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NAPIER PEOPLE AND PLACES COMMITTEE

Open Attachments (Under separate cover 1)

Meeting Date: Thursday 28 March 2024

Time: 9.30am

Venue: Large Exhibition Hall
War Memorial Centre
Marine Parade
Napier

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HAWKE'S BAY CIVIL DEFENCE AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT GROUP RESPONSE TO CYCLONE GABRIELLE

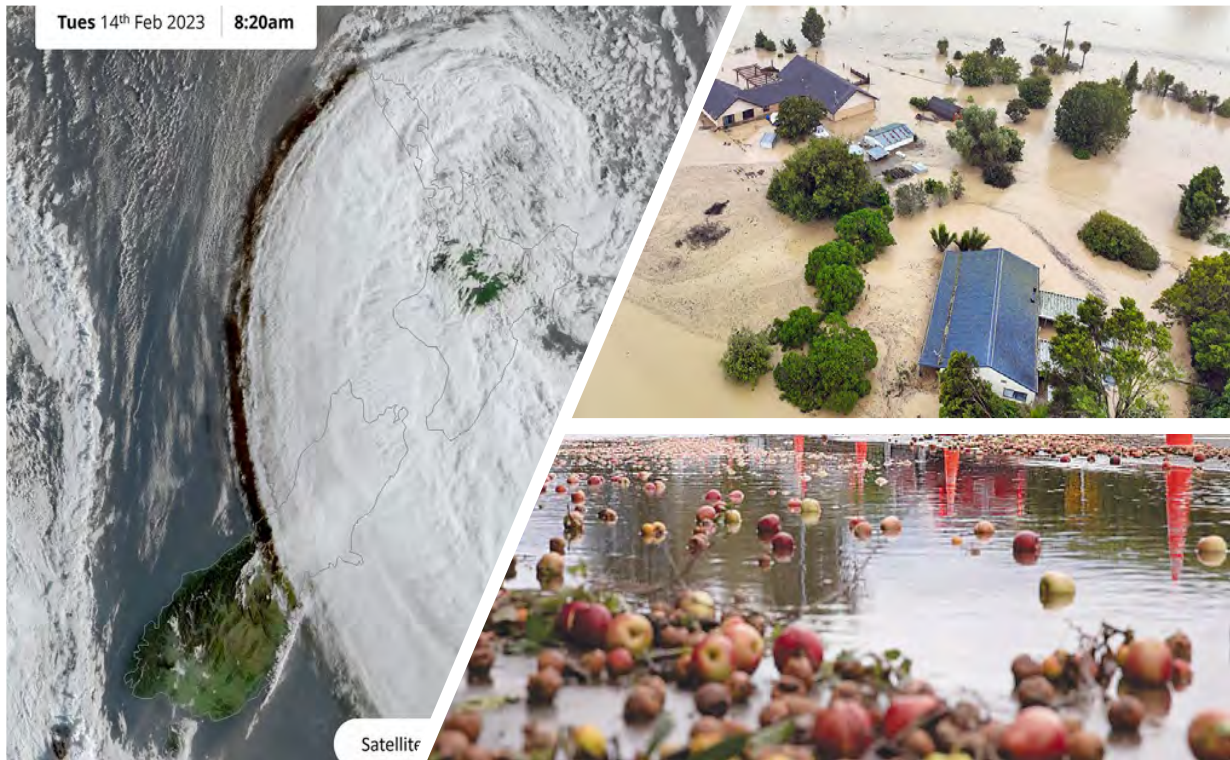


Photo credits clockwise: Axios, BBC, Rural News



INDEPENDENT EXTERNAL REVIEW FOR HAWKES BAY CIVIL DEFENCE AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT GROUP

MARCH 2024

Independent External Review

“The very real consequence of failing to learn lessons is loss of lives and property...We should not belittle the magnitude of this challenge, however; problems recur because they are inherently very difficult to solve. If solutions were evident, emergency response professionals would have adopted them long ago. This should motivate agencies in all emergency response disciplines and at all levels of government to give serious attention to the goal of inculcating a culture of learning from past disasters to prevent future losses.”

Donahue, Amy, and Robert Tuohy. “Lessons We Don’t Learn: A Study of the Lessons of Disasters, Why We Repeat Them, and How We Can Learn from Them.” Homeland Security Affairs 2, Article 4 (July 2006). <https://www.hsaj.org/articles/167>.

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OVERVIEW

THE CYCLONE IN HAWKE'S BAY

Over the weekend of 11th-12th February 2023, as New Zealand braced for the impact of severe tropical Cyclone Gabrielle, emergency management¹ authorities in Hawke's Bay felt confident that they had made appropriate preparations.

