

A new Australian Government drought plan

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Agriculture hub

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1 Confidentiality

No

2 Please specify the parts of your response that are confidential

Not answered

3 Do you agree to your response being published on our website?

Yes

4 Please de-identify my response

No

5 I have read and understood the privacy notice and consent to the collection, use and disclosure of my personal information as outlined in the privacy notice.

Yes

6 Confirm that you have read and understand this declaration

Yes

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- 10 Which stakeholder group do you represent?
Government
- 11 Please select the state/territory you are based in.
New South Wales
- 12 Submission upload
Not answered
- 13 Would you like to continue with the survey?
Yes
- 14 Is the Australian Government's approach to drought across the drought cycle clear in the draft plan?
Yes
- 15 Why or why not?
It is understood that the draft plan is intended as a guiding document for drought policy and programs and as such it is very high level. While the principles around the Government's support for drought as described under the 4 Pillars are clear and generally agreed, the draft plan reads like a promotional document for existing Government programs under the National Drought Agreement. Where this is in keeping with the review recommendations, what communities in inland regional NSW are looking for, and need, based on lived experience through two droughts is confidence about the in-drought response and its cross-government coordination.

Unfortunately, this level of detail including governance and implementation arrangements to coordinate a whole-of-Government response to drought is out of the scope for this consultation.

It is agreed that it is essential that farming and other regional businesses are equipped with skills to plan for management in periods of drought. In this respect any funding programs that support farmers to adopt innovative technologies and new practices are supported.

Having said this, farmers, communities including local councils want to know what is actually going to happen when communities are in drought. The draft plan offers little confidence to communities on the ground. Simply "acknowledging the diverse impacts of drought on a wider range of cohorts" and noting "the broad range of stakeholders that have a role to play across the drought cycle" is not enough. Particularly where in the last drought communities struggled through lack of coordination and resourcing for program and support service delivery on the ground.

Given this, a lot more detail is needed around pillar 3- Working together. Where the overarching principles and shared responsibilities are agreed, how this will be delivered on the ground is the key. In particular, through decades of strategic work in water security in the central NSW region, there is an urgent need for regional leadership and inter-governmental collaboration in water planning, management and infrastructure development. This is the 'missing piece.'

What is clear is that, as is the case under climate adaptation planning, the Australian Government is seeing that responsibility for managing drought rests with the individual and communities in preparedness, risk management and financial sustainability. Where the theory behind this is understood, the support for individuals needs to be very clearly set out, easily accessible and well coordinated on the ground, especially for farmers who already manage complex and physically demanding enterprises. This is not always the case. It is not sufficient to direct people seeking assistance to online services. Telecommunications services remain insufficient in many rural areas and some skill levels to enable access to these is lacking.

There is a big difference between programs being available and farmers and communities knowing what is available to help prepare for drought, designing and planning projects, writing applications, navigating program delivery and managing reporting and acquittals. All in a competitive, often complex, time and resource hungry funding framework. At the community level, feedback from the Minister for Infrastructure, Catherine King to the CNSWJO Board meeting on 23 August is that the current round of the Growing Regions program is heavily over subscribed. For local councils the time and resources wasted in applying for these competitive and over subscribed grant funded programs is actually a problem not a solution. While poor coordination by the NSW Government of

the Regional Drought Resilience Planning program is seeing projects that are not fit for purpose.

How this will sustain individuals and communities in the face of predicted long-term droughts is uncertain and high risk especially where in Central NSW many communities came precariously close to running out of water for critical human need leaving little if anything for stock.

Preparedness and resilience of communities needs reliability of water supply for critical human need and productive use. This is a major factor in having the confidence to plan ahead, invest and run a profitable business. Businesses will not establish in the region if continuous water supply is not available and businesses that close as a consequence of a lack of water, potentially will not reopen. There needs to be greater consideration of water for critical human need and productive use in all strategic frameworks from the Murray Darling Basin Plan down - including this one.

From lived experience through two droughts in the Central NSW region, individuals and communities including local councils need to be clear about what funding and support will be available, who will provide it and at what point in the drought. This is the key.

Where this may be described in another plan or policy, finalising drought preparedness processes and policy at a national level which is built on understanding triggers and how to act when they are pulled is critical. These responses should be place based and in some cases, farm based, to ensure the best allocation and actions are taken.

