

TAS Farm Innovation Hub Submission to the Productivity Commission Inquiry into the effectiveness, efficiency, and appropriateness of Part 3 of the Future Drought Fund Act 2019

March 2023

Overview of the TAS Farm Innovation Hub

The Drought Resilience Adoption and Innovation Hub Tasmania (TAS Farm Innovation Hub), is hosted by the Tasmanian Institute of Agriculture (TIA), University of Tasmania and brings together a network of twenty-five partners, including peak industry bodies, farmer networks, regional natural resource management bodies, water managers, rural financial service providers and universities. Working with our partners, we help Tasmanian farmers, and those who support them, to build valuable relationships, access critical information and participate in knowledge-building activities to drive more innovation in their business, care for land and waterways and enhance community wellbeing.

Since our establishment in June 2021, the hub has built a strong foundation as a mechanism for facilitation and collaboration to build drought resilience by:

- Establishing our team, national and local networks, and effective place-based governance and strategy;
- Building relationships with diverse partners and stakeholders; and
- Supporting on-ground projects to address locally defined drought resilience priorities, delivered through hub partners and their networks.

The hub is now well positioned to capitalise on these foundations. The next 18 months will focus on implementation and delivery at community and farm levels. We have built strong relationships with our partners, but time is needed to build and earn trust through delivery. Having longer-term certainty and stability is fundamental to delivering the medium and long-term changes that the FDF aims to contribute to. For example, at a farm level, adopting new practices and technology is a process of building trust and allowing for experimentation and learning with farmers in line with the agricultural calendar and seasonal workloads. Longer-term certainty would provide a more realistic frame to support institutional and farm-level practice change.

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

Notwithstanding considerations to broaden the scope to support resilience to climate change (below), the hub considers the funding principles, vision, aim, strategic priorities, and objectives of the Funding Plan to be largely appropriate.

In particular, funding principles relating to co-design (8), recognition of the diversity in agricultural production (10), and collaboration with existing networks (11), have been fundamental to the establishment of a regionally relevant and tailored model to support agricultural practice change and drought resilience in Tasmania.

Our experience is that delivering programs based on these principles takes time, especially when engaging with diverse partners and stakeholders with varied expectations and little certainty regarding the longevity or continuity of the hubs and other FDF programs. It has been challenging to establish the hub in line with these principles and build trust with our partners while delivering early outputs.

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?

We consider a key strength of the FDF is the systems-based view of resilience reflected in the strategic priorities (economic, environmental and social resilience) and funding themes (information, planning, practices and community) – which better reflects how farmers and the broader agricultural community consider drought resilience needs and priorities. At the same time, the sheer number of programs and grants operating in Tasmania (all with co-design requirements and targeting largely the same stakeholder and end-user groups) can create confusion and stakeholder engagement fatigue. There is an opportunity for better coordination and

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communication on FDF activities within Tasmania to manage these issues. This is discussed further under opportunities to enhance collaboration and planning below.

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

A broader focus on climate resilience would enable a more regionally relevant and systems-based approach to the activities of the FDF programs in Tasmania that better respond to the realities of farm planning and risk management, and community capacity building needs.

While many areas of Tasmania – especially the Midlands and East Coast – regularly experience drought, across Tasmania, the impacts of a changing climate and increasing extremes will challenge current farming practices and knowledge. Ensuring community wellbeing and resilience will require an approach to adaptation and risk management that encompasses the full spectrum of likely climate impacts.

We believe the only risk to such a change in scope would relate to public perceptions and confusion about the purpose of the hubs and FDF more broadly. Hubs have, to some extent, already broadened their scope with the channelling of funds to progress the National Agricultural Innovation Agenda, which has demonstrated the value of having a regionally-based, national network of hubs to facilitate connections across the research to commercialisation spectrum.

How could the Fund enhance engagement with and benefits for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people?

We are committed to developing trusted and meaningful relationships with Tasmanian Aboriginal people. The hub has defined goals to build our capacity and skills, and support a small number of targeted drought resilience projects with Aboriginal organisations who are custodians of land currently under agricultural production. In pursuing these goals, we are working with our partners and collaborators who have established and trusted relationships with Aboriginal community organisations.

The ability to tailor our goals and approach to reflect the hub's starting point and Tasmanian circumstances has been critical. However, we acknowledge this may not align with, or deliver to, the FDF's expectations for engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Greater clarity and guidance around the intentions of the FDF in this space would be welcome and suggest any initiatives would be of greater value if Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people could define their own goals of engagement with the FDF rather than a top-down approach. There is a tremendous opportunity to learn about resilience from different cultural perspectives, however, it is essential to build up to this point with due respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, autonomy, and cultural and intellectual property rights.

Any effort to enhance engagement needs to account for the existing heavy engagement load that weighs on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to consult and provide feedback on a huge range of government and non-government initiatives, allow the time and space for communities to define their own goals within the FDF, recognise the diverse voices and perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and to undertake this engagement underpinned by a long-term commitment to working together.

Feedback to the hub from Aboriginal leaders has emphasised the nature of FDF grant rounds excludes their participation, with short timeframes and narrow guidelines that force compartmentalised, rather than holistic approaches to resilience and emphasise agricultural land use.

What opportunities are there to enhance collaboration in planning and delivering drought resilience initiatives, including with state and territory governments?

Strong collaboration between the hubs has supported improved delivery, problem solving, and information sharing. The National Communities of Practice and Cross-hub collaboration grants have consolidated this network.

While a strength of FDF is its complementary programs, the number of programs has created confusion among stakeholders and unnecessary duplication by program delivery partners. In Tasmania, the FDF programs compete for the same target audience and rely on many of the same organisations and producers for co-design and implementation. The TAS hub has initiated regular meetings of organisations implementing FDF programs

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in the state to raise awareness of activities, share information, and identify collaboration opportunities. However, it has taken time for each program to become established enough to be in a position where it is possible to look for meaningful collaboration activities. With state government programs now underway, opportunities to collaborate are increasing.

Better coordination and mapping of state-based FDF funded programs and projects at the outset would have assisted in coordinating programs and on-ground activities. It has taken some time for the hub to understand the suite of FDF programs implemented in Tasmania – which is changing with each grant round, new program or service. Greater consultation with the hubs and other organisations implementing FDF programs as new programs are designed could help ensure that collaboration and coordination opportunities are built in, or at least that connections can be supported across programs. It may also support new programs to establish more quickly, building on, and coordinating with, those that are already established.

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?

Relationships with the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF, e.g. via communities of practice) and the FDF (e.g. through the Hubs Advisory Committee) have been critical in supporting adaptive management of the hub to progress outcomes in line with expectations and based on our regional context.

The hubs have proven to be a valuable collaborator and delivery mechanism for other programs that contribute to agricultural innovation and productivity. For example, through the delivery and hosting of Agricultural Innovation grant activities (DAFF), Regional Soils Coordinator (BLCC), and Innovation Broker pilot (Agrifutures). However, these opportunities were unforeseen in the initial planning and design of hub activities. Engaging with these opportunities – though valuable – diverted time and resources away from planned activities and added heavy workloads to new and understaffed teams.

The hub would appreciate greater coordination and planning from administrators across programs regarding grant calls. Successive announcements and calls that overlap with peak agricultural and cultural events, combined with short application timeframes, undermine co-design and collaboration principles and favours organisations with high capacity and established networks that can rapidly pull together applications.

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