

Ms J Chong and Mr M Roberts,
Commissioners
Future Drought Fund Inquiry
GPO Box 1428
Canberra City ACT 2601

06 March 2023

Dear Ms Joanne Chong and Mr Malcolm Roberts,

Meat and Livestock Australia (MLA) is a producer owned research and development organisation for the Australian red meat and livestock industry. MLA's purpose is to foster the long-term prosperity of the Australian red meat and livestock industry. We do this by delivering research and development that contributes to producer profitability, sustainability, and global competitiveness, and growing demand through marketing initiatives for red meat in Australia and overseas.

MLA is supportive of the vision and objectives of the Future Drought Fund (FDF) as provided in the inquiry documentation, given MLA's purpose also for industry prosperity. As such, under the auspices of our Strategic Plan, MLA is investing in a range of products to enhance drought resilience the Australian red meat industry, including significant investment in climate research and tools to manage weather and climate risk. Since the inception of FDF and associated Hubs, MLA looked forward to identifying opportunities to collaborate and leverage our skills, expertise and funding partners to accelerate the impact for red meat producers.

To date MLA has collaborated with the Future Drought Fund (FDF) program through the following:

- Co-investment with the Southern NSW Drought Resilience Adoption and Innovation Hub to develop an Ag-Tech web-based tool to evaluate the benefits and costs of deploying ag-tech products on-farm.
- Shared a project that MLA was unable to support due to budget constraints at the time, with the Southern Qld Northern NSW Drought Resilience Adoption and Innovation Hub and who were able to invest in.
- Provided technical in-kind support to the FDF's 'Extension and Adoption of Drought Resilience Farming Practices Grants Program' grant round via making a MLA project manager available to assist with reviewing the grant applications received for the.
- Developed a catalogue of extension and adoption products for business resilience in dry times specifically for sharing collaboration opportunities and available resources for the FDF Hubs to utilise, (www.mla.com.au/globalassets/mla-corporate/researchanddevelopment/documents/210928-tools-and-resources-for-building-business-resilience_v6.pdf).

As part of the Red Meat 2030 Strategic Plan and MLA's 2025 Strategic plan we have prioritised investing in adoption, particularly embedding extension activities into research projects. With MLA's direct investment and producer engagement, since 2015, we have seen red meat producers receive total net have benefits of \$899.3million. Critical to this success has been the peer-to-peer learning model supported by skilled coaches/facilitators/practitioners. To be able to successfully scale adoption initiatives across the country, there is a need to address the limited number of and capacity of public and private sector people skilled in extension

practices. Recently MLA in partnership with the University of Melbourne undertook a review in global adoption practices suitable for the red meat industry (www.mla.com.au/research-and-development/reports/2022/a-review-of-global-adoption-practices-and-outcomes-and-recommendations-for-implementation-within-the-australian-red-meat-industry/). A recommended key concept for successful adoption is the need to invest in the professional development of advisors and change practitioners to improve their technical and people skills to support producers implementing practice changes within their business.

MLA has been investing in increasing the capacity and capability of public and private extension practitioners through its Future Livestock Consultants, Livestock Advisor Essentials, Livestock Advisor Updates and mentoring in its adoption programs; Profitable Grazing Systems, EDGENetwork and BredWell FedWell. These investments are seeing improvements in hundreds of extension practitioners, but to see practice change amongst the estimated >100,000 red meat producers will require thousands of extension practitioners. MLA suggests that for the Commonwealth Government to deliver greater drought resilience to all agricultural producers, will require even more extension practitioners than estimated for red meat alone. MLA would recommend that the Future Drought Fund considers investment in increasing the capacity and number of public and private extension practitioners in technical and people skills to deliver programs to increase drought resilience amongst primary producers.

In considering how to facilitate increasing the capacity and number of extension practitioners, university partners to the FDF could look to increase or offer professional extension training in its undergraduate and postgraduate courses. In 2023, of the eleven Australian universities that offer a bachelor's degree in agriculture only four offer a subject in extension practices. Providing training opportunities to increase the skills and knowledge of extension practitioners in behavioral science, group facilitation, monitoring & evaluation and consultancy business practices would provide a legacy of skilled extension practitioners to support primary producers tackle any future industry challenges.

Recommendations:

- I. the Future Drought Fund considers investment in increasing the capacity and number of public and private extension practitioners in technical and people skills to deliver programs to increase drought resilience amongst primary producers.
- II. Encourage agricultural universities and/or state based tertiary or vocational education institutions to provide extension training for undergraduate and postgraduate courses for students and early to mid-career agriculture professionals to undertake extension training.

Yours Sincerely,

Jason Strong
Managing Director, Meat & Livestock Australia