

## **TORRES STRAIT: TIDAL INUNDATION**

### **Tidal Inundation**

Some Torres Strait islands have been badly affected by tidal inundation in recent times. In particular, the outer islands of Boigu (population according to 2006 Census: 283), Saibai (337), Warraber (247), Iama (311), Poruma (166) and Masig (300) have been affected. The attachment to land is such that there is a reluctance to relocate, but significant expenditure will be required to protect infrastructure on affected islands (approximately \$22 million has been cited). The inner islands are not as threatened as some, but do suffer inundation from time to time. There have been unfavourable comparisons made locally with the significant Australian Government aid to Pacific countries for climate change mitigation compared to the investment in the Torres Strait.

The Commonwealth Government (FaHCSIA and TSRA) has provided \$1 million in funding towards tidal gauges in the Torres Strait region to assist island communities in monitoring sea levels. These gauges will monitor mean sea levels on at least four islands and will provide key information to assess tidal variation, potential sea level rise and to support planning decisions. The Commonwealth Government, through the Department of Climate Change and Energy Efficiency, has also provided \$400,000 for new research into the impacts of climate change on Torres Strait communities. This research is being used to assess the risks of coastal inundation and erosion, and to identify and assess specific adaptation options. Discussions are currently being held with relevant Government agencies on the issue of tidal inundation in the Torres Strait region.

### **Major Infrastructure Program**

The TSRA coordinates planning and delivery of the Major Infrastructure Program (MIP) which has been jointly funded for 12 years by the Commonwealth and Queensland Government (most recently at \$28m per annum) to provide essential health related infrastructure such as water supply, sewerage, roads. The MIP has a very successful record in achieving improved health outcomes and this was demonstrated in its recent review, published in September 2010.

The current round (MIP 4) finishes this year. Under joint Commonwealth / Queensland Government funding arrangements, the Commonwealth has provided \$56m over 4 years for MIP 4. In all (MIP 1 to MIP 4), the Commonwealth has provided around \$100m for health and environmental infrastructure spending under the MIP program since 1999.

TSRA has been advised informally by FaHCSIA that the Commonwealth will not be funding a MIP 5 on the termination of MIP 4 in June 2012. Queensland Government funding for a MIP 5 is still apparently “on the table”. TSRA had intended using MIP 5 to fund protective infrastructure works and adaptation on the six islands identified as most vulnerable to ocean inundation.

### **Minor Protective Works**

Some minor protective works (sand relocation) have commenced with existing funds on the island of Warraber with a range of other less difficult and less resource intensive works expected to follow on several other of the most vulnerable islands. These works are short term responses, and while useful, do not represent a long term solution to erosion and inundation on these islands.

The identification of these minor works was assisted by a previous project by the Australian Government to assess erosion and inundation risks and develop adaptation options for the four most vulnerable island communities. Dr Kevin Parnell, who undertook this project, is now continuing this same assessment and community consultation on the remaining 13 Torres Strait communities with the \$400,000 of research funding announced on 5 May 2010.

### **Timeline of key announcements/reports**

- In May 2009, TSRA raised the issue at the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues.
- In October 2009, the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Climate Change, Water, Environment and the Arts Inquiry report: *Managing our Coastal Zone in a Changing Climate: the time to act is now* is tabled.
- In December 2009, TSRA announced that \$22 million in funding was required for urgent mitigation works in the Torres Strait region.
- In May 2010, TSRA released a Torres Strait Climate Change Strategy.
- On 5 May 2010, the Department of Climate Change (DCC) released the report *Risks from Climate Change to Indigenous Communities in the Tropical North of Australia*, which finds climate change will have a significant impact on Indigenous communities in the far north of Australia. Saibai Island in the Torres Strait region is one of eight case studies listed in this report.
- On 5 May 2010, the Government announced that \$1 million in funding will be provided towards tidal gauges in the Torres Strait region to assist island communities in monitoring sea levels; and \$400,000 will be provided for research into the impacts of climate change.
- In October 2010, the Government's response to the aforementioned House of Representatives Standing Committee report is tabled (see below).
- In December 2010, the CSIRO prepared a report for TSRA's Land and Sea Management Unit titled 'Observed and Future Climates of the Torres Strait Region' (see below).

### **House of Representatives Standing Committee on Climate Change, Water, Environment and the Arts Inquiry report**

In November 2010, the Government tabled its response to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Climate Change, Water, Environment and the Arts Inquiry report: *Managing our Coastal Zone in a Changing Climate: the time to act is now*. Recommendations 17 and 18 of this report relate to the Torres Strait region.

