



FRRR

Foundation for Rural
Regional Renewal

The know and the how.

Connecting good will, with good purpose,
for the vitality of rural and remote
Australia.





11 September 2024

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Response to Consultation draft of the Australian Government Drought Plan

FRRR welcome the opportunity to make this submission.

Our response is informed by our experience supporting regional communities across the last 25 years, and through the delivery of both in-drought response and drought preparedness programs including the:

- [Tackling Tough Times \(TTTT\) Grant Program](#), and the recent [Impact Report](#) (681 Projects),
- Future Drought Fund's [Networks to Build Drought Resilience Program](#) (83 Projects), and the
- Future Droughts Fund's [Helping Regional Communities Prepare for Drought Initiative](#). (239 Projects).

1) Is the Australian Government's approach to drought across the drought cycle clear in the draft plan? Why or why not?

FRRR supports the plan as an improved effort to collate all phases of the drought cycle into one document. Specifically:

1. The clear purpose, scope, context and history are helpful.
2. The affirmation of current drought policy, and overt statement of preparedness with assurance of a safety net is useful.
3. Specific recognition of the many sectoral players is welcomed e.g.: *Governments, industry groups, financial and professional services sectors, research organisations, charities and not-for-profit sector also have a role across the drought cycle.*
4. Specific commitment to 'working together' is important and necessary in an increasingly interconnected policy-environment and one where regional communities are experiencing converging issues. *Drought policy must reflect the importance of stakeholders working together to address the challenges of drought and our changing climate.*
5. Specific recognition of First Nations people is strongly supported by FRRR. *First Nations peoples have a deep understanding of the land, and their traditional knowledge can contribute to building drought resilience.*



Suggested areas for strengthening:

1. Articulation of a clearly defined, whole of population outcome the plan is striving to achieve from an environmental, economic and social perspective would be helpful. At present, this is not overt in the 'Current Drought Policy' section on Page 8.
2. A clearer articulation about who is likely to benefit and what mechanisms/sectors will be used to deploy the support at specific stages of the drought cycle would also be helpful. While acknowledging government plans to develop a separate Drought Response Framework, the current plan is not consistently clear about the intended program beneficiaries throughout the three-stage drought cycle (farmers, local economy, wider community), who might be involved (sector delivery partners), and the long-term outcome that each program is seeking to strengthen (social, economic, environmental). At present this is stated under some program descriptions, but not others. This is critical to ensure a balanced approach to social, economic, environmental support is delivered, and will provide clarity to both local communities and sectoral delivery partners on what is reasonable to expect into the future, and who may be involved.
3. Equitable geographical reach of programs is critical, as is the ability of program design to adapt local context and needs; particularly for rural, remote and very remote communities. At present, the plan is silent on the unique impacts of geographical remoteness amplifying the impacts of drought, and the importance of program design that has national reach, but with local relevance/flexibility embedded, in section 'Current Drought Policy' (Page 8).

Improvement suggestion: (Page 5 Current Drought Policy)

Expand the preamble of:

Drought policy and programs must also evolve and improve to ensure government support remains appropriate and meets the needs of stakeholders. This includes considering the approach to drought policy in the context of a changing climate.

to include a commitment to being:

responsive, equitable, flexible and locally relevant to farmers, local people and communities across Australia, considering the approach to drought policy in the context of local conditions, and more broadly, a changing national climate.

4. FRRR encourages further exploration of the approach to supporting community wellbeing during drought. The recognition and emphasis on this domain are excellent to see however the use of terms such as community-led can be interpreted in differing ways by different stakeholders, and the approaches to enabling community-level impact are not always right-sized, sequenced, or timed for the needs of communities experiencing drought. FRRR's recent evaluation of the Tackling Tough Times Together grant program, delivered in



partnership with the Australian government alongside philanthropic and corporate partners, offers a series of [recommendations](#) for design and implementation of in-drought programs targeting community wellbeing. See [page 4 and 20-23 of the report](#).