Better drought preparedness is essential – however, the three tiers of government need to work together to develop tools and advisory services that build on best practice drought management techniques. This is the missing piece.

We need a better understanding of triggers that would signal when we need to instigate drought management actions and case by case/place based management approaches to enable the minimisation of worsening conditions of untreated impacts. Local Government can work with State and Federal Governments to improve current approaches.

16 Is the draft plan clear as to why the Australian Government’s drought policy and response is different to that for natural disasters?

No

17 Why or why not?

The draft plan is clear as to why the Australian Government's drought policy and response is different to that for natural disasters, however, communities do not

understand drought as an issue separate to natural disasters. It is unreasonable for drought to be seen as anything other than a climate impact that needs similar consideration to natural disasters.

Where there is merit in supporting preparedness, risk management and financial sustainability this must not detract from planning for and coordination of responses in the face of drought as a natural disaster.

What we have seen on the ground is that all droughts are different, and the impacts can be compounded by existing market and other stresses in communities and that these can have long term and cascading impacts. For example, local feedback during the last drought was that it would take 5 or more years for stock levels to return.

Where in theory preparedness and risk management at the individual and community level is essential, the questions that must be considered are is this achievable at the scale that is needed? When does a drought become an emergency requiring a similar response as a natural disaster? And more importantly what can be expected on the ground?

To expect individuals to bear the brunt of preparedness is a big ask and a high risk that will not negate the impacts of extreme long-term drought where even the best prepared farmer and community will struggle. This is particularly the case where the CSIRO and climate scientists are predicting long-term droughts over periods of 3 or 4 years and longer. These pose a high risk to the economy and sustainability of inland regional communities that will require the support of all levels of government irrespective of whether it is classed as a drought or a natural disaster.

Any measures aimed at building preparedness and resilience will need to be tested using stochastic models for longer term drought scenarios. Action planning is needed so that when triggers are pulled in future there is a known set of actions that can be activated

Recommendation 16 is that the department continue to explore how incident management approaches across government can be applied to drought, and how such arrangements can be explained in the new plan. It is noted that the department's response is that learning from cross-government approaches to incident management, and arrangements to coordinate whole-of-Australian Government responses to drought is out of the scope of this plan.

Findings from a Drought Issues Study by the Western Research Institute commissioned by Central NSW Councils in 2018 found that it is exactly this that is needed.

Does Pillar 1 – Evidence based decision-making provide greater clarity about when, why, how and what the government will consider when determining its response to drought?

No

19 Why or why not?

Please refer to responses to previous questions. This is all very high level- where again as detailed above, communities want clarity around the governance and implementation of a known set of actions being activated on the ground in regions when droughts reach a certain trigger point.

There is a raft of information services available, but the integration and interpretation of these data sources to develop an understanding of triggers and how they should be used to initiate actions to manage the impacts of future drought is still lacking.

Funding allocated to activities that improve data collection and management, information sharing and dissemination, including through effective communications suitable for the audience are needed and supported.

There can be no doubt that easily accessible and useful data to help farming businesses, communities and other stakeholders understand and assess their weather, drought and climate risks is helpful in planning and making informed decisions. Likewise providing farming businesses and communities opportunities to develop the skills they need to plan for and mitigate weather and climate risks is also helpful. However, as detailed above, there are challenges in putting the onus on individuals and communities to manage drought.

More critical in long-term planning for farming businesses and communities is having security of water supply for critical human need and productive use. This is a major factor in having the confidence to plan ahead, invest and run a profitable and financially sustainable business. As detailed above, there needs to be greater consideration of water for critical human need and its value for productive use in all strategic frameworks from the Murray Darling Basin Plan down - including this one.

Where the Regional Drought Resilience Planning program aims to fund regions to develop resilience plans with associated governance, as is the case with any plans developed at a regional level, critical will be a governance and implementation plan that prioritises actions and identifies who will deliver these and how they will be funded. Identifying regional needs and priorities to inform future investment is one thing where

the risk is that plans become shelfware without the commitment by governments in the resourcing both human and financial in their delivery.

Again, this comes down to actions that are outside the scope of this draft plan- a need to identify and understand what triggers for action against drought should be observed and at what time they need to be acknowledged. This includes the design of programs that will respond to the triggers. This requires a multi-tier government collaboration to ensure we properly assess the impact of drought and are ready with tools in place to manage drought impacts. Finalising drought preparedness tools is critical.

