

Response to the Consultation draft: Future Drought Fund Investment Strategy 2024 to 2028.

The Ag Excellence Alliance (Ag Ex) in South Australia has been integral in the establishment of the SA Drought Hub and providing ground-up feedback on the roll-out of the other FDF programs. Ag Ex represents 20 farmer driven grower groups across the state delivering applied research, development, and extension projects to the farming community. It is well placed to provide constructive feedback to the ongoing development of the FDF program. The following is a summary of feedback received from the networks of Ag Ex on the gaps in the FDF and where increased focus could be directed to achieve improved outcomes for drought resilience.

- Continual improvement in capacity to deliver effective extension projects is crucial. Providing support to further develop skills in extension, project development, management, and delivery will pay significant dividends in achieving effective project outcomes leading to increased drought resilience.
- All FDF Programs should contribute to increased producer, farm business, and community resilience to drought. This questioning could be employed across all FDF programs to determine whole of fund outcome. MEL should be purposefully resourced to enable quality data and information collection.
- The MEL needs more robust baseline information to measure success of investments over time (longitudinal studies). MEL needs to be an integral part of project delivery, and not over complicated. Increased focus on outcomes (qualitative measures – changes in knowledge, aspirations, skills, attitude and practice change), less on statistics (quantitative measures - number of meetings, participation number, etc). Make better use of case studies.
- Incremental change can lead to transformational change – small steps are important in dealing with increasingly complex farming systems. Transformation change can be a challenging concept that involves long term considerations. Incremental change, if properly planned, can effectively contribute to desired longer-term outcomes. A big part of drought resilience is to mitigate the risks it poses to a farm business. Transformational change often poses a higher risk to a farm business than incremental change.
- Data is increasingly important in supporting innovation – however data needs to be accurate if it is to successfully support the uptake of new farm practices that increase drought resilience. Engaging expertise that can effectively assist in managing and interpreting data that provides value to on-farm decision making and practices is critical if it is to help drive drought resilient practices.
- Recognising the strengths of FDF partnering organisations will be critical to achieving the most effective outcomes for drought resilience. As the FDF matures, working to the strengths of collaborating organisations when partnering or leading programs and/or projects will result in the best returns on investment.
- The Drought Hubs have been a critical success factor in the FDF program, and ongoing support to further develop the Hubs will be critical in achieving drought resilience in the medium and longer term, especially as the impacts of climate change become more evident.

Ensuring the Hubs are properly resourced with the ability to engage the best expertise available will be critical to future success.

- The SA Drought Hub has played a critical role in setting up and engaging the grower group network in delivering on-ground outcomes, ensuring the drivers for change are from the grower perspective up. The Hub has also been critical in significantly improving the connection between research and growers, helping to better direct research to achieving on-ground outcomes, and creating avenues for researchers to connect with on-ground organisations and growers.
- Farmers learn from farmers – support local community networks, especially the next generation of farmers. Value the experience and knowledge of older farmers by effectively engaging them in support networks for the next generation.
- Ensure grower groups are supported to continue to develop and deliver effective on-ground programs. Support the development of local leadership, project management and delivery skills. Grower groups are ‘innovation brokers’, bringing together farm advisors, researchers, regional NRM organisations, resellers and farmers. They provide much of the local/on-ground information and support “soft- infrastructure” that farmers seek, and this is key to helping industry and government achieve their goals. The grower group resource deserves better recognition as a “grass roots” delivery system.
- Key influencers of farm decision making can greatly increase the uptake of new and innovative practices that contribute to drought resilience. This network can bring significant skills and experience to the development and delivery of on-ground programs. The growth of farm adviser networks provides a key avenue for influencing the uptake of innovative drought resilient practices. This network needs to be recognised and appropriately rewarded when engaged in project development and delivery.
- The move towards net zero emissions in agriculture is creating significant concerns amongst growers. The role that the FDF has in this space from a drought resilience perspective needs clarification, especially considering the other Commonwealth and State government programs focussing in this challenging area.
- The regional drought resilience plans need to connect with key stakeholders in the regions. Their purpose and key recommendations need to be well articulated and communicated, informing on-ground investments in the regions from the Hubs and other community and business focused FDF programs, as well as other (non-FDF) Local, State and Federal initiatives.
- The farm business resilience program needs to be integrated with and / or coordinated with the Drought Hubs to ensure better connections with key on ground stakeholders to improve uptake and relevance.

Yours sincerely

[Redacted Signature]

[Redacted Name]

Ag Excellence Alliance.