Disaster funds for cyclone damage

AUTHORITIES are racing to put a roof over the heads of 100 families left homeless in the wake of Cyclone Marcia as another 50,000 Queensland properties remain without power.

More than 1500 houses in Yeppoon and Rockhampton suffered structural damage, while access to electricity is emerging as a major obstacle in the recovery effort. But as the state’s central coast picks up the pieces, regions to the south are still contending with a flood emergency.

“Our fundamental priority now is on those families who have been the most severely impacted,” Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk said on Sunday.

Ergon energy bolstered its field crew contingent from 500 to 800 in Yeppoon and Rockhampton but said outlying properties could be left in the dark for weeks.

“There are over 1800 power lines down. This is absolutely significant,” Ms Palaszczuk said.

Almost 100 per cent of Yeppoon and 92 per cent of Rockhampton had no power, she said.

The federal government has signed off on Natural Disaster Relief and Recovery funding for the Rockhampton, Livingstone and Banana Shire council areas.

Cyclone and flood victims can immediately access hardship payments of $180 per person or up to $900 for a family of five or more. The destruction was extraordinary, Deputy Prime Minister Warren Truss said as he toured central Queensland.

Further south, poor access to phone and internet communications has stifled the response.

In the Banana Shire, which takes in the town of Biloela, up to 400 properties may have been inundated by floods, Mayor Ron Carige said.

He was furious after the region’s disaster co-ordination centre ran into a repeat of the communication issues that plagued the 2013 flood.

Telstra had promised it wouldn’t happen again, Mr Carige said.

Ms Palaszczuk has vowed a review.

Telstra arranged for a helicopter to deliver a generator to the key network site and was expecting progressive restoration of services.

Closer to Brisbane, Ms Palasczuk said the situation appeared to be slowing down in Gympie.

The small town of Jambin, south of Rockhampton, faced evacuations due to flooding of the Callide River.

The SES has responded to more than 6000 requests for help, with more outstanding.

Queensland’s Chief Health Officer, Jeannette Young, urged people to stay out of floodwaters, which could be contaminated.
QLD: Callide Dam victims fear flooding repeat

Queenslanders whose homes were flattened by a wall of water that spilt from a dam during Cyclone Marcia fear they could suffer another round of flooding.

Hundreds of residents were inundated after the operator SunWater refrained from releasing water from Callide Dam, near Biloela, before the cyclone crossed the coast on February 20.

The dam was at 89 per cent capacity on the night of the disaster and it’s now 91 per cent full as a low pressure system threatens to dump substantial rain on the Biloela area.

SunWater’s facing fresh criticism over the way it operated Callide Dam during Cyclone Marcia, following revelations it took 21 minutes to warn residents that floodgates were open.

AAP RTV
FLOOD-HIT communities downstream of the Callide Dam are hoping SunWater will be held accountable for the management of water released last Friday night during Cyclone Marcia, after Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk announced an independent review into the dam’s operations on Tuesday.

Dakenba cotton and grains producer Philip Wilkie was in disbelief of the flash flood that swept across three of his properties north of Callide Creek on Friday night.

“We could’ve been all killed actually,” Mr Wilkie said as he began the back-breaking clean-up.

“We just can’t believe it. It went right over the top of our cotton, which has never happened before and we’ve been here over 50 years.

“I’ve never seen a flood like that.”

He estimated the value of his 160-hectare irrigated cotton crop had halved, but he said the half a million dollars lost there “is nothing compared to all the other stuff we’ve got to replace”.

“Literally millions of dollars. I was just driving around today and the soil lost ... you just can’t replace it,” Mr Wilkie said. “Some of the country will never recover. There’s a paddock with massive holes, the water has taken out thousands of metres of soil – it’s sickening.”

Three of his water tanks, picked up by the flood force, sit out of place among damaged fields.

Mr Wilkie is one of many flood-affected residents who believe SunWater’s procedures for Callide Dam water releases are to blame.

SunWater said the Callide Dam’s gates were set to automatically open when water levels reached 90 percent capacity and it was not designed for flood mitigation.

During last Friday night a peak of 1.8 Olympic swimming pools per second flowed through the dam spillway.

