

Landcare NSW Incorporated

ABN 24 958 819 359

Suite 109 | 3 Gladstone Street | Newtown NSW 2042

T: 0458 168 225

administration@landcarensw.org.au

www.landcarensw.org.au



The Drought Secretariat
Commonwealth Drought Taskforce
Drought.taskforce@pmc.gov.au

Cc. Jim Adams, CEO National Landcare Network; Jock Laurie, NSW Drought Coordinator; Hon. Minister M. Blair

18 December 2018

RE: Developing a Commonwealth Strategy for Drought Preparedness and Resilience

Dear Sir/ Madam,

Landcare NSW welcomes this opportunity to provide input to the development of a national drought management strategy:

Landcare Groups in NSW have been part of the state's rural and regional landscape since the 1990's *Decade of Landcare*, and before that under many other local names. They primarily address care for our important natural resource base, *i.e.* our soils, water, native vegetation and unique wildlife, but also farm sustainability and the health and welfare of our rural and regional members and neighbours. This includes the impact of weather events, climate change and drought. They do this through regular meetings, often at night in a member home, field days and workshops, followed by a barbecue a cuppa and a chat. There are some 2,800 Landcare Groups and some 60,000 Landcare members embedded within the NSW community. Landcare is non-political, and does not seek the limelight, but that is not to say some of our members do not have strong views on many issues related to our role.

Landcare NSW was established in 2007 to represent and support the NSW Landcare community as their State peak body. It works closely with State agencies and in particular with NSW Local Land Services, NSW Department of Primary Industry, the NSW Office of Environment and Heritage (OEH), the Biodiversity Conservation Trust, the NSW Environment Trust, the Parliamentary Friends of Landcare, community associates such as the CWA, and national agencies such as the National Landcare Network, of which Landcare NSW is a member. Landcare NSW also works closely with Landcare Australia. Landcare NSW policies and support programs are developed with input from 25 regionally based volunteer Councillors, most of whom are also farmer landholders managing current drought conditions.

With respect to Drought Action, Landcare respects that NSW Local Land Services have both the charter for emergency management and responsibility to take the lead role within the State and, in this regard, Landcare NSW is taking a support role. On many issues we work side by side. With

funding support from the NSW Government, and until this month a small amount of Federal NLP1 funding, Landcare NSW has some 70 part-time Landcare Coordinators embedded within community Landcare Groups across NSW in association with Local Land Services.

Within this context, Landcare NSW and the Landcare groups it represents have taken a lead role in publicising and promoting sustainable land management by the many farmer landholders across the State, who are managing these 'dry times' as part of their long-term business and land management strategies. Landcare NSW has also expressed concern for the smaller number of principally younger farmer landholders who have purchased new properties just prior to this dry spell. Landcare NSW has been concerned by some of the mainstream media portrayal of the 'plight of farmers' during the current drought, but has been buoyed by the generous responses of city 'cousins' to the various appeals.

Our concerns and Recommendations for the Future

Landcare NSW's principle concern is that not enough is being done to help responsible landholders to better manage their natural resource base. The resource base is most vulnerable to degradation through wind and water erosion during and soon after drought. Any damage to the farm natural resource base has long recovery times, if ever. In this context Landcare NSW is working on stronger relationships with the R&D community and funding agencies, and with NSW environment agencies, on improved technology/ information flows through our Landcare Group and Coordinator network to land managers.

Landcare NSW supports the current FRRR managed '*Tackling Tough Times Together*' small grants program for rural and regional communities, which is funded in part by the Commonwealth. Landcare NSW is also very supportive of the environment and land management programs funded in NSW through the NSW Environment Trust and OEH. However, we have concerns about the focus, logistics and costs associated with the current Commonwealth funded NLP2 'Smart Farms' and regional delivery programs.

Landcare NSW has consulted with its network of 25 regional Landcare Councillors, and through them the large NSW Landcare community they represent, on the questions raised in the Issues paper '*Developing a Commonwealth Strategy for Drought Preparedness and Resilience*' and submits the following recommendations to the Joint Agency Drought Taskforce.

