery Committees (Appendices 5-8 inclusive) be referred to the State Recovery Committee, for further consideration and recommendation to the SERCon.

11. That due consideration be given to the Mayor’s Communiqué (Appendix 9) of 9 July 2009 as a parallel reference to the Recovery Centre Reports on the May 2009 floods.

12. That the report on the effectiveness of the Natural Disaster Relief and Recovery Arrangements during the North Coast Floods (May 2009) (Appendix 10) be considered in light of any current or future reviews of the NDRRA at State/National level.

13. That the reports of Government and non-government agencies (Appendix 1 and 5-8 inclusive) be referred to the State Recovery Committee, for consideration and appropriate referral.

Recovery Centres

14. Appropriate recognition be given to all personnel who contributed to the recovery arrangements arising out of the May 2009 floods.

15. That the SERCon maintain a governance and oversight of the May 2009 Issues Log, and that all outstanding matters be acquitted.

16. That the SERCon provide information to all inquirers as to the outcome or resolution of their issues.
17. That the Communications Plan implemented by the North Coast Regional Recovery Centre (May 2009) be considered as a model for future natural disaster recovery arrangements.

**Ongoing issues**

18. Referring the issue of the allocation and deployment of early or advanced flood warning systems (including Telemetric Devices), and other contemporary measures, as a means of accurate and timely forecasting of flood events to the State Emergency Service with a view to identifying areas for improvement.

19. Consultation with the NSW Roads and Traffic Authority and the National Broadcaster, ABC Radio, with regard to the applicability and allocation of temporary signage (portable, variable message switching devices) and permanent signage, respectively, as a means of community-based awareness during periods of natural disaster.

20. The proposed State Recovery Committee, consider the establishment of industry-specific advisory groups with a view to progressing industry recovery issues, such as a Generator Subsidy Scheme for dairy farmers.

21. Having Tourism NSW represented on future Recovery Committees with a view to the promotion of tourism in post-natural disaster affected communities.
9 Recommended Further Reading
