

## July 2023

### Subject

Grower Group Alliance/South-West WA Drought Resilience Adoption and Innovation Hub submission to the Productivity Commission: Interim Report - Inquiry into the effectiveness of Part 3 of the *Future Drought Fund Act 2019*.

The SW WA Hub contribution endorses the Drought Hubs National Network contribution.

### Introduction

The Grower Group Alliance (GGA) and the South-West WA Drought Resilience Adoption and Innovation Hub (SW WA Hub) welcome the opportunity to contribute to the Productivity Commission interim report.

The South-West Hub members work collaboratively to enhance drought resilient practices and accelerate innovation and adoption. Funded by the Australian Government's Future Drought Fund, the SW WA Hub is engaging with its 59 members and utilising and leveraging the power of the GGA grower group network 'hub and spoke' model to facilitate greater innovation from 'the ground up'.

GGA has a significant network of 65 grower group organisations with a combined membership of 4200 farming businesses and a total network of 91 organisations. It has a strong track record in grower-led innovation, effective peer-to-peer learning and delivering outcomes for producers. Grower groups were identified as the 3rd most important influencers on farming practices and decision-making after family /other farmers and consultants and ahead of R&D Corporations, farm input suppliers and Department of Agriculture and Food WA (AgKnowledge 2017, Assessing the Value of Grower Groups).

The Hub's 59 consortium Partners represent all sectors of the WA agricultural supply chain and are providing cash and in-kind co-contributions. The SW WA Hub is also linked to end users through eight Regional Node Leads. The eight Node Leads appointed were four grower groups, three NRM groups and a Food Council, each with their own networks, experience and knowledge they contribute to the Hub.

The Hub is guided by four Regional Advisory Committees (RACs) which comprise of 46 skills-based industry experts from government, agribusiness, academia, producers, NRM and first nations across the four agro-ecological zones of the Hub. The GGA Board, its innovation and finance and risk sub committees and a skills-based program steering committee, comprising two GGA representatives and two industry representatives, oversees the SW WA Hub governance.

The Hub is using the power of collaboration with its extensive ecosystem to identify priorities, increase adoption and strengthen impact, including engagement in regular, public knowledge exchanges. The Hub benefits from its existing and strong collaboration with members and key stakeholders.

The SW WA Hub undertook an extensive situation analysis review of the four agro-ecological zones in the region: Wheatbelt, Southern Rangelands, Mid West & Gascoyne Coastal and South West.

The purpose of the review was to develop a baseline knowledge of drought-related agricultural initiatives that have occurred in recent years and identify 'gaps' where new opportunities could enhance outcomes in a hotter, drier WA climate.

From this process, the Regional Advisory Committees and Node Leads undertook a ground truthing process with their networks, Hub partners and farmers to develop regionally specific priorities. The priorities developed were used as criteria in the recent Extension and Adoption of Drought Resilience Farming Practices Grant round. 46 of the region's 54 priorities were addressed by grant proposals.

Further detail on the Hub Activities can be found in the body of this document and on the Grower group Alliance website.

## Future Drought Fund Outcomes

### **Interim finding 1 - The intent of the Future Drought Fund is sound, but it is too early to assess its impact**

The FDF has been continuing the policy shift to promoting preparedness and building resilience to drought – before drought occurs. The impact metric on this success needs to be assessed against economic, environmental and social outcomes.

While it is too early to assess impact, it should be noted that there is strong bonds across the Drought Hubs at multiple levels and over 140 projects underway. The quality of projects should give confidence that drought resilience will be improved.

### **Interim finding 2 - Future Drought Fund design and delivery problems will continue to constrain progress unless addressed**

The scope of the FDF programs allows for a nationally consistent approach, while delivering regionally appropriate responsiveness. The opportunity to develop the next Funding Plan and review of the FDF programs should enable further refinement of the scope of programs and the priorities, as opposed to redesigning the FDF.

The series of programs funded by the FDF were necessarily announced in short succession, which was not optimal to allow for initial adequate support, strong integration between programs and program co-design.

The timing of the release of the FDF programs and grant rounds in 2021 and the first half of 2022 created initial confusion among stakeholders and potential partners in FDF projects. Now that programs are established, there is more opportunity to consider the implementation strategy to integrate and sequence programs going forward. There are also opportunities to implement longer planning timeframes and more co-design.

