

Future Drought Fund
Productivity Commission
GPO Box 1428
Canberra ACT 2601

11 July 2023

Dear Commissioners

Coutts J&R are the monitoring, evaluation and learning consultants for the Climate Services for Agriculture program. We would like to submit the following comments in relation to information request 6 and information request 7 which were part of the *Review of Part 3 of the Future Drought Fund Act, Interim report*. These are detailed below.

Information request 6:

A MEL focus from the beginning of the program increases better integrated MEL process.

The CSA program engaged Coutts J&R as an external MEL consultant early 2021 to integrate MEL planning and data collection systems. This included designing a MEL plan in consultation with the program team to gain their expertise and buy-in to the MEL process. It has been found that over the life of the program so far that involving the program team in data collection method design and bringing them along in the MEL process has worked well to ensure relevant outcome focused data is being collected around program level outcomes and learnings are being incorporated in the program.

An FDF MEL framework for CSA was slow to be rolled out.

An FDF directed MEL framework was not provided until mid-2021. This was not too much of an issue for the CSA program as it had engaged external MEL consultants who had already designed a MEL approach with tools and strategies for gathering relevant data for reporting against outcomes. For programs in a different position, this may have proved more challenging in terms of designing integrated MEL processes.

The FDF CSA MEL framework is siloed.

At a Fund level, there needs to be clarity and visibility of how the programs interrelate and engage with each other to producer better outcomes. This extends to the MEL framework. While situating CSA within the FDF and linking the program with DR.SAT as a climate information provider, the program level MEL framework does not provide much clarity in terms of where CSA sits in relation to other FDF programs. To meet this at some level, CSA has included a success measure under the CI-2 Outcome *Users take action in response to the improved information and understanding* around the use of CSA's information in other FDF programs. This is important, however its success does also hinge in part on an underpinning assumption of the FDF developed program logic - that communication campaigns and linkages across related (FDF) programs are effective. This assumption does not define what effective means in relation to CSA and which programs need to be linked for the assumption to prove true.

It would be beneficial for an overarching FDF MEL framework to be shared among the programs that details how the data across programs is being collated and reported against Fund objectives. It should include shared outcomes focused on effective program integration to achieve better climate resilience outcomes. This needs to be reported in the FDF annual report. To date the CSA program information included in the FDF annual report has been very output focused, despite the program level MEL report focusing on outcomes.

Information request 7:

Measuring the CSA program against long-term climate based decision-making outcomes is contextual and unrealistic.

There are three key issues to consider around measuring CSA's progress against FDF outcomes. The first is the nature of the CSA program as an IT based platform being developed based on user-centric and co-design principles; the second is that the types of decisions-making it is targeting are long term and not necessarily quick on-ground changes; and the third is that it CSA is operating in a complex climate information space.

1. **User-centric development** – The CSA program has been focused on developing its user interface and data presentation in a way that is useful and relevant for its intended users. This is necessarily a time-consuming process, requiring ongoing IT development and iterations and user engagement. By its nature, the CSA program is engaged in a trust building exercise that cannot be truncated to allow time to demonstrate to its engaged stakeholders that their views and feedback are being considered in the platform design, and that the data is robust and reliable. It is not realistic to expect widespread use and decision making based on what has essentially been a climate information tool and development process.
2. **Longer term decision making** – The types of decision-making being targeted by the CSA platform, whether at the producer, service provider or broader industry/regional government/NRM planning level, is based around long term change. Changes on the ground may be incremental at first and without immediate outcomes. Expecting widespread on-ground change and action as a result of CSA information by the end of its initial four years is not realistic – particularly as its primary focus has been on developing and delivering the tool. What is realistic is to demonstrate that the CSA program is on the pathway to being part of the decision-making processes relating to developing long-term climate resilience.
3. **A complex climate information space** – Longer-term climate planning is a relatively new conversation for producers. This type of information is not necessarily being actively or regularly sought out and may not be immediately understandable or at the front of mind of potential users. Given the broader climate conversation and the types of decision being made on farm, it is not realistic to expect to build a tool and achieve wide-spread adoption within three or four years.

A central MEL database helps collate outcome focused data.

The CSA program has worked to integrate a MEL mindset into the program from the start of its implementation phase which has proved important. This has included the development of a secure online central MEL database which has data entry forms designed around the program's outcomes and success measures. The types of data being collected in this way include stakeholder engagement/social research activities, communication outputs and narratives. The data being collected is tagged where relevant as relating to outcomes and success measures. There is also

opportunity to record learnings which can be used to inform future engagement or other program activities. From a CSA MEL perspective, this means that relevant data is collated and available for analysis and reporting against outcomes as and when required.

Monitoring and data gathering tools should be designed around outcome reporting.

Program data collection tools should be designed with reporting against outcomes in mind. It is important that feedback sheets for example are designed to gain outcome relevant data. The CSA MEL consultants have worked with the engagement team to ensure any event feedback questions asked are outcome aligned and therefore useful for reporting.

Narratives are an effective tool for collecting outcome focused qualitative data.

Where qualitative and contextual data is important, particularly to demonstrate the pathway to impact, narratives are an effective way of collecting and presenting evidence of change and progress towards outcomes. The CSA program is focused on narratives as one way to demonstrate its pathway to impact. As a structured approach to gathering qualitative data, narratives are helpful for collecting tangible evidence against program outcomes. As a story telling approach they work because¹:

- **Storytelling values and respects diverse ways of knowing and learning.** It is empowering, participatory and is based on popular knowledge.
- **Stories can be used effectively alongside statistics and surveys.** Including stories in your program evaluations puts a face on the facts and figures, and helps you figure out what's working, what's not, and why.
- **Stories speak to a broad audience.** Including your stakeholders' voices and perspectives can help you communicate to your stakeholders, your funders, and the larger community what you are accomplishing and why your program is so important.

On their own, narratives tell valuable stories about potential and actual impact, when collated together, they form a powerful evidence base demonstrating the pathway to change. The CSA MEL consultants produced a narrative report at the end of 2022 reporting directly against program outcomes. Based on these real examples, an evidence backed pathway to impact diagram was developed for CSA and progress could be demonstrated against each of the program outcomes. This report will be updated at the end of 2023.

Yours sincerely,

Amy Samson, *Principal Consultant*

Dr Jeff Coutts, *Director*

Ben Coutts, *Principal Data Analyst*

Coutts J&R

¹ Sukop S 2007, *Storytelling Approaches to Program Evaluation: An Introduction* (<https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/read/47754205/storytelling-approaches-to-program-evaluation-the-california->)