Water, water everywhere...

When floods and other disasters threaten the clean water supply in the Asia Pacific region, a network of Rotarians springs into action to supply potable water. Jessica Goulburn spoke to Aquabox Project Chairman Ian Thomas about the project's recent work.



When flooding in The Philippines threatened clean water supplies earlier this year, Aquabox Australia sent 90 boxes.

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Here in Australia, clean drinking water is often taken for granted, but when floods, bushfires and earthquakes hit, some people aren't so lucky.

In 1999, the Rotary Club of Eltham set up Aquabox Australia. Based on a similar program in the United Kingdom, the project provides water purification and humanitarian aid in disaster areas with two products: the Aquabox 30 and the Aquabox Gold.

The Aquabox 30 is an 80-litre box containing everything necessary to purify up to approximately 30,000 litres of water. The Aquabox Gold has a slightly lower capacity for water purification but contains items such as blankets, tarpaulins, cooking and eating utensils, hardware, and mosquito nets. The project's aim is to provide healthy and safe drinking water to help prevent waterborne disease.

Chairman of the Aquabox Project Ian Thomas first became involved with Rotary in the 1980s.

"I was introduced to Rotary through Group Study Exchange," he recalls. "It's a scholarship-type award that sees six young business people travel to a Rotary district overseas and have a look at businesses." He joined the organisation five years later.

Early days

Aquabox Australia has come a long way since its launch, with the box now more closely tailored to typical needs of disaster areas in the Asia Pacific.

"The first model that we used was the UK model, getting donations of used clothing and filling the boxes up with that," says Ian. "Well, our region is different to the UK of course, so while that worked, it didn't work very well. We decided that if we were to continue to do it, we would revamp the whole thing."

When it comes to the nitty gritty, the whole club is on board. "When we need to do something like pack boxes, then all of the club members help," Ian says.

> **"The Rotary Club of Eltham has sent 1100 Aquaboxes – that's 5.2 million litres of clean water.**

Since 2009, the Rotary Club of Eltham has sent more than 1100 Aquaboxes – approximately 5.2 million litres of clean water – to disaster areas including Fiji, Samoa, Haiti, The Philippines and Pakistan. On home soil, the project has also helped victims of the bushfires in Victoria whose tank water was polluted by ash.

The project in action

Last year, Ian was informed of flooding in Cambodia and the club members swung into action.

"One of our members was in Cambodia when the President of the Rotary Club of Phnom Penh sent a message around to people on his mailing list asking for assistance to get some gear up to the flood victims," Ian says.

The message got to Rotary Club of Eltham, and Ian got in touch.

"I said 'This is what we've got. How can we help?'" Ian says.

A shipment of boxes was sent as soon as possible, with Ian and another Rotarian from Eltham accompanying it.

"It was good to see it first hand," Ian says. "We distributed most of the boxes to an area about two hours north of Phnom Penh where the floods hit, and, almost a year later, received word that some of the boxes were still in use."

More recently, the Aquabox project has assisted flood victims in Manila. After a call for help from the Rotary Club of Loyola Heights, the team sent 90 boxes – all they had available – within 10 days.

Preparation

The team has started working on the next step: stocking boxes closer to areas prone to disaster. It's a pre-emptive strike by the Aquabox project, aimed at avoiding delays of up to a few weeks getting the boxes on the ground in disaster areas.

"There's about a 99 per cent chance that floods are going to be repeated in Phnom Penh or in Cambodia, so we have 120 boxes up there which can be sent out in about 48 hours," Ian says.

The best advice Ian gives others wanting to launch humanitarian projects is to plan. "Once you start there's a huge commitment. It's certainly worthwhile but one of the hardest things is to secure a regular income of donations. Plus, you need commitment from other team members."

The Aquabox project just keeps growing. As people in disaster-prone areas begin to catch on to what the Rotary Club of Eltham is doing, the requests pour in. With no shortage of disasters around the world, particularly in the Pacific, Ian says there's always demand.

"We're pretty happy and proud of the project, it certainly keeps us busy. We have earthquakes, volcanic activity and, of course, the monsoon season is always flooding somebody out." ••

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