



[REDACTED]

6.12.2023

FDF Working Group

To whom it may concern

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] This includes working with farmers, pastoralists, and First Nations communities.

Being one of the seven regional NRMs in WA and of 54 across Australia that have over 20 years of successful community-level work in sustainability and resiliency. These NRMs align the local and regional priorities of farmers, land/sea managers, local community groups and industry with national and international objectives through Commonwealth programs funded through NHT. This includes Sustainable Agriculture, Sustainable Agriculture Facilitator development of communities of practice, and landscape-scale environmental programs like Threatened Species, World Heritage Area, and Ramsar. These initiatives strengthen the skills, knowledge, and capacities of communities and often intersect with other programs/projects.

Covering 28% of Australia, the Rangelands is the largest of Australia's NRM regions. It spans from the tropical top end of the Kimberley, through the arid interior, to the Great Australian Bight in the south. This vast region is home to many remote and diverse communities, including 450+ pastoral stations, horticulture, small producer groups, over 100 First Nations groups and Ranger teams, and isolated horticultural areas. To effectively operate across this vast area, with its diverse communities and limited funding resources, over 25 years RNRM developed a unique collaborative approach. It has been innovative in building strong networks of trust, promoting knowledge sharing, and fostering collaboration among farmers, elders, Aboriginal ranger groups, science, industry, R&D, and clients.

[REDACTED] significant transformation in R&D, extension processes, and agricultural practices. [REDACTED] and through direct engagement with farmers, [REDACTED], Hub board meetings, and design of Hub program infrastructure. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] RNRM has invested significant dedication, time, knowledge, and resources in these programs related to the Northern Hub and to a lesser extent the SW WA Drought Hub.

[REDACTED] we contributed to the formation of partnering arrangements, shaped the initial FDF submission, and secured community group, agriculture, and WA university commitments of support. RNRM has continued to be proactive contributors, sitting as members of the Hub Committee, and having representation on its RDEA Committee. It is also a Node

Manager of both the two hubs in WA acting as Extension Officer, and led drought resiliency projects. Our aim was to strengthen and enhance the program so it is highly relevant and adds value to identified local/regional priorities.

██████████ I would like to suggest some potential areas of improvement for the FDF programs. While I understand that the Drought Hubs are only one component of the FDF program, my suggestions mainly pertain to the Hubs. However, some might apply more broadly.

The Future Drought Fund (FDF) undoubtedly offers a unique opportunity to not only fortify the drought resilience of farming practices, but also to ensure a strategic and systematic approach across the entire agriculture Research, Development, Extension, Adoption and Commercialisation (RDEAC) network. It is important to note that funding for rural communities and agriculture challenges across Australia's vast continent and rangelands is somewhat limited. However, there's substantial energy and passion of community groups, organisations such as regional Natural Resource Management (NRM), and other engaged programs, all dedicated to fostering innovation, supporting change, and building resilience.

Reflecting on past learnings and in the spirit of encouraging systemic change, it's crucial to strategically add value to existing efforts and coalitions in regions like the WA Rangelands. There are indeed significant gaps and barriers to overcome, yet also abundant opportunities to build upon the priorities, efforts, and passion of local communities, their trusted networks, and supporting infrastructure.

With the inception of the Drought Hubs, the FDF aimed to enhance integration and bridge the RDEAC at an ecosystem level, thereby increasing overall resilience. This is, and continues to be, a noble overarching objective. The Hubs have indeed initiated some new locally relevant and collaborative projects, leveraging existing capabilities and refining focus areas. However, with the benefit of hindsight, I believe there were shortcomings in how the Drought Hub infrastructure was established and executed, especially in its ability to adapt to resilience objectives that met system-wide needs. Specifically, the community/industry-level network and essential processes for developing trust, collaboration, and momentum were not sufficiently harnessed or further developed.

Over the past 10-20 years, significant strides have been made towards fostering local leadership capacity, addressing historical legacies, and promoting a more holistic social and ecological approach to agriculture. This progress has required substantial investment of resources, time, and passion, involving Commonwealth programs and numerous regional entities, including farming groups, First Nations groups, and embedded R&D initiatives. Organisations like Rangelands NRM have been instrumental in this journey, embodying collaboration, and holistic thinking, and aligning local, regional, and national priorities.

