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TORRES STRAIT PREPARES FOR CLIMATE CHANGE IMPACTS

Low-lying island communities in the Torres Straits have once again suffered flooding and erosion due to a combination of poor weather and king tides.

Extensive flooding affected very low communities such as Saibai and Iama and further erosion of shorelines near community infrastructure on Poruma, Masig and Warraber.

The impacts of this flooding include seawater washing through communities, accelerating the rusting of machinery, shutting down waste treatment plants, undermining paving and roads, swamping low lying buildings and threatening to inundate fresh water supplies.

The floods also wash through community cemeteries, tipping headstones in these important social and cultural sites and causing significant stress for relatives.

Funding from the Commonwealth and Queensland Government was secured in 2014 to build coastal defenses for the most exposed communities and Torres Strait Island Regional Council (TSIRC) is leading the project.

Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA) Chairperson, Mr Joseph Elu, said communities have been suffering the impacts of these tides for decades.

“Our low lying island communities will be far less exposed to major storm surge and tidal events once the seawall project is completed – which are expected to commence in early 2015,” Mr Elu said.

“The rising sea level is a major concern for our region, but not the only challenge we face as climate change will pose new risks to the region’s economy, health and wellbeing and environment.

“Fortunately, the TSRA is developing a Torres Strait Adaptation and Resilience Plan in partnership with the TSIRC and Torres Shire Council to face these challenges.”

Mr Elu said the Adaptation and Resilience Plan identifies short, medium and long-term climate change risks and various strategies to will help the region to proactively respond to these challenges.

“Seawalls are a critical immediate action that will give communities breathing space for longer-term planning,” Mr Elu said.

“The Adaptation and Resilience Plan also considers the impacts of hotter temperatures and extreme weather events as well as the potential flow on climate change effects for the region on neighbouring Papua New Guinea and mainland Australia.

“It is clear however that prevention is better than cure and it is critical that there is a strong global effort to tackle climate change before the impacts get too severe.

“Despite the challenges our region still has a strong future if we can secure the support and investment we need to proactively respond to climate change.”

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TSRA Media Contact – Bruce Nelson on 0423 403 449



Caption: King Tides Saibai January 2014 (Image: TSIRC)



Caption: King Tides Saibai January 2014 (Image: TSIRC)



Caption: Tides washing over graves at Saibai (Image: TSRA)



Caption: Poruma community members call for help to address ongoing erosion concerns (Image: TSRA)



Caption: A tree is uprooted on Masig as waves and tides erode the coast (Image: TSRA)