

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into the 2022 Flood Event in Victoria

Rochester – Wednesday 23 August 2023

#### MEMBERS

Sonja Terpstra – Chair

David Ettershank – Deputy Chair

Ryan Batchelor

Melina Bath

Gaelle Broad

Wendy Lovell

Samantha Ratnam

Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell

Sheena Watt

#### PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

John Berger

Ann-Marie Hermans

Joe McCracken

Evan Mulholland

Rachel Payne

**WITNESSES**

Sharon Williams, Lake Eppalock Working Group and Flood Mitigation Subcommittee;

David Christie, Christie Dairy Farm and Community Recovery Committee; and

Tracie Kyne, Lake Eppalock Working Group, Rochester Business Network and Rochester Community Recovery Committee.

**The CHAIR:** I declare open the committee's public hearing for the Inquiry into the 2022 Flood Event in Victoria. This public hearing is for the Environment and Planning Committee, a bipartisan committee of the Parliament looking into the October flood event. We will be providing a report to Parliament, which will include the recommendations to the government. Please ensure that mobile phones have been switched to silent and that background noise is minimised.

I would like to begin by respectfully acknowledging the Aboriginal peoples, the traditional custodians of the various lands we are gathered on today, and paying my respects to their ancestors, elders and families. I particularly welcome any elders or community members who are here today to impart their knowledge of this issue to this committee or who are watching the broadcast of these proceedings. I also welcome any members of the public in the gallery and remind those in the room to be respectful of proceedings and to remain silent at all times.

All evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during the hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

I will just take the opportunity to introduce committee members to you. My name is Sonja Terpstra. I am the Chair of the Environment and Planning Committee and also a Member for North-Eastern Metropolitan Region.

**John BERGER:** Hi. John Berger, Member for Southern Metro.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Wendy Lovell, Member for Northern Victoria Region.

**Gaëlle BROAD:** Hi. I am Gaëlle Broad, Member for Northern Victoria.

**Melina BATH:** Good morning. Melina Bath, Member for Eastern Victoria.

**Sheena WATT:** I am Sheena Watt, Member for Northern Metropolitan.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Member for Northern Victoria Region.

**Samantha RATNAM:** Morning. Samantha Ratnam, Member for Northern Metropolitan Region.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, committee members. With that, I will now hand over to you. Please, we welcome your opening comments but ask that they be kept to a maximum of 5 to 10 minutes to ensure that we have got plenty of time for questions. I will give you a 2-minute warning as you approach your time. Who would like to lead off?

**David CHRISTIE:** My name is David Christie. I am a fourth-generation farmer out in Nanneella, 7 k's from town. We have been there for 104 years, our family. We flooded in 2011 and got smashed pretty bad, so we changed a lot of the ways we were farming for climate change and all that. We have probably spent about \$4 million on housing cattle and changing the way we farm to stop this happening again after 2011. Heat stress and all the rest of it to do with climate change changed the way we farm completely. We got smashed in 2022. I am not a public speaker, so just bear with me.

**The CHAIR:** No, that is okay. No problem at all. Just take your time. No worries.

**David CHRISTIE:** We lost a lot of cattle. We could not get them out, so we drowned some. A lot died of disease, mastitis and all the rest of it. We are just shy of \$2 million that 2022 has cost our business. We got a \$70,000 grant from the government. We had to jump through a lot of hoops and all the rest of it. I do not know, I suppose we can manage a drought. We might not make any money, but we can manage it and survive. With a flood we have got nothing. We cannot divert it. I have been on this mitigation committee with these guys, and they are doing an unbelievable job, but we are just not getting very far.

I am not sure what else you want to know. Our insurance – we are just about uninsurable. My parents are living along the river in town here; that comes on our policy. Like I said, we are 7 k's from the river and do not have flood insurance at home. But it comes off my policy, so our insurance went up 20 grand. So we pulled the pin on it. We cannot do it.

**Melina BATH:** Annually?

**David CHRISTIE:** Annually, yes. I think it is nearly 40 grand or something like that. We did not make any flood claims on the dairy farm, so it should not affect it, but it did.

