

Wheatbelt NRM Submission – Draft Drought Resilience Funding Plan

December 2019

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the Draft Drought Resilience Funding Plan consultation. Wheatbelt NRM welcomes and supports the Government's Future Drought Fund initiative. Our comments both aim to reinforce elements of the draft plan and highlight where intel from NRM community strategic planning can inform actions.

About Us

Wheatbelt NRM is an independent, community-based organisation involved with NRM endeavours within the Avon River Basin in Western Australia. The organisation operates from its Northam office and exists as the second largest of the seven NRM regional organisations in the state, with responsibility for the 12,000,000 hectares of the Avon River basin.

Engaging the farming community is central to our approach. The vision the community has set for the Regions is:

“A healthy environment that has a viable agricultural industry and retains a strong sense of place”

Strategic planning with the community is one of the organisation's key objects. Current planning was done using a resilience assessment and is therefore well placed to inform the priorities of the Drought Resilience Funding Plan.

We would like to highlight the following strategic priorities from the Regional NRM Plan:

- Promote and implement farming systems resilient to seasonal variability
- Exploit opportunities for re-vegetation in both conservation and agricultural systems
- Develop opportunities for perennial vegetation-based enterprises
- Maintain ground cover on agricultural lands
- Develop viable economic systems of saline land
- Diversify agriculture to take advantage of landscape variability
- Increase targeted feral animal control

A sustainable resource base is fundamental to the future of our agricultural industries and regional communities. Regional NRM bodies plan, coordinate and deliver programs in partnership with farmers and other land managers to support a sustainable resource base. Our approach balances economic, environmental and social outcomes.

Preparing our submission

Wheatbelt NRM has encouraged all its members to contribute to the consultation by either attending your workshops or providing written submissions. In preparing this submission we have drawn on feedback from members, a draft submission from NRM Regions Australia and the discussion our [REDACTED] had with members of your committee last month at the consultation roadshow.

Responding to Draft Plan

Overarching comments

- We welcome the recognition that *Environmental resilience for sustainable farming landscapes* is a strategic priority of the draft plan and recognise the importance of the three strategic priorities identified. However, there are risks with this approach, many potential activities that could be supported by the fund will deliver benefits towards two or more of the strategic priorities, so care will be needed to ensure activities do not fall between the priorities.
- We endorse your funding principles that support a community-led or co-design approach and that propose that where possible use or collaborate with existing community networks, Indigenous organisations and communities, industry and natural resource management organisations, and farmer groups. Australia's national network of NRM regions is built upon community-based planning that relies heavily on developing strong partnerships, but more importantly it is a network that can assist with tailoring drought resilience efforts to regional industry/landscape/community needs.
- The draft funding plan recognises the importance of coordination across Federal government programs as well as with programs from other jurisdictions. One of the key characteristics of regional NRM organisations is the development of regional NRM plans. These are community and evidence-based, respond to the region's unique landscape, agricultural industries and sustainable resource management challenges and seek to align programs across all levels of government. In relation to Environmental resilience we can assist with this coordination.
- Our regional NRM plans are adaptable. In 2013, with support from the Federal government, they were updated to take account of, the then, latest climate change projections. One option for consideration in your funding plan is to support the plans being further updated to produce a regional (or group of regions) *Drought Resilience Framework*. Such a framework (developed in collaboration with communities and industry) would identify the broad drought resilience challenges facing the region(s) and the actions required now to address those challenges.

Some actions to consider investing in

Scoping the extent of the resilience challenge

Resilience is a positive concept for a better future, and we support the call-to-action build around this priority. A common understanding of resilience is the ability to recover after a stressor.

Resilience does not mean being tough, and social scientist Dr [REDACTED] cautions against this interpretation. We do not need to ask the 'Aussie battler' to be a legend by being able to withstand more. This approach is potentially devastating to the people involved.

Classic studies of resilience consider that resilience is a system attribute that is created by having diversity and redundancy. Diversity will ensure the whole system doesn't respond to the stressor in the same way, and redundancies (i.e. having more parts to the system than it uses at any one time) mean that there is something to step in and take over after the impact of the stressor.

