A personal perspective on managing a natural disaster: The Somerset floods of 2014

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What I will cover

• The Somerset Floods of 2014
• The impacts particularly on farming
• Learning:
  • Communication and the role of Social Media
  • Volunteers
  • Insurance
The Somerset Levels

- Approximately 160,000 acres (650km²)
- Inhabited since Palaeolithic times
- Many attempts to manage water over the centuries, monasteries were responsible in the Middle Ages
- Several significant flood events over the centuries
- Managed landscape; artificial watercourses created to help manage water
- Severn Estuary has high tidal range and combined with stormy weather can cause flooding

- The area is rich in biodiversity
- Complicated system – many different opinions on how to manage the area
- Water levels managed by the Internal Drainage Boards
- Environment Agency responsible for the main rivers

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The 2014 flood was more extreme than had been experienced for a generation

11,000 hectares of agricultural land flooded
Over 200 homes under water, some for months
The Event

Late December – heavy rain, first flooding including closure of one of the main routes into the Southwest of England

Our Response
Emergency road closures
Diversions
Landslides
Clearing fallen trees
Communications

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The Event
Early January – storm surge combined with high tides
Significant inland flooding of agricultural land
Village of Muchelney cut off
Local residents and volunteers using social media to coordinate response

Our Response
Continued highways response
SCC provide humanitarian support boat. Needed for nearly ten weeks.

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• James Winslade’s Farm; cowshed and the evacuation
Throughout January storms continued to sweep in from the Atlantic with prolonged heavy rain. Homes and farms flooded.

**Major Incident declared 24th January.**

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**The Event**

**Our Response**

School and public transport, caring for people Staff on the ground working with volunteers to evacuate farm animals

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The Event

**February** – More rain, further high tides, more flooding
Press and political interest remains high

**March** – Waters receding moving towards recovery

Our Response
Councils working 24/7
Still responding but preparing for recovery
Farm evacuation at Fordgate and flooded livestock sheds
Farming Response

• Responsibilities for livestock – ultimately the landowner
• Farmers are used to working with and living with water and will move their livestock from the moors that are likely to flood
• Farm buildings/dwellings are built above the “usual” flooding level – in an exceptional event this will not protect them
• Agencies can provide help – FWAG, NFU
• Potential Evacuation – farmers need to be proactive and have a flood plan ready. Some left it too late last year
• The farming community is very good about supporting itself - Forage Aid – was hugely useful last year. Very helpful contributions from farmers from all over the country and Young Farmers Clubs.
Recovery

- Cleaning up – getting rid of the waste
- Financial help – utilities, council tax
- Getting people and animals home
- Supporting businesses to recover – promoting Somerset
- Insurance issues – lobbying Government
- Mental health issues
- Donations
- Volunteers
- Repairing infrastructure – roads, rail, telephones etc
Farming Recovery

Some evidence that impacts upon the soil and wildlife may not be as significant as previously thought.

People can take longer to recover, we are still dealing with Mental Health issues.
Learning - Communications

• Communication via mobile phones, social media is now instant
• Government at all levels can no longer control the flow of information in a disaster
• digital communications can help Government bodies get information from those affected and can help get messages back out
• In Somerset, many volunteers including farmers all over the country were engaged via social media
Learning - Volunteers

Played a significant role in responding and in assisting with recovery. Not just local people but a national response with donations and people travelling from across the country.

Issue to consider:
• Coordination
• Storage and distribution of donations including fodder for farm animals

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Local farmers

Burnham Rescue boat

BV 206s

Wessex 4x4

Red Cross

SCC Boat

Argocat

Unimog

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Learning - Insurance

• Post flooding, many of those affected have struggled to obtain affordable insurance and this impacts on the community
• Engaging with insurance companies and the national government to ensure that all households, farms and businesses can obtain affordable insurance has been a priority in Somerset
• Further work is needed to ensure that the insurance industry recognises that building resilience in infrastructure at the outset is the most effective way to minimise risks and reduce long-term costs
Questions?

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