



6 December 2023

Mr Brent Finlay
Chairperson

National Consultative Committee
Future Drought Fund
Canberra ACT 2601

Lodged online survey, and uploaded submission via FDF [website](#)

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The Sidney Myer Fund

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Dear Mr Finlay,

FRRR welcomes the opportunity to make this submission to the Future Drought Fund's National Consultative Committee, and Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry relating to the:

- Future Drought Fund Investment Strategy 2024 to 2028, and
- Future Drought Fund Drought Resilience Funding Plan 2024 to 2028

Our submission aims to provide the Committee with a:

1. Survey Response
2. Response to Discussion Questions: 2024-2028 Investment Strategy
3. Background: About Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal
4. Summary: FRRR's experience with the Future Drought Fund (FDF), and

We look forward to the collation of community and stakeholder feedback, and ongoing collaboration with the FDF towards building a vibrant and sustainable future for remote, rural, and regional communities across Australia.



1) Survey Response

FRRR have chosen to focus on specific survey questions and detail, that is most applicable to our experience and learnings as a delivery partner of the FDF.

Survey Question 1:

FRRR have chosen to submit a written response, that covers both the survey questions, as well as relevant discussion questions in the Consultation Draft of the Investment Strategy 2024 to 2028.

Survey Question 2:

FRRR identify as an FDF Delivery Partner.

Survey Question 3: To what extent do you agree with the following statement?

The draft Funding Plan provides an appropriate framework to guide spending on drought resilience initiatives.

FRRR Response: Agree

Survey Question 4: How could the draft Funding Plan be improved to provide high-level guidance before funding decisions are made?

FRRR Response: No further suggestions are made.

Survey Question 5: To what extent do you agree with the following proposed investment stream to support drought preparedness?

Place-based Action and Partnerships – working with on-ground stakeholders to facilitate regional engagement, collaboration and action that is locally relevant (see section 6.1 of the draft Investment Strategy).

FRRR Response: Strongly Agree.

FRRR agrees with the Productivity Commission's assertion that 'There is no one size fits all approach to place-based action because all communities and regions are different and in turn the needs of one community or region can vary greatly from its neighbour. Many stakeholders have commended the demonstrated flexibility of the FDF and the extent to which the FDF strives to understand, and invest in the greatest local need, although this can make measurability of national outcomes more difficult. The Commission has recommended that the shift to place-based planning and action is desirable and would enhance the public good (see Table 1, Recommendation 3.1)'

In current and future program design, significant opportunity exists to leverage greater 'bottom up', less 'top down' approaches to engaging the broader community in drought preparedness.



While flexibility at a local level is critical, FRRR look forward to a greater degree of program and delivery partner role delineation and consistency of remit, specifically that Hubs and RDRPs play at a national, state, and local level. This will both reduce potential duplication, but also ensure that both delivery partners and community members have greater understanding of the purpose and scope of individual programs throughout the FDF and is critical to a genuine place-based approach. (environmental, economic, or social outcomes or a combination)

An approach to the reduction of delivery partners should be taken with care, as a real strength of the FDF is the diversity of partners and deep local relationships that are now established. A small handful of programs will not achieve the transformative effect, and the national reach the fund is seeking. An increased focus on FDF delivery partner collaboration, effective timing of parallel programs, and clarity of role, would yield greater outcomes in most instances than an attempt to reduce delivery partners outright.

FRRR also welcome the increased profile and role of first nations communities in drought resilience activity and initiatives.

Survey Question 6: To what extent do you agree with the following proposed investment stream to support drought preparedness?

Information, Skills, and Capacity Building – supporting farmers and their communities to grow and share knowledge, tools, and practices needed to adapt to the challenges of drought and other climate risks (see section 6.2 of the draft Investment Strategy).

FRRR Response: Agree.

Noting that the assertion in the strategy relating to 'The Helping Regional Communities Prepare for Drought Initiative (HRCPTI) also includes 3 capacity building elements providing a national mentoring program and leadership training as well as a National Learning Network to further support information sharing. These elements could potentially be aligned better or integrated with the other FDF capacity building programs.'