The FDF programs have produced a portfolio of projects that achieve different outcomes over different timeframes, providing a flow of drought resilience insights to support the outcomes for improved drought resilience and climate preparedness. The Hubs program can provide regional insights into the development of FDF programs and could play a more significant coordinating role than it has to date, to support FDF program design and to fill gaps in program delivery. e.g. properly

funded, the Hubs could oversee the implementation of the Regional Drought Resilience Planning program plans and anchor other programs.

It would be worthwhile for the FDF to publish a consolidated project list with additional information per program to reduce duplication and build confidence. Currently, the information is held on individual program pages.

### **Interim finding 3 - The Funding Plan does not provide clear guidance on planning, strategic sequencing and prioritisation of programs**

The next Funding plan will benefit from the experience of the Department, stakeholders and program partners. While adjustments to the Funding Plan to improve strategic sequencing of the programs is appropriate, it is essential that the Funding plan doesn't become rigid or prescriptive. A truly collaborative program cannot be rigid.

The Funding Plan may need to be interpreted depending on regional conditions and requirements. It needs to be adaptable and flexible to respond to challenges, opportunities and technological developments. The Plan should also enable incremental, transitional and transformational programs to maintain the rate of good news from the Fund. Concentrating on transformational programs only is likely to result in far fewer positive outcomes over a prolonged period, resulting in interim perceptions that the Fund is ineffective.

Program sequencing and priorities of the FDF could be improved by co-design with stakeholders. Probity issues tend to prevent this but these need to be addressed and resolved to achieve valuable regional input.

## Next steps for the Future Drought Fund

### **Information request 1 & Interim recommendation 1 - Building resilience to climate change should be more explicitly recognised as an objective**



#### **Information request 1**

Explicitly recognising climate change resilience as a priority for the Future Drought Fund could increase the types of activities eligible for funding. The Commission is seeking views on this proposed change, including:

- given the limited resources available to the Fund, what climate change resilience activities should and should not be funded?
- whether changes are needed to the governance arrangements of the Fund.

GGA and the SW WA Hub agree that the FDF should be explicit in the objectives to build resilience following codesign process. The resources of the FDF are limited. The role of the FDF is to share learnings and reduce silos of information and programs. An increase in the number of activities eligible for funding should only be undertaken with a clear strategy, purpose and outcomes.



South-West WA  
Drought Resilience Adoption  
and Innovation Hub

E: [swwadroughthub@gga.org.au](mailto:swwadroughthub@gga.org.au)

Web: [gga.org.au](http://gga.org.au)

Twitter: @GGA\_WA

Postal: Locked Bag 4, Bentley Delivery Centre 6102

Any changes to scope will enable the Fund to address a wider climate change brief, but this should not detract from the purpose of the FDF – to build drought resilience in regional communities, businesses, supporting people and the agricultural sector. The scope of FDF shouldn't be broadened so far as to dilute the drought resilience activities and limit synergies amongst programs.

A shift in scope from drought to climate should be considered in conjunction with the number of state and federal programs that are considering climate change resilience. A duplication in effort may result if FDF overlays environmental outcomes. The program design also needs to recognise there are significant regional differences in what constitutes drought and climate resilience.

Understanding drought and the intersection with climate change and resilience in the context of South West Australia means that climate changes will significantly impact on current agricultural systems. Issues related to a hotter, drier climate where rainfall is lower and unseasonal, sometimes falling in intense events at the in summer. In the case of WAs nationally significant grain industry, we will see frost, the 'drought of the south' significantly increases in its extent, frequency and severity. Drought resilience in this context requires significant adaption of existing agricultural production systems. The Hub believes that the increase in extreme and episodic events such as cyclones, fires and floods will best be supported by existing emergency management and response arrangements.

For a majority of SW WA agricultural systems, resilience activities will require programs that look at warming, drying climate with reduced reliability of rainfall, both in quantity and time of year.

### **Information request 2 & 3**



### Information request 2

The Commission is seeking views on whether and how the Future Drought Fund can achieve greater environmental and economic resilience through more investment in natural resource management activities.

