



2018 Drought Summit – Landcare’s Role

Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister, Treasurer and Chair of the Drought Finance Task Force together with the Minister for Agriculture and Water, The Co-ordinator General for Drought, Premiers, Ministers (Federal and State) and invitees all.

Thank you for the opportunity to present on behalf of **the uniquely Australian, community-based, voluntary organisation that is Landcare.**

Landcare was launched nearly 32 years ago, on the slopes of a treeless hill west of Bendigo, by two remarkable women, Heather Mitchell, then President of the Victorian Farmers Federation and Joan Kirner, then Victorian Minister for Conservation, Forests & Lands.

Since then Landcare has grown to be one of our largest (if not the largest) volunteer-driven movements which has now been embraced in twenty other countries.

Landcare’s volunteers and their communities are its greatest asset. Its building and sustaining of community capacity, its autonomy and lack of hierarchical structure enables it to respond rapidly with demonstrable “on the ground” outcomes and its on-going “year on year” leadership in the community – that is Landcare’s strength. Another strength is to add value through building partnerships with others such as Federal, State and Local governments, NRM organisations, educational institutions, especially schools, industry and philanthropic organisations.

Landcare groups, networks, co-ordinators and volunteer members have been at the forefront of natural disaster response, recovery and future preparedness in drought, bush fire and flood since its inception. As an example of Landcare’s standing and reputation, the Upper Goulburn Landcare Network, representing some 250 volunteers, was responsible for the distribution and accounting of nearly \$1m lodged with it from the Victorian Government’s Black Saturday Bushfire Appeal and Grocon Pty Ltd.

A further example is that provided by the Little River Landcare Group based on the townships of Yeoval and Cumnock in drought stricken Central Western NSW. As a consequence of media exposure, Janie, from an even smaller village in West Gippsland, contacted the group through the Yeoval post office. She offered to raise funds locally and through social media, to purchase grain and to cover transport costs. However she was concerned as to how it would be equitably distributed and accounted for.

Indeed these are valid concerns arising from the wonderful response, mostly from those 85% of Australians that live within 50kms of the coastline – where are the donated funds going and are they being prioritised to those in most need? The model provided by the Victorian Black Saturday Bushfire Appeal could well be considered in future.

The Little River Landcare groups’s co-ordinator, Stacey, suggested a process whereby a small anonymous committee would develop a list of those in the community that might be approached to be recipients. These potential recipients were asked if they could help by accepting the grain as it couldn’t be stored – a reversal of the more usual form of social contract – “*can you help us rather than this is how we can help you*”. Two months ago twelve volunteers travelled a return journey of 1800kms with three trucks and three utes and delivered 60t of grain, mineral blocks, dog food and prepaid Visa vouchers to Yeoval. Of the 490 members of the Landcare group only one was critical of the process. The two



communities have now connected through social media and look forward to meeting and helping each other.

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Here, with us today, is a person who was, for ten years, the co-ordinator of the Little River Landcare Group, who was the Australian Rural Woman of the Year in 2014 and who now is the Drought Coordinator for NSW – as many of you would know, that person is Pip Job who is also a farmer and mother of two youngsters.

There are many examples of the above “Janie” story. In my own small town of Avenel we have a “Katie” story who has mustered support for an even smaller village near Coonabarabran and the trucks are leaving tomorrow on their 1600km round trip. Other examples are those many helper organisations, most initiated by individuals or very small groups, to help in the long standing drought in Qld like Aussie Helpers, Drought Angels and the Burrumbuttock Hay Runners and of course the CWA.

And the towns, large and small, connecting with those in drought stressed areas of Qld and NSW many through Landcare. Not only through donations of fodder or goods but some have provided relief by offering to swap houses and be “farm sitters” to drought impacted families.

I mention these examples to clearly demonstrate the wonderful response of individuals and community based organisations - coordinated by organisations like Landcare - that respond in a “so-typically Australian way” and I am sure you will have appreciated how often women’s names have been mentioned.