I am not sure what else you want to know. I have a bit of a grievance with Goulburn–Murray Water. I was ringing them. I wanted the channels dropped a week before this event. Blind Freddy knew there was a 4000-k front coming. We knew we were going to get smashed some way or another – I am also in the SES, so we get those alerts – and nothing was done. We have done a lot of work with Goulburn–Murray Water and the guys since, and a lot of it they really could not do. What we thought they could do, they cannot. Nothing was done. Everyone went into lockdown – nothing was done to help. We know we could have altered some channel stops in the channel and probably saved some of our farm, but we would have flooded someone else out, and it is not our property. I would have been in the shit for that.

**The CHAIR:** That is fine. Thank you for those opening remarks. Would either one of you like to supplement? Sharon?

**Sharon WILLIAMS:** Good morning. My name is Sharon Williams. I have been a Rochester resident for 55 years. I am a wife. I have raised four daughters here, been a business owner for 31 years, am a passionate community person and a Rochester mitigation committee member. Our family home was one of the lucky ones. Our home just survived the catastrophic flood in October 2022. In saying that, survivor guilt is real. Both my parents, aged 82 and 87, and my husband's parents, aged 89 and 90, were flood affected and are currently still living with us, and all things going well, should be back in their homes in November, December.

In the lead-up to the flood the Rochester community, surrounding communities and strangers came and sandbagged and others helped prepare homes and businesses – but it was not enough. Once the water receded, it was the locals who took control of our recovery. We were so grateful for the help and support from neighbouring communities. They came into town with trucks, tractors and manpower and wrapped their arms around us with kindness. The most heartbreaking sight was driving around and seeing people's muddy and sodden possessions all out on the nature strips waiting to be collected and thrown on the mountains of disposals, their devastated and broken faces – the look of, 'What the hell just happened?' We have a population of over 3000 people, and every person in town and our surrounding farming area has been affected.

The flood mitigation committee was formed in November 2022 with five like-minded community members, residents, farming and business owners, who all agreed, 'We can't sit here and let this happen again.' We believe, in the face of a very wet, late winter/spring forecast released weekly by the BOM, from late winter onwards the government allowed all Victorian reservoirs to continue filling at above their designated fill curve, thus reaching 99 per cent-plus by late September. No attempt was made at any time to reduce the catastrophic flood risk that an overflowing Eppalock represented to all those living below. The Victorian government, the NCCMA and GMW all failed their collective duty of care to compassionately minimise flood damage to all residents in the face of the BOM's seasonal forecast. Never again should the reservoir be managed to produce the biggest possible flood given the available water, as was the aim in 2011 and 2022 – planned reservoir management to safely pass the 500,000 megalitre flood surge through Eppalock during a 10-day period without exceeding a 50,000 megalitre-per-day flow. This represents a catchment rain of 150 mils in two days. This is

likely given the current climate cycle during the next strong La Niña event, which is what we face. This is what we must manage.

In summary, during a high-risk flood period the outlet pipe of Eppalock – 1600 megalitres per day is the maximum output capacity through the current release valve – should be fully opened and left on while the reservoir remains above 90 per cent full, allowing 10 per cent air space. It takes 20 days to release 30,000 megalitres because the total capacity of the lake is 300,000. This can now happen, with an amendment to the water release policy. Long-term options such as a permanent infrastructure at Eppalock to allow a much larger volume of water, up to 20,000 megalitres a day, to be released – in the event of a significant weather event or increasing water capacity of the lake, as examples. A new set of operating rules to minimise catastrophic flooding below Eppalock should be mandated, with the aim to never again send uncontrolled flood flows over the emergency spillway – safe and profitable reservoir management that enhances the lifestyle of all floodplain residents – not just maximising water storage and maximising flood damage for the benefit of the irrigation industry and maximising environmental water storage.

What can be done right now to help Rochester township and surrounding farming properties have better water management? Release water before it rains. The water minister or state government can make an interim amendment to the water release policy today, stating Lake Eppalock's maximum holding capacity is 90 per cent. If nothing is done, when this happens again, who will be responsible for loss of property, loss of livelihood and loss of life? The Rochester district community is resilient. They really care about each other, and they are also traumatised, frustrated, scared and tired. We need action now – an interim flood mitigation plan implemented immediately until a permanent solution is found, to give us confidence and peace of mind to rebuild homes and lives back here. Please do not forget us. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Did you want to add anything?