The Commission is also seeking views on:

- how existing programs could be adjusted, and what activities should be funded, to achieve mutually reinforcing environmental and economic benefits
  - how these outcomes – and the causal links between actions and improved resilience – could be best measured
- how Future Drought Fund activities should interact with the National Landcare Program and other natural resource management programs.



### Information request 3

The Commission is seeking views on how the Future Drought Fund can best support social resilience, considering the roles that state, territory and local governments play.

The Commission is also seeking views on:

- whether existing programs (outside the Better Prepared Communities theme) could be adjusted to better achieve flow on benefits for social resilience, and if so how
- how social resilience outcomes can be best measured.

The SW WA Hub supports the view that resilience is achieved through a combination of economic, environmental and social factors. Climate change is important that farmers and regional communities have climate resilience production systems, driving prosperity and delivering economic, environmental and social returns to the communities they live within.

It may be that other bodies are better placed to administer social resilience. However, it should be recognised that the coordination of social, environmental and economic enhancing activities can provide synergistic benefits. This coordination may be more effectively delivered by commissioning those referred bodies through the FDF interim report.

A move to natural resource management activities should be balanced against the significant number of initiatives currently funded and delivered by agencies and organisations around Australia. These include the National Landcare Program, the National Heritage Trust and national resource management programs. There are also various State Departments for environment and agriculture that also fund biodiversity and natural resource activities. Changes to programs delivered by the FDF should avoid duplicating existing funding streams that provide investment for sustainable agriculture and environmental protection.

Projects delivering environmental and economic benefits should establish reasonable assurance of expected economic benefit before funding is awarded. This may require pilot programs to establish the evidence or proof of concept before larger-scale long-term projects are approved. Grower

groups provide an advantage in delivering information and relevant insights directly to a region's growers. The involvement of grower groups in project design, in-flight management as well as extension will be critical to achieving mutually reinforcing economic and environmental benefits. topic.

Additionally, it is worthwhile considering how Aboriginal engagement and increasing Aboriginal outcomes will be enhanced by a reduction in the FDF role in social impact. The SW WA hub's engagement with Aboriginal people has shown a consistent desire to build social and environmental outcomes into economic benefit projects. If FDF deletes the social element from its Funding Plan programs may not recognise social outcomes when assessing project proposals, resulting in fewer aboriginal projects awarded.

Rather than develop unique social resilience indicators, the FDF may benefit from using existing social resilience indicators that are already tracked at scale and over longer time periods by government Departments or other stakeholders. This could include leading indicators related to well-being, social inclusion, community capacity, participation, empowerment or cohesion. Alternative approaches might include a focus on social resilience among communities more vulnerable to drought, such as Aboriginal communities or geographic areas such as the Northern and Eastern Wheatbelt of WA. Measuring social resilience among Aboriginal people should utilise cultural safety approaches and follow the principles outlined in the Indigenous Evaluation Strategy.

Drought resilience in Australia will be best addressed by regional involvement in environment, economic and social factors, this is highlighted:

*"Stable adaptation takes many different forms according to local circumstance: the nature of the local problems confronted (severity, duration, complexity, remedial capacity), the configuration of the new technologies applied (scientific, financial, governance, lifestyles, resource management), and competition between localities (and the effectiveness of their strategies – individual, private, public, cooperative). We would therefore expect to see variety between one locality and another in the problems and responses (behaviours, strategies, cohesion and competition, focus, time-span, moneys expended), and a wide variety of outcomes over the short-, medium- and longer terms. Some of those outcomes will be more stable than others."*<sup>1</sup>

*"...Wilkinson maintained that jobs and income were key to community survival and development that did not include economic development was not viable."*<sup>2</sup>

*"managing for drought is about managing for the risks involved in carrying out an agricultural business, given the variability of climate"*<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0743016711000854>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0743016711000854>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2212094714000036>

## Information request 4



### Information request 4

The Commission is seeking views on:

- the extent to which the suite of programs, as well as individual program design and program monitoring, evaluation and learning plans, align with the theory of change and program logic
- how the program theory, and its use, can be improved to better guide investment, prioritisation, program design and monitoring, evaluation and learning in the next Funding Plan period.

The FDF theory of change and program logic directly influenced the individual Hubs MEL plans. Hubs worked with the FDF Hub program staff to develop shared outputs and outcome indicators. With the additional experience of the Department, and utilising experienced program staff from the Hubs, the program theory and Hub MEL could be reviewed to incorporate the learnings to date.