Teamed with “unprecedented” rainfall upstream of the dam, identified as a one-in 10,000 year event, led to rapid increase in water levels, a SunWater spokesperson said.

Water levels rose by more than 7m in three hours last Friday night, compared with 5.5m over 18 hours during Cyclone Oswald in 2013. But Mr Wilkie claimed SunWater was “negligent” in disregarding the early warning signs.

“There’s that many farmers and businesses in Biloela and surrounding areas that are so disappointed that the dam could’ve been dropped down before [reaching 90 per cent capacity],” Mr Wilkie said.

“The Bureau of Meteorology was saying we were definitely getting at least 100mm of rain with Cyclone Marcia.

“We kept making phone calls after phone calls to SunWater for up to three days before the rain and they took no notice of it.

“They kept telling us they were ‘monitoring it’.

Locals are raising questions over what exactly was being “monitored” as little warning was given once the Callide Dam gates automatically opened.

Mr Wilkie said he received a “panicked” message at 9.30pm and within 30 minutes floodwater began raging through his family home, which is 20 metres from Callide Creek, on his property, Emohruo.

He estimates it was 1.5 metres high.

While residents such as Mr Wilkie came to terms with the damage left, they hope the review will force the Callide Dam operations management guidelines to change before history repeated itself again.

“We thought that after the 2013 flood, they would’ve learnt, but now as far as I’m concerned SunWater are idiots,” Mr Wilkie said.

SunWater responded to the Premier’s announcement of the independent review, saying the company “understands the government will undertake a review of the operation of Callide Dam during Tropical Cyclone Marcia and will fully participate in all aspects.”
The force of surging floodwaters moved this water tank and other objects across properties.

Philip Wilkie and son Ray, Emohruo, Dakenba, estimate they’ve lost half a million dollars in value from their 160ha irrigated cotton crop. Before flood water engulfed the crop they were predicting an average yield of 10 bales/ha.
CQ meatworks race to restart in Marcia’s wake

CENTRAL Queensland’s three major meatworks are racing to restart operations after the devastation of Cyclone Marcia.

Processing was disrupted at Teys Australia’s plants in Rockhampton and Biloela as well as the JBS plant in Rockhampton after the category 5 storm battered the Capricorn Coast with up to 300km/hour winds.

Teys Australia general manager for corporate affairs Tom Maguire said the Lakes Creek plant at Rockhampton would be operating on Friday or at latest on Monday. The plant had suffered some minor damage to its main office building and training facility but the loss of electricity and disruptions to water supplies had created the most concern.

Electricity and water had since been restored.

Mr Maguire said an assessment was being made of processed beef stored at the plant. Water quality was also being analysed before processing would resume.

Lakes Creek employs about 900 people and processes more than 1730 cattle a day.

It is unknown when JBS’s Rockhampton plant at Nerimbera on the Fitzroy River will be back in action. However, it is understood the plant suffered some damage from the cyclone.

A company statement said no information could be provided until after an engineering report was received. The plant employs 500 staff and processes 696 cattle a day.

In the meantime, it is understood slaughter cattle were diverted to JBS plants in Townsville and Dinmore.

Teys Australia’s Biloela plant was least affected by the cyclone, losing only a single slaughter shift. Mr Maguire said the plant had been unscathed by the cyclone but local flooding had disrupted operations.

“They knew what they were doing when they built the plant in 1956,” he said. “The location of the plant meant it was not affected by flooding at all. It was the extensive local flooding in the local area that was the issue.”

Biloela has about 400 employees and processes about 700 cattle a day. Mr Maguire praised the efforts of emergency services and disaster management workers during the cyclone.

Member for Callide Jeff Seeney said there were major issues with roads used to transport cattle to the three meatworks.

“Electricity and water had since been restored. It will take some time before the road network is back up to speed.”
Marcia damage bill to top $400m

SARAH ELKS

THE damage bill left in Cyclone Marcia’s wake will easily top $400m as new figures show Queensland farmers have taken a $50m hit and $250m worth of council roads and bridges need to be rebuilt.

Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk, who travelled to disaster-hit Biloela and Jambin yesterday, said the number of uninhabitable homes had risen to 550, seven days after the cyclone hit central Queensland.

“Families and people are completely distraught,” Ms Palaszczuk said.