With respect to the drought response framework, it is hard to provide meaningful feedback without actually seeing it. While the description provides some idea of the high-level overarching considerations that will guide the government's decision-making during drought this is all pretty meaningless to communities wanting to understand what triggers a known set of actions to be activated, what those actions are and most importantly that they will provide the support needed on the ground at the time they are most needed. Lacking in NSW currently is any inter-agency coordination for drought.

20 Does Pillar 2 – Strategic drought support provide greater clarity about how the Australian Government will respond across the drought cycle, including what support it will not provide?

Yes

21 Why or why not?

It is clear what the high-level principles are for the Government's strategic drought support and what support it will not provide. The challenge in all of this is in what these principles lead to at the community level - the design of fit-for-purpose policy, program and implementation plans that deliver the outcomes needed, where they are needed and when they are needed.

Existing funding programs aimed at increasing preparedness, resilience and financial sustainability need to have simple application and management processes. Currently, for local councils the time and resources wasted in applying for competitive and over subscribed grant funded programs and the management and acquittal processes is actually a problem not a solution. For self-employed individuals running farming businesses, navigating the raft of programs to determine eligibility, planning projects and developing applications is even more challenging.

There is a need for more effective inter-governmental collaboration at the regional level

inclusive of Local Government to inform the development of fit-for-purpose policy, program design and implementation plans to ensure that funding and effort is aligned with the region's strategic priorities and leverage its strengths.

22 Have you identified any gaps in how we have responded to any of the review recommendations in the draft plan?

Yes

23 Why or why not?

To be fair the draft plan does address the review recommendations. The problem is more with the recommendations themselves. While it is good to identify these high-level principles and to understand the Australian Government's position, since 2017 communities have struggled through back to back natural disasters - drought, fires and floods.

Recovery from these with their economic and social impacts, together with the impact of covid and the pressures of the global political and financial situation on markets are taking their toll on inland regional communities. While it is appreciated that droughts have a longer lead time than a flash flood or bushfire and that preparedness is good, the climate impacts should be considered in the same way. Especially in the face of predicted hotter, longer droughts. In short communities want to feel confident that Governments of all persuasions will work together on-the-ground to deliver a coordinated response across jurisdictions. This continues to be the missing piece and is out of scope for the draft policy.

24 Do you have any comments on the work underway for us to consider as we progress it?

The Central NSW region continues to be challenged by water security which is impacting on the growth potential of the region. Further there is a lack of recognition of the productive value of urban water to the economy at both the local and national level. This has been recognised by both the Productivity Commission and Infrastructure Australia where clearly more work is needed to understand the impact of drought on the resilience of urban communities and the social and economic implications of this.

There is an urgent need to consider water for critical human need in the conversation about drought policy. This is referenced as being a jurisdictional issue but what has been found including by Infrastructure Australia and the Productivity Commission is that there needs to be better inter-governmental collaboration on strategic water planning and management from the Murray Darling Basin plan down, particularly for water for critical

human need. We need to ensure that the policy, legislative and regulatory settings are right in to enable this water in times of shortages.

It is good to see reference to the Australian Government support programs relating to urban water in the draft policy, but more is needed. Water infrastructure planning now for future droughts is essential – these projects can take decades to happen and require long-term commitment to capital renewal by the three tiers of government. It needs to be forward looking and contemplate the impacts of drought. The challenge is that we need more reliable, secure water.

The opportunities through more reliable, secure water are:

- Better water management and security - to look differently at the way we manage our natural assets such as water and how we use technology to monitor their use. We need to look at international best practice such as in the Netherlands who almost two decades ago, set themselves an ambitious target of 'twice as much food, half the resources. Better water security supports not only agriculture but population growth and industry development.
- Agriculture - With better water security, new technologies and the opportunity to develop additional income streams through net zero initiatives such as carbon trading and soil sequestration – the future of agriculture in Central NSW is positive.

Local Government is a solid conduit for improving the understanding of local drought conditions and how to apply drought resilience measures to regional communities. This connectedness with our communities is the most efficient basis for monitoring the impacts of the drought and the success of drought preparedness funding provided in collaboration with other tiers of government, the business sector and other stakeholders. Ensuring Local Government has a seat at the decision-making table in the design and delivery of funding programs where a place-based response is the most appropriate is key to the delivery of outcomes needed.