## Interim recommendation 2 - Establishing a drought and climate change resilience knowledge management system

The development of a knowledge management system to share drought and climate resilience is important. However, it should not duplicate existing industry systems. Insights from FDF programs and projects should be shared widely and housed in a suitable knowledge-sharing database currently in existence.

There is opportunity for the Hubs to support this work, however, it should be completed centrally by the FDF, to ensure continuity of service and capacity and resources to manage the insights. The eight Hubs and other FDF Programs should not produce a new set of knowledge-sharing systems.

## Interim recommendation 4 - The timing of Productivity Commission reviews should be changed

Timing of the Productivity Commission report should allow for adequate time to ensure future funding is secured to allow for program continuity and staff retention. The current review timeframe will create uncertainty for Hub staff and may lead to unintended consequences with staff loss affecting program performance. In the current situation confirmation that the program will continue will only become clear after the Federal budget in May 2024, only six weeks prior to the Hub project's end date on June 30 2024.

## Monitoring, evaluation and learning

### Interim finding 4 - Monitoring, evaluation and learning activities have not adequately tracked performance

The SW WA Hub generally agrees with the finding of the interim report. As noted, the initial MEL was developed quickly and was a largely top-down process. The Hub MEL does specify short,



medium and longer-term indicators. The concentration of measuring outputs is because this early in the life of projects there are few outcomes.

## Information request 6



### Information request 6

The Commission has identified challenges with the implementation of Fund and program monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL). We are seeking further views on:

- the clarity of MEL requirements for, and guidance provided to, program implementers
- what mechanisms might better integrate monitoring, evaluation and reporting with learning
- any other specific, practical changes that would improve how MEL is conducted across the Fund.

### Clarity of MEL requirements and guidance

The FDF Hub program MEL managers continue to collaborate with Hub MEL staff to clarify requirements and adjust the plans based on feedback. There is an opportunity to develop the MEL strategy for the next Funding Plan and programs that should include more codesign with key stakeholders, including Hub MEL staff.

As the Hub program matures, a shift in focus from outputs to outcomes reporting is warranted. The MEL reporting will also benefit from increased emphasis on sharing learnings rather than focusing on activities and outputs.

Consistency and comparability of data collection in a national program also needs to accommodate regional MEL contexts and support local decision-making.

While the Hub MEL plans have a strong emphasis on outputs, and also identify relevant outcomes aligned with the FDF MEL Framework program logic. All Hub MEL reports currently have a high degree of consistency with output and outcome indicators, while also accommodating regional considerations. The SW WA Hub recognises that more work could be done to capture additional outcomes that show the pathway towards higher-level impacts and the unique contribution of the Hubs.

### Integration of M&E and reporting with learning

Following the FDF Extension and Adoption and Long-term Trial grant rounds the Hub conducted a lesson learnt and continuous improvement process; resulting in changes to internal processes and how stakeholders are engaged. The Hub has planned to establish mechanisms such as participatory MEL workshops (MEL Summit) to review and integrate MEL data and lessons learned into its adaptive management and program improvement cycle. This approach could be adopted at a whole program scale across all Hubs.

### MEL focus across the Fund

An overall evaluation of the FDF will benefit from considering aspects of complexity-aware and systems evaluation approaches. They would be more appropriate for high-level system-wide evaluation of the Funds interrelated program components.



The FDF should evaluate the collective effect of all programs, their coherence and interactions and the emergent outcomes that result from component interrelationships. Evaluation approaches or techniques should be determined by the purpose of the evaluation and needs of the primary audiences. Williams and Hummelbrunner (2010)<sup>4</sup> describe nineteen mixed methods grounded in systems thinking that can augment program evaluations.

The emergent outcomes that are expected from the Funds Hub program could include:

- changed ways of working, including increased collaboration among stakeholders (breaking down of silos) and a stronger focus on true co-design approaches by partner and system organisations (i.e. universities, government departments, RDCs, Hubs) to ensure interventions meet end-user needs
- empowered end-users, actively demanding an early stake in the design of interventions aimed at supporting their drought resilience.

