

TNQ Hub Response to the Productivity Commission: Inquiry into the effectiveness, efficiency, and appropriateness of Part 3 of the Future Drought Fund Act 2019



3 March 2023

Attn: Productivity Commission – Future Drought Fund (FDF) Review

Applicant: Tropical North Queensland Drought Resilience Adoption and Innovation Hub (TNQ Drought Hub)

Dear Commissioner,

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Productivity Commission Inquiry into the effectiveness, efficiency and appropriateness of Part 3 of the Future Drought Fund Act 2019.

The TNQ Hub is led by James Cook University and based out of the JCU Ideas Lab in Cairns. Working in a ‘hub and spoke’ model, the TNQ Hub is partnered closely with six natural resource management (NRM) groups across Tropical North Queensland (TNQ) to deliver drought resilience activities across the region. The Drought Resilience Research and Adoption Program invests in collaborative research, development, extension, adoption and commercialization activities. These activities help land managers and Tropical North Queensland communities to become more prepared for, and resilient to, future droughts. All TNQ Hub Node Members are working to enhance the knowledge and capacity of land managers to better understand climate adaptation and the importance of being better prepared. Resilience building is entrenched in each Node NRM and the TNQ Hub continues to collaborate regionally to identify opportunities to enhance and build on sharing knowledge and expertise with land holders across the TNQ region.

Through a close national community of practice, the eight hubs have established a strong collaboration and knowledge sharing culture and collectively engage in solutions to meet FDF aims towards building drought resilience.

The TNQ Hub’s interactions with the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (AFF) Future Drought Funds teams have been very positive and supportive. In particular, AFF visits locally have been very beneficial and have received positive feedback from Hub partners and demonstrate the importance of ‘on the ground’ engagement.

The TNQ Drought Hub views the FDF as a critical mechanism towards enhancing the preparedness of land managers, communities, regions and sectors in facing future climate variability challenges. The TNQ Drought Hub, since its establishment, has formed networks of industry, government and producers to collaborate and identify opportunities to address gaps by leveraging existing delivery capabilities and look at ways to scale across TNQ, but also the national landscape through the Hub network.

Response to questions asked by the Productivity Commission

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

Collaboration, co-design and engagement with industry and hub partners strongly suggests the funding principles, vision, aim, strategic priorities and objectives of the Funding Plan are appropriate and effective.

A key strength of the plan is embedded in the national network, which allows for meaningful collaboration between the eight hubs and provides opportunity to discuss activities in different regions for more targeted investment that result in meaningful activities with impact.

The TNQ Drought Hub acknowledges the submission from the Future Drought Consultative Committee and supports the comments on challenges and opportunities to inform the next funding plan and suite of FDF Programming contained within the submission. We note that it is difficult to deliver long-term outcomes through short-term projects. Short timelines are a significant impediment to the quality and effectiveness of field trials and adoption strategies when aiming for desired outcomes. Long term timelines are necessary to reach program goals. The TNQ Hub strongly supports and endorses long-term investment to drive meaningful change for long-term outcomes.

2. 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?

The flexible modes of operation between the hubs allows for regionality of programs to achieve targeted outcomes towards preparedness for future drought.

The close national community of practice across the eight hubs and the trusted collaborative arrangements allow the national hubs to collectively engage in solutions to share and adopt administrative practices, reduce duplication and identify and share overlapping programs and target audiences. The Hubs national community of practice enhances the FDF program's ability to meet their objectives towards 'enhancing the public good by building drought resilience in Australia's agricultural sector, the agricultural landscape and communities'.

Communities of Practice are operating at Director, Knowledge Broker, Operations Manager and Communications levels to share lessons learnt, local and regional issues and solutions, and create a multi-layered and cross-linked network. A strong ethos of collaboration, collegiality and sharing has been created, which has led to stronger grant applications, enhanced networks, new collaborations and knowledge sharing within every Hub's region. The TNQ Hub has been instrumental in leading discussions on climate adaptation, indigenous engagement, and commercialisation of ag-tech within these Communities of Practice.

