

Submission to the Australian Government - Productivity Commission

Future Drought Fund Inquiry

(In response to findings in the interim report)

I survived the millennium drought.

It was relentless. Year after year with no rain. And no money. Tough decisions are hard to make even when you are in the right frame of mind. When it's all too hard – it's even harder.

A farmer's self-worth, his or her self-esteem, is tied up with growing a good crop, or raising productive animals. Australian Farmers are very good at what we do. When we can't do what we are good at – we suffer. Depression was widespread in my community – in our farm group and amongst our neighbours. It would be very easy to see this as a health problem. It is not.

The things that made a real difference were the people in the local farming community who could organize, rally and put together opportunities for farmers to gather. It is not simple. If you gather together people doing it tough – it can spiral negatively. What it needs is a clever hand to guide farmers towards perspective. To get out of their own head and see opportunities.

Time and time again we know that those who came best out of the drought were those who could make a decision – to destock, to diversify, to slash expenses. It was those who were stuck in 'fight or flight' that fared the worst.

Our service industries – our medical professionals, our financial counsellors, all the people who advise us – are not always the best placed to make a real difference. What we need are leaders. The people in our community who have the skills, the networks and real connections in their neighbourhood and in their farming family communities – to bring hope; or understanding or perspective.

Leaders will create an environment where making the hard decisions are easier. And with the hard decisions made and a plan in place – Australian farmers will be better able to adapt to the adversity which could have destroyed them, their family and their community.

I was lucky enough to visit the community of Mogo on the NSW South Coast after the bushfires. We spoke to a great number of locals about what happened in the fire and in the aftermath. Without a shadow of a doubt, the most effective leader in that community was the guy with the coffee van. He knew everyone. He was able to reach out to those who were more remote, those who were socially and physically isolated. He was connected to other community leaders including the local indigenous mob. He was the reason that the whole town responded immediately to reach everyone they could and then single handedly set up the relief effort in a sensible and equitable way. It was not the official structures that were agile enough – they didn't have the motivation or the knowledge. Council, Health, Emergency Services are too big and bureaucratic in that circumstance. What worked was leadership in place.

Drought resilience is about people not the weather. How people respond to adversity will determine how we survive the next drought. And how quickly we bounce back. We have learnt a lot from the past – we could do so much better next time if we just invest in people.

Social resilience is the critical piece in a nationally funded Federal Drought Fund. Without this investment – we will not get the impact we need – to respond, to react and to survive.

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