



Inquiry into the effectiveness of the Future Drought Fund

Riverine Plains Inc's submission to the Productivity
Commission

3rd of March 2023

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Overarching statement

Riverine Plains Inc is an independent, member based not for profit Incorporated Association (NSW) with over 450 members and over 30 service providers as partners. Our office is based in Mulwala New South Wales (NSW) on the border of NSW and Victoria. As a consequence we work closely with both the Victorian and southern NSW Drought Resilience Adoption and Innovation Hubs (Hub).

As a direct consequence of the Future Drought Fund (FDF) Riverine Plains has utilised the opportunities provided by the FDF to increase relevance, impact, capacity, capability and value to our members, agricultural businesses, and the community right across our region. The FDF has enabled Riverine Plains to provide locally validated information and projects that are relevant, accurate and greatly assist farmers in their on-farm decision making. Projects in collaboration with other farming systems groups (FSGs) and with research providers has enhanced our capacity to meet local producers' needs.

Riverine Plains strongly supports the investment made by the Australian government in the Hubs. This support has enabled Riverine Plains to leverage our work and build effective on the ground programs and projects designed to support our producers and the broader community. By doing so this increases the resilience of producers and their ability to manage the impacts of drought and an increasingly variable climate.

In addition, the Hub has enabled us to reduce fragmentation and duplication across FSGs, it has enhanced collaboration and cooperation and enabled us to focus on public good projects.

Recommendations are captured in the following themes.

1. Review Hub structure and function
2. Project length, development and focus
3. Lengthen funding cycles
4. Clarity around expectations and reporting
5. Capacity and capability Building

Background on Riverine Plains Inc.

Riverine Plains Inc is an independent, member based not for profit Incorporated Association (NSW) with over 450 members and over 30 service providers as partners. The Riverine Plains Inc membership base extends across north-eastern Victoria and southern NSW. Of relevance to this inquiry, we are members of both the Victorian and southern NSW Hubs and as such, can give a well-informed perspective, grounded in experiences from different operating systems.

As an organisation driven and owned by farmers, we specialise in timely, independent and relevant farmer-driven research, extension and validation activities that delivers on-the-ground benefits for local producers. We believe in and act strongly on the basis of "farmers inspiring farmers" and our mission is to build prosperity in our members through building relevant knowledge and skills.

Are the funding principles, vision, aim, strategic priorities, and objectives of the Funding Plan (attachment B) appropriate and effective?

Riverine Plains does broadly support the funding principles, vision, aim and strategic priorities of the current Funding Plan, suggestions for improvement are captured within this submission. In summary, the FDF has proved effective and enabled us to:

- increase employment in the region by taking our staff from 4 to 12 staff in the preceding two years
- increase our membership base by 20% over the past 12 months
- increase our research and demonstration sites from 7 to 24 across our region
- diversify our research and project portfolio from a focus on grains and soils to now include projects in drought management, climate mitigation and management, livestock, agtech, building resilience in communities, weather stations and environmental management
- enhance our and our members' capacity to create change for our region as evidenced by the number of attendees at our events - 2000 farmers now engaged in our activities as compared to 600 in 2020
- focus more on extension, which facilitates change management on farm
- invest in locally relevant, timely pilot projects through the Victorian Drought Hub
- increase our engagement and collaboration with other Farming System Groups (FSGs) both through the Hubs, taking us from three to 20 codesigned, collaborative regionally relevant projects.

We are now nationally recognised as a research partner of choice, and we partner with a range of leading universities and research and extension organisations in Australia to perform locally-relevant, farming systems projects. We have previously engaged with other Farming Systems Groups (FSGs), however through the FDF, this has increased significantly, and the collaboration is yielding efficiencies internally as well as positive impact on the ground for our members and broader regional and rural community.

Review Hub structure and function

1 Recommendation - Review all Hub Knowledge Broker roles to determine the most efficient practices and principles to embed them in a streamlined, consistent manner nationally.

