

8 December 2023

## Submission on the Effectiveness of the Future Drought Fund in Engaging Rural and Regional Communities to Build Resilience

### Overview

Farmsafe Australia appreciates the opportunity to provide feedback to the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry on the Future Drought Fund 2024-2028 Funding Plan and Investment Strategy. Recognising the pressing need to foster a culture of resilience and responsibility across rural and regional Australia, the Australian Government's commitment to establishing the Future Drought Fund has made an invaluable contribution to the way that farmers plan for drought and is acknowledged by industry as a proactive approach to strengthening industry and community sustainability.

In navigating the distinctive challenges presented by rural and regional communities, especially in the farming sector, government initiatives can significantly benefit from leveraging the expertise and community trust embedded in agricultural not-for-profit organisations. Recognising the importance of long-term engagement, nuanced understanding, and community ownership, a collaborative approach between government and not-for-profits will lead to more effective and sustainable outcomes and ensure that the Future Drought Fund achieves its long-term objective of building economic, environmental and social resilience across Australian agriculture and the rural and regional communities that support it.

Thank you for considering these insights prior to government investment into new programs. Farmsafe Australia looks forward to continuing to work alongside the Australian Government to ensure that rural and regional communities have the knowledge, networks and support needed to face future droughts and continue to provide safe and sustainable food and fibre long into the future.

### Who Are We?

The Farmsafe Australia network grew out of the establishment of locally based farm safety action groups and state Farmsafe Committees in the late 1980's. Today, Farmsafe Australia is the national entity connecting state farming organisations, peak commodity bodies, influential advocacy bodies and other key groups that share an interest in agricultural health and safety. Through collaboration, our network of members focuses the national conversation on concerning trends in the agricultural workplace health and safety landscape and what we, as an industry, can do to turn those trends around. We are 100% not-for-profit.

Our campaigns and resources are based upon the philosophy that the primary responsibility for farm safety rests with individual farmers, farm workers, and their families. However, as individual farming organisations or stakeholders in the agricultural industry, we have a responsibility to farmers to support them in producing food and fibre safely, ethically, and sustainably. We exist to inform, educate and engage farmers as they navigate through workplace health and safety legislation and obligations as business owners and employers - providing information about hazards and risks often attributed to the farming environment and the importance of the human assets within the farming environment.

*Committed to keeping you safer on Australian Farms*

## Our Members



## Evaluation of the Draft Funding Plan

Farmsafe Australia supports the framework provided by the Draft Funding Plan and the triple bottom line approach that has been proposed as an adequate guide for spending funds. Drought resilience, like farm safety, is not merely an isolated aspect of Australian agricultural operations, but an integral component that ripples across economic, environmental, and social dimensions.

Although Farmsafe supports most of the recommendations made by the Productivity Commission in their review of the effectiveness of the Future Drought Fund, we feel very strongly that relevant, national not-for-profit organisations should be involved in the design and delivery of programs and initiatives. Their involvement, where appropriate, ensures that messaging remains consistent, communication of opportunities and outcomes is effective, and (through pre-existing networks) ensures they are accessed and shared by many. It has the added benefit that projects and initiatives can be leveraged to create even more value and avoids the risk of duplicating programs.

We have compiled some suggestions below on key criteria and recommendations that could be considered to maximise the integration of some programs into existing frameworks and the impact of any future investments, especially within the context of place-based action, partnerships and social resilience.

## Proposed Key Features of New Programs

While investment in drought resilience, spanning economic, environmental and social initiatives, is undeniably important, the effectiveness of such programs hinges on their alignment with the unique needs and insights of the communities they aim to serve. Drought resilience is not a one-size-fits-all solution but a complex intersection of local knowledge, community cohesion, and shared experiences. Community-led initiatives not only ensure a nuanced understanding of the

specific challenges faced but also foster a sense of ownership and commitment. In empowering communities to design and implement projects tailored to their realities, we cultivate a resilience that is not only sustainable but deeply ingrained in the fabric of local life, ensuring that investments are utilised to their fullest extent for the benefit of all.

However, the significance of co-designing programs through collaborative partnerships between state and national industry not-for-profits and local community groups cannot be overstated. This partnership ensures the creation of a nationally consistent framework while embracing the unique nuances of local contexts, resulting in programs that are both nationally robust and locally relevant, while reducing the risk of needless duplication and fragmented messaging. This collaborative approach underscores a cohesive strategy, where the strength of a consistent framework works together with the tailored delivery models that resonate with the diverse needs of communities across the nation.