“They’ve lost their homes, their livelihood, but thankfully there has been no loss of life. When I was in Byfield (northeast of Rockhampton) the other day, it is a miracle … everyone survived.”

Tony Abbott visited the coastal town of Yeppoon last night, to inspect the scene and share a barbecue with volunteers.

The extent of the damage is still being tallied. Local Government Association of Queensland chief executive Greg Hallam told The Australian Cyclone Marcia had wrought $250m worth of damage to council infrastructure such as roads and bridges.

He said the destruction would have been worse without the flood mitigation works completed after previous disasters.

Ms Palaszczuk said that while it was too early to estimate how much damage had been done to state government infrastructure and roads, Queensland’s agricultural sector had suffered at least $50m worth of damage. The Insurance Council says it has received more than 12,000 claims worth more than a total of $70m.

More than 22,000 families and businesses are still without power in the disaster zone, even after Ergon restored electricity to 14,000 customers in the 24 hours to midday yesterday.

Residents flooded by releases from the Callide Dam, near Biloela, are still angry. Emergency Services Minister Jo-Ann Miller expects to receive terms of reference this week for an Inspector-General’s inquiry into the dam.

Four charities — Red Cross, Salvation Army, Vinnies and Uniting Care — were yesterday given $1m by the Queensland government to continue their work. Uniting Care has psychological first aid workers in the field and Red Cross has more than 50 paid staff and 1000 volunteers in the disaster zone. Chairman John Pinney said the Red Cross still had staff in Biloela in the wake of the 2013 floods.

“It’s easy to get over the bridges and the roads and buildings, but people have been shattered by this series of events,” Mr Pinney said.

The Salvation Army has served more than 3000 meals to storm victims since Cyclone Marcia and Vinnies has 300 volunteers in the affected area.
Terms of reference for an inquiry into flood releases from Callide Dam near Biloela will be set this week.
Premier ditches appeal and gives $1m straight to charities

JASON TIN

Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk has announced her plans to give $1 million to charities helping with the cyclone recovery effort, with each to get $250,000.

The State Government donation will take the place of a formal premier’s relief appeal.

The Salvation Army, Australian Red Cross Society, St Vincent de Paul Society of Queensland and UnitingCare Community will each get a share of the money.

“I know that these groups are doing the work that is needed on the ground,” said Ms Palaszczuk, who will today fly to Biloela and Jambin.

“That is why I have decided not to have a premier’s relief appeal, but to direct the money out to the organisations so they can help people straight away.”

Ms Palaszczuk (pictured) urged Queenslanders to help towns recover by donating cash to the named charities.

In Rockhampton, 51 per cent of households have had their power restored, while in Yeppoon that figure is 80 per cent. The Premier said more than 550 homes were inhabitable. “That number is sadly increasing,” she said.

She said there was not yet a final assessment on the damage bill for roads and infrastructure, but said that about $50 million of the state’s agricultural industry had been hit.

When asked about Callide Dam, Ms Palaszczuk said she was waiting for the outcome of the Inspector-General’s independent review before commenting further.

“He now needs to get on with the job and carry out that inspection,” she said.
Tropical Cyclone Marcia

Callide Dam floodgates opened and towns, farms were flooded

Operations under review

THERE will be a full review into how SunWater managed Callide Dam in the lead-up to and during Tropical Cyclone Marcia.

Residents of Biloela and Jambin areas evacuated their homes in a hurry when the floodgates on the dam opened automatically, with little or no official notification from authorities.

The town was flooded, farms were destroyed and homes have been left in ruins. Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk has received a preliminary briefing on the situation.

“We’ll be doing a full review but my initial advice is that the volume of water that was received was almost double the 2013 event,” the Premier said.

Federal Member for Flynn Ken O’Dowd said action was needed to stop flooding in the region.

“I am trying to organise to come up (to the area) with a minister because they are the ones that get things done,” Mr O’Dowd said. “I believe the area needs something like that to create a good think tank for change.

“The whole episode reminds me of the Wivenhoe Dam flooding.

Dams either have two main purposes – supply water or protect against flooding. There are many dams (like Callide) that are purely for water supply and to assess what happened during this event would be impossible at this stage.”