While we agree, the audience of HRCPTI is largely one of the wider communities, where Hubs and RDRPs are largely focussed on primarily agriculture focussed organisations, that have varied reach into communities where the ripple effects of drought are most felt. While increased collaboration is useful, so to, is clarity of scope, audience, and outcome sought for each delivery partner.

Further discussion is required re: extension of FBR and potential integration with aspects of the HRCPTI, specifically the mentoring program, leadership training and the National Learning Network, to increase the scalability of outcomes. The FBR has a limited audience, while HRCPTI has a very solid broad community audience which should be retained. Greater collaboration, not strict integration is suggested.



FRRR agree 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 and recognise the risks in their family, neighbours, and broader community; and is already supported by many FRRR projects, albeit not overly stated as a program priority or objective.

This can be easily integrated into the next stage of program design, being mindful not to replicate the many local, state, and national mental health initiatives underway.

Survey Question 7: To what extent do you agree with the following proposed investment stream to support drought preparedness?

Agricultural Landscapes Management – supporting the development, trial, demonstration, extension, and adoption of better land management practices to build natural capital (see section 6.3 of the draft Investment Strategy).

FRRR Response: Agree

A dedicated program such as a new Drought Resilience Soils and Landscapes program would decrease the number of ineligible applications to HRCPI and reduce confusion for community members.

Survey Question 8: To what extent do you agree with the following proposed investment stream to support drought preparedness?

Innovation and Transformation – supporting new ideas to transform the agriculture sector's resilience and preparedness for drought (see section 6.4 of the draft Investment Strategy).

FRRR Response: Agree

FRRR request that Innovation grants are linked to locally driven HRCPI and/or RDRP activity, and not designed and delivered in a 'top-down fashion' where grant recipients have no local connection to the region where they are delivering the project e.g.: Burnett region of Queensland.

Within the HRCPI, opportunity exists at a community level to activate community led innovation initiatives (e.g.: Collective Impact Regional economic diversification, or female led innovation initiatives to mitigate the downstream social disadvantage risks of drought) in highly drought sensitive regions, and as such, 'innovation' should not necessarily be constrained to one program, or delivery partner, provided a clear scope is defined (economic, social, or environmental.)

Survey Question 9: To what extent do you agree with the following proposed investment stream to support drought preparedness?

Enabling Activities – supporting knowledge sharing and measuring the impact of the FDF (see section 6.5 of the draft Investment Strategy).

FRRR Response: Agree



FRRR are leading a \$1.4 million evaluation process for all elements of the HRCPI that has now articulated short-, medium- and long-term outcomes of social drought resilience that can be shared across the FDF. This is an innovative approach, whereby indicators are 'community tested' and funding recipients are a critical part of generating evaluation processes and outcomes.

Survey Question 10: What support and activities are most important to build drought resilience? Are there other activities not mentioned in the draft Investment Strategy that should be supported?

FRRR Response: Agree

The most important support and activities to build drought resilience are ones where grass roots community members and organisations benefit, particularly in remote, rural and regional locations. This is where the greatest impact of drought is most keenly felt, and as such, all programs should be highly focused on this.

2) Draft Investment Strategy Discussion Question Response

Section 6.1 Place-based Action and Partnerships –

Working with on-ground stakeholders to facilitate regional engagement, collaboration and action that is locally relevant (see section 6.1 of the draft Investment Strategy).

FRRR welcomes the Commissions' indication that the shift to place-based planning and action is desirable and would enhance the public good (see Table 1, Recommendation 3.1)

6.1.1 Funding Options:

FRRR support the suggestion that Funding could be extended for the Hubs, provided the expectations of each Hub in undertaking this role be strongly clarified in a public statement, and genuinely undertaken across a diverse cross section of the community, provided there is an overt expectation, and Hub commitment to, collaboration and information sharing with all FDF delivery partners. This should be very clearly articulated, linked with progress payments, and ideally yield the reach and impact the FDF is striving to achieve.

The Hubs' role could be better defined to deliver more impact for their regions by clearly stating their remit, funding, and staffing, so that other FDF programs can readily identify natural points of collaboration. Their role could also be improved by an increased understanding of peer FDF delivery partners, and programs.

However, funding for Hubs should not outweigh other delivery mechanisms or partners such as HRCPI, FRRR and ARLF, where we are better placed to deliver funding, projects or support and have greater capacity to leverage stronger, closer networks within grass-roots local community.



