

## Uranquinty Community Led Planning and Exercise Wirraway – a case study

To embrace the concept of shared responsibility for disasters and as an antidote to combat otherwise stretched State Emergency Service (SES) and Wagga City Council resources during large scale floods in 2010 and 2012. The small town of Uranquinty saw its new community led flood emergency action plan in place and tested on the weekend of 19 October 2014.

The Uranquinty Emergency Committee (UEC), an offshoot of the town's Progress Association, developed the pilot plan in conjunction with the SES over a three month period prior to a community led simulation exercise on Sunday 19 October. Local buy-in, ownership and involvement was a vital ingredient to increase the likelihood of success of this type of initiative.

Based on the risk profile of the town of Uranquinty, the UEC realised that their own community needed to be proactive, especially based on their experiences in the 2012 floods and the impact of new levee banks in the town. Wagga City Council are also undertaking an overland flood study which may result in further mitigation works and additional flood protection.

The Uranquinty Emergency Committee agreed that as a community, they needed to take the lead and do something to be self-sufficient given the high likelihood that access to the area could be cut off in a large scale flood. Locals developed a resources register and engaged local suppliers to be part of the initiative.



The UEC discussed tactics to notify and evacuate their fellow residents from high risk areas using techniques gleaned from personal experience both overseas and locally.

The committee aimed to increase the awareness of local flood risk; gathering and providing localised information to improve the efficiency of a future enactment of the plan, and garnering support from the community.

The exercise – a pilot for the state – started at 8.30am. A "Flood Bulletin" was issued by the SES to the local community UEC. This advice of potential flooding triggered the activation of a phone tree by the UEC to notify people in high risk areas of the likely threat so that they could prepare their family and property.

The participants in the exercise quickly realised that not everybody identified in the high-risk area was contactable and residents noted this on the contact sheets to enable other approaches to be explored.



As part of the exercise the situation escalated, with the SES issuing an Evacuation Order to the UEC. This indicates that it was time for residents to leave properties at-risk from flooding.

The UEC then mobilised six community-led teams to doorknock and evacuate these affected residents.

The local residents were visited during the exercise by their fellow community members, providing an opportunity to build rapport, impart and gather information. Residents were asked about any specific needs that they may have should a flood arise in future. Telephone numbers were also gathered to help improve the efficiency of future telephone tree activations and ensure contact could be made in future.



Those that were not home had tape tied to a prominent spot on their property so that, if required a reconnaissance team could identify from the street level if properties had been contacted. This initiative was developed by the UEC based on their personal experience during a tsunami warning issued by authorities in Fiji.



Residents had developed detailed sector maps to identify the properties that had been contacted through the process and those that were not home or not answering the door.

Those evacuated were then asked to come along to the local community hall to learn more about the role they could play in a future flood.





Of approximately 80 properties that were contacted as part of the exercise, about 60 community members and SES volunteers then converged at the community hall for sandbag and flood rescue demonstration.

Here the SES was on hand to demonstrate some of the techniques that can assist people to fill sandbags and build an effective wall to



help prevent floodwater from entering their homes. Residents were also taught how to use a 'throw-bag' to rescue somebody that had been swept away by floodwater. This not only reinforced the NSW SES message of Never Enter Floodwater but empowered residents to undertake safe and timely actions to rescue people that may be in a life-threatening situation. A number of 'throw-bags' were issued to the UEC as an appreciation of the efforts they had made.



The exercise put the community at the centre of the disaster planning and response. It increased ownership by the community of the resulting risks and actions to reduce the impacts.

This new way of thinking can challenge traditional thinking about emergency management, where disasters were only seen as a government responsibility and this led to a traditional reliance on emergency services by individuals and communities.

It brings us closer to reality and needs exploration and adaptation in more communities across NSW and indeed Australia. Especially where there is low levels of local volunteerism or SES presence, or where the onset of

the hazard is too rapid to enable a timely response by emergency services.

The emergency flood plan was vital for the town because of its flooding history.

Uranquinty is situated in a flat catchment that is without a flood gauge. Therefore there is little to no upstream warning of a flood other than localised rainfall. This rainfall inevitably ends up affecting the town. Homes in Uranquinty were flooded in the 2010 flood and was evacuated by the SES again in 2012.

Many residents left the area without helping others in the community and then realised that a collaborative effort would produce better results in future.

SES crews were busy evacuating other densely populated surrounding areas such as The Rock, Central and North Wagga and could not always access the smaller satellite towns such as Uranquinty. It became evident that the solution required some level of self-help from and for the community.

It is the intent of the Uranquinty Emergency Committee to review and fine tune the arrangements annually to ensure the plan stays fresh and accurate.

The initiative was led by the community with support from NSW SES, Wagga City Council, Origin Energy and other local businesses.