Landcare NSW's recommendations

That the Commonwealth Government:

1. Provide up to \$10 million per annum for the next five years to extend the very successful *Local Landcare Coordinator Program* in NSW and Victoria to all States and Territories on a dollar for dollar basis with all States/ Territories with a specific focus on enhanced natural resource management and drought preparedness;
2. Require all foreign investors in Australian agriculture (broadly defined) to engage with local/ regional natural resource/ drought preparedness initiatives and groups such as Landcare;
3. Promote natural resource management and drought preparedness more broadly, including local/ regional community/ farmer engagement, through its various grant and other funding support programs;

Landcare NSW Incorporated

ABN 24 958 819 359

Suite 109 | 3 Gladstone Street | Newtown NSW 2042

T: 0458 168 225

administration@landcarensw.org.au

www.landcarensw.org.au



4. Invest an additional \$5million per annum (from the \$100m per annum drought fund) into Smart Farms small community based natural resource/ drought management grants, *i.e.* for grants up to \$50,000 over two years, on a broad regional basis rather than centrally through Canberra as at present;
5. Implement taxation measure which will promote future on-farm/ within business drought preparedness/ resilience, including grain and fodder storage and harvesting equipment;
6. Continue its support for natural resource management, rural industry and meteorological research and development, and especially engagement with local, regional community and farm communities, to facilitate rate of uptake.

These recommendations have been formulated from the responses of Landcare NSW to the questions raised in the Issues Paper *'Developing a Commonwealth Strategy for Drought Preparedness and Resilience'* as detailed below.

Landcare NSW's responses to the Questions raised in the Issues Paper *'Developing a Commonwealth Strategy for Drought Preparedness and Resilience'*.

Q1- What existing approaches, policies and programs best prepared farms and communities for the current drought?

Most long-term farmers, and next generation family farmers, have experienced several drought events in their lifetimes, or in the period they have had custodianship of their properties. Though the current drought is widespread across eastern Australia, and some areas have experienced several years of below average rainfall, many 'old-timers' do not regard the current 'drought' as severe as some past drought events. They point to the following improvements:

- Regional road and bridge infrastructure, coupled with modern trucks allowing movement of larger loads of livestock, feed and fodder over long distances either from or onto regional farms not previously accessible;
- Improved regional telecommunications, including access to NBN services, in most, but not all, regional areas. Mobile phone access remains a challenge in many areas;
- Meteorological Services – though always the subject of a lot of debate!
- Feral animal control programs managed on a regional basis. Rabbits are frequently mentioned as exacerbating previous drought events;
- Plague locust control, on a State and regional basis. Also mentioned as exacerbating previous drought events;
- Development of an Australian feedlot industry (including associated feeding technologies), with ability to take in large numbers of animals during dry times, and thus relieve pressure on paddocks and pasture;

- Development of on-farm storage of grain (silos), fodder (hay sheds and silage pits), and feed-lots (including associated drought feeding technologies), thus relieving pressure on paddocks and pasture;
- Development of on-farm water storages and associated technologies, e.g. solar pumps and remote monitoring of livestock waters;
- New knowledge generation, facilitated through industry levies and Commonwealth dollar for dollar funding for industry led and directed research, etc;
- Recognition of the public benefits of improved natural resource (land) management, and Commonwealth funding for national, regional and local community led Landcare and associated programs;
- Farm household support measures for those landholders without viable farm or off-farm income sources.

Q2- Why has government policy promoting preparedness and resilience not been sufficiently successful for some farmers/sectors despite being a key objective for almost three decades?

At the outset we need to recognise and appreciate that many farmers / landholders have been better prepared for the current drought. They have significantly reduced their farm stocking rates, progressively reduced their flocks and herds to younger core, most valuable breeding components, and have been able to sell their culled livestock at good market prices. They have forward contracted supplies of feed and fodder, and have facilities for on-farm feeding which reduced pressure on their paddocks and pastures.

Most farmers, but not all, are better educated than they were a generation ago, they are computer and telecommunications literate and able to access the latest technologies and information, not just from around Australia, but from around the world. Many have travelled extensively, including through Nuffield Scholarship, Rural Leadership and similar support programs.

However, some farmers/ landholders are not coping, and unfortunately it is mainly on this cohort of landholders that the city mainstream media has focused national attention (also see the response to Q12 below).

Some farmer attitudes to issues, such as drought preparedness and management, climate change and adoption of new technologies, are also shaped by social pressures or hierarchies within their local communities, e.g. 'we have always coped with drought in this way', 'we just need a little rain and the country will be back to normal again', 'we just need more help from Government', 'this is not a hobby, I have to make a living you know', and also by the rural press and some within farmer organisations. Farmers can be ostracised within their communities for stepping outside the accepted norms and code of practice.