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Federal Member for Flynn, Ken O’Dowd

The whole episode reminds me of the Wivenhoe Dam flooding.
DISCUSSIONS: Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk met with Local Disaster Management in Biloela this week.

PHOTO: EMMA CLARKE
SunWater cops flak over dam

Council fumes at ‘miserable failure’ to protect locals from flood danger

GREG STOLZ

DAM operator SunWater should be stripped of its responsibilities to warn residents about flooding dangers after “failing them miserably” and putting lives at risk, an angry local councillor says.

SunWater has been under fire over last week’s devastating floods in Biloela and Jambin in central Queensland in the wake of Cyclone Marcia.

Residents have accused SunWater of contributing to the flooding by failing to release water from the swollen Callide Dam before the cyclone’s heavy rain hit.

They have also condemned late warnings – or in some cases no warnings at all – that the dam’s automatic gates had opened, forcing night-time evacuations.

Banana Shire councillor Pat Brennan said SunWater was responsible for warning residents within 10km of the dam to evacuate if there was to be a sudden water release.

“It failed them in 2013 and it failed them miserably again last week,” he said. “We can’t fail those people again.

SunWater has the responsibility to warn people but it can’t handle it and people’s lives have been put at risk.

“We’re not talking about property losses here – we’re talking about the potential to wipe out a whole lot of people.”

Cr Brennan said residents should never have been forced to evacuate in the middle of the night.

“It’s no good trying to evacuate people in the middle of a Category 3 cyclone at 10 o’clock at night,” he said.

“The people that are most-affected (by a major flooding event) are always the ones with the least amount of time to get out.

They should have been evacuated in daylight hours.”

Cr Brennan said it was a miracle none of his constituents were killed.

“I compare it to driving at 50 head of cattle at 100km/h and missing them all,” he said.

“That’s how lucky those people were. I don’t like to criticise, but people let us down, something went wrong.

“The system must change. It’s no good Sun-Water hiding behind operational manuals and saying ‘it wasn’t my job’. I don’t wear that.”

Banana Shire Mayor Ron Caridge said SunWater had also refused to extend its evacuation warnings beyond the 10km radius, leaving the council to issue alerts.

Jambin, about 34km from the Callide Dam, was severely flooded last week.

Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk has ordered a full investigation into the flooding.

The inquiry, by Emergency Management Inspector-General Iain MacKenzie, will examine issues including dam operations and the adequacy of warnings. SunWater has fended off questions about its dam protocols, saying they will be the subject of the review.
Family blame dam operator for brush with death

GREG STOLZ

BRISBANE: A young Queensland family who fled for their lives as a 2m wall of water bore down on their home have slammed dam operators SunWater for putting them in peril.

Catrina Stevens was forced to gather up her three terrified young children and bundle them into the car late Friday night last week after the Callide Dam’s automatic gates burst open, swamping Biloela and surrounding areas.

Home alone when Cyclone Marcia hit – husband Trent was trapped at work at nearby Moura – Mrs Stevens said she received no warnings from SunWater to evacuate.

A friend texted to tell her that residents of Jambin, 27km away, had been warned by the council to evacuate.

As she scrambled to get her kids into the car, her sister-in-law phoned to warn her that her area was about to be hit by a huge volume of water from the dam.

“That made me panic even worse,” Mrs Stevens said yesterday.

“We had no time to save anything from the house – we just had to save ourselves. It was absolute chaos.

“If we had been driving up that road to escape minutes earlier, no-one would have survived.”

The Stevens’ four-year-old home on Muirs Rd may have to be demolished. Jambin, about 34km from the Callide Dam, was severely flooded last week.

Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk has ordered a full investigation into the disaster, which has caused millions of dollars in damage.

The probe will be conducted by Emergency Management Inspector-General Iain MacKenzie.

SunWater has fended off questions about its dam protocols, saying they will be the subject of the review.

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Biloela residents Trent and Catrina Stevens with their children Peyton, 4, Carter, 2 and Theo, aged 10 months.

Picture: JACK TRAN
Meeting a no-show for SunWater

SUNWATER will not attend a public meeting in Biloela. Former councillor Rosemary Munroe has organised the meeting at the civic centre tonight for locals to discuss flooding in the Callide Valley during Cyclone Marcia.