This is different thinking to modern business approaches that triumph the most efficient, drive for lean systems and seek golden solutions. This thinking has created monoliths which are the opposite of resilience. Some examples of monoliths include monocultures in agriculture, economies dominated by one sector, and utilities reliant on a single infrastructure. Most worrying about the monoliths is how hard they are to move, as they are designed to protect themselves. For this reason, we have laws to prevent monopolies.

Resilience comes from having lots of little guys, so that when the stressor happens different parts of the system react differently and there is always something/someone to step in.

How can the Drought Resilience Funding Plan use this? Do not get in the way of change, enable it. We recommend that funding that assists the current farming system to improve is a smaller component of the investment than the funding that helps breed diversity and redundancy within the regions. This diversity and redundancy should expand past the growers to the supply chain, and expand past the farming sector to regionally based industry.

Information is critical

The National NRM response to your consultation heralded the need for information. We would like to offer caution on this investment area – instead of stating that information is critical, we propose that using information is critical.

Lack of drought preparedness has not been because of a lack of information, but rather a sidelining of science and/or inaccessibility of science by the end user because of multiple decadal erosion of extension efforts in Australia.

Scientists knowing more won't improve resilience – policy makers and land managers having their information needs met might.

We would also like to bring attention to entrenched emphasis on research organisations delivering for 'industry'. This has decreased the investment in research for public good – research to protect the resource base.

Farm Level Planning

The following excerpt is from the NRM Regions Australia response and Wheatbelt NRM supports it.

“Ultimately decisions about preparing for and managing drought need to be made by farmers. They need to address the complex trade-offs between climate forecasts, market signals, financial goals and farm business goals. Our collective aim should be to provide them with information and programs to help with this process and enhance their drought resilience.”

We would like to expand on this call-to-action by suggesting the following question be addressed in all farm plans:

“How will my business make money in the years it doesn't rain?”

This focus will assist planning to do more than protect and moderate the existing farming system, for example wheat, and encourage exploration of perennial systems and investments in other parts of the supply chain and regional economy.

The responses could be:

- Carbon payments
- Farm stewardship payments
- Sandalwood harvest
- Sandalwood processing
- Biofuel harvest
- Agistment of stock onto salt bush alleys
- Manufacturing

The alignment to the Wheatbelt's NRM plan is quite clear. We recommend that the Drought Resilience Fund be prepared to invest in crucial infrastructure to accelerate perennial based industries. Economic

assessments of alternative industries, for the purpose of drought resilience, should have long timeframes to profit and not be expected to compete with the existing industry. It doesn't matter that you can't make the same returns as Wheat, you need this in place for when you can't grow Wheat.

Wheatbelt farmers are currently facing a barrier to adopting carbon credits as a "drought friendly" income source. The overhead of auditing and accounting for the credits locks out many projects that are small enough to be part of the mix of a typical cropping enterprise. Ideas to address this barrier include:

- Remote sensing based auditing systems
- Regional enterprises providing aggregated auditing service, that allow for a sample of project results to be applied to a package of plantings
- Regionally based subsidised auditing services to reduce the expenses to Land owners while the carbon price is low
- Regulation change that drives prices for Carbon Credits

The Drought Resilience fund could be used to address these types of barriers to improve the adoptability of many diversified income streams for regions.

The WA Government delivered Farm Planning as a drought response about 5 years ago. Feedback from the community conveys that this was very helpful. It was a punctuated effort that could be rolled out (and updated) too many more farmers. WA has been in a 'long slow' drought and as such is in a good position to share learnings with other states. Even within our region it is clear that we have farmers who routinely 'kick goals' growing wheat on 300mm of annual rainfall, and others whose farming systems struggle when their expected rainfall of 500mm drops to 400mm. How do we share that knowledge?

Dealing with pest plants and animals

The ability of farmers to manage drought conditions (and respond post-drought) can be constrained by emerging feral animal and weeds that come to the fore in drought conditions. Based on experiences with previous droughts, feedback for farmers currently managing drought and climate change modelling suggests that addressing these issues before a drought will help build resilience to drought (see Brown & Schirmer 2018).

Diversification of farm income - Carbon Abatement and Stewardship

While other government programs deal with carbon farming and stewardship it is important that they be part of any efforts to build drought resilience. This could occur by providing information in farm planning programs and by mapping opportunities at a landscape scale.