2) Is the draft plan clear as to why the Australian Government's drought policy and response is different to that for natural disasters? Y/N Why or why not?

Whilst the difference between rapid onset disasters and slow onset drought is clear, it remains important to recognise that for communities in regional Australia, there is often a close correlation between these events and disjointed policy and funding approaches hinders their efforts. Funding programs in the emergency management and drought portfolios could be better-aligned and coordinated so as to reduce the load placed on communities when responding to both natural disasters and drought; and when undertaking preparedness work. FRRR would be open to working with Government to explore opportunities for better coordination.

3) Does Pillar 1 – Evidence based decision-making provide greater clarity about when, why, how and what the government will consider when determining its response to drought? Y/N Why or why not?

Pillar 1 does not provide sufficient detail on when, why, how and what the government will consider when determining its response to drought; and who it will consult to support the decision making.

While the Framework 'considerations' listed are useful, it falls short of describing in depth who the government will receive community level advice from beyond the national forum; specifically with regard to social impacts of emerging drought given the lack of data tools available to provide timely indicators and evidence of potential social wellbeing decline. The primary tools listed are designed for agricultural purposes, and some are still in trial phase (Australian Agricultural Drought Indicators Project). Reliance on rainfall deficiency data only is not considered an accurate way to determine program eligibility.

While FRRR agree that [" information on the extent and severity of drought remains important to inform government drought responses and support industry adaptation \(see Hughes et al. 2022\)"](#) the existing data tools do not recognise social indicators. Use of ABARESS/CSIRO Drought Early Warning System relates to crop yields, pasture growth and farm business profits only.

Improvement Suggestion:

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- List the FDF's Helping Regional Communities Prepare for Drought Initiative under Page 13, rather than 18 and 19, as a recognised program under the 'Enabling preparedness and risk management' section.
- The Plan recognise and articulate the need to invest in a nationally recognisable combined indicator data tool that seeks to better define social wellbeing at a local community level. Opportunities exist to scale and test the existing (FDF funded) NSW [Early Insights for More Resilient Communities](#).

4) Does Pillar 2 – Strategic drought support provide greater clarity about how the Australian Government will respond across the drought cycle, including what support it will not provide? Y/N Why or why not?

Pillar 2 Strategic Drought Support is helpful in understanding the scope of program support available at a high level.

Through the experience gained over 25 years of working alongside regional communities, and the 681 projects of the TTTT program specifically, FRRR urges DAFF to consider a wider range of delivery mechanisms, noting that a large-scale, national approach to program support often does not meet the unique needs of smaller rural, regional and remote communities given their scale, entry point, level of administration and delivery methodology that may not adapt well to localised need in design, scope and timing.

FRRR urges the inclusion of:

- o Programs that promote broad community wellbeing and participation, where local communities participate in their design and implementation, as an upstream intervention in building positive mental health. (Page 18)
- o A funding mechanism whereby communities can access support for regional infrastructure that has a lower entry point than \$200,000, given this is largely beyond the capacity of many small regionally based community organisations to apply for and manage. Much strengthening of social capital can be gained through supporting simple, practical infrastructure requests up to \$200,000, likely between \$25,000 to \$150,000, as evidenced in the TTTT report as an enabler of community connection and cohesiveness.
- o A funding mechanism whereby communities can access support for economic revitalisation that is below the minimum entry point of the Growing Regions Program at \$500,000. While this program has a role at a local government level, significant strengthening of social capital can be gained through supporting simple, and hyper local economic development requests up to \$200,000, likely between \$25,000 to \$150,000 such as community festivals that deliver both social and economic gain, offsetting the decreased local spending in communities during drought (Page 16). The TTTT report has a robust evidence base to support this also.



- o A funding mechanism whereby communities can access support to activate general community activities that engender social connection, and build skill development, and leadership skills to reduce social isolation and participate in local decision making. Significant strengthening of social capital can be gained through supporting simple, practical requests between \$25,000 and \$150,000.