**Tracie KYNE:** The only thing I will add – and I did not prepare anything for this committee – is that in June we recorded record rainfall. Two hundred per cent of our average rainfall fell in June, hence our dam now being at 100 per cent. We cannot wait until November before this report is released from the government to make suggestions about what should happen. We cannot wait until then because we know October was when it flooded last year, with the dam at capacity – at 55 per cent – this time last year. So we cannot wait. Mr Andrews and Ms Shing can actually make decisions right now to decrease that dam to 90 per cent, which Sharon mentioned is going to take days to do. But that will give us 10 per cent airspace to take in any spring rain that may come now. That is what we are worried about.

**The CHAIR:** All right. Thank you. We will throw to questions. Dr Ratnam.

**Samantha RATNAM:** Thanks very much for your evidence. I just want to acknowledge all the pain and suffering that you all have gone through – the trauma – and continue to go through as well. In terms of some of the recovery efforts – and similar to the question I asked in the last session – where are you all able to channel some of those findings or the recommendations and learnings that you all have gathered? Are you all able to channel that anywhere? Is this a place that you would like to be heard? I am just trying to think about how we gather all the lessons you all have gathered and reflected on in ensuring this does not happen again – or mitigate the worst impacts of an event if it happens in the future.

**Tracie KYNE:** We are very fortunate that our state member from the National Party and of course Wendy have certainly listened to us and are speaking on our behalf in state government. We believe they are hearing us, but we do not believe that is being taken any further. That is due to the comments made by Harriet Shing and the lack of, I guess, information or contact from Mr Andrews.

**Samantha RATNAM:** Could I ask one follow-up question? Just in terms of the intervening months since the flood event, there was a remark in the prior session as well about some things that could have happened immediately that could have helped locals access the information and resources that were sort of theoretically available as well. What has the ongoing presence been like? Have you all felt that there have been regular check-ins with you from the authorities that would ordinarily be responsible for some of that follow-up work and support work? Is it happening at regular intervals? Is it happening at all? Or is it happening ad hoc?

**Tracie KYNE:** Do you know, leading up to the flood our main point of information was the Rochester Community Page Facebook page.

**Samantha RATNAM:** Right. Okay.

**Tracie KYNE:** That was our main source of information. That is where we got where our dam was sitting and what water was coming over. That is where we went for our information. We are just so lucky that the people that run that page are on the ball and are in it for the right reason. No, I do not believe that there has been any follow-up information. We had Goulburn–Murray Water here on Monday, but they literally said they have no answers or ideas as to what to do. That does not help us.

**Samantha RATNAM:** Thank you.

**David CHRISTIE:** When David Littleproud was here the other day he said, ‘It’s funny; in Queensland if there’s a crisis out the bush or whatever, they’ll send an inspector out from Brisbane or someone to lead things and say, “What do you need?”’ They will use local knowledge; they will ask people who have been there all their lives and say, ‘What do you want done?’ He said, ‘In New South Wales it’s a bit wishy-washy.’ He said, ‘In Victoria it is hopeless.’ They will come in and the people who have been here all their lives will say, ‘This is going to happen’ and they will say ‘Well, you are not a hydrologist’ or ‘You are not a scientist’ or whatever, so – nothing.

**Samantha RATNAM:** There is a real gap and a mismatch there.

**David CHRISTIE:** Yes.

**Samantha RATNAM:** Thank you. I am happy to come back later.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks. Ms Lovell.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Thanks. Over my 21 years in Parliament coming here to Rochester, it has always been all about water. For the first 10 years it was the Rochester west irrigators and that five or six years where they had zero allocation and Bendigo was about to run out of water supply because Eppalock was so low. And then of course we have had the 2011 floods and now these floods. It is still all about water, and it is all about Eppalock. Obviously something needs to be done with that dam. Obviously the water in that dam belongs to someone. Are you aware of the percentage of water that still belongs to irrigators versus the percentage that might belong to urban water supply?