All levels of government need to recognise and support this extraordinary community response capacity and to ensure that “red tape” can be minimised, even temporarily if necessary, to avoid frustrating or suppressing this capacity. The relaxation of truck load width restrictions on drought fodder is a great example.

Landcare is a sound investment for taxpayers support. It provides natural resource management services on public land (covering nearly a third of public land in Victoria), its revegetation projects enhance livestock health, pasture productivity, water quality and help in preventing soil erosion in cropping areas.

Most significantly, Landcare’s soil health educational programs and projects assist in improving our soil’s capacity to store carbon and moisture, to increase productivity and to enhance our capacity to manage and recover from the shocks of climatic risk and uncertainty. Landcare is fortunate indeed to have, as its patron, the National Advocate for Soil Health, Major General Michael Jeffery.

Landcare welcomes the support and advocacy provided by the Parliamentary Friends of Landcare in NSW and those Ministers and Senators and Members in the Federal Parliament, both as Party Members and as independents such as the Member for Indi, herself a long standing Landcarer.

Funds allocated to Landcare groups are leveraged by a factor of 3 to 5 fold through unpaid administration, labour and landholder’s financial contributions. The local landcare facilitators and co-ordinators, funded by the Victorian and NSW governments, provide the essential co-



ordination and support for Landcare groups and networks “to allow volunteers to get the job done”.

The fifth dot point of the Terms of Reference for Major General Stephen Day’s appointment as the Co-ordinator General for Drought refers to

“.... To provide advice ... on the development of a long-term drought resilience and preparedness strategy”.

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Last month on a roadside near West Wyalong, I talked to a young farmer feeding out silage to cattle that had come down from a friend’s place north of Bourke. I asked him where the silage, in his large feed-out bin, came from. He said from his family farm nearby but he had a major problem as his grandfather had buried it in large pits many years ago and he had to extend the length of his post hole augur to locate them!

But he said there was sufficient to feed both his cattle and his friend’s cattle for at least six months ahead. He also said the real lesson for him was because the silage was so hard to find and so difficult to uncover and feed out ... it was the perfect drought reserve unlike the plastic wrapped silage rolls that deteriorate and are readily used for supplementary winter feeding. So thanks to the “Grandpa” that he had never met. Indeed a lesson for all involved in the risky business of farming.

All too often metropolitan media have highlighted starving or dead animals and the plight of landholders that have been under-prepared for the drought; who didn’t take advantage of the near record prices and lowered their stock numbers or who failed to put aside fodder or funds for the inevitable droughts that the “Grandpa” above planned for. Many areas had bumper conditions just a year or two prior to the current drought. But rather than conserve fodder or take advantage of farm management deposits many were, perhaps understandably, tempted to have a holiday, buy a new tractor or fix up the kitchen. The harsh reality is that farming is an uncertain business and allowing for risk and unforeseen events is the highest priority when conditions are favourable.

Landcare and many other community-initiated self-help groups such as the Birchip Cropping Group or Tablelands Farming Systems in NSW have provided valuable opportunities for landholders to share the lessons, their knowledge and experience; to connect with agricultural, resource management and health professionals and to provide support to those families who are not coping with the stresses of the drought. Again the Little River Group with its Farmers Teaching Farmers program is one of those “landcare and peoplecare” initiatives that have filled the gap left by the decline of rural extension services and what used to be called agricultural colleges, providing practical farming and farm business management training for future farmers, that have been either closed or have been escalated to higher academic levels. Farm business management has been replaced by Agribusiness mainly pitched to careers in banks, corporates and large agricultural enterprises. A university with campuses across NSW offering a degree in Agricultural Business Management states

“.... there is also increasing demand for better-trained farm managers of large agricultural enterprises.”

Yet it’s the smaller producers of our food and fibre, the family farmers, that need the management skills to adapt to the increasing risk of climate variability and extreme events



and to emerge from; to learn from those events and to increase their resilience in planning for the next such event.

Landcare's fundamental focus – a mission – so well espoused by the Chair of the National Landcare Network's Members Council -

.... to build resilient, healthy, sustainable and productive landscapes and to build resilient and healthy communities.