



FUTURE DROUGHT FUND - DROUGHT RESILIENCE FUNDING PLAN

NRMs and the Drought and Innovation Hub



December 2023

CONTEXT

Natural Resource Management organisations (NRMs) operate in a similar but different context to the Drought and Innovation Hubs (The Hubs). However, both rely heavily on Australian Government funding, including through the Future Drought Fund (FDF) and both operate in similar stakeholder environments, particularly agricultural communities. The Productivity Commission has made recommendations to improve the effectiveness of the FDF, and the effectiveness and efficiency of the Hubs is central to these changes.

There is an opportunity to improve the alignment of NRMs and the Hubs, noting their different objectives and operating models.

RECOMMENDATION

That NRM Regions and the 54 nationwide NRMs work closely with the Drought and Innovation Hub network to improve efficiency and effectiveness as well as ensuring that Natural Resources are a priority investment area and focus for the Hubs.

CASE STUDIES

Decision Support Tools and Containment Feeding

NRM South is currently implementing a drought-decision tool for dryland pasture farmers called Farming Forecaster. This tool gives farmers advance notice of pasture availability helping them manage groundcover, animal health and prevent erosion. One of the tools that farmers can use under drought conditions is containment feeding. However this practice has not been successful in Tasmania due to a lack of expertise combined with historically unsuccessful attempts and social licence challenges.



A local grass-roots organisation (the Derwent Catchment Project) applied for funding to improve extension support for containment feeding to the FDF, which was unsuccessful. NRM South recognised the importance of this tool and its relevance to the Farming Forecaster project, The Tas Farm Innovation Hub was also receptive to exploring a solution.

The Hub and NRM South designed and delivered workshops that supported farmers' understanding of decision-support tools and subsequently containment feeding through the Derwent Catchment Project. The outcomes were funded between NRM South and the Hub and brought interstate expertise from NSW and SA to areas that were already experiencing drought-pressure. These sessions were well attended. They helped farmers with tools that would assist them in using farm and financial data to make the right strategy decisions to successfully navigate drying conditions in unfavourable market conditions, including a deeper understanding of containment feeding.

Soils

Tasmania's three NRMs responded to a request from the Australian Government to establish a network of Soils Extension Practitioners and to run a relevant project to build soils knowledge for Tasmanian landholders. The program was successful, attracting emerging talent, and delivering capability development, soils testing, field days and three decision support tools in a relatively compressed timeframe.

Ongoing funding was not available through DAFF. The NRMs recognised that there was a high risk that the significant development investment as well as momentum from increased interest of landholders was going to be lost. After discussions with the Hub, a project was able to be agreed that gave a 12-month extension to the work of the Soils Extension Practitioners and keep landholders engaged in exploring the importance of soil to their productive environments.



The Hub also funds the Regional Soils Coordinator which is hosted by NRM South. This arrangement gives the Soils coordinator access to different perspective and similar but different networks. The Hub provides a stronger commercial resilience perspective while NRM South adds a strategic landscape value perspective. Both perspectives are important for the Soils Coordinator as they provide input to the National Soils Action Plan.

East Coast Primary Producers

The East Coast of Tasmania is strongly affected by drought, with low annual rainfall combined with no access to irrigation infrastructure. However, the growers in this region are highly resilient and have found ways to diversify, work as a community, and look for funding and grants to improve their outcomes.

NRM South works closely with and supports this group, and through discussions with farmers it became clear that the burden of coordination and preparation of applications was falling on a few farmers who had significant existing demands on their time managing their farming enterprises.

NRM South worked with one of the lead farmers to clarify the need and support their application through to the Hub. The result was a part-time funded position with the capacity to engage with all farmers in the region and represent those needs in coordination of relevant activities as well as applications for grants and support funding. This model is being considered for other farming communities who would benefit from collective coordination and support.

FUTURE POTENTIAL

The opportunity for NRMs to work with the Drought and Innovation Hubs and improve outcomes for landholders, as well as natural resources, is high. Funded through the Future Drought Fund the mission of the Hubs centres around agricultural commercial success, climate resilience and community robustness. NRMs have similar interests, importantly however, bring the strategic perspective of natural assets, sustainable production, and biodiversity to the agenda.

While these missions are complementary, they are not the same. Additionally, the organisations have different governance arrangements, different access to research and academia and different funding structures and future funding potential.

Recognising the difference in our missions, values and strategies while finding ways to collaborate and support each other's success will most importantly optimise long-term benefits to landholders and landscapes and the communities that rely on them.