Operational funding for regional engagement and communication including adoption/outreach officers and knowledge brokers to connect farmers and communities to relevant science, innovation, networks, and government initiatives could both sit within Hubs, as well as HRCPI, and be mutually beneficial.

Hubs are one of many partners who may be well placed to deliver regional priority projects articulated in RDRPs and should not necessarily be nationally considered as the only mechanism that is locally relevant in each region.

FRRR agree that pathways to implement RDRP actions could include a discrete program of small implementation grants led by the Commonwealth or jointly with states and territories that focus on particular action types or themes, such as those that could be transformational for a region or industry, OR could be integrated into a HRCPI Small Network Grant if they focus on social outcomes, and are charitable in nature (yield broad community benefit)

Hubs could also be tasked to take forward aspects of regional plans, in partnership with regional stakeholders, that align with their farmer focus and knowledge brokering.

Grassroots (community) actions could also implement socially focussed aspects of RDRPs, through inclusion of HRCPI Small Network Grant Guidelines, as seen already through the HRCPI. If the HRCPI was extended, it could also continue local support for projects, including those that reflect the interests of First Nations peoples which FRRR strongly support.

While a variety of options exist for implementation pathways and governance options of RDRP's, and while the plans are conceptually sound, it seems in some places, they are largely driven by state government priorities and ways of actioning regional plans. While this is understandable, it is very difficult to align another national program with given the very wide diversity of timing and scope.

In summary, diversified project delivery models have enabled communities to consider projects and initiatives that are best suited to their local circumstances. Ideally into the future, programs should therefore provide flexibility in the method of delivery and allow for communities to determine what will work best, while still working within the broader construct and outcomes sought within the philosophical architecture of the Future Drought Fund.

A reduction of delivery partners is not likely to necessarily achieve the desired outcome of greater fund impact. FRRR would urge a greater clarity of focus on individual program scope (environmental, economic, or social outcomes), increased commitment to program collaboration and information sharing by delivery partners, and resourcing through a variety of delivery partners to reach a wide cross section of the community where drought has its greatest actual impact.



Section 6.2 Information, skills, and capacity building

Many existing FDF programs strive to build the capacity of farmers and regional community members, arming them with the knowledge, tools and support systems needed to rise to the challenges of drought and other climate risks.

The Helping Regional Communities Prepare for Drought Initiative (HRCPDI) also includes 3 capacity building elements providing a national mentoring program and leadership training as well as a National Learning Network to further support information sharing.

FRRR agree these elements could potentially be aligned *where locally relevant in specific Community Impact regions* with the other FDF capacity building programs e.g.: Climate Tools.

FRRR would welcome the introduction of FDF providing training on how best to use and interpret information from existing climate tools, including but not limited to 'My Climate View' and could be integrated in grass roots community networks through the Community Impact regions of HRCPDI.

A reasonable long-term goal for CSA could be providing adaptation information to better support practice change in response to climate projections.

FRRR also agree 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 and recognise the risks in their family, neighbours, and broader community, and while not overtly stated in guidelines, the HRCPDI (through CIP and SNG) is already supporting a wide variety of projects of this nature.

Section 6.3 Agricultural Landscapes Management –

Supporting the development, trial, demonstration, extension, and adoption of better land management practices to build natural capital (see section 6.3 of the draft Investment Strategy).

While Information, Skills, and Capacity Building – supporting farmers and their communities to grow and share knowledge, tools, and practices needed to adapt to the challenges of drought and other climate risks, and NRM is justifiably a strong emphasis of the FDF, it should form one part of a wide suite of programs that do not overlook the importance of the wider communities in which drought has an impact.

It is also recognised that some RDRP's chose to focus on environmental outcomes more so than social or economic outcomes by virtue of the primary expertise of the implementation partner, and ability to engage a diverse range of stakeholders and their views beyond the traditional agricultural sector which arguably has resulted in a heavy focus on environmental outcomes in some regions.



A strong reliance on RDRP's alone to identify local drought preparedness priorities, will not result in a nationally consistent approach, by virtue of very varied RDRP rollout timing, dedicated resourcing to activate, clear 'ownership' of the plans, and inconsistency of scope across regions and states.