Currently there are Knowledge Brokers positions within the Hubs themselves, within the University networks and within the FSGs so a concentrated effort to understand where value can be leveraged further at all three levels will be useful.

The Knowledge Brokers situated in each FSG are an opportunity to bring challenges and opportunities identified through community consultation to the Hubs. The Knowledge Brokers in the Hubs we thought were to take questions, challenges and opportunities from FSG Knowledge Brokers and then research what has been done on the raised topic, connect with researchers/other organisations who have knowledge or experience or work with FSGs to develop a project for submission if there is a gap. The University based Knowledge Brokers were to work closely with the Hub Knowledge Brokers to bring them research of relevance. Being partners of both the Victorian and sNSW drought hubs has exposed us to the different ways these positions operate.

The FSG Knowledge Broker role has been responsible for continual community consultation, (see Appendix 1 and 2) however a process to streamline and make use of that information needs improvement to maximise the value of these positions. There have been challenges when the FSG Knowledge Broker brings ideas to the Hubs with little support to further these ideas and no

further apparent outlet, bringing into question the intent of the Knowledge Broker network across all three levels, the Universities, the Hubs and the FSGs.

Hub Knowledge Broker roles have been helpful in the following ways

- every funding round pulling together all stakeholders to pitch their project ideas to facilitate collaboration.
- helping to build project proposals ensuring they will address producers' identified issues.

Areas for improvement for Hub Knowledge Brokers are as follows;

- proactively collate information derived from questions into simple language for dispersal to all Hub members, both locally and nationally.
- develop a template for knowledge sharing and simplifying research into common language for end users
- collation of themes across Hubs to enable storage and dispersal of common sought-after information
- better utilisation of the grow^{AG} platform to understand previous research and investment
- ensure community consultation is fed to the Commonwealth to help shape future funding rounds and feedback the actions and response from the Commonwealth to Hub participants
- clarity on the difference between the communications team and the knowledge brokering roles.

2 Recommendation – Review the governance model and operations of each Hub to increase efficiency and transparency.

The governance models of the Hubs are unclear and greater transparency in this regard would be welcome. The Hub in WA is the only one hosted outside a university. As there is no publicly available data or information on different structures, project costs, project types, geographic spread and impact, it is hard to comment on the most effective hub model. However having a number of different models provides an opportunity to compare structures to elicit the most cost effective, nimble and impactful way of moving forward.

Project length, development and focus.

3 Recommendation - Review consultation and previous submissions and determine national themes of significance for future program investment

During the development of recent proposals for the FDF, it's apparent there are project consistent themes across jurisdictions. An example of this was demonstrated in the Extension and Adoption funding round where Tasmania, South Australia, Victoria and NSW all had a focus on containment feeding. Because of the limited pool of funding available in any one grant round, and the open nature of the round, it was thought only one containment feeding program would be supported, despite it being widely recognised as a key to unlocking success as articulated in the specific consultation Riverine Plains delivered as Hub "Pilot project" in collaboration with numerous FSGs.

For further information on the community consultation describing the need for further investment in containment feeding, please refer to Appendix 3 in this submission.

Additional national themed funding rounds deserving further consideration. Being a part of two Hubs has given us a unique insight into consistent themes across state borders. These are as follows

- Mental health promotion, training and socialisation
- Business resilience with an emphasis on decision making
- Nitrogen banking and resultant carbon sequestration capacity in soils
- Capture and utilisation of farm data.

Further insights could be gained by re-visiting unsuccessful submissions to determine the most common themes.

4 Recommendation - Consider more long-term projects with project direction revision dates built in.

When looking at a change management process, particularly when implementing innovation from research trials and demonstrations, it is important to run projects over at least two years to consider seasonal influences. For example, if the trial is run for one year which experiences above or below average rainfall, it makes interpreting results for an average year difficult. It is widely recognised that long-term projects deliver increased adoption on the ground as over time and seasons, farmers confidence increases and there is capacity to measure the economics over time, an important key driver in the change management and adoption process.

