Appraisal

The first thing to do is to do perform a very rough appraisal of any records affected by flooding, to determine:

- which records are the most valuable/important, e.g. vital records and permanent records.
- which records are at greatest risk of further deterioration, e.g. saturation, format, container, proximity to water or cardboard/wood that could act as conduits sucking up water and ‘infecting’ currently dry records/boxes.
- which records are duplicated elsewhere or in digital format.

Don’t waste time going through the contents of boxes; for now, simply appraise on the basis of box labels and condition. It may be necessary to triage records, prioritising records that can still be salvaged, identifying those that are likely beyond recovery and those that are duplicated elsewhere. Records that cannot be salvaged should be listed in a Notification of Incident form once you have treated or stabilised the recoverable records.

Safety

Please note that as important as records are, the health and safety of staff takes precedence, so when inspecting flooded storage areas, please be alert for slipping and electrical hazards, be aware that water-logged wooden shelving may collapse, and if there is any sign of mould, avoid prolonged exposure and report it to the RMU immediately so we can ensure it is dealt with safely. For more information on mould, please see TAHO Advice 46: Treating Records with Mould.

When moving records, remember that cardboard becomes very flimsy when wet, so be careful when lifting boxes as the bottom may tear/fall out.

Relocation

The first step in treating salvaged records is to relocate them to a clean, dry and well-ventilated working area, ideally one with plenty of table/counter/bench space to lay out records on. Fans (on a low setting) and dehumidifiers can speed up the drying process, as can opening windows to improve air flow. Records exhibiting signs of mould should be segregated in a separate room to avoid contamination. If the volume of wet records is too large to process in a timely manner, they can be stabilised by freezing them until they can be processed.
Paper documents/files

Dirty records should be cleaned before drying using a gentle stream of cold water and gentle dabbing if necessary – do not rub/scrub them or use detergent. Paper records should be placed on blotting paper or absorbent paper towels. If possible, separate sheets and interleave with paper towels, but wet paper is extremely fragile, so handle with care and only separate sheets if you can do so without damaging them. Replace the absorbent paper when it becomes saturated.

Books/volumes

Bound volumes and books should be treated in much the same way as loose paper documents, interleafing pages with absorbent paper towels. If the bindings are strong and rigid enough, prop them upright (i.e. on their bottom edges as if you were reading them) on absorbent paper with the pages fanned open. When they are nearly dry, interleave the pages with absorbent paper and place the book/volume flat on a table with a brick or similar weight on top to help compress the pages. Place a board between the book and the weight to distribute the weight evenly.

Photographs

Wet photographs, film and glossy paper are likely to bond together if allowed to dry before they are separated, so they should be placed in a tub of clear water to separate them before placing them on absorbent paper to dry. Never wipe photographs when wet; if they are dirty, they can be cleaned by gently moving them in the water tub.

Mould

Mould is a generic name often applied to various types of fungi that grow on the surfaces of materials such as fabrics, paper, food and leather. It can be detected by the presence of powdery material, multi-coloured pigmentation, staining or a musty odour. Mould left unchecked can devastate records rendering them unusable. It can also pose a serious health risk.

If you detect the presence of mould in any of the records, please contact the Records Management Unit immediately and obtain respiratory masks, gloves and eye protection before moving or working on records. Mouldy records should be carefully placed in airtight plastic bags/tubs before moving them to a dry, well ventilated work area quarantined from other records.

They should be dried in much the same way as other records, then vacuumed with a HEPA filtered vacuum cleaner and a soft brush, being careful not to let the vacuum cleaner nozzle get close enough to the records to suck up the actual records. For more information on mould, please see TAHO Advice 46: Treating Records with Mould.

Further information

For more information, please visit our website at www.utas.edu.au/it/records. If you need help, please contact the Records Management Unit at RMU.Staff@utas.edu.au.

Useful Links

- “Recovering flood-damaged records” (National Archives of Australia)
- “Recover and salvage your records after disaster” (Queensland State Archives)
- “Salvaging water damaged collections” (Queensland State Library)
- “TAHO Advice 46: Treating Records with Mould” (Tasmanian Archive & Heritage Office)