The FDF program MELs should not be viewed as operating independently but rather working collaboratively with other components to support drought resilience across environmental, social and individual farm business scales. To adequately collect, analyse and report on data across all programs, is the responsibility of the Department, rather than individual programs or projects. The responsibility to collect long-term data, beyond currently funded program terms is also the responsibility of the Department.

## Information request 7



### Information request 7

While there have been challenges with implementing monitoring, evaluation and learning, the Commission is interested in examples of monitoring, evaluation and learning being conducted effectively to track and improve Fund and program performance and outcomes.

In particular we are interested in any practical examples from across the Fund and programs, of:

- program *outcomes* that are being monitored and measured, and how data is being collected and analysed to do so
- longer-term monitoring of outcomes and impact after the conclusion of a program, project or activity
- learning activities deliberately undertaken during the course of program or activity implementation, to identify any challenges and other insights, and use these to change and improve implementation
- how attribution and contribution has been addressed in monitoring or evaluation
- monitoring and evaluation of:
  - partnerships
  - environmental resilience outcomes at landscape / multi-property scale
  - social resilience outcomes
  - knowledge uptake by the wider sector; specifically, monitoring of how knowledge generated by the Fund has been applied by people beyond those directly participating in a Fund program or activity.

---

<sup>4</sup> Williams, B and Hummelbrunner, R (2010) Systems concepts in action: a practitioner's toolkit. Stanford University Press.

The SW WA Hub continues to conduct the MEL reporting as required by the FDF. The view of the Hub is that additional tools are required to capture all relevant outcomes and contributions of the Hubs in changes to knowledge, attitudes, skills and aspirations (KASA) and practice change for drought resilience and preparedness.

The ability to demonstrate contribution rather than attribution has been a focus of the SW WA Hub. This is based on the recognition that multiple factors will impact developing drought resilience in the region, rather than assuming specific outcomes are a direct and sole result of the FDF or Hub programs activities

The SW WA Hub has the following MEL activities underway:

- Collect outcome narratives and Most Significant Change stories relating to enhanced partnership and collaboration, from key stakeholders and partners.
- Collect outcome narratives from up to 80 farmers and land managers regarding KASA and practice change, through the eight regional nodes. The Hub will assess the appropriateness and effectiveness of the above approaches in capturing outcomes over time.

#### **Approaches that could be used**

Other methods that could be used to demonstrate contribution towards outcomes include, among others, Outcome Mapping and Contribution Tracing (this would require unique aspects of FDF interventions, products or knowledge, such as DR SAT or CSA, being tracked).

FDF MEL would benefit from learnings or utilising methods of comparable programs. Previous MEL approaches to measure environmental impact of National Heritage Trust (NHT) projects highlighted the limitations of project-level data collection and national storage and analysis. Performance Story Reporting / Collaborative Outcomes Reporting approaches were developed and used for NHT reporting between 2008 and 2013. They both utilised mixed method approaches, program logic and judgments by expert panels to consider that likelihood longer-term outcomes would be achieved. Elements of these approaches and those currently used by the Hub can capture economic, environmental and social resilience outcomes.

The use of longitudinal monitoring on the FDFs outcomes would need to be managed by the Department. Longitudinal monitoring or specific evaluations could look at specific communities or regions most likely to benefit from FDF programs, to consider long-term outcomes after the conclusion of the program.

Knowledge uptake by those not directly participating in a Fund program or activity could potentially be captured by evaluations that explicitly look for unintended outcomes in the wider sector and by approaches such as Outcome Harvesting.

**Improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people**  
**Information request 8 & Interim finding 5 - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have had limited participation in the Future Drought Fund**



### Information request 8

The Commission is seeking views about its suggested options to improve engagement with, and benefits for, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. We are interested in whether these options should be implemented, and if so, what would be needed to ensure their success in practice. Other suggested options are also welcome. The options, which are not mutually exclusive, include:

- establishing a Future Drought Fund Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander working group to work with the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry to improve the design and implementation of the Fund
- requiring the Consultative Committee to include Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander representation
- developing a Future Drought Fund Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander strategy
- providing specific funding and resources to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, the Hubs and other relevant organisations to advise on and undertake engagement
- improving guidance about how Hubs and other organisations can meaningfully engage with existing networks to foster strong partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander outcomes in the Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Framework
- establishing a specific funding stream for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations
- providing flexibility around some grant criteria, such as the requirement of co-investment.