A strong balance of social, economic, and environmental programs, and a diversity of delivery partners who effectively collaborate and share information, is ultimately required to yield genuine, sustained, and transformative outcomes at a community level.

Section 6.4 Innovation and Transformation –

Supporting new ideas to transform the agriculture sector's resilience and preparedness for drought.

As previously discussed in 6.1, there is opportunity to expand on innovation opportunities (beyond one stream of grants) at a community level to work towards a deeper transformative effect through community wide social innovation initiatives (but not agriculture industry). This could easily be integrated into the existing HRCPI Community Impact Program in specific regions of high drought sensitivity where the greatest need exists, but noting that greater time to achieve this is likely required beyond four years.

Section 6.5 Enabling Activities –

Supporting knowledge sharing and measuring the impact of the FDF

Enabling activities are essential to the success of the FDF and should be directly funded to support FDF programs.

Significant opportunity exists for coordination at a federal, state, national and local level through connected evaluation, coordination of delivery partners, collaboration in regions or across outcome areas, information sharing of peer FDF programs, and communication of impact stories and outcomes through events, publications, and other digital media product.

A key opportunity is to create a regular state by state information sharing mechanism, including clear contact lists of representatives for easy sharing of information, and possible date coordination on a region-by-region basis where possible. A simple version of this is already underway in Tasmania and is effective. However, there must also be continued investment to support such information sharing and collaboration, in order to not further strain organisations delivering outcomes for the Future Drought Fund.

While the HRCPI has supported (and funded) local delivery partners to undertake this role at a grass roots level in specific regions, growth in this area across all tiers of delivery will support the



effective and ultimate take up of information, reduce duplication of effort, and amplify the outcomes and attitudinal change the fund is ultimately seeking.

These roles and function should be clearly articulated with delivery partners.

Within HRCPI, funding is already allocated, and activity underway relating to MEL activities, including increasing capability, developing performance measures, developing measurement approaches, and conducting evaluations.

Eight 'Deep Dive Regions' have been already chosen to support longitudinal studies to measure long term impact of FDF participants and their communities.

Capability building within HRCPI is underway with over 150 grant recipients participating in activities that improve data collection and management, information sharing and dissemination, including effective communications suitable for the audience.

Section 7. Implementation

FRRR welcomes the Funds intention to allow for additional time to be provided to allow a greater focus on co-design of programs and to facilitate locally led projects and ensure alignment with other government and non-government initiatives.

FRRR look forward to participating in the conscious decision-making process and program design to smooth activity streams and prioritise co-design, which would likely result in allocation of less than \$100 million in 2024–25 (the first year of the next 4 funding cycle), and larger allocations in years 2 to 4 (2025–26 to 2027–28). It would allow greater analysis of the program outcomes as they conclude and for new programs to be reflective of lessons learnt.

FRRR highly support the inclusion of co-design in assisting with mapping and aligning activity around existing and planned state and territory government and non-government initiatives, and warmly welcome the opportunity to work collaboratively with other partners to design a program that is both locally and federally relevant.

3. About the Foundation for Rural & Regional Renewal (FRRR)

The Foundation for Rural & Regional Renewal is the only national foundation specifically focused on ensuring the social and economic wellbeing of remote, rural, and regional communities.

Established in 2000 with the Australian Government and the Sidney Myer Fund as members, FRRR connects common purposes and funding from government, business and philanthropy with the genuine local needs of rural people and places. FRRR provides funding and capacity building support at the hyper-local level; aligning funding, big and small, to community-led solutions that build resilience and long-term viability and vitality of smaller remote, rural and regional communities across Australia.

Since its establishment in 2000, FRRR has delivered in excess of \$155 million to more than 13,000 local projects.



Why investment in Communities is important.

FRRR commends the Australian Government on the recognition of the importance of social capital within the Future Drought Fund Funding Plan. One of three of the Fund's objectives was to "enhance the public good by building drought resilience through programs that will strengthen the wellbeing and social capital of rural, regional and remote communities."