### **Key Features of the Investment Strategy**

***Greater transparency regarding the roles and responsibilities of key service providers (including the Hubs), including in promoting further integration of programs.***

Although the Hub and Node model does regionalise and contextualise programming and investment, the efficiency of each hub could benefit from a review, as recommended by the Productivity Commission. The opportunity for individual regions to lead program design and development has both pros and cons. Feedback has suggested that the effectiveness of the Hubs has been limited, especially in the ability to engage and communicate with the surrounding farmers and communities.

The challenge for individual hubs is marshalling and using the different regional voices to ensure that their message is not fragmented and that opportunities to engage are communicated in a way that motivates engagement. There is a unique role for not-for-profit organisations like Farmsafe Australia to play in coordinating and facilitating these solutions, leveraging their member networks so that relevant messages can be effectively delivered at the local level by the hubs. The networks and long-term relationships cultivated by not-for-profits stand as invaluable assets in community engagement and development. These organisations, deeply embedded within local contexts, have fostered trust, understanding, and collaboration over time. Leveraging these networks is pivotal for the effective coordination and facilitation of localised projects and initiatives.

***Fewer and longer-term programs that are better integrated & Building momentum and learning from programs with demonstrated impact***

The establishment of long-term sustainable programs for behavior change, particularly in challenging areas like rural mental health and environmental stewardship, requires a significant investment of time. Sustainable behavioral change occurs through a gradual evolution over an extended period. Long-term commitment allows programs to adapt to evolving needs, ensuring they remain relevant and effective. As time passes, generational change takes hold, securing behavioural shifts that endure and contribute to the well-being of communities and the environment alike.

- **Time and Multiple Touchpoints for Behavioral Change:**

Behavioral change within rural and regional communities, particularly in the farming sector, requires sustained effort and multiple touchpoints. Government interventions are often constrained by administrative processes and short project timelines, making it challenging to establish the necessary rapport for lasting behavioural change. Not-for-profits, characterised by their commitment to community-driven initiatives and long-term relationships between both government and community, are better positioned to invest the time required for meaningful engagement and sustained impact.

- **Sustainability and Continuity:**

The continuity of not-for-profit involvement in farming communities ensures the sustainability of projects. Unlike short-term interventions, the ongoing presence of these organisations allows for continuous support, adaptation to evolving needs, and the building of resilience over time.

### **Integrating Existing Programs to Drive Efficiency and Maximise Impact – Social Resilience**

There is a risk that allocating funds to programs that operate in isolation from existing national initiatives is just reinventing the wheel, resulting in unnecessary duplication and resource allocation. This not only dilutes the overall effectiveness of nationalised interventions but also diverts valuable funds from areas where they could be more strategically employed at the local level. Integrated programs that build upon existing frameworks leverage established networks, knowledge, and resources, optimising efficiency and impact. By prioritising integration and collaboration, the Future Drought Fund can ensure that each dollar invested contributes synergistically to broader, more sustainable outcomes, fostering a cohesive approach to addressing shared challenges.

As stated above, in a farming community, not-for-profits act as linchpins that connect, support, and uplift the community through their established networks and long-term relationships. This approach ensures that projects and initiatives are not only effective, but also deeply embedded in the needs of local families and community life. These communities are deeply distrustful of outside interventions and require trusted and established voices to motivate engagement.

Farmsafe Australia, a national body with a network of members across jurisdictions and commodities, is perfectly placed to develop and deliver consistent messaging, especially within the context of social resilience, that resonates across rural and regional Australia. Our diversity of members gives us unparalleled national reach directly into farming communities, with trusted voices to act as facilitators and ambassadors.

One of our key priorities is farmer and community engagement and one of the areas of significance that could benefit from a nationalised framework and integration with existing programs is mental health. This area has not been significantly resourced through the first three years of the Future Drought Fund, and yet, strong mental health forms the cornerstone of sound decision-making in farming, influencing outcomes across the spectrum of safety, financial, environmental, and social domains. The demanding nature of agriculture, marked by the drought cycle, and coupled with unpredictable weather, market fluctuations, and operational complexities, necessitates a resilient and focused mindset.

With regards to workplace safety, a farmer's ability to make quick, thoughtful decisions during high-pressure situations directly correlates with their mental well-being, ensuring the implementation of effective safety protocols. Financial decisions, such as investment strategies and risk management, are similarly shaped by a farmer's mental acuity, influencing the economic viability and sustainability of their operation. Environmental stewardship relies on clear-headed decision-making to adopt sustainable practices that preserve natural resources. Additionally, social interactions within the farming community and beyond demand a balanced and empathic mental state, fostering collaboration and shared responsibility.