The “Extension and Adoption of Drought Resilient Farm Practices” and the “Long Term Trials” are helpful initiatives that will help to deliver impact on the ground, where it is needed most and we strongly support the role out of similarly shaped projects in future.

To demonstrate from the ground up the importance of longer-term work, an example.

Our 'Improving soils to optimise water use on farm' was an FDF round 1 project. It involved working with a group of farmers to build understanding of soils and soil mapping, so when drought occurred, they better understood soil management principles and practices. Specifically, the project built the understanding of stubble management and alternatives to burning to increase ground cover, soil moisture retention, increased carbon and microbial levels in soils.

The project spanned 18 months which only provided time and funding for one growing season. This was unfortunate as the farmers had momentum and were interested in looking at other soil treatments over varying seasons. A one-year project doesn't allow for consideration of seasonal effects of the treatments and importantly doesn't elicit any valuable economic data, a key instrument in adoption on farm.

Because of the success of this project, we are looking for alternative sources of funding to continue this work, specifically with the Grains Research and Development Corporation (GRDC).

5 Recommendation – Consider open continuous call for funding to deliver timely, regionally relevant projects.

One of the most impactful things we have had as part of the Victorian Hub has been the “pilot project” facility built into our contracts. This has enabled Riverine Plains to undertake pilot projects driven by requests from end users, when they are needed to ensure impact is delivered in a manner that elicits practice change. Pilot projects we have invested in to date are as follows:

- containment feeding industry scan and consultation identifying gaps
- drought proofing crops with additional foliar and soil treatments
- de-risking farmer businesses through the inclusion of renewable energy
- enhancing female participation in agtech.

These have been our highest impact projects and have been used to inform larger, longer-term investments at low cost and low risk. Importantly they are regionally relevant, timely and nimble without having to wait for a funding round that suits a given region, season and situation.

Having funding rounds open for continuous submission will ensure projects are well considered, regionally relevant, collaborative, and timely when submitted, and it ensures workloads are managed by staff as all grants typically come in at the same time leading to burn out and mistakes. This will enable a more strategic and well-written approach to planning and project delivery.

The FDF has a strategy, so it ought to be up to Hubs and partners to pitch projects that are regionally significant, timely and that fit the strategy, ensuring flexibility and projects land when they are needed, rather than meeting a funding round. If not possible to have all FDF funding continuous, portion off a percentage for use in this way.

6 Recommendation - Enhance engagement with RDCs and recognition of their long-standing systems for engagement and funding

Following on from the above point, continuous funding rounds will foster greater investment with RDCs. The RDCs have been trying to engage with the Hubs and in their current funding structures, this has proven difficult. Each RDC sets their funding rounds at different times of the year and priorities are developed using long standing and independent panels of farmers.

Often the FDF funding calls do not align with long standing strategies and operating systems of the RDCs. Trying to fit the FDF funding rounds in with RDC funding priorities needs more consideration as it is too soon to determine the impact and possibilities of working more closely on projects to leverage value.

Should the scope of the Fund be broadened to support resilience to climate change? Why or why not?

Riverine Plains would welcome the scope of the Fund being broadened to support building increased resilience to climate variability. The increasing frequency and severity of droughts is we know, a consequence of an increasingly variable climate but is only one challenge derived from this. Our rationale is provided below.

7 Recommendation - Consider widening the mandate of the FDF to cover climate, rather than only drought.

During a period of above average rainfall, farmers are less focused on improving drought resilience, but rather are reaching out for information on how they can improve their productivity and sustainability across a range of climatic conditions. Riverine Plains understands the value of preparing for drought well in advance of it occurring, we fully understand the 4 stages of drought and that each needs different management. The four stages of drought being

- coming into drought
- living through drought
- coming out of drought
- preparing for the next drought.

Currently, we are finding farmers are tired of hearing the term 'drought' being used repetitively and to some extent are 'tuning out' or 'glazing over' at the mention of the word. This negative reaction is diminishing the impact of the work we are doing on your behalf. We are finding some farmers have chosen not to attend an event as they thought the topic was not relevant to them at the time.