**David CHRISTIE:** Not off the top of my head.

**Tracie KYNE:** Forty per cent is for entitlement holders. We are very aware of that. Sixty per cent is owned by the government. So they have capacity to reduce that dam by 10 per cent with a signature or a signing or a phone call to say, ‘Get that dam down.’

**David CHRISTIE:** Entitlements are not irrigators either, are they?

**Tracie KYNE:** No, no, no. That is right.

**David CHRISTIE:** That is urban as well.

**Tracie KYNE:** Yes.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Right.

**Tracie KYNE:** So forty per cent is for entitlement holders, whether that be farming or Bendigo, for example.

**David CHRISTIE:** Urban – Coliban Water.

**Wendy LOVELL:** So irrigators and Bendigo. And the government water would include the environmental water that is in Eppalock as well.

**David CHRISTIE:** Yes.

**Wendy LOVELL:** What actually needs to be done to the dam? What works need to be done to make Eppalock –

**David CHRISTIE:** Look, everyone wants to make it bigger, but that is not going to happen. I do not know. I do not know if they have got to look at carryover laws – if you do not use it, you lose it. I am an irrigator. I have got water in Eppalock and Eildon, so I lose the same. When we were talking to Harriet, she started saying, ‘Are you going to ring people and say we have let your water down?’ I am one of the people. And it is not just me. I am just talking about all the farming around Rochy too. It is not us, but we own the water. If we get a 20 per cent allocation, we get a bill for 100 per cent. We pay whether we get it or not. So letting our water go – like I said, we can manage a drought; we cannot manage a flood. I do not know if they have got to look at making 90 per cent or 85 per cent the new 100 per cent full and letting it go, or if they have got to look at carryover laws that if you do not use it, that is your environmental flow – let it go. Do not try and carry it over, because the airspace is not there to put it next year.

**Wendy LOVELL:** What works need to be done to enable you to release water more quickly? We talked about 1600 megalitres a day.

**David CHRISTIE:** Yes, but that is the problem: they are not prepared to let 1600 megs out today. So you can put 25,000 megalitre doors on there, but who is going to hit the button to open it? They are going to come back to the same argument: we do not own the water.

**Tracie KYNE:** Well, Sharon, Dave and I have put our hands up to say that we will release it.

**David CHRISTIE:** Yes, we will pull the plug.

**Sharon WILLIAMS:** We will pull the plug.

**Tracie KYNE:** We are quite happy to take that on.

**David CHRISTIE:** And to sort of go back, they have got to change policy from the top down and say, ‘Righto, if we get to 90 per cent, we have got to start releasing it’ or manage it differently in a wet year than a drought year. We all know we are heading for dry now, so it makes it hard, but if we get good spring rain in the catchment, the same thing will happen.

**Wendy LOVELL:** And I guess it is about common sense. You release it when there is plenty of water; you are not going to release it when there is not.

**Sharon WILLIAMS:** Yes. That is right.

**Tracie KYNE:** And the problem is that at 1600 meg a day, which, like Dave said, they are not prepared to release anyway, if we did that a week leading up to a rain event like we had last October when the dam was at 55 per cent, that is like a dripping tap. It is not going to have any effect on the survival of our farmers, our residents and our businesses – no effect whatsoever. So we need big release mechanisms in place so that someone with some common sense can say, ‘We need to release 15,000 a day for the next seven days.’

**Wendy LOVELL:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** All right. I might just follow up from that question. So help us to understand. I am hearing you very clearly what your opinions are about Lake Eppalock, but help me understand with the flood event that happened: it did not just rain in one place –

**David CHRISTIE:** No.

**The CHAIR:** it rained everywhere. So I want you to explain to me and for the committee’s benefit as well: why is Lake Eppalock so pivotal in your mind about releasing water? Because it did not matter – like, the water was everywhere. So I am wanting to understand why you are saying that that is the solution to this, because my understanding is it rained everywhere up there. There were people affected in multiple areas. So why is it in your minds that you think that changing – you know, you just said it is about irrigators owning water, and then I

understand the other part is also drinking water, right? So what is it that is going to make a difference to a massive flood event like that by changing the dam?

**David CHRISTIE:** In that event, probably not a lot, really – like, you would need the Grand Canyon to get that amount of water through town.