However, the importance of prioritising farmer and community mental health extends far beyond the immediate challenges posed by periods of drought. While drought undoubtedly amplifies stressors, the need for mental health support is an ongoing, intrinsic aspect of rural life. Mental resilience is not a trait that can be summoned only in times of crisis; rather, it is a skill that requires continuous development over an extended period, and a sustained approach is essential. Repeated and consistent messaging, coupled with skill-building initiatives, forms the foundation of this long-term commitment. By fostering this type of resilience as a continuous journey rather than a reactionary measure, we can

create a culture where individuals are equipped to navigate the ebb and flow of the drought cycle and agricultural challenges, ensuring that mental health remains a steadfast priority irrespective of climatic conditions.

Any investment into localised mental health initiatives should take into consideration existing initiatives, such as [ifarmwell's](#) modules developed in South Australia, and look to nationalise these initiatives as they already have demonstrated effectiveness and targeted benefits for the rural/regional audience, instead of investing in new initiatives that may not have yet demonstrated significant impact or value. These types of solutions are well-researched, developed by farmers and shovel-ready, reducing the need for extensive planning and design phases.

### Investment Recommendations & Alignment with National Priorities

Under 6.1.1.1 Funding Options, Farmsafe Australia would support competitively funded opportunities to deliver cross-Hub or cross region projects, but these should be open to established not-for-profit organisations, to work collaboratively with the hubs to deliver these projects, as in point 1 below. We would also suggest that not just the funding option, but the funding model, should be considered, and models should reflect that resilience of any kind takes time to develop, monitor and evaluate. Three years will not provide adequate time to evaluate or understand the impact of resilience-building projects.

Under funding from the National Farm Safety Education Fund, Farmsafe Australia drafted the [National Farm Safety Education Fund Strategy](#). This strategy is underpinned by research and outlines the needs of farmers and rural/regional communities in areas including Physical and Psychological Wellbeing, Leadership and Cultural Change and Industry Endorsed Training and Continued Learning. These pillars align closely with the Future Drought Fund's objective to strengthen the social capital of rural, regional, and remote agricultural communities.

Under 6.2.1 Funding Options, the suggestion that social and community resilience could be furthered through mental health first aid training and education, building the capacity of farmers to support one another, is acknowledged and supported. As above, this type of educational programming aligns with our national strategy and should be designed and led by organisations such as Farmsafe Australia who have the capacity to provide long-term, effective workshops in collaboration with recognised experts in rural/regional/farmer mental health. Farmsafe Australia can ensure that the programs are not one-off trainings but initiatives that have multiple touchpoints and repeated contact with participants to ensure skills continue to be used and built upon.

This type of contact essentially 'trains the trainers' and ensures that each community has long-term and agile resources to draw upon into the future. These 'trainers' are then enabled to replicate and multiply their knowledge transfer, (ie if a workshop trains 8 trainers and they in turn train 8 more each, there are effectively 72 trained ambassadors) amplifying the messages of the regional hub, creating greater access and awareness and efficiently multiplying the public good created.

#### 1. Investment in Not-for-Profit Partnerships:

- Encourage Future Drought Fund collaboration with established not-for-profits with a proven track record in community engagement and topics of relevance.

#### 2. Flexible Funding Models:

- Implement funding models that allow not-for-profits to engage with communities over extended periods, recognising the time required for behavioural change.
- If the aim is delivering transformational programs, multiple ongoing contacts and diverse touchpoints is hugely significant. Sustainable and profound change rarely occurs through isolated interventions; rather, it thrives on a continuum of interactions that cater to the diverse needs and preferences of the target audience. Employing a variety of touchpoints, such as workshops, community events, online resources,

and one-on-one interactions, ensures a holistic and inclusive approach. These differing touchpoints serve as building blocks in a transformative journey, reinforcing key messages, addressing varied learning styles, and allowing for the gradual internalisation of new concepts. By fostering a continuous and dynamic engagement process, transformational programs can better navigate the complexities of individual perspectives and foster a deeper, lasting impact on the individuals or communities they aim to serve.

We genuinely appreciate your consideration of our submission and look forward to collaborating with the Future Drought Fund in the future to create a safer and more sustainable agricultural community. Together, we can make a lasting difference in the lives of those who ensure our food and fibre security.

Should you require any additional information or have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact our Executive Officer, Stevi Howdle on 0488 298 499 or [showdle@farmsafe.org.au](mailto:showdle@farmsafe.org.au).

Kind Regards,



**Felicity Richards**

Chair