We need to always recognise that farmers are also people, and people vary in so many ways. What is best drought management practice for one farmer may not be the best management practice for his or her neighbour. Any change, including adoption of new practices, takes time, often generational change within the community or through trusted people embedded within those communities. Others are just happy with their financial position and way of life. Landcare NSW believes the Commonwealth government should focus on overall community benefits and measures which deter community costs.

In this respect, Landcare NSW is concerned that the new National Landcare Program phase 2 (NLP2) program has lost its 'Landcare' community focus and the ability to address on-farm drought management, natural resource management and conservation issues through a community benefits perspective. For example, within NSW, funding previously provided through the NLP1 regional

Landcare NSW Incorporated

ABN 24 958 819 359

Suite 109 | 3 Gladstone Street | Newtown NSW 2042

T: 0458 168 225

administration@landcarensw.org.au

www.landcarensw.org.au



component to fund 20 Local Landcare Coordinators embedded in local communities (not just Landcare but also Farming Systems Coordinators) and smaller on-ground / on-property projects has been lost under NLP2.

Q3- Does this vision for the Commonwealth strategy capture key issues and is it achievable?

The proposed Commonwealth Government vision 'To have farm businesses and rural communities that are always prepared for, and capable of responding and adapting to, drought so that both continue to prosper' is fair enough, but (!), this statement needs an additional clause addressing 'looking after the natural resource base'.

Q4- Will these three priority areas help achieve this vision? Are there any other areas of Commonwealth responsibility that would help?

1. Informing businesses and communities.

This must include Local Government.

2. Incentivising good practice.

This must include improved access to current and new knowledge, including research findings and technologies. In this context Landcare NSW is working with NSW Local Land Services, OEH and Meat and Livestock Australia on ways, including the role of Local Landcare Coordinators, to reduce the knowledge and adoption gap for improved on-farm/ property management of soils, vegetation, water, and biodiversity.

3. National stewardship of strategically important resources: water, soil, and vegetation.

Three words 'national' and 'strategically important' are of concern and alternatives need to be considered. Stewardship needs to include all levels of government, the community and the current farm/ land owner/ custodian. 'Strategically important' implies that some resources are not important, whereas we consider **all** our national land, water, soil, vegetation and wildlife resources to be important to greater or lesser degree.

Q5- What information do farmers, communities or governments need to plan and prepare?

At all these levels, improved access to accredited, reliable sources of current and new knowledge, including research findings and technologies, is required. They also need the skills and/ or advice to be able to use this information. However, more than information, they need help to change, to be prepared to accept new information and to adopt new strategies.

In this context, Landcare NSW is working with NSW Local Land Services, OEH and Meat and Livestock Australia on ways to reduce the knowledge and adoption gap for improved on-farm/ property

management of soils, vegetation, water and biodiversity, through its network of 70 Landcare coordinators, 2,800 Landcare groups and 60,000 Landcarers across NSW.

Q6- Do governments, farmers and rural communities know what to do with this information?

Not always; some of the knowledge, information and systems are a challenge, especially for some older farmers, particularly where local figures must be entered into computer-based programs to develop 'action' scenarios. Some farmers consider these programs a time and technology challenge and this is where they need help from a trusted local advisor or Landcare coordinator.

Many farmers, and politicians, do not acknowledge 'climate change' per se, or as a contributor to the current dry times.

Q7- How do we extend planning and responses beyond farm businesses and to communities?

The Commonwealth needs to seriously consider better use, and support for, the very significant network resource base it already has in local community-based Landcare Groups and Farming Systems Groups, within NSW and across the rest of Australia. These groups are perfectly placed to engage with their communities to extend responses from the single farm to the local, regional, or catchment community. Landcare NSW is concerned that the Commonwealth expects too much of this significant community based volunteer group of dedicated constituents, and has withdrawn the paid part-time NLP2 support they need for Local Landcare Coordinators.

Then there is local government, some of whom are switched on to natural resource management issues within their community constituencies while others are not. The Commonwealth also has the existing Australia wide network of NRMOs, including Local Land Services in NSW, and private sector consultant advisors.