The SW WA Hub is generally supportive of the comments in the interim report and continues to work with Aboriginal land managers that are impacted by drought and seeking to improve resilience and preparedness.

To improve Aboriginal organisations engagement with grant rounds, there are a number of options available. This includes changes to co-investment requirements, change to infrastructure expenditure restrictions, administration set up, or practical requirements to support Aboriginal organisations and land managers to engage with future FDF grant rounds.

In establishing the strategy as proposed, it is important to ensure that it is developed with consideration to existing strategies, or it utilises learnings from previous programs. The strategy will likely need to consider economic, environmental and social outcomes, while meeting the FDF objectives. SW WA Hub engagement with Aboriginal people has identified the importance of social resilience in proposed projects.

## Information request 11 & Interim finding 8 - Regional Drought Resilience Plans could be improved



### Information request 11

The Commission is seeking views on how the Regional Drought Resilience Planning program can be improved, including through better integration with other Future Drought Fund (FDF) programs, stronger governance and public reporting.

The Commission is also seeking views on whether the Australian Government should reassess the value of the program and consider options for reallocating funds to other FDF activities.

The SW WA Hub supports the work of the RDRP and worked with DPIRD in managing stakeholder engagement to minimise consultation fatigue in developing the plan.

The RDRP program develops plans. There has been limited consideration given to how the plans will be managed and implemented. There is an opportunity to work with the Hubs to support implementation.

## **Interim recommendation 5 & Interim finding 9 - There is scope to improve the Drought Resilience Adoption and Innovation Hubs**

The SW WA Drought Hub welcomes the recommendation to extend the hubs. We also welcome the recommendation for clearer expectations, accompanying performance monitoring and a revised, more holistic monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) plan to better target the overall program expectations. The SWWA hub endorses the PC's description of the goals of the Hubs and our potential to link better with other programs of the FDF.

The current two-year lifespan of the Hubs does not allow an adequate evaluation of the impacts or outcomes. However, during this short time, the SW WA Drought hub has built strong and unprecedented partnerships in South West WA, and the eight hubs nationally have formed a strong collaborative network at multiple levels.

The SW WA Drought hub believes that this national network of Hubs can play a more constructive role by providing regional perspectives to issues identified by the PC, such as a lack of integration and coordination among the many different programs and lack of knowledge sharing infrastructure.

The SW WA Drought Hub has established a comprehensive and inclusive priority setting process and governance structures. It has:

- established under the Grower Group Alliance Board and established a skills-based governance and technical steering committee.
- completed the appointment of a Regional Soil Coordinator, Innovation Manager and 2.5 Adoption Officers by November 2022. These appointments are enabling a more thorough engagement with the Hubs 52 members and brokering regionally engaged partnerships.
- procured consultants to develop situational analyses to inform priority project areas and underpin the governance, impact and efficacy of the program. The consultants reviewed relevant literature and consulted widely with SW WA Hub members across each of its four agroecological sub-regions.
- convened four regional advisory committees (RACs), one per region, with a total of 46 members from widely differing backgrounds. Committee members were chosen through an expression of interest process which resulted in a diverse membership from government, agribusiness, academics, producers, NRM groups and First Nations organisations. The RAC's role is to link stakeholders, identify gaps in sub-regional priorities following engagement with their networks and put them forward for consideration and ranking them in importance.
- procured eight Node Leads (four grower groups, three NRM groups and a Food Council) to engage in two-way conversations with producer groups and their networks over sub-regional priorities, identify gaps and advise the Hub. Node Leads are paid positions.
- supported the regional rollout of FDF grant rounds by assisting proponents to address grant guidelines, drought resilience priorities and strengthening proposals. Our support of the



grant rounds filled a void in the agricultural innovation system, generated richer, stronger and more collaborative projects and improved the success rate for applicants. For example, when the Adoption and Extension grant round was opened by the FDF in November 2022, the SW WA Hub re-advertised the opportunity through our extensive communication networks and received 120 enquiries from stakeholders, advised 58 of them that we believed their ideas were not sufficiently well-targeted to be successful. We linked proponents of well-targeted projects to proponents of similar projects across WA and Australia and provided advice on best practice extension, monitoring and evaluation and economic impact assessment where possible. Twenty seven written applications were submitted to the SW WA Hub for further review and they were provided with written feedback and letters of support. Seven projects from SW WA (four were collaborations with parties from other states) were successful among the 18 projects awarded nationally from the round.