**Tracie KYNE:** In 2011, in Rochester, it was a beautiful sunny day. The day that water came through our town, it was a beautiful sunny day. In 2022 it did rain everywhere, but it was what Eppalock caught from everywhere that affected Rochester. That was the issue. It captures water from everything south and north, going back into Eppalock, which then feeds down our river.

**David CHRISTIE:** I do not think it is just Eppalock you need to focus on though, it is all of the little 1 per cent and 2 per cent things – the channels, the modernisation of channels around this district, where they have gotten rid of natural levee banks. It is all of those little 1 and 2 per centers that you have got to look at.

**The CHAIR:** So it is the whole piece we need to look at.

**David CHRISTIE:** Yes. It is not just about putting gates in the lake. I do not think that is going to solve it.

**The CHAIR:** I think this is the thing: there is a clear view in the community that people think that Lake Eppalock should have a mitigation role, but it does not.

**Tracie KYNE:** That is right.

**David CHRISTIE:** No. It is a catch and spill, yes.

**The CHAIR:** That is right. At the moment there is a study being undertaken to determine whether it should or not. That then leads into: the infrastructure has not been built to actually do what people think it should do, okay. So this is where there is a mismatch in what the expectations are of the community and what it actually does right now. We hear that. I want you to know that we have heard it very loud and clear, but I am also interested in: like you are saying, there are other parts to this, because if you are focusing solely on Lake Eppalock, you are missing the other parts. You are saying there needs to be all this other work – like, there were natural levees.

**David CHRISTIE:** Yes. Just modernisation, like I said. There are channels around town being decommissioned and pipelined, or they have bought the water off and shut them down. Well, traditionally they were levee banks around the water out of different areas. That might save someone. It might create drama for someone else. But the focus just is not on Lake Eppalock, I do not think.

**Tracie KYNE:** In 2011 there was a study done after the flood, and there was a recommendation brought back to –

**The CHAIR:** Sorry, by whom? Do you know who did the study?

**David CHRISTIE:** Well, it would have been from the shire, wouldn't it?

**Tracie KYNE:** The shire or the council. And there was a recommendation to build levee banks to push the water to the east of the town. The community as a whole pretty much said no to that, because not only were we going to save some but we were going to make some worse, including our farmland out to the east. Dave's would have been one of those farms in that firing line. We are a community looking out for each other. We do not just look after ourselves, and therefore if we were going to make some worse, we said no.

**The CHAIR:** Like you said, every time you try and look at a solution you can see there are not easy answers for any of them.

**Tracie KYNE:** Correct, that is right.

**The CHAIR:** All right. Thank you very much for that. We will move on. Mrs Tyrrell.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Thank you, Chair. Is this the only outlet that the Rochester region relies on for water access?

**David CHRISTIE:** No.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** What are the others?

**David CHRISTIE:** Lake Eildon comes through here and the greater Goulburn.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Lake Eildon, okay. And do we have any underground water that people channel into as well?

**David CHRISTIE:** Yes.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Okay. How many irrigators are left in the region, roughly?

**David CHRISTIE:** No idea. I do not know.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** You do not know.

**David CHRISTIE:** No. Well, when they shut down out the west there, the government bought back the water allocation or the water rights, and that went into environmental flows. I suppose if those irrigators were using water all the time, that would just tick away at the lake capacity. Like I said back before, if they are holding that water to carry it over – we had carryover laws back in the 80s, but we did not have such a big government holding, I suppose, and environmental holding of the water.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** We did not have the speculators.

**David CHRISTIE:** Yes. A lot of it, like you said, is speculators trading. Water is a commodity now. You do not have to be bundled to the land, so it is a commodity.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Yes. So that is what I am trying to work out: how many irrigators and water users in the region actually rely on the water, and how many are making use of that storage facility for just trading?

**David CHRISTIE:** There are figures there. I have seen them, but I cannot remember.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Okay. Thank you. Chair.