The FDF could consider changing the focus to maximise farmer participation and effectively increase their resilience to all climatic conditions, as we know climate volatility will increasingly challenge farm production. Farmers are more interested in how they can 'be better prepared for

the future’, ‘increase profitability and sustainability’ or how they can ‘manage adverse seasonal conditions’ than improving drought preparedness, particularly given the previous two seasons.

To mitigate this risk, and to stimulate engagement on a deeper level, consider changing the mandate of the FDF to cover the management of climate variability.

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?

Drought resilience is only one aspect of a farm business. There are a number of topics requiring inquisition, that may not be directly related to drought, but with an increasingly variable climate are becoming important. Riverine Plains supports a broadening of the focus beyond drought resilience.

8 Recommendation - Ensure Biosecurity is addressed in future rounds.

Although the current focus of the FDF is solely on drought, one of the biggest challenges facing agriculture in a changing climate is increased biosecurity risks. If the FDF ends up widening the scope to include climate volatility and mitigation, co-investing in biosecurity projects with organisations like Animal Health Australia, Plant Health Australia and the State Governments will help ensure biosecurity risks are minimised.

As the climate warms and becomes more volatile, diseases are moving further south. Additional to this is the increased flow of equipment and produce as farmers are buying properties in different climatic zones to de-risk their enterprises. Because seasonal conditions are moving and changing and disease risk is constantly shifting, there is heightened need for biosecurity monitoring, diagnosis and research.

The FDF is currently focused on future proofing agriculture in drought, however with a focus change to include climate, we believe biosecurity is one of the most important things to consider investing in.

Biosecurity underpins not only food safety and security for Australian’s but also is imperative in maintaining trade and market access. For a country that produces enough food to feed six times our population, and with a large reliance on export markets, this is important as agriculture is crucial for rural communities’ economic stability.

Where we specifically feel the Hubs could play a key role is in biosecurity preparedness at a local regional level. Despite the implementation of strict, if somewhat complicated, biosecurity arrangements in Australia, the risk of an exotic pest or disease incursion continues to increase. This places increasing pressure on a biosecurity system that successive reviews have identified as being under-resourced and lacking the agility to deal with emerging threats. Furthermore, what

investment is available is predominately directed toward more costly eradication programs or the containment and management of established pests and diseases despite the clear economic benefits of preventing entry of exotic pests and diseases and being better prepared when incursions do occur.

We have been approached by the southern NSW Hub to consider what role we as a key farming systems group could play in identifying opportunities to promote government, industry, and community collaboration on a regional basis to enhance biosecurity prevention and preparedness. This is not intended to address or replace quarantine, eradication and containment functions that are already covered by the current system but to complement them by harnessing the reach and expertise that resides within regional communities. Riverine Plains sees considerable opportunities in assisting our regional communities understand and prepare for these threats, but on the basis of a participatory approach built from the ground up rather than regulatory from the top down.

Clarity around Expectations and Reporting

9 Recommendation - Provide clarity on preference for funding either independently or through the Hubs

The FDF set up an incredibly innovative and impactful model in the eight Hubs across Australia. There has been some confusion with funding rounds as to whether, projects should come through the Hubs or independent of the Hubs, but utilising the networks established through them. This doesn't diminish the importance of the Hubs in any way as the networks formed continue to be utilised and need ongoing support. We have been given different advice by the two Hubs we are engaged in and seek guidance from the Department on the best way to progress projects.

10 Recommendation - Overall contracting and reporting processes require simplification and improvement

Timing of funding cycles and the now understood time for contracting complex, multiparty public-private partnerships requires further consideration. It is important that the start of projects is timed to enable commencement at seasonally relevant times. Contracting typically takes four to six months from the time a successful application is awarded. For example, a two-year project which takes six months to contract only allows 18 months for the project to run. Given a cropping or pasture program, or a livestock breeding program typically runs over 12 months, 18 months only allows for one complete season, see Recommendation 4 for more information.