“We have a lot of people who would like to hear from (SunWater),” she said.

“We particularly want to look for the future on the sudden release of the dam. It’s not a witch hunt. We just don’t want this to happen again.”

Inspector-General Iain MacKenzie, attending on behalf of the Queensland Government, said he was looking at facts but the views of locals would be the most important part of his review.

“I can’t promise creeks and rivers will never flood again but I will be looking at the operation of the dam and the timeliness of the warnings.”
Inspector-General responds to extensive flooding in Biloela

Review begins into Callide Dam process

EMMA CLARKE

BILOELA: They came, saw and assured they will listen.

Inspector-General of Emergency Management Iain MacKenzie is in Biloela this week as the community responds to last week’s extensive flooding across the region. Mr MacKenzie has been asked to review the operations surrounding the Callide Dam gates.

“Particularly, we’ve been asked to look at dam operations,” Mr MacKenzie said. “I have to make comment about what I think about that in terms of reasonableness, but it’s obviously a very subjective issue.”

Mr MacKenzie said he was communicating with the affected community throughout the process.

“I’m particularly looking at the emergency action plan that exists for the dam and how that operated and how that is integrated with local disaster management groups here,” he said.

He said the review aimed for better outcomes for the community.

“People that live in an area that is likely to be flooded, regardless of anything to do with the dam, should know what to expect and be able to receive warnings so, frankly, we’re not asking people to evacuate in the middle of the night.”

He said the report was due to the State Government by late May.

“My aim is to make some recommendations that are very easily implemented and that could be done quickly. Certainly, we would want things in place before another wet season.”
Storm-hit locals pour scorn on dam operator

ANDREW FRASER

RESIDENTS of Biloela in central Queensland say government-owned dam operator Sunwater has little option but to change its operating manual because the Callide Dam has overflowed twice in two years after cyclones.

Biloela, about 100km inland, does not have a long history of being in the path of cyclones, but in 2013 it was hit by Cyclone Oswald and last month was hit by Cyclone Marcia.

Both times, the gates to the nearby Callide Dam were automatically opened and water flowed through the dam gates at the rate of 1.8 Olympic swimming pools a second, pouring more water into already swollen creeks.

Biloela resident Paul Higgins, who lives on Callide Creek only 5km downstream from the Callide Dam and whose house went underwater—the first time in the 33 years that he has been living there—said people in the area had contacted Sunwater in the days before the cyclone hit asking them to release more water before the cyclone arrived.

“They followed their plan exactly, no question about that, but now we’ve got an inquiry, so hopefully that will give everyone some peace of mind. The main thing is that it is transparent and open,” he said.

For me, it’s not so much the fact that it flooded, as it is that we had so little warning,” Mr Higgins showed The Australian a text messages from Sunwater at 8.39pm, which said “flooding expected—rapid rises”, but by that stage, roads had already been cut by the rising floodwaters. He received another text from Banana Shire at 9.42, which read “Water releasing Callide Dam. Threat to life and property. Jambin and Goovigen leave area now or seek higher ground.”

Banana Shire mayor Ron Carnegie said that Sunwater, which is owned by the state government, had worked on the principle that the rain would be much the same level as it was in 2013.

“They followed their plan exactly, no question about that, but now we’ve got an inquiry, so hopefully that will give everyone some peace of mind. The main thing is that it is transparent and open,” he said.

The incident is being investigated by the state’s inspector, who anticipates bringing down a final report in May.

But a statement from Sunwater said that the intensity of the rainfall was “extraordinary” in that it led to a rapid increase in water levels at the upstream gauging station by more than seven metres in three hours.

“This compared with Cyclone Oswald in 2013 where the increase in water levels at the upstream gauging station of around 5.5m occurred over a period of 18 hours,” read an the information paper, which was circulated at a public meeting at Biloela on Friday night. Mr Higgins said that he understood that Sunwater had followed its emergency plan, “but maybe they need to look at it again”.

Another resident whose home was also inundated, Robert Fisher, also said that Sunwater needed to re-examine its operating procedures after the dam gates had automatically opened twice in two years at a time when the area was hit by cyclones.
Biloela resident Paul Higgins on his property, 5km downstream from the Callide Dam in central Queensland
Waiting on dam review

No changes to operation till then

Campbell Gellie
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SUNWATER chief executive Peter Boettcher has said his company’s operation of Callide Dam (in an emergency situation) will not change until the State Government review is over.