**The CHAIR:** All right. Thank you. Mr Berger.

**John BERGER:** Thank you, Chair. And thank you for your appearance at today's hearing. David, I am just keen to understand a little bit more about the channel system. You mentioned earlier on that you sought assistance from –

**David CHRISTIE:** Goulburn–Murray Water.

**John BERGER:** the Goulburn catchment people to release some water. I think your next part might have been, 'Where does that water go and what effect does that have downstream?' if you like.

**David CHRISTIE:** We have been asking this since 2011: what capacity can the Waranga main get rid of if we drain that system the week before, down to stock and domestic level, like they do every winter to do works – do not take anyone's stock water off them, but drain that system down? If they cannot stop it getting in the channel, we need to manage it when it is in there. Mine and everyone's – we are all on a flood plain, we know that. But when it comes out the whole sole thing of a gravity irrigation system is that it runs from the highest part of your farm and it gravity feeds when you irrigate. So if it is going to come out of your irrigation channels, the bottom part of your land has already taken the flood. If it comes out the top, we are screwed from top to bottom. Like, there is nowhere to go. Like I said, I am only saying my experience, but all my neighbours are exactly the same. Upstream of Rochy, downstream, we are all in the same boat. But we housed our cows. We went a metre and a half above what they told us to build. We thought, 'If it's going to happen again one day, we'll plonk them in the shed and they'll be right.' Well, I had 2 foot of water through my sheds. We had not a speck of dry land to put cattle on. So I just look at it and go, 'Why can't we drop these channels, open these gates, get rid of this water, use it as a drainage system?' But I just couldn't get any answers.



**John BERGER:** And this has been part of your thinking through the committee that you are working through at the moment, and you have come up with –

**David CHRISTIE:** Yes, yes. They just keep saying we cannot do it. Well, tell me why we cannot do it. Give me some figures.

**John BERGER:** So you have not got any answers as to why you cannot do it.

**David CHRISTIE:** Not really. We had a real good discussion on Monday with them. They chucked some figures out and they said, ‘Look, since all the modernisation –’

An example is a small channel that goes past my place. I can pump 20 megalitres a day when I am irrigating. But they said to drain that system they can only drain 5 megalitres in a 24-hour period. To me, that is ridiculous. And it goes through a pipeline now since it was modernised. So that is what I want to know: why wasn’t there any, I suppose, modelling done on this happening when they were doing all this modernisation? We have got to, or we are liable. We cannot levee bank in case I flood my neighbours.

**John BERGER:** From what you are saying, there are some alternatives that could be available that we just need to explore.

**David CHRISTIE:** Just looking at it as a dumb arse, yes. To me it is obvious; if it is getting in the channel and the channels are full before it rains – before it floods the channels ran a banker. We said, ‘Open the lakes; open Cooper, open Greens, let’s fill the lakes. Empty that channel and run some water out.’ It just seems so basic to us looking at it. There are obviously technical reasons they cannot or they will not, but –

**John BERGER:** Yes, but I think it is good for us as a committee to understand that there are some alternatives that –

**David CHRISTIE:** Yes. Water is going to run downhill – simple. So if we open that channel and use it – it is a massive channel. If the water has got to get in it, get it away from the town. We can dump it in the siphon, get it out of the town, just run it out. But we just could not get any response.

**John BERGER:** Okay. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Bath.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you. And thank you for being an SES volunteer, as many people are – many farmers and community members very much so. Thank you very much, Sharon. You nearly made me cry when I was listening to you, so thank you very much for sharing that with all of us.

David, on that system around Goulburn–Murray Water and the mitigating effects, we are hearing you. We need to make recommendations from this committee. They are saying, ‘No, no, we can’t,’ for whatever reason. I want to understand: are they pushing back saying it is financial? At the end of the day most things are financial. What do you need to tell us? Like, what do we need to recommend to the state government and then through them to Goulburn–Murray to be able to open the siphons and increase the drains – the channels, I should say?

**David CHRISTIE:** I do not really know. I changed after the meeting with them, because you could see they were all trying, especially the guys that live in town. They lived through it, so if they had an answer, I am sure they would do it.