- extended the findings of SW WA projects and relevant projects from across the network to farmers through field days, workshops, conferences, the science to practice forums and newsletters. As projects mature a stronger flow of information will result.

## Drought Resilience Innovation Grants

### Information request 12 & Interim finding 10 - The role of Drought Resilience Innovation Grants



#### Information request 12

The Commission is seeking views on whether the Future Drought Fund should be supporting agriculture innovation and if so, what types of innovation it should fund.

If Innovation Grants continue, the Commission is considering whether the Innovation Grants program could be improved by adopting a 'challenge-oriented' approach whereby the Australian Government outlines specific resilience challenge and invites applicants accordingly. The Commission is requesting feedback on:

- whether this approach is worthwhile
- whether similar approaches have been effective in other jurisdictions
- what the process should be to identify and define challenges
- how to scope and stage a 'challenge-oriented' approach appropriately, given funding limits.

The SW WA Hub is supportive of the continuation of grant programs to address innovation challenges. The Hub suggests that alignment with our regional priorities remains a key factor in the assessment of future grant programs and would welcome the opportunity to co-design grant rounds to maximise the adoption of outcomes of the projects and improving drought resilience in the SW WA agro-ecological regions.

Future FDF programs should be designed to fill gaps in the scope of FDF outcomes, with some existing program purposes and priorities potentially clarified. The value of the FDF is the ability to deliver nationally aligned with regionally relevant insights to prepare for drought.

Outcomes from Innovation Grant projects are beginning to deliver information, such as the Innovation Grants WaterSmart Dam project described below:

### **Innovation case study**

The WaterSmart Dams project (WSD) has 12 demonstration sites operational, with instruments installed. The project addresses farmer's need for reliable and affordable water in an increasingly drier climate. The south-west WA's 200,000 dams are valued at \$10 billion and are reported to regularly fail. Consultation with 1,818 producers found 25% to 100% of their dams failed between 2018 and 2020<sup>5</sup>. Producers advised the current rainfed water infrastructure is insufficient for their farm business operations. Options include renovating existing dams, building new design dams, and implementing effective evaporation suppression and runoff technologies. The WaterSmart Dams project will demonstrate these options, measure effectiveness, quantify cost and benefit, and co-design planning tools to enable producers to choose the best option for their requirements. The Grower Group Alliance, four grower groups, University of WA and DPIRD scientists will present best practices at multiple field days, and the GGA will extend the new knowledge and free water planning tool to the network. This will improve the drought resilience of individual farm businesses and regional communities. The learnings have relevance to other jurisdictions.

Innovation Grants should continue, as projects like the above are unlikely to be funded under the existing RDC sector, due to their cross-sectoral nature, quality and scale.

An additional 25 projects are funded in SW WA, all contributing to building innovation and drought resilience for producers in the region. The SW WA Hub has been successful in developing projects by fostering collaboration across the region and Australia, partnering with other Hubs and organisations to deliver projects.

## Summary

In this submission, the SW WA Hub offers the following insights:

- The FDF program of work is likely to deliver a significant number of insights to improve drought preparedness, resilience and recovery across Australia
- Program sequencing and priorities of the FDF could be improved and co-designed with stakeholders to improve outcomes. Probity issues need to be addressed and resolved.
- Programs being developed from identified priorities should be viewed in conjunction with other existing government funding initiatives, including the National Landcare Program and National Heritage Trust, to minimise potential duplication
- There is a role in innovation for the FDF
- Programs should consider the balance between incremental, transitional and transformational outcomes – but a portfolio approach is required
- A balance of economic, social and environmental focus is essential to address challenges faced by regional communities into the future
- Social aspect removal may negatively impact on the FDF's ability to fund Aboriginal projects in future.

---

<sup>5</sup> Countryman article | 7 March 2022 | "Many Wheatbelt dams 'failed' in 2018-2020: GGA gets \$3m for dam improvement project"