Speaking to the Observer yesterday afternoon, Mr Boettcher said SunWater was open to the idea of changing the operating rules, if the independent review findings support it.

“With respect to any changes to the future operation of the dam, if the review recommends that the dam is operated differently, and the community supports a different mode of operations, and the government supports that, then we will change the operating rules to deliver that outcome.

“We expect that an independent, qualified hydrologist who understands dams and catchments will look at all aspects of the operations of the dam and of the flood event throughout the valley and we look forward to a transparent process that gives the local community an opportunity to have their say and to learn more about how the dam operates.

“We have provided a considerable amount of information for the review already, and believe that this review will provide the best opportunity for questions from the community to be examined.”

More than 50 people turned out to a community meeting with class action lawyers last night in Biloela to discuss whether to make a claim against Callide Dam operators SunWater.

Maddens Lawyers principal Brendan Pendergast said he believed the management of the dam in the lead up to Cyclone Marcia had worsened the effect of the flood on Callide Valley residents.

“You don’t have to be a trained dam manager to know if the rain is coming, lower the level in the dam,” he said.

“It’s not reasonable (for SunWater) to say ‘we could have done that but we have some plan in place that says we don’t do it’.”

...if the rain is coming, lower the level in the dam.
Class action possibility

Lawyers touch down in Callide to talk to flood-affected residents about dam release

Madeline McDonald
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FIVE weeks after flood-waters from Cyclone Marcia tore through the Biloela area a number of lawyers have touched down in the Callide Valley reportedly to discuss a potential class action.

It was reported by the ABC yesterday that some Callide residents believed the flood waters had intensified as a result of the emergency release from the Callide Dam.

Lawyer Brendan Pendergast visited the flood-affected residents and told the ABC that he believed there was a possibility of a case for compensation.

“It seems to us that the inundation that occurred following the 20th of February event could have been avoided,” he said.

“What ought to have happened, we would contend, is that the (water) levels should have been lowered by opening of the flood gates and... releasing water 48 hours or so before the heavy torrential rain arrived with the cyclone. “We say the situation is aggravated by the fact that in 2013 a similar chain of events occurred with a similar flood to follow.”

Mr Pendergast told the ABC flood-affected residents were angry and that some held SunWater responsible.

Dam operator SunWater chief executive Peter Boettcher told the ABC he was not concerned lawyers were meeting with residents.

He said people should wait for the results of the independent inquiry into the flooding that was being conducted by the Queensland Government.

“We think they’ve probably jumped the gun a little bit,” he said.

“We are participating fully in that review.

“We have provided a considerable amount of information already and we expect that when that information is made available in the public domain, through the review process, our position will be justified.”
MARCIA OVERFLOW: SunWater says Callide residents should wait for the results of the independent inquiry into the flooding caused from the water release of Callide Dam following Cyclone Marcia. INSET: Jambin’s Trent and Catrina Stevens suffered a huge amount of damage as the water from the Callide Dam tore through their property.

PHOTO: PHOTO EMMA CLARKE / CENTRAL TELEGRAPH
BILOELA: Sunwater chief executive Peter Boettcher says his company’s operation of Callide Dam will remain unchanged – at least until the State Government review is over.

Speaking to APN earlier this week, Mr Boettcher said SunWater was open to changing the operating rules if the review findings supported it.

“With respect to any changes to the future operation of the dam, if the review recommends that the dam is operated differently, and the community supports a different mode of operations and the government supports that, then we will change the operating rules to deliver that outcome,” he said.

“We expect that an independent, qualified hydrologist who understands dams and catchments will look at all aspects of the operations of the dam and of the flood event throughout the valley, and we look forward to a transparent process that gives the local community an opportunity to have their say.

“We have provided a considerable amount of information for the review already and believe that this review will provide the best opportunity for questions from the community to be examined.”

More than 50 people attended a community meeting with class action lawyers last night in Biloela to discuss whether to make a claim against SunWater.

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“You don’t have to be a trained dam manager to know if the rain is coming, lower the level in the dam,” he said.