**Melina BATH:** They are sympathetic.

**David CHRISTIE:** Yes. But I just do not know. Like I said, back to the 2 per centers, there is no one thing that is going to fix it. There was a suggestion we pipe the channel with the main channel to eliminate all the banks so the water runs straight over the pipes and keeps going towards Echuca, where it should go, and that is a hell of a cost. Like, that is a massive cost, so I am not sure if that will be an option, but that is one option. Yes, the floodgates are another one, but I just think they have got to look at carryover laws. We just cannot keep carrying it over and putting it in a space, unless they going to make the lake bigger to take carryover water and keep the same allocations. That would work. But that does not seem to be an option.

**Melina BATH:** So, please, I am not verballing you. I just want to drill that down. They need to provide a list of options and approximate costs for those options, and this might be collectively for Rochester Goulburn–Murray Water, but then others, so there could be a whole level of recommendations around channels and costs for those mitigations.

**David CHRISTIE:** We all want irrigation water, so I suppose you have got to take that risk as well. If you are going to run channels and run the water into the area, you run the risk of it flooding, and you cannot get the water away too. So a little bit of both.

**Melina BATH:** One quick one: you formed in November 2022. Thank you very much again – that is your time that you are giving. The advocacy process – you are formed as a mitigation recovery committee. Where are you getting blocked? You have had a conversation with Minister Shing, but what else do you want to see from your committee in terms of open doors for advocacy? Do you want regular meetings? What do you want?

**David CHRISTIE:** Not really. We sat there for a couple of hours and everyone in the room spoke about their own personal side of it, and at the end of it she just said, ‘Well, I’m not going to do anything, basically, until we get the report.’ So it sort of just shut everyone down. Everyone went in trying to come up with solutions, not blaming anyone.

**Melina BATH:** So you want to fast-track the report?

**David CHRISTIE:** Yes.

**Sharon WILLIAMS:** Yes, certainly, because we do not want to leave it until November. We are just terrified because we are known for our spring rains. The majority of floods we have had have been in the spring or around Elmore Field Days, actually. So we are terrified of that.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Ms Watt.

**Sheena WATT:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you all for being here today. I wanted to reflect on what Ms Bath said about your service to the SES. One of the terms of reference for our inquiry is to look at the resourcing of the SES and the adequacy of its response to the flood event and the resourcing of the SES to do what it does that we all value so very much. As an actual volunteer, and you have been here on the ground, is there anything you want to share with us about that particular piece in our investigations?

**David CHRISTIE:** No, not really. It is other people that would be better at that. But more the frustration of it. Back to the local knowledge: even in 2011 we had guys ringing us – Elmore and all the rest of it – saying this is what is happening. And our controller had put that to the ICC, and they said, ‘We’ve got to get hydrologist reports, and we’ve got to get people that are qualified to ring us and say that’s coming.’ The numbers we were getting were not right.

**Sheena WATT:** What do you mean by ‘numbers’, sorry?

**David CHRISTIE:** The expected flood levels were wrong.

**Sheena WATT:** Oh, the levels, not the number of volunteers.

**David CHRISTIE:** At the end of the day, it does not matter what anyone says, they were wrong. We knew what was coming. We were told to doorknock. In 2011 I spent three days in here doorknocking and all the rest of it and lost half my hay at home. I had a baby that was five days old, so I said I would never do it again. So I did not this time. I came and gave them a hand for a while, and then I looked after what I had at home. I also went to the pub, to be honest, because we could not do a damn thing when it was coming out like it was coming. We could not alter it. We could not do a thing.

But getting someone telling you it is going to be a certain level – and that is what we were telling people, to lift your stuff up 200, 400, whatever – when we knew it was going to be higher than that. So they have got to get their facts right or listen to the people in the town. That goes back to what I said about David Littleproud before. Just come and get the people that know what is going on – the oldest people live along the river. There

used to be river wardens, and no-one takes notice of them now. In the old days, in the old channel system, we had drop bars.

**Sheena WATT:** What were they, sorry?

**David CHRISTIE:** Just bars in each check that altered the level. So you would pull a bar, ring your neighbour, he would pull a bar – just maintain the levels. Now they have got what they call tailored channel control. It is all electronically changed over in Tat. No-one is here seeing what is going on. So you ring them up and they go, ‘Well, we can’t do anything about it. We’re not a flood mitigation service.’ Before, 15 years ago, you would go and do it yourself.

