



MEDIA RELEASE – 27 January 2009

January 1984 Southland Floods - 25th Anniversary

Twenty five years ago today marks Southland's Black Friday. The day when many of the low lying areas in Southland were awash with surface flooding from a record rainfall of 134mm which had fallen by 9am on Friday January 27, 1984.

To commemorate the 25th Anniversary of the worst flooding in Southland's recorded history the Southland Civil Defence Emergency Management Group together with the Southland District Council, Invercargill City Council and Environment Southland, have brought together some of the surviving members of the 1984 civil defence team, emergency services and other key players involved in the floods.

Southland Civil Defence Emergency Management Group Coordinator/Controller Neil Cruickshank welcomed the Minister of Civil Defence, the Hon John Carter who had made a special visit to Invercargill today to help commemorate the anniversary.

"More than 1400 homes were flooded in Invercargill, Otautau and Tuatapere, leaving many families struggling in temporary accommodation for months. The total loss of private, commercial and public property was estimated at over \$100 million (1984 dollars).

"The purpose of the event is to recall an event of great social significance in Southland, and also to remind the community of the need to prepare for emergencies, as floods, like earthquakes and other natural disasters, can strike anywhere at any time," Mr Cruickshank said.

After the launch, a travelling roadshow will visit eight towns around Southland.

The roadshow, made up of displays of photos from the floods and Civil Defence advice, along with television footage from 1984, will spend several weeks in each town.

Starting in Winton in February, the roadshow will then move to Otautau in March, Tuatapere in April, Riverton in May, Te Anau in June, Lumsden in July, Wyndham in August, Gore in September and return to Invercargill in October, when it will be incorporated into a larger exhibition at the Southland Museum and Art Gallery.

The roadshow will be based in Southland District Council area offices in Winton, Otautau, Riverton, Te Anau and Lumsden, with the rest of the venues still to be confirmed.

As part of the roadshow, people affected by the floods can sign up to an oral history project run in conjunction with the anniversary. The Southland Oral History Group will then contact interested people to record their story.

ENDS

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Southland Floods – January 1984 A Summary

- Extensive flooding affected large parts of Invercargill and rural Southland, including the towns of Otautau and Tuatapere after record rainfall all over the province on 26 January 1984.
- The Southland Catchment Board began issuing floodwarnings to farmers along the Aparima and Oreti Rivers on 26 January.
- Overnight on Thursday 26 January low lying parts of Invercargill were affected by stormwater flooding as the city's drains were unable to cope with the runoff from the heavy rain. Smaller watercourses began to overflow their banks – notably the Kingswell Creek in South Invercargill, the Otepuni Creek which runs through the central city, and the Waikiwi Stream, at the northern boundary.
- The Fire Service received more than 60 calls to homes in Invercargill affected by flooding. Many were sandbagged, then evacuated.
- By 1.30am the heads of the Police and Fire Service agreed that they could no longer cope with the increasing flooding within the city, and recommended that a State of Emergency be declared.
- Mayor Eve Poole made the declaration at 4am on Friday 27 January. At 9.50am it was extended to the whole of the Southland Region.
- Southland's civil defence organisation consisted of one full-time Civil Defence Officer (Bill Earley), based in Invercargill; a controller (Cr Jim Brass) and deputy; a chief welfare officer (Anne Stoddart), 17 trained wardens and a light rescue unit. The headquarters was located in the basement of the City Council building. CD headquarters and operations were also established in Otautau and Tuatapere.
- By dawn, Invercargill was isolated, with the only access in and out of the city by air.
- Timber from the Kennington sawmill was washed away by the Waihopai river. It built up against a farm bridge just upstream of Invercargill, causing the bridge's collapse. That weakened the stopbank until a 40 metre gap was scoured out. Water from the Waihopai river poured out of the channel, through the Prestonville industrial area and into the residential suburb of Grasmere.
- Grasmere residents had only a few minutes warning of the approaching flood, and most had no time to save their possessions or even leave their homes. Most were evacuated by boat, with some rescued from their rooftops by helicopter.
- By nightfall, an estimated 4000 people had been evacuated from 1000 homes in Invercargill. Many businesses in the central city were inundated.
- Evacuees were processed at Civil Defence welfare centres. Those who could not stay with relatives or friends were billeted overnight.
- In Otautau, the Aparima River and Otautau Stream combined to flood the township. Over 300 people were evacuated from 190 houses – two thirds of the community. Evacuees were taken first to the school and then, when that was inundated, to the golf club.
- In Tuatapere, 70 homes were evacuated – 37 were actually flooded.
- By dawn on Saturday 28 January, the Invercargill airport was flooded several metres deep by water from the lower Oreti River. Air New Zealand had

removed its Boeing the previous night as a precaution but many privately owned small aircraft were flooded in their hangars.

- A public flood relief appeal was launched, with the Government matching donations \$ for \$. It eventually topped \$6 million.
- The State of Emergency in Invercargill was extended twice and finally lifted on 15 February.
- Roy Baines was appointed as Disaster Recovery Coordinator – the first such appointment in New Zealand.
- Most residents were unable to reoccupy their homes for several months, due to the extent of the damage and a shortage of skilled tradespeople. The NZ Aluminium Smelter made its vacant staff houses available to evacuees at a peppercorn rental. Many families lived on their sections in caravans and house buses while their homes were repaired. Others stayed with friends or relatives, or rented private accommodation.
- There were also extensive losses in rural areas. It is estimated that more than 12,000 sheep, 100 cattle, 334 pigs and 75 deer drowned during the floods. 170km of fences and 52 farm bridges were destroyed.
- Insurance claims exceeded \$50million. It is estimated that another \$50 million of damage was caused to public infrastructure.
- Several of the rivers which flooded – most notably the Waihopai, but also stretches of the Aparima and the lower Oreti – already had stopbanks but these had been built piecemeal over years, in response to ad hoc demands.
- After the floods, the Southland Catchment Board was asked to design comprehensive flood protection schemes for the Waihopai River, Otepunu Creek and the Kingswell Creek in Invercargill, the Aparima River to protect Otautau and the lower Waiau River to protect Tuatapere. A scheme had already been designed for the Lower Oreti River, which would have protected the Invercargill airport, and this was awaiting Government funding approval in January 1984.
- By March 1987 none of the schemes had been cleared by the National Water and Soil Conservation Authority and the Treasury. A timely flood on the Aparima and Oreti Rivers caused further damage to Otautau and the Invercargill airport, and approval for all the schemes swiftly followed. The Government approved a special 70% subsidy for the urban schemes – normally it would have been 30% – with the balance paid by the communities which benefited from the protection.
- Invercargill, Otautau and Tuatapere now have comprehensive schemes designed to protect the communities against a 1984-sized flood, with 0.5m extra capacity.
- These schemes are maintained by Environment Southland.