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1<sup>st</sup> March 2023

## Response to Inquiry into Part 3 of the Future Drought Fund Act 2019

[www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/current/future-drought-fund](http://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/current/future-drought-fund)

The Ag Excellence Alliance has taken into account feedback from the SA grower group network in formulating this response. The network is in agreement that the FDF has been a significant investment in engaging farmers and industry stakeholders in developing practical and innovative solutions to drought preparedness and resilience. In particular, the formation of the Drought Hubs, with a focus on extension and adoption of research outcomes and innovative technologies, has filled an important gap in the RD&E complex. The importance of the Hubs in being the connectors in the regions and driving a collaborative approach to RD&E will only improve and become more effective as relationships and trust develops further.

The funding principles of the FDF are well documented, clear and succinct, as is the vision, aim, strategic priorities and objectives of the FDF plan. Drought and future climate projections go hand-in-hand, so including climate change projections in the next iteration of the FDF is logical. Future projections of increased intensity and duration of drought periods will make preparation for and resilience from drought even more important.

In respect to duplications of existing Commonwealth funding programs, the FDF has crossed the borders with other funding streams in particular the National Landcare Program and National Soils Strategy programs. There is the opportunity to be more specific about what constitutes drought resilience and preparedness in a future funding program. There is also overlap between FDF programs that has the potential to create duplication on the ground. A more specific drought resilience mandate and clearer direction for each of the FDF programs is likely to reduce this risk and provide clarity to the broader community on the role and function of each program, and how they are interrelated.

Transformational opportunities needed to strengthen drought resilience require greater focus in future programs. It is too easy to fall back to business as usual and focus on tweaking current systems rather than looking for transformational change. This requires a commitment to longer term investment in drought resilience projects to allow time for transformational change to be demonstrated across variable seasons, and for adoption pathways to be created, implemented and realised.

We agree with the needs for multiple levels of program at the farm, regional and national level. The program will continue to mature in its ability to develop national level projects as structures bed down and further trust develops between stakeholders. To this end improved stakeholder face to face gatherings will lead to greater collaborative opportunities developing.

The co-design process driven from the needs at the user end is critical in delivering relevance. The ad hoc announcement of funding programs with short timelines for developing project applications can make co-design a difficult process. More structured funding programs that are publicised well in

advance that articulate the key objectives of each program will enhance the quality of project applications that are built on collaboration with partners at all levels from the end user to the researchers / technologists. Clarity in programs, early communication and deep consultation will also avoid competition for funding with the organisations and farming systems groups the Drought Hub would intend to work with.

Recognising diversity in regional communities is critical to the design and roll out of programs and projects. This comes down to ensuring the people and organisations that have best resources and expertise to deliver and have the right community connections and trust are engaged in project development and delivery. Understanding the capabilities of potential program / project deliverers is critical to effective and efficient delivery of outcomes that have lasting benefit. These organisations are those that have the best understanding of barriers to change.

Co-investment in programs and projects is difficult for not-for-profit organisations. These are the organisations that quite often are driven by the end users and have the capability, networks and trust to deliver at the local level (for example farming systems groups). Partnerships with State agencies and Research and Development Corporations can often generate cash co-investment, however these arrangements need to time to develop, so are difficult to cultivate with ad hoc and short response times for funding proposals. In-kind arrangements can also be problematic as there is no consistency for calculating in-kind. Large institutions can build in significant in-kind contributions; however, this is much more difficult for small not-for-profit organisations.

Extension and adoption strategies are often not well understood or articulated in the development and delivery of programs and projects. Also, capacity to deliver effective extension projects is limited by people with the skills and experience to deliver effectively. *People create change* and the future of extension requires a shift from focusing entirely on technical content to include an understanding of people, decision making processes, impact of change and how people learn. Increasing the personal ownership in the change by engaging and focusing on the people increases the likelihood of adoption and practice change. Grower groups across the nation play a critical role in the development of sustainable and profitable broadacre farm practices through their strong relationships with RDC's, research providers, State and Commonwealth government agencies, NRM regional organisations and industry. Grower groups are 'innovation brokers', bringing farm advisors, researchers, regional NRM organisations, resellers and farmers together. They provide much of the local/on-ground information and support "soft- infrastructure" that farmers seek, and this helps industry and government achieve their goals. These groups have been critical to the on-ground delivery of the first phase of the FDF through the Drought Hub network. The ongoing support of this network to manage and demonstrate their value in the co-design process and delivery of effective RD&E programs and projects will be important for future effectiveness of the FDF investments.

Supporting the development of extension skills in the next generation of project development and delivery personnel will be critical to the success of future FDF program. Investment in this area of training will pay significant dividends in achieving drought resilience and preparedness in regional communities. The National Grower Group Collective has been addressing this issue with funding support from the National Landcare Program and has developed a strategic plan to address the future needs of extension delivery capacity in the grower group network, focusing on the key pillars of collaboration, capacity building, and extension development and delivery.

Yours sincerely

Mark Stanley

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