**Sheena WATT:** I think there is probably something for us to consider off that, so thank you for sharing that today. I really appreciate it. Tracie, did you have anything you wanted to add to that?

**Tracie KYNE:** I believe that from a flood mitigation perspective, we do not have anything in government at the moment that actually looks at mitigation. It is probably more around we need that commodity that we were talking about, and we need to keep it like some precious jewel. But there is no-one on the other side of that that protects communities like ours against the other side, and that is what we are most concerned about. We have mentioned it a few times now: 55 per cent last year; it is at 100.3 per cent now. That is scary. And there is still no-one on that mitigation side for the government – actually working for us, rather than being told no.

**Sheena WATT:** I appreciate that, thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Broad. Question?

**Gaelle BROAD:** Yes, thank you. I really appreciate your time today. Sharon, you had 11 people, you said, in your house. If you can speak to maybe your experience of the recovery phase because we are now coming up to nearly 12 months since the floods too. So how do you feel supported, and are there just key recommendations that you would consider for this inquiry moving forward?

**Sharon WILLIAMS:** Well, being elderly, they all thought they were going to be living in their home and retirement life and things like that. Just after the floods Dad drove away and said, ‘Can you imagine us having to do this at our age? Total rebuilds.’ The saddest part is we have lost a lot of our history. Our older people have either been put into early, premature care because families have not been able to either take them in or they have not coped very well or they have just got nowhere else to go. So that is a lot of our history, and a lot will not be coming home. It is really important when they get to their age that they have got their connections; they have lived in town for their whole lives and brought their families up here. So it is lovely – we have been very lucky with some communities coming in – to see the connection, for people to have connection with each other. Because you drive around and you think, ‘I haven’t seen them at all; I wonder where they’ve gone to.’ You just do not know where people have gone, and that was the worst part after it. Getting in and having community things and reconnections has been really important for everybody, so I think that is really good. But the insurance things have been a problem with a lot of people. I think a lot of them are trying to wear down a lot of them. I had a lady the other day, just when I walked out, she was in tears. She said, ‘I just can’t do this anymore.’ She is on her own. Just the things they have said: ‘Pull stuff out of your shed and clean it before we come and check it for you, to be assessed.’ She said, ‘I can’t do it.’ I do not know. It is just constant.

**Gaelle BROAD:** I guess I am just interested, because with any flood, you cannot look at it as a certain geographic location because all our water systems are very much connected. I speak to people in Benjeroop and they were concerned about the amount of water held and carried over – it seems to be getting higher and higher each year. I have also had people raise concerns about planning decisions, with subdivisions being built in flood areas, like in Bendigo; perhaps it is contributing to the extra water coming down. David, in your submission you talked about it being preventable, this event. Are there any key recommendations that you see moving forward? You have kind of touched on a few of them.

**The CHAIR:** And before he answers that question, I will just let you know we have got about 2 minutes left for this session before we have to go to the next one. So, please.

**David CHRISTIE:** Like I said, there is a whole range. They have just got to start from the policy, I suppose: who is going to turn the tap on, all the way down to checking the modelling after all this infrastructure. Like,

there has been a fair bit done between Rochy and Elmore that I think might have caused a bit of the grief over the west of town – but I am not an engineer. They need someone to come in to maybe have a look at what has gone down there. Some of the banks pulled out might need to be put back in, to stop the water getting forced out that side of town. And that will force more out my way, but I mean there are a lot of houses over that side wet this time that were not last time, so they have probably got to look at that. But like I said, from the top down, policy – turn the tap on, drop some water. Get a bit of air space and a bit of breathing space for these guys. They have got to live with it. Imagine living in a caravan now when it starts raining of a night-time – no, it is not the way to live.

**The CHAIR:** All right. Thank you all very much. I know there are other questions that want to be asked here, but as I have said earlier – sorry Wendy – you can put your questions on notice to these witnesses if you did not get to ask a follow-up question. I would just like to thank you all very much for your evidence that you have given us today. It has all been very, very helpful for us to understand what it is like for you in Rochester. So again, thank you all very much, and please reach out to Lifeline or other services if you found this particularly challenging today. Thank you.

**Witnesses withdrew.**