

Future Drought Fund
Productivity Commission
GPO Box 1428
Canberra ACT 2601

7 July 2023

Dear Commissioner Chong and Commissioner Roberts

Re: Written submission to the Australian Government Productivity Commission's Review of Part 3 of the Future Drought Fund Act - Interim report

I take this opportunity to provide comment on the Interim Report from the Australian Government Productivity Commission's Review of Part 3 of the Future Drought Fund Act. My comments relate particularly to statements contained within the Interim Report relating to the notion that there is *"little empirical evidence on what national government programs targeting social capital can translate into meaningful resilience for local communities"*, and that there is consideration of *"prioritising funding towards economic and environmental resilience, and less on its suite of social resilience activities"* (Executive Summary, page 12).

Firstly, this recommendation appears to be in stark contrast to the priorities identified by local communities during the co-design phase, who consistently highlighted wellbeing as a key priority, across various states. To ignore findings from the co-design process would be very disempowering to the rural community members who took the time to participate in this process.

Secondly, in my opinion, it is very unlikely that the true impact of social resilience-focused projects funded by the Future Drought Fund (FDF), could have been fully captured to date. For example, in 2022, the ifarmwell team that I lead at University of South Australia received a Foundation for Rural Regional Renewal (FRRR) FDF Networks to Build Drought Resilience grant to run a Vocal Locals social network campaign in Loxton, South Australia. The evaluation demonstrated this resulted in significant improvements in the number of conversations community members who were familiar with the campaign were having about mental health or wellbeing ($p=.015$), as well as improvements in comfort speaking to others about their mental health or wellbeing ($p=.001$) and engagement in activities to maintain or improve their own wellbeing ($p=.012$). However, due to the FRRR/ FDF's tight grant reporting timeframes, the results of these analyses on impact could not be included our grant reporting (that was limited to reach). We are currently finalising a paper for publication in a peer reviewed journal. Once submitted it may take 6-12 months for these findings to be made public, due to the rigorous peer review process. It is likely that other important gains like these ones, will emerge with time.

Thirdly, because some local, ground up community-based initiatives have not quantified their impact effectively to date, does not mean that cannot be done, and this is not an area worth investing in. There are established methods and people who are skilled in doing this, but this may require collaboration with experts outside of local communities.

There are also meaningful ways that trends in social resilience could be captured at a national level. The Regional Wellbeing Survey led by Professor Jacki Schirmer does exactly this. I recommend speaking to Professor Schirmer about measurement of this. She is a highly regarded, international expert in this field, who will be able to advise on the most meaningful methods to employ.

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As you would be aware, it is also possible to put dollar values on social issues. For example, American research has shown that the loss of one life to suicide, results in lost productivity worth \$1.2M from that individual alone (see Florence, C., Simon, T., Haegerich, T., Luo, F., & Zhou, C. (2015). Estimated Lifetime Medical and Work-Loss Costs of Fatal Injuries — United States, 2013. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 64(38), 1074–1077. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24856804>) Perhaps these sorts of impacts and approaches could be considered, in future calculations of the value of social resilience measures. Further, the impact of improved wellbeing on productivity in the agricultural industry is something that we are currently seeking funding to explore.

Finally, over the last 12 months, I have led a team consisting of farmers, suicide prevention and psychology experts and key industry groups (e.g., National Farmers Federation, SA Drought Hub) that has developed a proposal for a national, coordinated approach to promoting resilience and wellbeing, and prevent suicide in agricultural communities (an industry-based initiative). This is a five-year proposal with in-built evaluation using the Regional Wellbeing Survey and Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) suicide statistics. We are currently seeking Federal funding to support this. It is likely to be easier to measure the impact of national, coordinated, targeted social resilience initiatives such as this one, rather than broad, diverse community-based initiatives. This is a point made by the National Mental Health Commission in their guide “Creating a collaborative: How to build an industry-led initiative”.

We, the ifarmwell team at University of South Australia, and our industry collaborators welcome further consultation on this important matter. Thank you for taking the time to consider this submission.

Yours sincerely

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