#### **Recommendation 17: Agreed**

*The Committee recommends that the Department of Climate Change, in collaboration with the Queensland Government, CSIRO and Indigenous communities in the Torres Strait, undertake a major study into the vulnerability of the Torres Strait to the impacts of climate change and provide assistance in the development of an adaptation plan.*

#### **Recommendation 18: Agreed in principle**

*The Committee recommends that the Australian Government give the five recommendations calling for information, studies and data, as proposed by the Torres Strait Regional Authority, early and urgent consideration with a view to their implementation.*

### **CSIRO report 'Observed and Future Climates of the Torres Strait Region': Key Findings**

- Simulated changes in climate indicate that a significant degree of climate change in the Torres Strait region is inevitable, and likely to become increasingly apparent over the next 30-100 years. Changes are expected in both the mean values and in the magnitudes and frequencies of these extremes. Therefore, long term planning should not assume that future climate and resources will be as they were over the past 100 years. Significant adaptation to a changing climate will be required.

- The practical implications of these projections of climate change suggest possible widespread impact across the Torres Strait region. Such impact can affect ecosystem health, agricultural productivity, water resources, fisheries, human health, tourism, pest abundance and low lying islands.
- Increases in sea level due to climate change are expected to pose the greatest threat to the wellbeing and viability of low lying island communities.
- Coastal ecosystems will be affected by rises in sea level, storm surges, and storm tides also by extreme weather events. Sea level rises are expected due to the thermal expansion of oceans and the melting of glaciers.
- Climate impacts and adaptation assessments should be improved by further development of versatile climate impacts and adaptation models and methodologies for a number of key sectors and activities.

### **Assistance provided to those affected by flooding in South East Queensland**

Prime responsibility for the protection of life, property and the environment rests with the States and Territories. However, the Australian Government is committed to supporting States and Territories in developing their capacity for dealing with emergencies and disasters, and provides physical assistance to requesting States or Territories when they cannot reasonably cope during an emergency.

### **Media Release**

On 6 April 2011, the Prime Minister, the Hon Julia Gillard MP, and the Queensland Premier, the Hon Anna Bligh MP, announced a \$39 million package to support the recovery and wellbeing of people in Queensland following the disasters.

This package, to be funded under the Natural Disaster Relief and Recovery Arrangements (NDRRA), consists of:

- (a) \$20 million for community development;
- (b) \$10 million for mental health, in addition to the \$1.2 million announced on 14 March 2011;
- (c) \$5.8 million for financial counselling; and
- (d) \$2 million for a Disability Care Plan.

### **FaHCSIA's Recovery Effort**

The Department's recovery effort is focused in five primary areas:

1. Supporting whole-of-government decision-making processes;
2. Providing offset savings of \$93.47 million, through FaHCSIA's Portfolio Budget Submission, to support Commonwealth disaster expenditure. An additional \$0.17 million contribution towards the Commission of Inquiry into the Queensland Floods is being funded from within existing Departmental resources;

This includes:

- \$75.13 million for the Disaster Income Recovery Subsidy;
  - \$17.84 million for ex-gratia payments for New Zealand citizens impacted by flooding;
  - \$0.50 million for a Commonwealth contribution to the Red Cross Victorian Flood Relief Appeal; and
  - \$0.17 million for the Commission of Inquiry into the Queensland floods.
3. Increased outlays in some parts of the payment system, including Rent Assistance, Family Tax Benefit, and the Aged Pension;

4. Providing an additional \$1.71 million in Emergency Relief funding in Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria
  - Queensland - \$1.03 million to 85 providers in 144 locations
  - New South Wales - \$419,777 to two service providers
  - Victoria - \$261,000 to 26 providers in 33 locations.
5. Supporting FaHCSIA funded service providers through a range of flexibilities in the Department's mainstream programs and services to address the current and emerging needs of adversely affected communities.

**Assistance provided by Emergency Management Australia within the Attorney General's Department included:**

- **Australian Government Disaster Recovery Payment as at midnight 8 April 2011**
- Claims granted – 392,665
- Amount paid - \$458,006,087
- **Disaster Income Recovery Subsidy as at midnight 8 April 2011**
- Claims granted – 53,271
- Amount paid - \$58,812,780
- **Ex Gratia Payments to New Zealanders as at midnight 8 April 2011**
- Claims granted – 2,682
- Amount paid - \$3,209,000

**Under the Natural Disaster Relief and Recovery Arrangements (NDRRA) the following assistance is provided on a cost share basis between the Commonwealth and the State Government:**

