

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 University of Tasmania (UTAS) within the Tasmanian Institute of Agriculture (TIA) and brings together a network of 25 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.

This submission responds thematically to interim findings, recommendations, and information requests as per the Commission's Interim Report.

Climate change resilience and program scope

Information Request 1

Explicitly recognising resilience to climate change as an objective for the FDF would allow hubs (and other FDF programs) to broaden our language to reflect priorities of our regional communities. This does not necessarily require a wholesale change in scope of FDF activities, but better enables program implementers to contextualise and connect drought resilience activities to broader concerns and priorities around building climate resilience.

This could be supported through better coordination / complementarity within DAFF programs that address climate resilience in agriculture.

Establishing a drought and climate change resilience knowledge management system

Interim Recommendation 2

The TAS Farm Innovation Hub recognises the value of having a knowledge management system to improve sharing of existing tools, information, practices, and support as part of facilitating drought and climate change resilience across programs.

While findings from the NOUS Group drought resilience information system review have not been made available, NOUS' sharing of initial insights with the hub network flagged the vast amount of existing information and tools, but that these were hard to navigate, access and translate into action. At the same time, the need and interest in a shared knowledge management system or information platform is a recurring theme raised by hub stakeholders.

Development of a system that meets expectations and avoids known limitations of similar platforms is likely to be challenging. Key considerations include:

- Clear and realistic definition of how the system will be used and by whom, and their involvement as part of design and implementation.
- Upfront planning and resourcing for ongoing maintenance and updating of the system to ensure legacy.
- Capacity for regional and industry filters and quality control that builds on, rather than duplicating, existing resources.

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- Digital and offline / hard copy resources, with localised support to facilitate access, local application, and learning for implementation of tools and resources.

There is significant scope for national leadership in this space, however experiences with DR SAT and CSA are also insightful. There is a risk that nationally-led initiatives lack accessibility and relevance regionally – investment in a knowledge platform needs to include development of regionally relevant (and developed) resources, and the human networks and capacity for sharing, adapting and supporting their use. Unless there are direct benefits to the regions from this system, there is a risk that local stakeholders and partners see this as an investment in the FDF architecture, that could have been better invested in local information and knowledge resources.

Emphasis on environmental outcomes and collaboration across National Landcare Program, NRM Programs and Regional NRM Bodies

Information Request 2

The TAS Farm Innovation Hub supports the Commission's recognition of the value of contributing to environmental outcomes. One of the five priority themes that guides hub activities includes activities that contribute to:

Landscapes: *Building knowledge and skills to increase the health of soil, vegetation and waterways, and measure on-farm natural capital to support drought resilience*

There is sufficient scope in the hub's current objectives to invest and collaborate in this area in a way that complements, rather than duplicates the roles of other programs and organisations. The TAS Farm Innovation Hub has built strong relationships with each of our three NRM regional bodies, key conservation NGOs, and community groups, and have funded on-ground projects that include e.g. development of a landscape scale revegetation strategy to guide revegetation on multiple farms, and natural capital and biodiversity planning. In addition, co-hosting of the Regional Soils Coordinator (RSC) with the hub and NRM South is helping to better connect expertise and skills to contribute to environmental outcomes in the context of agricultural production.

Critical barriers to working more effectively with organisations who are well placed to support hubs in delivering landscape-scale NRM outcomes include:

- Co-contribution requirements – as Commonwealth funded entities, the NRMs are limited in their ability to co-contribute to projects as it is considered double dipping. In practice this can be an effective mechanism to leverage federal funding and collaboration for greater outcomes across complementary programs, like the NHT and FDF.
- Uncertainty and delays regarding core-funding for NRMs which has necessarily absorbed attention and staff capacity.
- Short timeframes and fragmentation across programs spanning drought resilience and NRM contributing to perceptions of competition between Hubs and NRM groups. Longer lead times for grant rounds would allow for more collaborative discussions in the lead up to submission.

Supporting social and community resilience

Information Request 3

Focusing the FDF on economic and environmental outcomes misses the significant, and consistently raised priority for actions to build community networks and resilience, including regional mental health support. While we appreciate there are a range of programs and departments that target community and social resilience, there is a strong case to ensure this remains a part of the FDF – if not for its intrinsic value, because these types of capital also support an innovative, and transformative and vibrant agricultural and rural sector. In the TAS Farm Innovation Hub Call for Projects, activities that contributed to social connections, community leadership and wellbeing of people and communities *in addition to* other hub priority themes were encouraged in recognition of the importance of these connections as part of drought preparedness and response, as

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raised by our stakeholders. While we recognise social resilience is hard to quantify and measure, we do not believe this is a reason not to invest in it, particularly given the value regional communities, including First Nations communities, place on holistic approaches to resilience.

