# Submission

## Next phase of investment under the Future Drought Fund

December 2023

About Growcom

Growcom is the programs and projects delivery arm of the Queensland Fruit & Vegetable Growers Ltd (QFVG) the State Industry Body representing Queensland fruit, vegetable, and nut growers. It is our belief that outcomes can only be achieved with the grower at the centre of what we do. We continually strive to be the provider of choice and to be recognised for our high-quality delivery. Our humanistic approach is that all services must be practical, useful, and relevant to growers.

Background

Jointly funded by Queensland Government, through the Drought and Climate Adaptation Program and the Federal Government Future Drought Fund, Growcom has delivered the Farm Business Resilience Program for Queensland Horticulture in the first 4-year funding cycle. This formed part of the 16 programs developed and delivered to focus on better climate information, planning activities, farm and land management practices and community preparedness to build drought resilience. Additionally, Growcom has supported and collaborated in kind contributions to initiatives delivered through the SQNNSW and TNQ Drought hubs.

Drought and Horticulture in Queensland

Writing this submission feels like DeJa’Vu as we find ourselves facing another drought as we enter a period of El Nino. While the impacts on agriculture are generally well understood, it remains important to highlight the ways in which drought impacts horticulture and the regional communities that depend on our industry’s direct and indirect employment opportunities.

It is fresh in our memory the impact drought had on both growers and community alike in the Granite Belt in Southern Queensland. With an almost exclusive alliance on the storage of their overland flow dams, the last drought left many growers exposed as their dams ran dry. Vegetable growers were unable to plant summer crops, tree crops suffered with substantial losses, ground water reserves declined, salinity issues arose, and community businesses closed. Along with the decline of water and loss of quality water, the impact of increased temperatures for extended periods increased the risk of commodities becoming unviable due to inability to produce fruit and to survive in both the short and longer term.

The effects on farmers and the resulting decline of the horticulture industry, had a substantial impact on horticulture, business and community, an impact that will have flow on effects for years to come.

Inclusion is Essential

Historically, Horticulture has not had any significant level of involvement in the formulation of government policies and programs designed to minimize the impacts of drought. As a result, horticulture continues to not be met with the same support as other agriculture industries.

As stated in our Growcom Submission to the Future Drought Fund and the Drought Resilience Funding Plan 2020 to 2024, December 2019; we expect government at all levels to:

* Properly consult with the horticulture industry, in its own right, on all relevant drought policy developments.
* Properly consider the significant variations across agriculture industries, including horticulture, that influence the effectiveness of policies and programs.
* Work with the horticulture industry to ensure policies and programs are properly targeted and avoid or mitigate industry impacts.
* Assist industry through funding and appropriately designed programs that facilitate drought preparedness, resilience, and recovery actions.

All rural industries and communities are impacted by drought and climate variations. Policy and subsequent initiatives should be inclusive of all rural industries and made available to all applicants. This has not been the case during the first phase of the funding plan. For example; we refer to the ‘Long Term Trials for Drought Resilient Farming Practices’ grant which the horticulture industry were not eligible to apply for. We had and still have a proposal for a program that met all the other eligibility criteria of that grant and if progressed would benefit horticulture and many other rural industries. We would like to see these long-term trials support research and development activities including longer term programs that have enduring applicable on ground applications with outcomes relating to long term resilience/ climate adaptation in the horticulture industry.

Farm Level Accessibility

The Future Drought Fund programs such as the Farm Business Resilience Program need to be made accessible to all people, not only quantified ‘primary producers’ as to do so excludes a range of wild harvest, startups and previously disaster impacted operations. We believe the intent of the funding is such that these cohorts should be included as the program is designed to strengthen the resilience capacities of individuals and their farm businesses, communities, and regions, to adapt, reorganise or transform to changing conditions. Some examples of this are:

* Increasing knowledge, skills, and capability, leading to increased flexibility and adaptability - commodity / regionally-based.
* Supporting people to make use of new information about viable options to adapt, reorganise or transform to changing conditions of climate based resilience, based on education, awareness and extension in partnership with industry and commodity groups.
* Building connections (social networks and relationships) to assist with information sharing, coordination, and collaboration.
* Strengthening the resources or ‘capitals’ available to individuals and communities helps them to plan, respond and adapt.
* Inclusion of grower and community knowledge. Without acknowledgement of their knowledge and input, the degree of difficulty for adoption of more resilient practices may be more pronounced. ‘On ground’ trials that growers and community can see merit in, that can be adapted to further situations, are beneficial for resilience building.

The state of the ‘5 capitals’ (financial capital, human capital, physical capital, social capital, and natural capital) are foundational to the capacity of the system to adapt and manage risks. Access to larger and more diverse resources allows for:

* All communities to be supported so that their knowledge and practices to care for country can maintained for the benefit of their communities and land management. Farms and Farming communities need to be supported from the ground up in such a way it is equitable across rural industries and communities. Therefore, initiatives should allow for inclusion of emerging rural businesses, industries and communities to participate in programs equitably and build from best management practices.
* Activities to evaluate key programs, better understand the needs of First Nations communities and to improve collaboration, information sharing and the way we measure success.
* Recognition of the on-ground knowledge of farmers and communities, including First Nations, applying best management practice should be supported and encouraged. There is opportunity to build projects to map local/ regional knowledge, practices, and community connection to the land during drought cycles.

Currently First Nations and emerging rural business applicants are only able to engage with Queensland horticulture through the Future Drought Fund if they can demonstrate they are primary producers, participating in the Farm Business Resilience Program. Associated with this program in Queensland there is one source of funding support, via QRIDA. This is only available to primary producers. The effect of this results in the inability of First Nations wild harvest operations and new primary production enterprises, those recovering from disasters with external income to qualify for any funding support for resilience practices. Additionally, there is no funding support in Queensland available for natural resource management activities. Therefore, no support for improved soil health activities, building resilience ‘from the ground up’. There is opportunity to collaborate with industry bodies to build economic resilience, to build environmental resilience through collaboration with natural resource groups and drought hubs, along with social capital building organisations to build social resilience.

Support for vision, aim and strategic priorities

Growcom support the Vision, Aim and Strategic objectives outlined in the Draft Drought Resilience Funding Plan 2024 to 2028 that have enduring outcomes, including through longer term programs.

Growcom is currently limited in its industry support through the Future Drought Fund via delivery of the Farm Business Resilience Program for horticulture in Queensland current Collaborative Subcontractor Agreement between State of Queensland acting through the Department of Agriculture and fisheries and Queensland Fruit and Vegetable Growers Ltd.

There remain wider opportunities to support and facilitate activities through longer term programs. For example; the previous ‘Long Term Trials for Drought Resilient Farming Practices’ grant of which Growcom was excluded previously. Long term trials (5 years) provide a greater degree of security thus providing an increased level of stability, these trials will provide opportunity to build better knowledge, uptake of resilience practices and opportunity to transform communities to be more resilient.

We request all future activities are not exclusionary and are funded on merit, in the spirit of the Future Drought Fund strategic objectives. Growcom supports the funding principles so would like greater opportunities to support activities that have enduring outcomes to support activities that have enduring outcomes, that will provide and ensure resilience and sustainability in regional areas as well as on a commodity basis.