While universities and entities of government agricultural departments should play a crucial role in agricultural adaptations and future resilience, the abrupt transition to a leading position in FDF Hubs that required community-level collaboration and E&A has proven challenging. In my perspective, this move has not fully realised the FDF's intention to create bridges, linkages, and overall productive improvements to the system.

Regrettably, there have been significant inconsistencies and missed opportunities to extend or refocus the momentum and foundations that have been built. In my view, the formation of the Hubs has been overly influenced by funding, management inexperience, and outdated governance and program delivery approaches.

████████████████████ we were deeply concerned about the risks posed by these issues and the fundamental levels of governance to collaboration. For example, we noticed power brokering overshadowing knowledge brokering within the Hub. There seemed to be incompatible attitudes and experience for proper governance and the achievement of genuine local and sector outcomes.

In summary, my primary recommendation is to place greater emphasis on integrating and amplifying the existing capacities and capabilities within regional communities. Specifically, I suggest a focus on enhancing or expanding organisations and coalitions that actively foster connections across community, environmental, and economic dimensions.

Detailed suggestions include:

Prioritise Agriculture Producers and First Nations: They should be at the forefront of engagement, prioritisation, delivery, and metrics for FDF program activities/projects. This will encourage innovation and bolster long-term resilience.

Balance Program Infrastructure: Ensure that the program infrastructure and its capability to connect across R&D through to EAC are appropriately balanced, not too heavy and supportive of these priorities.

Focus on Collaboration and Communities of Practice: Prioritise the extension and enhancement of collaboration and communities of practice.

Guide Holistic Management: Ensure infrastructure is capable to guide the innovation and development of a more holistic approach to farming e.g. extends on NRM, Regenerative Agriculture, and Healthy Country Cultural Objectives. Integration of local ecological functions, collaboration and adaptation, and financial and market imperatives.

Revise Language and Function: Consider changing the language and function of some FDF program areas away from academia 'end-user', pre-conceived 'adoption', and consultative paradigms.

Review the Hubs: Conduct an in-depth review of the Hubs to identify elements that can be integrated into the FDF, while considering the discontinuation of others.

Identify Effective Organisations: Identify organisations that effectively build community/industry-level capacity aligned with FDF strategies. These organisations demonstrate evidence of effective governance, mission alignment, dependable engagement, program/project management, and commitment to developing the capabilities of rural communities to collaborate and innovate.

Ensure integration of First Nations participation: Traditional Custodians, Aboriginal Corporations, Rangers leadership and collaborative work needs to be supporting by the trusted partner and service delivery networks in the region.

Incorporate NRMs: Incorporate regional NRMs more strategically into the FDF programs. These organisations have undergone Commonwealth Regional Delivery Partner (RDP) selection, and their infrastructure is already largely invested by NHT. Leverage their ability to connect across community leadership, environmental functions, and industry/local economies. In particular, consider building upon the RDP initiatives of 'Sustainable Agriculture' programs, 'Communities of Practice', 'Sustainable Agriculture Facilitators' (SAF), and Aboriginal Healthy Country and Rangers that are integrated into all NRM Agricultural and Environment Projects. Additional resources could

significantly enhance engagement in remote and rural communities, and develop agricultural FDF projects/activities in the region.

Balance Investment across Australia: Balance investment across gaps, barriers, and opportunities to resilience, rather than focusing solely on agricultural GDP and farmer population. One area to consider is the southern, central and parts of the northern Australian rangelands, which are grappling with a legacy of degradation, disconnection to markets, low socio-economic status, limited service/infrastructure provision, vast areas to manage productively, and susceptibility to climate and other threats.

Develop Political Will: Work towards cultivating political will for long-term programs that better align with resilience-building requirements. This is particularly important once confidence in the directions of program areas has been established.

In conclusion, the Future Drought Fund represents an invaluable opportunity to transform Australia's approach to drought resilience. Let us leverage this chance to not only bolster our farming practices but also to strengthen the entire agriculture network.

Yours sincerely,

