

# Future Drought Resilience Fund

Healthy Land and Water Comments

December 2019

Key points:

- NRM Groups across Australia have cared about and been engaged in drought resilience since they were formed. NRMs work closely with local landholders to build drought resilience and to support restoration and on farm practices – not just for when they are in drought but in preparation for the future.
- HLW notes that there is no mention of the role of Regional NRM organisations (just Gov and industry) in providing relevant information, training and capacity building support to landholders and communities to better prepare, improve resilience and adapt in the recently released Australian Gov Drought Response, Resilience and Preparedness Plan. Regional NRM groups such as HLW have been successfully working closely with landholders to accelerate adoption of best management practices and strategies and plans to improve resilience for many years, often in partnership with industry, Government and research organisations.
- Through delivery of activities which improve the condition of soils, pastures, land, waterways and native vegetation and help landholders improve risk management and adaptation capacity, we also build the resilience to respond to other natural disasters including floods, bushfires, and other challenges (including biosecurity risks).
- NRM activities increase resilience. HLW understands what works, what doesn't, and we continually innovate and test/pilot new ideas and cost-effective solutions on ground. For example:
  - Improving landholder's skills, knowledge and capacity to improve groundcover levels, pasture and land condition, Property Management Planning and risk management through training and support activities in various grazing initiatives over many years.
  - Cost effective restoration works to minimise erosion and loss of sediments and nutrients.
  - Delivering practical Property Management Planning programs to over 1500 landholders in SEQ, including improving awareness of regional climate impacts on agriculture and environment and building resilience through promoting use of tools to assess risks and develop and adaptation strategies and management actions.
- HLW believes that we need to move from resilience to transformation, to respond now but plan to adapt and transform our communities in preparedness for the longer term especially Australian rural and regional communities.
- Also need to progress a National environmental accounts framework and appropriate investment in implementing Regional NRM Plans. This requires a triple bottom line approach. HLW programs have always taken a holistic focus recognising need for initiatives to consider environmental, production and financial goals and health of natural assets and communities are vital to the success of NRM and the economy.
- Supporting and preparing rural and regional communities is a public good and public benefit. The Drought Fund settings needs to acknowledge that there is public good and benefit arising from investment in building capacity of individuals and on-ground projects which build resilience and that there needs to be flexibility within programs in relation to proposed activities, identifying investment sites and the impact of extreme climate events on activities.

- HLW agrees that Drought Fund initiatives must complement and build on existing initiatives – currently there are a variety of other similar initiatives aiming to promoting resilience through RLP, Smart Farms, State Government NRM and Ag programs, Industry BMP programs, RIDC etc. Any Drought Fund agreements and MERI frameworks need to recognise these other initiatives and see leverage opportunities as positive rather than requiring potentially duplication of resources and effort (noting that we are all working with the same landholders and communities).
- Effective collaboration is critical and Regional NRM groups have demonstrated their ability to work collaboratively with local, State and National industry groups, Landcare groups, research and all levels of Government. The recent unfortunate demise of a proven effective voluntary BMP program due to acrimonious relations between a State Industry organisation and State Government over new Reef regulations legislation highlights the need for settings which facilitate and encourage greater collaboration between industry, regional NRM groups and Government in delivering sustainability initiatives (further supported by a recent AgriFutures Report (*Integrating NRM with Industry-led Sustainability 2019*)).
- While there needs to be investment in R and D and translating these new innovative technologies and practices, this cannot be at the expense of proven capacity building and best management restoration practices which have not been adequately resourced over recent years. Proven continuous improvement learning approaches with appropriate mix of group and individual follow up support should be considered as being critical to improving accelerated adoption of best management practices and on-ground restoration activities which build drought resilience.
- It is worrying that despite significant Government and community investment in developing Regional NRM Plans over the last 15 years, there has been a lack of recognition of their value and missed opportunities for appropriate investment in their implementation to improve the adoption of best management practices, change and risk management and adaptation, to improve resilience of natural assets - soils, pastures, waterways and native vegetation, agricultural businesses and communities. In addition, it should also be noted that Regional NRM Plans represent agreed Longer-term Targets, and Strategies and Actions developed by community, industry, research and Government at a relevant scale reflecting regional and catchment differences.

#### Other key points:

- The lack of a National Plan/Strategy for Sustainable Agriculture in Australia rather than piecemeal programs and policies. The Australian Government Drought Response, Resilience and Preparedness Plan 2019 – of which the Drought Resilience Funding Plan is part – seems to be broad and reactive rather than a proactive vision, plan and strategies for Agriculture and Rural and Regional Communities. Agricultural businesses and rural and regional communities (and the issues they face including drought) require longer term policy settings, plans and programs to remain vibrant and operate effectively.
- While work is finally underway on National Environmental-Economic Accounting and discussions progressing frameworks for Valuing Ecosystem Services/Natural Capital – this has been very slow – and requires progress and National leadership with strong links to both the economic and environmental resilience priorities mentioned in the draft. Investment in more pilot projects across industries and regions is required to develop a National framework which recognises the true cost of production and ecosystem services currently provided for free by landholders. This is critical to supporting resilience initiatives.