To solve this for a winter cropping project, put a call for projects in March, the round closes in May, assessments of successful projects is done by August and contracting can be completed by February, enabling winter sowing to start. Something else to help with this would be a continuous funding round, see Recommendation 5 for further information.

The Monitoring Evaluation and Learning (MEL) reporting process is the greatest challenge we face and there is a need for the FDF to streamline the information gathering and reporting process. We understand the need to collate information for taxpayer purposes, however the time spent on the process is disproportionate to the value it provides our members and taxpayers. Of importance is the fact that the data we provide doesn't circle back to us, so we cannot then shape priorities to address gaps in farm knowledge or community resilience.

Additionally, some of the evaluation questions asked of participants at events are onerous and invasive, and it is difficult to understand the necessity of collecting some of this data, for example age, gender, enterprise, income, Aboriginality. It would be more important to elicit value of the program, ideas for another program as we can internally give you overarching information on the aforementioned if required.

Conducting effective evaluation is hindered by the noise of excessive and irrelevant questions, and dealing with this data is impractical and the return on investment of our time is not apparent.. Long evaluations without a clear value proposition back to the end user means not as many surveys are filled in, reducing the understanding the FDF can elicit from this valuable feedback mechanism.

Capacity and capability building

11 Recommendation - Embed extension specialists in FSGs in each Hub

In any change management process, it is imperative resources are put towards extension. Extension done well, in simple terms is de-risking the change management process and takes time, one on one or small group interactions with farmers and follow up. There is an opportunity, if not a pressing urgency, to develop a more robust and agile approach to increasing resilience in regional and rural communities by utilising the skills and knowledge already in these communities.

Extension skills are paramount and need to be learned and embedded in local people with local, lived experience, without these specialist skills, opportunities get lost. There is a skill in being a good extension officer and this is very different to a Knowledge Broker type role. By increasing our specific extension capacity, we will ensure research is being embedded in businesses ensuring resilience and decreasing reliance on funding from government when extenuating circumstances prevail.

A large part of extension is sharing knowledge in a relevant, timely way, but also to work with farmers and other organisations to develop projects of relevance. The latter is crucial, known informally as a participatory approach, it leads to collaborative project development which is crucial to start the change management process. By engaging in a holistic participatory approach, we are able to put into action the goal of the Hubs to build resilience and increase adoption of key research and development outcomes.

12 Recommendation - Continue the focus on capacity and capability building

Development and training of Riverine Plains staff through FDF initiatives has improved the quality and effectiveness of delivered research, development and extension activities. Furthermore, critiquing our evaluation strategies is enabling us to hastily gather participants feedback and implement required changes to ensure the focus of our work directly aligns to their interests and demand. By extending information effectively on key topics addressing identified knowledge gaps, we increase farmer participation at events. Further work needs to be done on this, for further information, see Recommendation 12.

Sitting outside the Hubs, a program run by the Australian Rural Leadership Foundation in the “More Resilient Communities” theme, is an example of beneficial leadership training provided to a Riverine Plains staff member. The program matched the staff member with a mentor who was further advanced in their career and involved one on one mentoring for six months, as well as webinars in leadership. The program enhanced our employee’s confidence, understanding of their strengths and weaknesses and provided strategies to advance their careers and increase their effectiveness.

Another example of a project in the “More Resilient Communities theme” that was funded through the Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal (FRRR). This project was titled ‘Enhancing Community Networks on the Riverine Plains’. The aim of the project was to increase community networks around drought resilience and to get farmers thinking about drought preparation. Small workshops were run across 25 community groups, facilitating discussion around what worked and what didn’t in the previous drought and what people should be doing to prepare for the next drought. The workshops brought together rural financial counselling services and specialists, Traditional Owners, women, youth, livestock nutritionists, bankers, agronomists, accountants and farmers. This was a very successful project as it helped us understand community needs and has fed into subsequent project applications ensuring we are not only pioneering new initiatives, by building on known needs in our community.

We welcome the opportunity to present to the panel in person and hope this submission is of use in shaping the next iteration of the FDF.

Kind regards

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Chair

Catherine Marriott
Chief Executive Officer