

Joint Agency Drought Taskforce

Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

PO Box 6500 CANBERRA ACT 2600

RE: NRM Regions Australia response to Developing a Commonwealth Strategy for Drought Preparedness and Resilience consultation paper

NRM Regions Australia is the collaborative body for the 54 regional natural resource management (NRM) organisations that cover Australia, both statutory and non-statutory, and that are funded in part by the Australian Government through the National Landcare Program.

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the recent paper. It is great to see recognition from the consultations that “Natural resource management is key to economic and environmental sustainability” (Consultation Summary, page 8); and positive that stewardship of natural resources is a priority area. Important also that the relationship and interdependencies across the three areas is acknowledged.

Initially we’d like to highlight that drought policy is integrally connected to many other Federal Government policies and programs, as noted in your document. It would be great progress to see Australian Government policy recognising this and working across areas and agencies to ensure alignment and leverage, for example with climate, carbon farming, water, agricultural and integrated natural resource management policy. Although easy to ask we know that moving from silos to a systems approach is much harder to do. We would encourage an overarching national policy and vision with clear mechanisms for connections within and between governments, and with the private and not-for profit sectors.

We would also like to endorse the acknowledgement that a long-term approach is necessary for natural resource management; and the need to increase recognition of its importance with governments and Industry.

We believe that the role of the regional NRM organisations across Australia is pivotal in providing this continuity and coverage, with accountability and responsiveness. This existing ‘soft’ or institutional infrastructure across the country is being underutilised by governments and industry. We would like to highlight that under the latest National Landcare Program the Regional Land Partnerships component is being delivered through the Australian Government’s partnership with Regional NRM Bodies who are the preferred service providers following the recently completed competitive tender process. Through this process we are ideally placed to deliver Australian Government priorities across both NRM and associated on-farm drought assistance packages.

Regional NRM plans are a useful tool for understanding what needs to happen and where, and in order to prioritise investment for NRM and resilience. We would like to see them identified as a key existing mechanism that works across landscapes and between levels of government. We are also requesting elsewhere additional funding to make the plans ‘climate ready’, ensuring that we are using the best available climate data, models, tools and engagement in our planning. NRM regions could help provide a better return on public investment (for example, regional NRM organisations leverage, on average, \$5 community/farmer funds for every \$1 of Government investment) and in building drought resilience (Brown and Schirmer, 2018. <http://nrmregionsaustralia.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Growing-resilience-to-drought-FINAL-23-Oct-2018-002.pdf>)

Drought also puts pressure upon our natural systems, upon which agriculture relies. It is important to acknowledge that careful management of these systems, such as soil and vegetation, is also crucial during drought to maintain environmental resilience. This may require separate funding and delivery mechanisms.

The priority areas and key findings

It is great to see recognition of the importance of natural resource management (NRM) in improving resilience to drought conditions recognised in the priority areas (as identified in the University of Canberra report and the example case studies we've previously contributed <http://nrmregionsaustralia.com.au/building-drought-resilience/>).

It is a surprise, however, not to see more overt discussion of climate change and adaptation in the document; perhaps this could be one of the priority areas. With the frequency and extremity of droughts increasing due to climate change it may be that adoption of known good practices and diversification as it is currently understood is not sufficient and more substantial adaptation to agricultural systems becomes necessary in some locations. The challenge of biosecurity will also increase. In this context Australia will need to more actively innovate and redefine agriculture, including environmental markets, ecosystem services and environmental stewardship.

Australian agriculture of the future will look different from today, and it will continue to adapt along the whole supply chain not just behind the farmgate. Government policies, including drought, need to account for likely changes in response to positive and negative drivers - biophysical, social and economic. In fact, we need to pre-empt and adaptively plan for the long-term; essential to further developing preparedness and resilience.