Public warnings and information about how to prepare had been posted on Facebook. Emergency management personnel, senior leaders, mayors and partner agencies across the region had met to plan their response. The accountable members of the Hawke's Bay Civil Defence and Emergency Management Group Joint Committee had asked probing questions and been given assurances of readiness by their emergency management teams.

Orange weather warnings from Met Service applied to the region. Hawke's Bay Regional Council modellers felt that, while the forecast 300-400mm of rain would test flood protection and drainage schemes, river flows were unlikely to rise beyond the 1 in 50 and 1 in a 100-year return periods on which their design had been based. Even when the weather warning moved to Red on Monday, emergency management staff were reassured that Met Service predictions of rainfall quantum remained unchanged.

And when some members of the public, including mana whenua with deep knowledge of the behaviour of the region's waterways, phoned emergency management authorities with concerns about observable river levels, forestry slash or river maintenance, they were told they were 'overreacting' or that plans were well in hand.

However, during the late evening of Monday 13th February 2023 and the early hours of Tuesday 14th, rain and winds intensified in the Hawke's Bay ranges and across the Heretaunga flood plains to unprecedented levels. Drainage systems were overtaken, stopbanks were breached or compromised. River flow telemetry failed as electrical substations were damaged, and some rain gauges stopped working for a period, while others were subject to such high winds that they underreported rainfall levels. The combined effects of silt from landslides, high rainfall, and forestry byproducts led to rivers breaching their banks, with silt covering crops and filling homes. Critical infrastructure -roads, electricity, fibre, bridges, businesses - was inundated, damaged or destroyed².

During this critical period, lives were lost, livelihoods ruined, communities were cut off and thousands of people across the region were traumatised, required rescue and were displaced.³



¹ In this report the terms 'emergency management' and 'civil defence' are used interchangeably.

² For a more detailed outline of the weather event and its regional impacts, refer to Appendix Seven below.

³ Picture: Guardian at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/feb/17/cyclone-gabrielle-survivors-return-esk-valley-new-zealand>

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REGIONAL RESPONSE

As the weather event intensified, the Hawke's Bay Civil Defence Emergency Management Group Emergency Coordination Centre (HBGECC or GECC) lacked situational awareness and intelligence about much of the danger and damage until too late. With only partial understanding of the severity of the event, they struggled to direct and coordinate first responders, partner agencies,⁴ tangata whenua, volunteers and other territorial local authorities (TLAs).

Communications failures, lack of data and the speed, severity and extent of this event overwhelmed staff in the GECC. They, and their partners in the other territorial authority Emergency Operations Centres (EOCs) did some brave and innovative things. They also had significant blind spots and made some mistakes. But above all, they were simply overwhelmed.

It is a profoundly counter intuitive feature of New Zealand's emergency management system, that as a crisis builds, and a declaration of emergency made, the command and coordination function⁵ goes to local council staff who, while they may be well intentioned about their roles, are inconsistently trained in the national Coordinated Incident Management System (CIMS), often lack operational experience and, as response moves into recovery, have full time day jobs with which to contend.

Given their modest resources, it was always going to be challenging for local authorities in Hawke's Bay to carry the depth of capability and operational experience needed to lead a response to an event such as this. This is in spite of the fact that the region has a more centralised approach to emergency management than many and an atypically large number of full-time civil defence staff.

Just as local communities continue to grieve and suffer as they move towards recovery, the local councils' emergency management staff have also been traumatised. Many have resigned. Some have left the region altogether as a result of public backlash, amplified in a region with many small, close knit communities. Councils are finding it hard to recruit their replacements.

THIS REVIEW

This Report describes the Hawke's Bay CDEM response and the early pivot to recovery, within a concentrated timeframe. Our findings have been drawn from the thousands of documents, hundreds of survey responses and dozens of interviews we conducted.

We see the critical lessons for the future that can be drawn from this event as falling into *two broad narratives*. One should inform improvements at *local and regional* levels and must be driven by the Hawke's Bay CDEM Group and TLAs. The other speaks to the need for new investment in enhanced *national* coordination, assurance, consistency and depth of professional leadership in response to emergencies. This is a more strategic matter for central Government.

⁴ In this report we use the term 'partner agencies' to refer to central and local government agencies involved in response and early recovery, including but not limited to the designated lifeline agencies.

⁵ The language in the CDEM Act is 'direction and coordination'. In using the term 'command' here and hereafter we are making the point that in emergencies a clear command function is required. That is, one entity must direct and lead the response.