5) Have you identified any gaps in how we have responded to any of the review recommendations in the draft plan? Y/N Why or why not?

The gaps pertain to the depth and specificity of information required to fully respond to the recommendations, specifically in regard to the recovery support (Recommendation 11 and 13), so that communities are aware of what they can reasonably expect.

The Drought Decision-Making Framework/Drought Response Framework (Recommendation 13/ Pillar 1) should be made publicly accessible to ensure transparency of decision making and to avoid claims of electorate bias.

FRRR look forward to the outcomes of work, and inclusion in the framework, currently underway in regard to Recommendation 3, including acknowledging the impacts of drought on a wider range of cohorts; including farmers, regional communities, families, young people, women, community organisations, First Nations peoples, and businesses and workers throughout the agricultural supply chain and across agriculture dependent regions, as referenced in the Discussion paper.

The role of Community Organisations is noted in the plan as delivering emergency relief (page 14); however, this understates the scope and role they play in responding to drought conditions. The FRRR Tackling Tough Times Together Program Impact Report provides 681 examples of community organisations playing a role while in drought, which is above and beyond emergency relief.

We highly encourage the formal recognition of the value and role that locally based community organisations play beyond emergency relief, in their ability to strengthen social capital and broad community cohesion during drought, in diverse and often remote regions that larger not for profits find challenging. Activities delivered by small, locally based community organisations such as events, wellbeing programs, economic stimulation to name a few, go well beyond emergency relief to directly and immediately support local people.

Improvement suggestion:

- In 'Current Drought Policy' (page 8) and 'Working Together' (page 21), we suggest that the plan recognise the wider range of people that are impacted by drought and importantly, the role that locally based community organisations play in delivering community strengthening



activities such as local events, training, networks, leadership development and small-scale infrastructure.

- Clarify the specific groups not listed in the current plan as beneficiaries, delivery partners or both.

6) Do you have any comments on the work underway for us to consider as we progress it?

As noted throughout this response, FRRR has recently released the Tackling Tough Times Together Program (in drought support) [Impact Report](#), [Podcasts and Videos](#).

In brief, this program provided grants to communities across rural, regional and remote Australia to manage the impacts of drought from 2014 to 2022.

The report contains key findings such as:

1. Investing in social capital while communities are 'in-drought' is critical. The feedback from more than 600 grant recipients provides a compelling evidence base relating to the need for long-term investment in human and social capital to offset the impacts and challenges that drought presents in communities, right across the drought cycle. Notwithstanding the positive investment in drought preparedness, the need to separately invest in strengthening communities is amplified while in drought, particularly in regions where drought is long-term, and the impact is magnified by singular industry reliance on agriculture. A complementary support mechanism that recognises the unique community-level conditions while in drought and works in recognition of the existing investment is critical.
2. Locally based not-for-profit (NFP) organisations play a critical role during drought.
3. Support for community-driven economic stimulation and diversification is critical, and pays dividends well beyond the drought, both economically and socially
4. Investment in social and professional networks is critical to long-term social cohesion and wellbeing both in-drought and beyond.
5. Investment in infrastructure provides the means for community groups to deliver future initiatives.
6. Investing in events and workshops yields community-wide wellness and social connection outcomes, mitigating known downstream impacts of drought such as social isolation and decreased mental health.

The report also makes recommendations for future in-drought program design:



1. Resources need to be readily available and easily accessible during drought to support communities to deal with the changes occurring locally.
2. Programs should overtly recognise and support the significant role that locally based not-for-profit organisations play in strengthening community wellbeing and connection and ultimately sustainability through:
 - a. Providing support that increases social and community-wide wellbeing and strengthens local networks. If they cannot stay together, sustain population and diversify, there will not be an economy to grow.
 - b. Social and community resilience being furthered through mental health first-aid training and education, building the capacity of locals to support one another and recognise the risk in their family, neighbours and broader community across the drought cycle.
 - c. Information sharing and knowledge building relating to future climate trends.
 - d. Ongoing support for community-based infrastructure that enables community participation.
 - e. Capacity building for people and organisations that promotes leadership and innovation; and
 - f. Supporting projects that promote community level economic stimulation and diversification.
3. Retain flexibility in regard to the project purpose and the simplicity of the application process to ensure funding is accessible to grassroots organisations, not just larger charities or organisations with paid staff.
4. Flexible funding and longer timelines allows communities to innovate and respond to local opportunities, creating the right conditions to identify, drive and deliver projects:
 - a. Tiered grants enable communities to scale projects according to need and capacity. These different funding amounts allow community organisations and groups to initiate fit-for-purpose solutions, balancing their response to local needs with their capability and capacity.
 - b. Small grants (\$20,000 to \$60,000) provide opportunities for community groups to deliver impactful but smaller scale initiatives, while larger grants (up to \$150,000) allow communities to drive larger projects that meet bigger needs. Providing choice empowers small communities to find the best fit for their project depending on their capacity.
 - c. Continue to recognise the increased costs involved in delivering projects in remote communities through larger value grants.
 - d. Recognise that the same model does not fit all. For example, workshops in remote communities require different accommodations to those delivered in larger rural and regional towns, so consider the isolation, distance covered by participants to attend and scheduling.



- e. Offering funding for a broad range of initiatives ensures there is a multidimensional approach to strengthening communities and building capacity. Projects that address the needs of a wide number of stakeholders across community, as well as projects that focus on providing opportunities to different cohorts within the community provide layers of support at the local level. This includes, but is not limited to, targeted projects providing opportunities to young people, women, First Nations community members and older community members. Meaningful outcomes were achieved from both general community projects as well as targeted projects, with initiatives aligned to all the objective areas, building social connection and community wellbeing.
5. Maintain longer funding cycles – including a minimum of 18 months to acquit projects – and ongoing funding options over multiple years, especially to help communities get back to ‘normal’. An extremely limited range of financial support exists for communities that remain impacted by drought and none specifically for this purpose beyond the end of TTTT program:
6. For community groups and not-for-profit organisations, the stability of multi-year funding can make project delivery more effective and lead to greater efficiencies particularly when addressing complex issues and aiming to create a lasting impact.
7. Multi-year funding for larger scale projects helped groups like Birdsville Social Club provide certainty to the community and enable participants to build their learnings and support networks over the duration of the project and support the internal operating costs to deliver projects.
8. Recognise the limited fundraising capacity of community organisations. During drought, many groups find it increasingly difficult to fundraise within their communities. For those with reduced capacity, grant programs like TTTT provide vital support and programs should not require co-contributions.

Other general feedback: Pillar 3 Pre-Amble:

Improvement Suggestion: Deeper grounding and focus on beneficiaries.

Current: Drought is a shared issue among all stakeholders. Working together is essential for formulating cohesive drought policy, providing consistent messaging, delivering aligned services and achieving better outcomes.

Suggested new: Drought is a shared issue among all stakeholders. Working together is essential for formulating cohesive drought policy, providing consistent messaging, avoiding duplication, ensuring equitable geographical and social reach, delivering aligned services, and achieving better outcomes to genuinely meet the need of people and communities impacted by drought.



Closing comment

FRRR extend our sincere thanks for opportunity to provide feedback. The Australian Government's Drought Plan is a significant policy piece for Australia, and through its successful delivery, will ensure the continued prosperity of remote, rural, and regional Australia. We appreciate our part in its delivery, and the enormous effort by all others involved, especially the communities across Australia living the actual experience of climate change and droughts.

Should you wish to discuss the recommendations in our submission, we would welcome the opportunity for further discussion. Please contact us on 03 5430 2399 or email ceo@frrr.org.au.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, written in a cursive style. The name 'Natalie Egleton' is clearly legible, with the first letters of each word being capitalized and prominent.

Natalie Egleton
Chief Executive Officer