



# Country Women's Association of NSW

*Incorporated in 1931 by an Act of NSW Parliament  
Constituent Society of the Associated Country Women of the World*

ABN 82 318 909 926

## **COUNTRY WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION OF NEW SOUTH WALES**

### **SUBMISSION TO THE PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION**

#### ***Inquiry into Government Drought Support Draft Report***

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**15 December 2008**



The Country Women's Association of New South Wales appreciates this opportunity to respond to the Draft Report into Government Drought Support produced by the Productivity Commission. Much of this response is repetitious of submissions the Association has made at inquiries at both Federal and State levels of Government. As the Drought is ongoing, with the official declaration only this week that more than 55% of New South Wales continues to be in drought, these points may be worth further consideration.

Rain has fallen in parts of New South Wales in recent months and given to the uninitiated the impression that the drought has broken. In essence, in terms of actual rainfall and in some areas, subsoil moisture's beginning to build up, some farmers and their communities have been able to face the future more optimistically. Even for many of these though, the prospect of ongoing debt, shortage of funding to be able to make the most of the "good times", damage to health, especially mental health, the loss of labour, the continued high cost of basic agriculture needs like fertilizer and sprays, as well as of diesel, coupled with the sense of failure and disenchantment with government in many rural communities, takes away the gloss of a prospective good season. How much worse then, for those farming communities and individuals dependent on agriculture for not just a living but an identity, where the rains have failed to materialise; or for those dependent on irrigation, who not only have no prospect of enough water and therefore income, but are still being charged to maintain an infrastructure they cannot use.

There is a need to change the system of drought relief that has previously been in place. The Declarations of Exceptional Circumstances were drawn out, often seemingly unfair and made only after reams of paperwork had been undertaken. Even in those areas eligible for assistance through being recognised as in EC, farmers were consistently advised to make no request for assistance without going through a professional. Such red tape was off putting in the first instance; anecdotally, one is given the impression that the necessary professionals were in very short supply. The restrictions hedging payments to individuals or families under the system also made it unattractive for many. Even when the amount of off farm income was raised, fairly late in the piece, it did not cover the salary of a full time teacher or nurse. Yet the stark choice had to be made – give up a career, which definitely put food on the table or move to part-time work, if such was available, in order to make income fit the criteria.

The Report of the Expert Social Panel spoke fairly dismissively of Relief Program introduced by the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries and distributed by the Country Women's Association of Australia. The argument is that such programs divert the Government from working on long-term strategies that need to be implemented. To us this is a narrow and short-term view, somewhat analogous to finding a person bleeding seriously, yet taking no action until a professional plan to deal with the crisis can be put in place. The sums of money distributed and the speed with which the assistance was taken up, both testified to the need for such a strategy; the claim that the Government used it to avoid real, long-term planning may have a hint of truth about it, but the fact remains that the Relief Payments were considered by many as the difference between survival and harm.

The current system did work for many, though according to the figures in the Draft Report, not nearly so many as we had somehow been led to believe and to accept. The system as is though, appears to have made little provision for coming out of drought. As pointed out earlier, where there has been adequate rainfall for a successful sowing, there still needs to be in place provisions for farmers to be able to farm effectively until drought-incurred indebtedness has been repaid; until there are

adequate on-farm funds for investment in restocking and/or mending or replacing machinery, for repairs to all those buildings and fences that were unaffordable in the drought years. Again, as pointed out in the Draft Report, Australian farmers are remarkably innovative and resilient; but they need ongoing assistance, once the actual drought conditions have passed, to be able to put those characteristics to use for themselves, their industry and their country.

So any new process of Drought Relief really needs built into it some measures to deal with recognised future poor or lean years; measures to assist during the actual drought times; and measures to make worthwhile continuation in the agricultural sector in recovery. The CSIRO and the Bureau of Meteorology, one hopes (though not with a lot of faith in light of funding cuts to the former; threatened closure of Agricultural Research Stations in New South Wales; and with the steady assurances of the B o M to farmers in 2007 that there was to be such continuing good rainfall that too many sowed too much unwisely and were left worse off than in 2006) can work effectively on the recognition of weather patterns that give rise to concern; can develop farming crops and methodologies that fit our changing climate patterns more effectively than many of our current practices.

Any approach though, has to be long-term, bipartisan (tri?) and agreed to by all levels of government. Too many policies are developed and implemented as vote catchers in the short term; if Australian agriculture is to survive as a viable industry, it needs long-term planning, research, development and processes. Australian politics is littered with "buck passing", both within the same level of government, but characterised by party political point scoring; or between the states and federal levels – and sometimes just between the states as they vie for funding and/or kudos. This whole system is costly in financial terms, time wasting and infinitely frustrating to the voter.

Australia has "ridden on the sheep's back" is the old cliché; agriculture is still an enormous earner for our country – in the current global crisis, it is our agricultural products that have buoyed our Balance of Trade, as even the mineral bubble has burst (temporarily only, one hopes). Yet it is an industry that has always been subject to uncertainties and the vagaries of weather, trade, fashion. This current drought though appears to the lay observer to have almost brought the sector to its knees. Capable, successful farmers have found they simply cannot continue. Farms that have been in a family's hands for generations are no longer attractive to their heirs. The old joke, "What is the definition of child abuse?" "Leaving your farm to your children," rings so humourlessly now.

As farming becomes more precarious as an industry, rural communities are decimated and die; then social isolation becomes an even more powerful factor in the decision not to stay, or to send the kids away or for the marriage break up – or the premature death of the farmer. As rural communities shrink, so do their services – a ward in a hospital closes, then the hospital; a doctor who cannot find adequate locum replacements, gives up and moves on; the banks have largely already gone; shops close; schools become too small to be viable and are closed.

We need better funded and more centred research into viable agricultural systems for this country; incentives for young people to seek a future on the land; ways to help communities not just survive, but to thrive; recognition that is real and therefore worth supporting that our agricultural industries do have a future.

In all this, I have said little about our irrigators; their position is parlous; they face absolute hopelessness. Governments talk about climate change and the measures

needing to be put in place; yet the common perception is that again 'the big end of town' will not be treated with the harshness our irrigators face daily. While both Federal and State Governments make pronouncements on water savings, the Australian and New South Wales Governments are congratulating themselves on buying back water licences. While there is general recognition now that those licences should never have been issued at all, the fact remains that they were and that they were bought in good faith. What future under this Draft Report do the communities along the Murray and in other irrigation areas face? When water has been bought back for environmental purposes, where have the purchases been made? An example is "Toorale" at Bourke – a working property, whose good agricultural land and water will no longer be available for production of agricultural products. Such knee-jerk and populist reactions serve only to place Australia as a producer of food and fibre for its own use and for export, at even greater risk.

If drought is to an ever more frequent event in Australia, and it would appear that it is, and if Government continues to see rural Australia as a diversion rather than core business, as we rural Australians fear much of the time, then there will not be a viable agricultural industry and the "Bush" will become a romantic reference in our literature. This Paper has not even made reference to the obstacles faced by our producers in light of Free Trade Agreements that the Australian Government has seen fit to enter into; that seems a different, though arguably, closely related, area of concern. One hopes the outcomes of this current three-pronged Drought Relief Inquiry will contribute to a viable lifestyle for ALL Australians, including those who choose to live away from the coast.

Margaret Brown  
CWA of NSW  
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