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

The scope of the Fund should be broadened to support resilience to all forms of climate variability whilst retaining a clear focus on drought preparedness and resilience. From a TNQ perspective, the FDF tasked each Hub to engage with all sectors and industry partners to identify the key priorities for TNQ, of which the number one regional priority was identified as 'drought and climate change adaptation'. This includes identifying and addressing risks of increased evaporation, reduced rainfall, greater rainfall variability, heatwaves etc and their impacts to water storage, agricultural production, decision making and planning. The TNQ Drought Hub's regional priorities can be found here: <https://www.tnqdroughthub.com.au/tnq-hub-priorities/>

Drought is a key form of climate variability faced by regional and remote communities. However, building overall resilience in agricultural industries towns and communities contributes to better outcomes of drought floods and other extreme events. It is essential to account for all aspects of increasing climate variability to enhance producers and communities' ability to be fully prepared across all possible extreme

variations in climate through better informed planning and decision making whilst retaining a drought preparedness focus.

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

The TNQ Hub has existing and trusted long-term relationships with 17 discrete Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities that face economic, social and environmental resilience challenges that are exacerbated by drought. The regionalised approach by the FDF programs has allowed the TNQ Hub to support individual councils to identify and address these issues and find innovative solutions to seasonal variability.

Long term commitment is required for effective engagement with Indigenous communities. Longer term investments will allow Hubs to determine the multiple benefits and knowledge systems of Indigenous Land Management from a drought preparedness perspective. These outcomes provide quantified, comparable data about the public benefit of Indigenous drought preparedness and will provide meaningful evidence to help governments and other stakeholders determine the level of preparedness of indigenous communities for long dry periods.

The TNQ Hub strongly encourages the Fund to further utilise existing national and regional networks and collaborations that have been established through the TNQ Drought Hub. This is a strong pillar for the TNQ Drought Hub given the existing key stakeholder relationships (for example the TNQ Drought Hub's close engagement with Torres Cape Indigenous Cape Alliance, Hopevale Congress of Aboriginal Corporation and others) to identify opportunities to promote climate preparedness activities in a culturally sensitive way.

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

The first phase of the Hubs has provided an opportunity for closer collaboration within regional representatives from local and state governments by building a foundational collaborative network of government, industry partners and universities. The TNQ Drought Hub is a strong example of this, given partnerships between Natural Resource Management groups, State Government, James Cook University and other universities, industry partners and RDCs that are now formed and can enhance collaborative projects that aim to build drought (and climate) resilience in the TNQ region. These partnerships and relationships can take time, but in an 18-month foundational stage these key relationships are active and provide an opportunity to leverage cross-sectoral service delivery that aims to build resilience in TNQ communities.

6. 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?

The national hubs collectively are recognised as leaders in agricultural drought resilience preparedness, adoption and innovation solutions and as such have become an important resource for future shaping and direction of the programs and initiatives from the Future Drought Fund. The TNQ Hub has provided support to many grant applicants, which has resulted in improved applications aligned with regional priorities. Identifying regional priorities and having grant rounds linked to those priorities has resulted in more targeted and meaningful activity towards long term outcomes of the FDF program. Therefore, the TNQ Hub (with support from other national Hubs) requests consideration for the Future Drought Fund to

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direct an appropriate proportion of programs to or through the national Hubs. By doing so, the Fund would avoid duplication and competition for funding at both regional and national levels and further embed Australia's position as a leader in climate adaptation and preparedness in agricultural production. Consideration should be given to timelines of submissions, grant applications and reporting. We recognise the consideration given to the January reporting period, grants, reporting and submission clash across departments between December and March each year. The TNQ Hub has responded to more than 20 submissions, grants and reporting during this period in both 2022 and 2023. A clear timeline of grant calls over the entire funding plan published early in the funding cycle would allow time to build new partnerships and plan appropriately to fit in with production cycles, seasonal activities and community events.

A core function of the TNQ Hub is the development and brokering of new partnerships and seeking opportunities to build upon and enhance innovative activities that aim to advance drought resilience in the TNQ region. With funding uncertainty moving forward, it poses significant challenges in identifying, attracting and retaining required skill sets at both the Hub and Node levels. Confidence in a longer timeframe for the hubs will contribute to deeper engagement with industry and community partners to benefit longer term drought resilience outcomes.

Thank you for your consideration and kind regards,

Professor David Phelps

Director, Tropical North Queensland Drought Resilience Adoption and Innovation Hub