

Drought Resilience Funding Plan.

Seasonal variations are not new to Australia. It is a national imperative that the agricultural sector has the ability and willingness to manage the variations climate which will lead to proactive, profitable, productive and therefore resilient regional communities.

Efforts to support agricultural businesses commenced with the purpose of short-term assistance that would enable producers to handle natural disasters such as floods and fires. It was not intended as a long-term support for farmers. This assistance has led to producers relying on government support to manage difficult seasonal circumstances.

Government strategies to build resilience within the agricultural sector have largely rewarded the inefficient producers. However, there are many examples of proactive managers putting steps in place to handle the vagaries of the Australian climate. Less than average rainfall is not a rare occurrence in this country, it is a reality.

The difficulty that we have across the agricultural sector is it's largely populated by people that lack a clarity of purpose and vision as to why they are there and what it is that the farm needs to deliver to them, to gain that purpose and sense of direction. They are involved in agriculture because of family connections in many cases or a romantic notion of lifestyle. The latter is true to some degree however that can only be so if there is profit.

"A sustainable farm, is where the next generation wants to come home and where both generations can earn a white-collar wage", Joel Salatin farmer from Virginia, USA. That statement sums up profit, lifestyle and family. It also describes the 3 strategic priorities that the **Drought Resilience Fund** will focus on:

- **Economic** resilience for an innovative and profitable agricultural sector
- **Environmental** resilience for sustainable farming landscapes
- **Social** resilience for resourceful and adaptable communities.

There are many sources of training available to the agricultural sector through government agencies, industry bodies and the private sector. They cater to all levels, such as certification required for use of chemicals through to management practices. The delivery is generally of a high standard however it is the follow through in terms of extension and on farm support that is lacking.

There is a real need for training in business management that is supported by on farm mentoring and consulting that will embed the learning gained through attendance at these courses. Course attendance is not enough as the skills learnt are largely lost upon returning home due to reverting back to activities of 'everyday life' and time lost away. The newly learnt skills need to be embedded using real and relevant figures from the individual's farm business and they need to become routine through practice and support.

Clarity of purpose, a sense of direction and the ability to analyse the business allows people to get off the treadmill and frees up headspace. The mental fog clears and they can see a way forward. Many producers are frightened to see where their business is financially. Knowing and being able to see the actual position creates the starting point to move forward with full support.

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This positive sense of purpose allows them to look at issues that relate to environmental outcomes for the farm directly and a realisation of the interconnected relationships in the wider landscape. The saying “*you can’t be green if you’re in the red*”, is profoundly true.

The ability to be able to plan, monitor and manage empowers people and allows them to lead and direct their business and the wider community.

Over the last 4 years I have been privileged to have worked as part of the extension and mentoring team on Project Pioneer a jointly funded project involving the Australian Government’s Reef Trust, the Great Barrier Reef Foundation, WWF and Resource Consulting Services (RCS) to reduce run-off from farms and to improve water quality in the catchments feeding into the Great Barrier Reef. This program has been successful due to the increased awareness of the importance of empowered and healthy people, managing profitable businesses that are then able to focus their attention on environmental issues and the consequent challenges thrown at them. The success of this program has led to a 3rd rollout. <https://www.rcsaustralia.com.au/project-pioneer/>

The current challenge of drought is having a devastating effect on rural communities and unfortunately when you live and derive your income from agriculture in Australia it is unavoidable. So, with this in mind it is about having programs that impart the skills to managers that will enable them to be proactive rather than reacting to seasonal circumstances. It is important that farmers have the capacity to analyse their businesses themselves, while having a sound understanding of all the tools available. This includes, the productive capacity of their land, as well as their finances while maintaining their capital base, which then leads to them being sustainable in the true sense.

The principles that we teach, work across the country from the Gulf of Carpentaria, the midlands of Tasmania to the Pilbara in WA. I have managed and worked on and with properties across that range of country and owned a property in northern NSW. These principles apply when they are adapted to suit the geography or climate and the circumstances of the individuals.

There is a massive generational change occurring at the moment brought about by age and the fact that the older generation is tired. It is an opportune time to be addressing the issue of sustainability of agricultural businesses, the regeneration of the landscape and the two need not be mutually exclusive. It is also imperative that we address the issue of drought resilience now, while it is front of mind, not later when rainfall has returned and the stress forgotten.

At RCS we believe a change is needed in agricultural practices that will bring about a healing of the landscape, that is not just production focused but profitable and sustainable, more resilient and a major contributor through the sequestration of soil carbon to the reduction of greenhouse gases.

Profitable businesses that have the ability to contribute to the nation through the supply of nutritious food and the capacity to pay taxes, while leading the world in regenerative grazing and cropping practices would be a turnaround from where we are now. The rewards from a social perspective are enormous. Regional communities that are vibrant will attract new industries and skills.

The **Drought Resilience Funding Plan 2020-24** is an opportunity to turn the Australian Agricultural sector into a profitable, regenerative and vibrant industry, through education, on farm training, mentoring and consulting that will be the envy of the world.

James Barnet
Senior Consultant

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