- Concessional interest rate loans of up to \$250,000 for small business and primary producers, as well as freight subsidies of up to \$5,000 for primary producers
- Concessional interest rate loans of up to \$100,000 for charitable and not-for-profit organisations
- Tier 1 clean up recovery grants of up to \$5000 and Tier 2 grants of up to \$20,000 for primary producers and small business
- Tier 1 clean up recovery grants of up to \$5000 and Tier 2 grants of up to \$20,000 for charitable and not for profit organisations
- Assistance for the restoration of essential public assets
- Essential services safety and reconnection grants of up to \$5,000
- Funeral and memorial grants of up to \$10,000

*Note: This is not a comprehensive list of assistance as each agency can and does vary business as usual funding to assist at these times and FaHCSIA does not have a full list of programs and services that have had this happen.*

**Further information on Disaster Recovery Subsidies and Payments**

**Disaster Income Recovery Subsidy – for both the Queensland floods and Tropical Cyclone Yasi**

The Disaster Income Recovery Subsidy provides assistance to employees, small business persons and farmers who lost income as a result of the flooding that commenced on 29 November 2010 and continued through December 2010 and January 2011 and may continue into February 2011 in Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia. This Subsidy will provide

fortnightly payments equivalent to the maximum rate of Newstart allowance depending on the person's circumstances.

Disaster Income Recovery Subsidy is available to Australian residents or eligible foreign nationals over 16 years of age. Eligible foreign nationals includes people who are on permanent visas (but who have not yet met the residency waiting period) and people who are on temporary skilled visas or temporary family visas.

Disaster Income Recovery Subsidy is not available to those already receiving another income support payment or pension such as Age Pension, Newstart Allowance, Service Pension or Exceptional Circumstances Income Relief Payment.

The Disaster Income Recovery Subsidy was announced on 10 January 2011, for an initial period of up to 13 weeks.

### **Australian Government Disaster Recovery Payment – for the Queensland floods**

The Australian Government Disaster Recovery Payment (AGDRP) will be provided to eligible people who have been affected by the heavy rainfall, storm damage and associated flooding in Queensland that began in November 2010 and continued into January 2011. There are sixty two Local Governments Areas (LGAs) included, including the Northern Peninsula Area Regional Council, Torres Shire Island Regional Council and Torres Strait Island Regional Council.

The payment is to provide immediate, one-off financial assistance to eligible Australians adversely affected by the disaster. The Australian Government Disaster Recovery Payment rate is \$1,000 per eligible adult and \$400 per eligible child. Claims for this assistance can be lodged at Centrelink until 4 July 2011 as application for the payment is available for a period of up to six months.

This payment will be made available where:

- a person was seriously injured, or
- a person is an immediate family member of an Australian who is killed as a direct result of the disaster, or
- a person's principal place of residence has been destroyed, or
- a person's principal place of residence has sustained major damage, or
- the person is unable to gain access to his or her principal place of residence for at least 24 hours, or
- the person is stranded in his or her principal place of residence for at least 24 hours, or
- the person's principal place of residence:
  - was without electricity, water, gas, sewerage service or another essential service for at least 48 hours (a utility failure), and
  - the utility failure was caused by damage to public or private infrastructure, or
- a person is a principal carer of a dependent child who has experienced any of the above.

### **Australian Government Disaster Recovery Payment – for Tropical Cyclone Yasi**

The Australian Government Disaster Recovery Payment (AGDRP) will be provided to eligible people who have been affected by severe weather, storm surges and flooding as a result of Tropical Cyclone Yasi that began on 3 February 2011 and affects the Queensland LGAs that are natural disaster declared under the Natural Disaster Relief and Recovery Arrangements before 18 February 2011.

Twenty LGAs are currently included; however none of these are located in the Torres Strait region. <sup>File 085</sup>

The payment is to provide immediate, one-off financial assistance to eligible Australians adversely affected by the disaster. The Australian Government Disaster Recovery Payment rate is \$1,000 per eligible adult and \$400 per eligible child. Claims for this assistance can be lodged at Centrelink until 3 August 2011 as application for the payment is available for a period of up to six months.

This payment will be made available where:

- a person was seriously injured as a direct result of the disaster
- a person is an immediate family member of an Australian who is killed as a direct result of the disaster
- a person's principal place of residence has been destroyed as a direct result of the disaster
- a person's principal place of residence has sustained major damage as a direct result of the disaster
- the person is unable to gain access to his or her principal place of residence for at least 24 hours as a direct result of the disaster
- the person is stranded in his or her principal place of residence for at least 24 hours as a direct result of the disaster
- the person's principal place of residence was without electricity, water, gas, sewerage service or another essential service for at least 48 hours (a utility failure) as a result of the disaster, or
- a person is a principal carer of a dependent child who has experienced any of the above.