Priority area 1 - Informing governments, businesses and communities

Communicating

We agree that tailored, consistent and constant communication is required, not just during times of drought. With an existing regional focus, we believe NRM regions are in a useful position to continue to assist with the development and/or dissemination of regional drought resilience and preparedness information including information associated with agriculture, NRM, and biosecurity - targeted to landholders' needs for each region. Importantly we can tailor information to ensure relevance rather than a "one size fits all" approach. With landholder networks and practice change work regional bodies can also engage directly with farmers to enable adaptation, application and adoption of information and tools.

RD&E

In a review of NRM literature undertaken through the Australia National University and funded by the Australian Government to inform the review of the National Landcare Program it became apparent how much less cross-cutting, NRM specific research is now being funded or undertaken.

More than the strong leadership and coordination identified in the key finding is required. We need dedicated funding and processes for cross-cutting issues such as climate, drought, NRM and the relationships between them. The Productivity Commission's 2011 review of the Rural RDCs recognised this and proposed another R&D organisation to address the gap. They suggested "Rural Research Australia" should be established to undertake

broader research that was cross-cutting and public good. Agrifutures (RIRDC) does have a cross-cutting role in its portfolio and may be a vehicle to grow this work with appropriate funding.

NRM regions have an important role in facilitating connections with other trusted organisations both private, public and NGOs who already have connections, experience and skills including the Research and Development Corporations (RDCs). We support further co-ordination of agricultural RD&E and can play an important role in disseminating new research such as new agricultural related technology and social research that can assist landholders with drought preparedness.

Priority area 2 - Incentivising good practice

The discussion and key finding on community preparedness and resilience is significant. Social capital contributes to resilience and adaptiveness. Natural resource management is about people as much as it is about livelihoods and the environment, and many of the NRM regions underpin their work with a community development model. Our organisations, along with many others, contribute to developing community leadership, capacity and connectedness across rural, regional and urban Australia.

It may be a good time to review and communicate Landcare tax incentives and the role they play in encouraging good practice.

Priority area 3 - Stewardship of important natural resources

NRM Regions Australia welcomes the key findings in this priority area and endorse the comments in the text. We request that this priority area is not watered down or deleted. We are happy to provide more specific detail about NRM activities beyond those listed if useful for the next stage.

As discussed earlier we believe regional NRM plans are a useful tool for prioritising investment for NRM and resilience, and for aligning priorities between levels of government and across agencies and policies. Integration is a key role of our organisations. We would like to see regional NRM planning identified as a key existing mechanism and are building collaborations such as with Geoscience Australia to ensure we are drawing upon the best available data and tools.

We agree with the key finding regarding carbon abatement projects and farm income diversification. It is recognised that carbon abatement projects could be an important opportunity for rural landholders to diversify their on-farm incomes and improve financial resilience particularly during drought conditions and under a changing climate. The proportion of the Emissions Reduction Fund (ERF) that went to the Land Use sector attests to the potential impact. To maximise the benefits and minimise perverse outcomes for landholders, regional communities and the environment Australia needs to build upon existing frameworks to ensure there are appropriate pathways, and checks and balances, for informed participation. Several submissions provided by NRM Regions Australia to relevant inquiries have more detail (<http://nrmregionsaustralia.com.au/our-publications/>).

Issues to take into account when developing actions

Government programs have not met their goals in the past when insufficient account has been taken of the capacity on the ground to deliver the program, or the speed or timeline for implementation. In addition to wasting money and community goodwill this is an opportunity cost. It is important that drought policy, programs and delivery, understand and address diverse capacity, both individual and institutional.



We would like to reiterate that regional NRM organisations provide an Australian-wide institutional infrastructure that can be readily utilised by governments to help deliver drought preparedness and resilience work; through our regional planning, our program delivery mechanisms, our networks and relationships. Working with landholders and communities in our regions is what we do.

This response is only a brief summary of points. NRM Regions Australia would be more than happy to provide further input and detail if useful to the Taskforce. Once again thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the consultations.

Contact: Kate Andrews, EO, NRM Regions Australia, 0403 604 823