

Future Drought Fund Productivity Commission
GPO Box 1428, Canberra ACT 2601
www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/current/future-drought-fund

Dear Sir/Madam,

I write to you on behalf of the Board of Directors of Mallee Sustainable Farming (MSF) Incorporated. We are described as a farmer driven grower group representing the R,D&E needs of dryland farmers located in the low rainfall Mallee regions of South Australia, NW Victoria and far western NSW. Our farmers operate in some of the most extreme low rainfall grain production environments globally. Farmers have been able to remain viable largely through recent advances in new technologies such as conservation agriculture/no-till, managing soil moisture and importantly managing risk; all key elements of developing resilient farming systems.

As an organisation, we are involved in the management and delivery of a number of projects that are funded through the Future Drought Fund. We value the opportunity to be engaged in these projects, as we share similar goals to the FDF in terms of enhancing the drought resilience of farmers, farm businesses and farming systems across our region.

We would like to bring to your attention some suggestions as to how a future program could be enhanced;

1. There needs to be a higher level of “trust” in the capability of farming systems groups (like MSF) to actively design and develop project initiatives (rather than projects designed by university and research organisations (having good intentions) but who frequently lack the practical and local context. We have examples of our organisation being invited to participate in the delivery of projects with minimal influence in project design or content.
2. Current project investments through the FDF appear to lack an ability to innovate on-farm. Innovation models unfortunately largely ignore the fact that innovation does take place on-farm, as opposed to an academic or research setting. On-farm innovation can be supported by providing professional facilitation and support to grower groups, with engagement of respected researchers, agronomists and leading farmers in this process.
3. There needs to be a higher level of farmer driven “bottom up” projects that are developed and owned by farming systems groups. There seems to be an in-balance in relation to resources that are available at the “grass roots” level, though we are unable to quantify this.
4. Provide a greater “lead in time” between contracting and project commencement. This will help us to better manage the logistics of conducting on farm research and alignment to the “growing season”.

In closing, we recognise the value of investing in drought research, risk management and farming systems resilience, and we encourage the continuance of this element of the program. The Mallee Sustainable Farming Board welcome the opportunity to be engaged in any future program co-design opportunities associated with the Future Drought Fund.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Jay Cummins
Executive Officer (Acting), Mallee Sustainable Farming Inc.