A challenge for some rural communities is that large corporates and foreign investors, many of whom are large overseas based superannuation funds or sovereign wealth funds, have bought up large tracts of Australian farmland, formerly family farms, with little or no current interaction with their local communities. They do not buy or sell locally, and often the farm managers have no local family association. Their focus is mainly on their financial return on investment rather than on their triple bottom line, including improvement in the natural resource base and community concerns such as habitat conservation. The Commonwealth has responsibility for foreign investment and can require foreign investors to invest also in their communities and in local natural resource management, *i.e.* through Landcare or other community groups and through endangered species vegetation renewal. Foreign investment has helped develop Australian agriculture, but the times have changed, our community has changed its priorities and foreign investors should also be asked, or required, to change their practice. There are precedents for this in the mining and in the renewable electricity industries.

Q8- What good practices can we take from the current drought to inform what plans and preparations work best?

Within NSW, Local Land Services (which has a State responsibility for emergency management) in association with the State Department of Primary Industries (in which the State Drought Coordinator is based), has done a good job in informing farmers and all landholders of their drought management options, through regional workshops, seminars, printed material and on-line materials.

Landcare NSW Incorporated

ABN 24 958 819 359

Suite 109 | 3 Gladstone Street | Newtown NSW 2042

T: 0458 168 225

administration@landcarensw.org.au

www.landcarensw.org.au



Landcare in NSW has supported this key State role for Local Land Services / Department of Primary Industries. However, Local Land Services specialist advisors are limited in number and based in major regional towns. They are also 'from Government', and an agency which has both advisory, administrative and regulatory roles; this means that Local Land Services specialist advisors need to be supported by community based 'and owned' Landcare and Farming Systems Groups, and their trusted support Coordinators.

Our response to Q1 above is also relevant.

Q9- Which policies and programs have been most effective in providing the right incentives for preparedness and resilience?

The most effective policies and programs are those which engage with local/ regional communities and which support them to discuss the issues, to take local/ regional group action, and their farmer landholder members to prepare for drought, e.g. past Landcare support programs (not the current 'Smart Farms' program), and the current FRRR managed TTTT program.

In addition to the benefits, or effectiveness, of the various Commonwealth incentives for improved drought management or relief, Government agencies, including this review Task Force, needs to address the disincentives, such as the up-front cost for individuals and the community, as well as the on-going administrative costs of these programs, *i.e.* all the 'Red Tape'. For example, the up-front professional accounting costs for an individual farmer applying for a \$12,000 farm household support allowance is around \$2,000. The up-front costs for a community group applying for a 'Smart Farms' program \$20,000 small grant is estimated to exceed \$3,000. For the 780 applications for the \$5 million first round Smart Farms small grants, the up-front community costs total a massive \$2,340,000 nationwide, *i.e.* almost half the value of the program! And this is all before project assessment costs, on-going program administrative costs (for both Government and the community). Program 'Red Tape' is a disincentive for community and individual response. The NLP 'Smart Farms' grants program needs a much smarter application process!

Yet another disincentive is the advertisement of 'Smart Farms' small grant program just before Christmas for lodgement just after New Year, a period when most rural communities are also looking forward to a break and local liaison is near impossible. Not a sensitive move for rural communities already coping with the stress of drought.

Q10- What more can we do to encourage good planning and good business decision making to encourage people to make the right choices?

Landcare NSW recommends the following;

- Education and ongoing learning opportunities for farm managers/ families and young community leaders, e.g. through short course training programs and through programs such as offered through the Nuffield Foundation and ARLF;

- Enhanced support for community-based learning and discussion groups, *e.g.* Landcare and Farming Systems Groups, which are focused on these priorities and sound local/ regional natural resource management, *e.g.*, 'Farmers learning from Farmers' (with support from professional advisors);
- Encourage better links between the Commonwealth's significant support for R&D and the above;
- Improved meteorological information, *i.e.* better, more reliable forecasts;
- Current, or some new, incentives for fodder and water conservation structures or machinery (*e.g.* 100 percent write-off in the year of purchase for fodder harvest machinery) for improved future drought management.