Information Request 13

Our experience with the Better Prepared Communities Program in delivering to social and community outcomes has been mixed. Based on feedback from our partners: more effective community and social outcomes would be delivered through greater, and more genuine collaboration with established local providers. The most recent experience with the Community Impact Program has placed significant strain on local lead organisations and those participating in 'co-design' as part of project applications. The rhetoric of collaboration and co-design has been critically undermined by unrealistic timeframes, and uneven resourcing between implementing agencies and local lead agencies and partners. This has created distrust and fatigue before projects have even been approved and has threatened relationships with local partners and the FDF more broadly.

Better coordination across programs, and improved recognition and utilisation of the existing organisations and expertise working across the intersection of community, social, environmental and economic resilience in the context of drought, would support more effective program delivery and outcomes. The roll out of the current program relies on extensive in-kind support and intellectual property from local lead agencies and project proponents who are disproportionately wearing these costs and risks eroding the social and human capital these programs are designed to support.

The role of agricultural innovation in building drought and climate resilience

Information Request 12

Agricultural innovation plays a critical role in achieving the goals of the FDF in terms of accelerated adoption of practices to reduce exposure to drought. The additional Agricultural Innovation funding is a valuable element of our program. Under this mandate the hub has been able to address core priorities of stakeholders that contribute to drought resilience but have broader relevance, including projects relating to digital literacy and digital agricultural technology which can provide a more accessible entry point to contribute to drought resilience.

We would be supportive of a challenge-style approach to focus agricultural innovation grants in the context of resilience, noting the value of the national hub network to work with regional stakeholders to identify and define challenges. Consideration should be given to innovative processes for application distinct from short window grant rounds, including the potential to leverage the hub's local network. For example, drawing on local networks and elicit producer/stakeholder pitches, filter for public good and other criteria, and facilitate broader connections to further develop projects to deliver on these concepts. Scope to fund time and expertise of stakeholders (particularly in the community/NGO sector) as part of developing applications would help to create more inclusive and accessible grant application development.

Improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

Information Request 8

The TAS Farm Innovation Hub is supportive of mechanisms to improve the FDFs engagement with First Nations. Success in this space is likely to depend on the FDF having the flexibility to address issues that are a priority for First Nations communities – a greater emphasis on landscape resilience may support this, while a decreased emphasis on social and community resilience may undermine it.

Providing flexibility around co-investment grant criteria is a valuable option, but we would re-iterate the points raised in our earlier (March) submission: efforts to enhance engagement need to account for heavy existing engagement load; allow the time and space for communities to define their own goals within the FDF;

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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.

We also note the impact of the 2023 Australian Indigenous Voice Referendum may have on the energy and capacity for First Nations communities to engage with the FDF.

Drought Resilience Adoption and Innovation Hubs

Interim Recommendation 5

The TAS Farm Innovation Hub supports the interim recommendation to continue the Drought Resilience Adoption and Innovation Hubs as a critical measure to capitalise on the relationships and progress made to date.

We note that participation of some organisations in hub activities has been limited by 1:1 co-contribution requirements. Allocation of core funding, and/or clearer rules around co-contribution requirements when dealing with other Commonwealth funded entities could enable greater access, participation, and benefit from hub activities.

Also refer to 'FDF and Hub Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (p. 5) for comments regarding the hub program MEL.

Climate information tools

Information Request 9

Our understanding is that DR SAT (producers) and CSA (service providers, consultants) target different audiences, and for different purposes. In addition to these FDF-funded tools, there are a wide range of regionally specific tools and platforms that exist (LISTMap land suitability mapping, Farm Forecaster, other tools and forecast services provided through Forewarned is Forearmed/Bureau of Meteorology).

Over-investment in tools, without attention and resourcing to their promotion and use is a critical risk. The FDF more broadly has enabled a re-investment in public extension services (adoption officers) and we would argue that the critical element to support greater impact from climate tools is the engagement with people and groups to support the use of the tools.

In Tasmania, poor digital infrastructure and challenges in literacy/digital literacy mean investment in facilitated (offline) processes is critical. The hub-funded project led by Rural Business Tasmania in collaboration with Derwent Catchment Project is a good example of a locally tailored, simple, facilitated process to help producers better understand their drought exposure, and connect participants with resources and support to mitigate risks. This type of process complements tools like DR SAT.

Options to enhance the FBR program to better support NRM

Information Request 10

The FBR Program in Tasmania is at the point of expanding from pilot to broader implementation. Learning modules defined by the Department of Natural Resources Tasmania include a dedicated focus on natural resource management and acknowledge the interplay between natural resources, environmental outcomes and production goals.

The FBR program provides a critical foundation for a farmer's journey to prepare for, and mitigate drought and climate risks within rigorous business planning. There is significant potential to better connect all FDF programs with the FBR, for example integrating climate tools (FDF and others) into modules, and facilitating connections to hubs and other resources.

