



stanthorpe & granite belt
chamber of commerce

25 February 2023

The Future Drought Fund
Productivity Commission

To Whom it May Concern

Re: Submission – Inquiry into the effectiveness of Part 3 of the Future Drought Fund Act 2019

On behalf of the Chamber, I would like to thank the Productivity Commission for the opportunity to provide a submission on the Future Drought Fund.

The Inquiry raises specific concerns and questions:

- Are the funding principles, vision, aim, strategic priorities, and objectives of the Funding Plan (attachment B) appropriate and effective?
- Do the programs, arrangements and grants focus on the right priorities to support drought resilience? If not, what should the programs, arrangements and grants focus on and why?
- Should the scope of the Fund be broadened to support resilience to climate change? Why or why not?
- What opportunities are there to enhance collaboration in planning and delivering drought resilience initiatives, including with state and territory governments?
- Are there any other changes needed to improve the effectiveness of Part 3 of the Act? Who needs to do what to make those changes happen?

The Chamber believes that firstly, to be able to answer the above questions, the Government needs to understand the reality of how a drought affects a community as a whole and what the true flow-on affects are.

Our community has experienced firsthand the mental and economic challenges caused by drought and are still recovering. The rest of the country may have moved on from the drought since it has rained, our community has not. Not only were the farmers affected by the drought, as their dams dried up so did our only town water storage, Storm King Dam. At the end of 2020, it dropped to a level where it was unable to supply Stanthorpe's township with water and a massive operation to truck in water was undertaken for over **16 months**.

The Granite Belt has a community of over 11,000 people with around half of the population living in the township of Stanthorpe and the remainder in the wider Granite Belt region. Those who live in the township with access to the reticulation scheme, were reduced to using 80lts per person daily for all their needs (showering, washing clothes, drinking water, cooking, cleaning, for pets etc). To give you some perspective, that is 8 of the buckets that you see in the supermarkets and hardware stores. Can you imagine only being able to use this amount of water each day!



That was if you were lucky enough to have access to the reticulation scheme. If you lived outside of the township of Stanthorpe – you were on your own and lucky to have 40 litres a day. Due to the trucking in of water for the township – it was near to impossible for those in the outer regions to buy water themselves (if they could even afford the escalating costs). Many reported that they kept children home from school as they didn't have the water to wash clothes or for proper hygiene and were too embarrassed to attend. Can you imagine keeping your children home from school!

Agriculture is the main industry on the Granite Belt with an annual turnover of \$300 million dollars and is the largest employer. The Granite Belt Growers Association estimated that there was a reduction of \$100 million dollars in wages and local spend in 2019/2020 season.

The Granite Belt is a flourishing tourism destination with award winning wine and cellar doors, glorious National Parks, famous festivals and Arts. During the drought the tourism sector also received a major blow as tourists stopped visiting the region as they did not want to “use” our limited water supply.

The flow on effects for our community were significant and made painfully obvious during the drought. You just had to walk up and down the main street and chat to the business owners for them to confirm how vital agriculture, Tourism and water security is for our community.

Our farmers and local businesses contribute significantly to our community's wellbeing from sponsoring our schools P&C's, Awards nights, donating fresh produce for fundraisers at street stalls and sponsoring our local sporting groups. When our local businesses are struggling – our whole community struggles. One of the biggest concerns was the loss of families due to unemployment caused by the drought. The loss of families led to lower numbers of children at the schools – which has a direct affect on teacher numbers – which led to teachers and their families leaving the region – which led to loss of numbers to keep sporting teams and special interest groups running – which led to loss of services (ie doctors, dentists, government services).

The Chamber recommends that to determine that funding principles, vision, aim, strategic priorities, and objectives of the Funding Plan are appropriate and effective there needs to be better engagement with stakeholders in the regions. There is a Stanthorpe Node as part of the Drought Innovation Hubs managed by the University of Southern Queensland and funded by the Future Drought Fund. Members of the Chamber executive attended the Node opening last year and were concerned around the projects that are being funded and requested a briefing around the Node's charter and allocation of funds. We are yet to have this briefing.

Our region is fortunate to have active representation through the Granite Belt Growers Association, Granite Belt Wine & Tourism and the Stanthorpe & Granite Belt Chamber of Commerce. We believe that these hubs and nodes need to collaborate with local groups to deliver projects and initiatives that will be useful to them and **NOT WHAT WE ARE TOLD WOULD BE USEFUL BY ACADEMICS** who have no experience or idea of what “drought resilience” really means to a community who has lived through the devastating affects. Learning how to have a worm farm will not provide resilience for our community in the next drought!

In your call for submission it is stated; *“Building drought resilience is a complex and long-term endeavour. It requires tailored and practical support reflecting the unique circumstances and diverse needs and aspirations of different farmers, their communities and agricultural industries.”*

The Chamber agrees with this statement and applauds the government for recognising that each community is different and therefore has different needs. As part of the drought recovery, our local businesses had to diversify and think outside the box to survive. Workshops on social media and digital marketing were extremely helpful and many businesses took the opportunity to step into the “on-line world” to increase their sales and customer base and have not looked back. There was also a focus on re-skilling farm workers so that they could gain other employment in the region. These helped to build resilience in the community, kept the economy ticking over, kept people in our region and empowered residents to help themselves!

The Granite Belt was one of the first districts in Australia to roll out drip irrigation in orchards as opposed to sprinkler irrigation due to our lack of water and was the first district in Australia to invest in protective hail net to protect not only from hail, but sun and drought (less water usage). The innovation and resilience shown by our farmers is incredible and with further funding AND COLLABORATION there is no doubt what else can be achieved through the Future Drought Fund.

During the drought it was often stated that “we were one day closer to rain”! Well, the rain has fallen, and the dams are full to overflowing and now we are focused on the fact that “we are one day closer to the next drought”. The question is, will our communities be prepared?

The Chamber would welcome the opportunity to meet with the relevant bodies to discuss our submission and would be available for further consultation before the final report is delivered to the government.

Yours sincerely

Graham Parker
President