





# Tropical Cyclone Larry hits the far north

By Kathryn Ryan

The devastation caused by Tropical Cyclone Larry was almost indescribable.

As the cyclone ripped through towns in the Innisfail area on the morning of March 20, it left a trail of destruction that hadn't been witnessed in Queensland since the Mackay cyclone of 1918.

Homes and crops were destroyed. Fallen powerlines, corrugated iron and trees littered the streets. Residents' lives were turned upside down.

The impact zone covered an area about half the size of Tasmania.

Damage was sustained from Cairns in the north to Cardwell in the south, and inland to the Atherton Tablelands.

Towns around Innisfail, where the eye of the cyclone passed, were worst hit. Early assessments indicated that in some areas 90 per cent of homes lost their roofs or suffered structural damage.

Despite the widespread devastation and heavy post-cyclone rainfall, the initial emergency response phase of the disaster was swift and effective.

Emergency Services Director-General Fiona McKersie said the effectiveness of the response was

largely due to the collaboration between agencies.

"From the time it became clear that Tropical Cyclone Larry was developing, the State Disaster Management Group convened, bringing functional agencies involved with the management of disasters together from the start," Ms McKersie said.

"The collaboration between the various agencies proved incredibly effective, providing consistency in the operation right from the beginning.

"Counter Disaster and Rescue Services played a vital role in coordinating all agencies, and in particular the State Disaster Coordination Group did an exceptional job in coordinating the whole-of-government response from Cairns.

"On the ground the cooperation between agencies was also evident. The incident management taskforce, which comprised CDRS, SES, QFRS, Rural Fire Service, ambulance, police and defence personnel, worked in support of Local Disaster Management Groups in Innisfail and other areas, responding to more than 4400 requests for assistance in the first two weeks.

"Other government departments and private companies also provided invaluable support to the communities.

"In the long term the community will benefit from the collaboration between Commonwealth, State and local government."

As lead agency for disaster management in Queensland, CDRS initiated disaster management preparations on March 17, three days before the cyclone crossed the coast.

At that stage Larry was nothing more than a tropical depression 1400km off the eastern coast of Queensland.

By the time it became apparent that the cyclone was going to hit the coast with severe intensity, specialist crews had been deployed to the region and liaison with other functional agencies was well under way.

SES crews from areas in the cyclone's path were activated and evacuations of more than 1000 residents began.

Safety and cyclone preparation messages were distributed to communities across the region through radio and television announcements. >>



» CDRS Executive Director Frank Pagano said this early intervention and management of the disaster proved effective, and ultimately saved lives.

“It’s quite astounding that a disaster of this magnitude could hit a populated area without causing any deaths,” he said.

“The outcome is testament to the fact that early warning and preparation in a disaster situation, coupled with cooperation from all agencies and the community, will save lives.”

Less than two weeks after the cyclone passed, more than 2000 staff and volunteers from DES had deployed to Innisfail and the surrounding areas to provide support to the affected communities.

Emergency services personnel assisted with everything from tarping roofs to coordinating food distribution, clearing blocked roadways, conducting building safety inspections and providing medical treatment.

Frank Pagano said the effective response from DES was largely due to extensive preparation for this type of scenario.

“We were prepared for a disaster of this magnitude to hit Queensland well before Tropical Cyclone Larry became a threat to Far North Queensland,” he said.

“In fact, as Tropical Cyclone Larry brewed off the Queensland coast there was an eerie sense of familiarity – in November 2005, CDRS staff ran ‘Exercise Weeping Maiden’, a simulation of a category

five cyclone hitting Cairns.”

With the initial response phase of the disaster over, the focus for the operation shifted to community recovery, with General Peter Cosgrove leading the Operation Recovery Taskforce, made up of a team of specialists including representatives from DES.

“Since I arrived in Innisfail after Tropical Cyclone Larry, I have been able to see both the devastation that was caused to far northern Queensland, and also the extraordinary relief effort that is well under way,” General Cosgrove said.

“The fact that no-one was killed directly due to Cyclone Larry is great proof of the fact that the people in the communities themselves, and all of the emergency services and local councils, were very well



prepared for the onslaught. “Now the initial relief effort in responding to the disaster is moving into the longer-term process of recovery. “Although life is returning to normal for some, the impact of this disaster will be felt for many years, through the long-term impact on the economy, and the psychological trauma suffered by residents who have lost homes and businesses and had their lives disrupted. “Overcoming these problems will be a massive task, but one that myself and the Operation Recovery Taskforce are committed to.” Much of the initial response’s success can be attributed to the hard work and commitment of the volunteers and staff from all agencies and organisations.

Fiona McKersie acknowledged the outstanding efforts of everybody involved with the emergency response.

“Since Tropical Cyclone Larry hit Far North Queensland I have witnessed many selfless acts and I would like to pay tribute to the dedication and commitment of everybody who contributed to the relief effort,” she said.

“I would also like to acknowledge the tremendous response from the many staff and volunteers from across government and also from the non-government organisations who have contributed in so many ways to the relief effort.

“I would also like to express my sincere thanks to the families and friends who have supported our volunteers and staff over this trying time, and the employers who have allowed our volunteers to take time away from work to assist with the response.”

CDRS Regional Director for Far Northern Region, Wayne Coutts, also expressed his appreciation for the support emergency services personnel provided to the region.

“We have been overwhelmed by the support from volunteers and staff from around the State who have come to the affected areas or provided support in any way,” he said.

“I know for a fact that the communities they are helping in the areas around Tully, Innisfail, Babinda and up in the Tablelands very much appreciate the assistance from these groups.

“I would particularly like to recognise the crews from the areas around the cyclone impact zone. Many of those people have been personally affected by Cyclone Larry, yet they selflessly came to the aid of their community in its time of need.” ■

## TC LARRY FACTS

- The eye crossed the coast between 06:20 and 07:20 AEST Monday, March 20 2006
- Crossing location was at Innisfail
- Category four or five cyclone at the time it crossed the coast
- Maximum wind gusts were 240-290 km/h
- Estimated central pressure was 950 hPa
- Eye radius was 15-20km
- Radius of destructive winds was 100km