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Options to enhance the RDRP program

Information Request 11

Implementation of the RDRP program was delayed in Tasmania and community-level engagement to inform the regional plans beyond key stakeholders is yet to commence. While there is good collaboration between the hub, FBR, and RDRP, concurrent roll out of the RDRP and Community Impact Program is problematic given the overlap of key stakeholders. Flexibility to account for delays in interconnected FDF programs – for example to enable finalisation of the Regional Drought Resilience Plans prior to implementation of the Community Impact Program in Tasmania would have been beneficial.

FDF and Hub Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning

Information Request 6

The hub's overall experience with hub-level monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) has been positive:

- The MEL team in DAFF have supported each hub develop a MEL Plan that provides high-level consistency across the eight hubs, while also allowing for regionally tailored and meaningful adaptations.
- Having the capacity to tailor the methods and approaches locally will continue to be critical for ensuring the lessons and insights can be meaningful for our hub, while reporting and feeding back into a bigger picture.

There is a good integration of monitoring, evaluation, reporting and learning requirements at a hub, and cross-hub level:

- The TAS Farm Innovation Hub's leadership has established an adaptive and reflective learning culture across the team, which has been fundamental to improving hub performance and relationships since establishment.
- Sharing of lessons and insights with partners has largely been informal to date, focused on industry advisory board members, and via one-on-one partner meetings. This is becoming more formalised as there is more tangible progress – eg. through annual partner forums that bring together all partners to discuss their projects and share perspectives.
- Cross-hub learning is supported through the DAFF MEL Team and Hub-MEL Community of Practice. which provide an opportunity for hubs to seek guidance on DAFF expectations; discuss challenges in the implementation of the MEL, and share our different methods and approaches to MEL facilitating learning across hubs.
- The emphasis on learning is shared across other Hub Communities of Practice (Directors, Knowledge Brokers, Operations, Communications), which have evolved to be highly effective networks for learning and collaboration.

To the extent that this could be improved at a program-level:

- There was an initial disconnect between the MEL Plan, and Operational and Activity Work Plans. While challenging, this was to be expected given the rapid establishment of the hubs, and co-design process which required a degree of open-ended activities at the outset and operational/activity plans delivered well before MEL plans were in place. We are in the process of updating these documents and ensuring better alignment.
- The provision of a whole-of-program synthesis of the eight hub's reporting (progress and MEL) may facilitate greater transparency and recognition of the achievements and insights for the program, without diminishing the safe learning culture that exists for hubs to report and reflect on challenges.

At FDF program level, a key concern as even more FDF programs get underway in Tasmania (FBR, RDRP, Community Impact Program) is the increasing burden on individuals and organisations participating in these programs to provide data as part of MEL. Though the scope and emphasis of these programs is different,

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there is significant overlap across key stakeholders, partners and targeted participants (not to mention similar programs funded through other sources).

Ideally, there would be a degree of coordination and collaboration in MEL across programs to maximise shared-data collection, as well as better sharing of insights and needs across programs. Realistically, the current sequencing/maturity of the different programs makes this challenging and is likely beyond the capacity of program implementers (including the hub) to manage at this point.

The TAS Farm Innovation Hub has initiated meetings of organisations implementing FDF programs in Tasmania which have been useful in raising awareness of activities and is developing cross-program collaboration on events. The importance of this mechanism has grown as FBR and DRRP programs get underway, and we expect this will continue to provide a vehicle for lesson sharing as programs become more established. The value of this initiative has been limited by the capacity of the TAS Farm Innovation Hub to lead this in addition to other activities – leadership and resources from DAFF could help deliver greater benefit from this opportunity.

Information Request 7

Attribution and contribution:

Given the range of FDF and other Commonwealth and State-funded programs that aim to build resilience to drought and changing climates, as well as other drivers and influences, it is not feasible to rigorously and accurately quantify the direct impact of the hub activities to change.

Considering the role of the hub to work collaboratively with others, it is more appropriate to consider how we have been able to contribute to and influence change. Testing of plausible causal links (ie. testing the consistency of evidence against steps in the hub's program logic) with input from partners, delivery partners and participants is a key strategy for establishing contribution. The MEL Plan outlines a mixed-method approach to data collection along these lines, however this is being adapted and refined as the hub activities have become clearer.

MEL of partnerships:

Increasing collaboration and partnerships is a critical outcome for the hubs. Working with hub-partner Southern Cross University, we are using social network analysis to visualise and explore if/how the hub is contributing to changes in collaboration through the network. This combines quantitative data visualised in a social network map representing the extent and strength of relationships in the network, with qualitative data that provides insights in if, how, and why, collaborations and partnerships are changing. This will be repeated over the life of the hub to track change as part of our MEL, but is also going to inform strategic planning around our partnerships in terms of who we are engaging with, who we aren't, and how we can fully leverage the potential of our partners and their networks.

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