Q11- Are there limits to self-reliance in some areas of Australia with more severe droughts expected, and how might Government respond while continuing to advocate for self-reliance

Yes, as a nation, and as a community, we need to question whether some current knowledge/ technologies and Government policies are allowing farm expansion into more vulnerable, more drought prone areas under the various climate changes scenarios, including whether current government policies, programs and incentives make such practice more attractive. Our history tells us that some past Government endorsed land settlement/ development policies and programs have dictated clearing of native vegetation on marginal land, *e.g.* steep hills, which in turn has led to soil erosion and siltation of our waterways. Do we need to continue expanding Australian broadacre cropping agriculture into more marginal, and production risky, areas just to 'feed the world' at marginal global price returns? Can we really 'feed the world? No! As a nation, are we better off concentrating our resources into more reliable rainfall areas with more productive soils and looking after these 'strategic' resources, focusing on quality rather than quantity? These are controversial issues for public discussion, debate and decision, but we need to have these discussions sooner rather than later.

We also need to recognise that some farm landholders are not preparing for drought, are not adopting new technology, are not interacting with their neighbours, are not controlling their weeds or feral animals and in general are not responsibly managing their properties. At the same time these people expect to receive any government 'hand outs', or a community support package that might be available. What to do about them, how to get them involved, is a community challenge at all levels.

Q12- How can a drought preparedness and resilience strategy be reflected in natural resource management policies and programs?

At Landcare NSW our principle concern is that not enough is being done to help responsible landholders to better manage their natural resource base, in addition to their business enterprises on which the current drought response measures focus. This issue is critical, especially during and soon after drought when our soils, water supplies and vegetation (and wildlife) is most vulnerable to degradation through wind and water erosion. Any damage to the farm natural resource base has long, costly recovery times, if ever.

Our soils, water, vegetation and wildlife on farm is not just a private farm asset- it is a public asset and a community asset too, on which our food and fibre supply and national wellbeing is dependent in many ways.

Landcare NSW Incorporated

ABN 24 958 819 359

Suite 109 | 3 Gladstone Street | Newtown NSW 2042

T: 0458 168 225

administration@landcarensw.org.au

www.landcarensw.org.au



Degradation of our soils and water resources also has significant external costs for our community, for example, through wind erosion resulting in dust storms which in turn impact on community health, air traffic, and city life amenity. Water erosion impacts on the quality of water and siltation in our waterways and dams, and on the cost of providing quality clean water to urban communities.

The Commonwealth seems to have lost knowledge of, or at least full appreciation of, the very significant and valuable natural resource management resource in community-based Landcare which it played a key role in establishing during the 1990's '*Decade of Landcare*'. Various Commonwealth Governments have fiddled, to greater or lesser degree, with NRM funding for 'Landcare' or on-ground natural resource management (including 'drought' management) over the years, leaving many (most) community constituents wondering 'what the devil is going on in their leaders' minds at the national level'.

Most community Landcarers are completely disenchanted with the focus of the current NLP2 program and its so called 'Smart Farms' and 'national environmental priorities' components. They question whether NLP2 is now a National Landcare Program at all. The Commonwealth needs to review whether the current grants/ tender model is the best model for 'purchase' of environmental benefits nationwide, or whether other models might engage greater community participation and response and be more effective, environmentally and economically, in the medium to long term.

To its credit, the NSW government (and also the Victorian government) has addressed this issue and has funded some 70 part-time Local Landcare Coordinator positions embedded in community Landcare and like groups across NSW. Through Local Land Services a further 20 such position were funded through Commonwealth NLP1, but this residual funding ceases on 30 December 2018, and is not renewed under NLP2. Within NSW these positions are supported by significant funding for on-ground environmental/ Landcare works through the NSW Environmental Trust and the Office of Environment and Heritage 'Save our Species' program.

Yes, a drought preparedness and resilience strategy could be encompassed in an expanded Commonwealth NRM/ Landcare policy/ program with additional / specific funding for community engagement, and with limited administrative overheads. Landcare NSW believes this issue to be as important to the nation as looking after the health and welfare of the farm/ regional community in any future national drought policy. Without the resource base we can have no viable farms or healthy, happy communities!

Q13- Is research, information and education sufficient, or is national/strategic guidance and coordination necessary?

- R&D reference above response. Meteorological research?
- Information – improved medium to long term meteorological information is needed. Even the shorter-term metrological information has been questionable/ variable over the past year, during the current 'drought'.
- Education – as above

If you have any further questions or require any additional information, please do not hesitate to contact me on 0457026177 or at azammit@landcarensw.org.au

Yours sincerely,



Dr Adrian Zammit | CEO
Landcare NSW Incorporated