Over its 23 years of operation; FRRR has built a strong evidence base of effectively supporting remote, rural, and regional communities to build social capital. Across all FRRR programs, the vast depth of investment focuses on the change that is created when funding volunteers and locally based not-for-profit organisations who provide vital support across the social fabric of communities. This includes:

- Of the \$19.8 million FRRR distributed during 2021/2022, \$14.5 million (73%) related to building organisational capacity, developing awareness, skills, and knowledge, or providing access to services or activities. The remaining \$5.2 million related to the indirect, but equally critical, investment in infrastructure and equipment.
- Additionally, FRRR has invested \$26 million over the past three years, in activities relating to the building of community level resilience, and developing organisational resilience and capacity, representing 52% of all FRRR investment.
- In relation to broader climate related impacts and disruptions, FRRR's track record of supporting communities to build resilience has seen us distribute more than \$58 million to communities specifically for disaster recovery and preparedness. During 2021-2022 alone, FRRR supported 475 grants (62% of all grants) in recovery and preparedness (including drought).

In the specific context of drought, FRRR has always supported communities to manage the impacts of, and increasingly, enhance preparedness for drought. This has occurred through a wide variety of multi-year programs with three specific mechanisms building social capital:

- 1) The 'in-drought support' investment mechanism of FRRR's Tackling Tough Times Together program supported 430 projects across Australia investing \$13,950,000 in federal funds while leveraging an additional \$17,000,000 from other donors and community level investment, since 2014. Focus areas indicate a significant weighting (approximate average of 48% of all grants) of communities seeking support for projects that aimed to build the capacity, capability, and sustainability of local not-for profit organisations to provide support to their communities, particularly where they are playing an increased role during the drought; or support to engage the community in leadership development and skills training.



While this program evaluation has just commenced in July 2023, the locally driven requests, final project reports to date and anecdotal evidence gathered so far from communities (from FDF NBDR) indicates a very strong need for and importance of long-term investment in social capital to offset the impacts and challenges that drought presents in communities.

- 2) With the eventual abatement of drought across most parts of Australia during 2020, FRRR welcomed the Government's policy shift to drought preparedness, and in early 2021, were pleased to successfully tender to deliver the Future Drought Fund's Networks to Build Drought Resilience program. This program has recently finished, resulting in the support of 87 projects and \$3,160,545 in Government investment in communities that leveraged a further 55% investment of cash and in-kind investment in social capital.

Through that program, a total of 791 activities engaged 37,841 people across regional Australia, of which 97% of participants were involved in capacity building, training or events relating to strengthening social capital. As a result of the funded activities, an average of 89% of participants rated they were satisfied, very, or extremely satisfied their networks had grown as a result of the activities, with connections ranging from 1 to 6 different sectors engaged per project.

Data indicators in the program's Measurement, Evaluation and Learnings (MEL) framework indicate a strong achievement of Year 1 outcomes relating to the building of social capital and include 43% of projects reporting a marked increase in network participation ranging from double to triple, quadrupled, or all new.

Sixty-one percent of funded activities involved intergenerational interaction, 34% involved people with a diverse cultural background, and 32% of activities involved First Nations people, indicating a high community appetite for social connection and network strengthening — an FDF MEL Program Logic and Data Indicator of success ('The number of, and participation in, local networks and programs to enhance drought resilience increases; Increased diversity of event network participation').

A rich evidence base has emerged through data and anecdotal feedback in final project reports that reiterate the importance of the investment in social capital building activities. In relation to the Year 2-4 FDF Networks MEL Program Logic Outcome sought in relation to training ('Communities learn from and share innovative ways to build drought resilience'), a key project outcome is evidenced by one participant reporting:

"It was crucial to begin workshops by breaking down walls and uniting the group to understand they are all in this together and their experiences are not singular. This vulnerability was an



attitude shift that proved significantly influential in describing the role social connectedness plays in drought resilience'.

The Agricultural Collective Ltd, WA, Opportunity 1, Tier 2; FDF NBDR Program

- 3) Through the FDF's Helping Regional Communities Prepare for Drought Initiative, and the nearly \$30 million investment to June 2025, FRRR has commenced ongoing social capital building and drought preparedness via a locally driven program design process in 35 regions. The aims of the program are to strengthen and improve the ability of agriculture-dependent communities to adapt, reorganise or transform in response to changing temperature, increasing variability and scarcity of rainfall, and changing seasons, for improved economic, environmental, and social wellbeing.

It is doing this by investing in projects that seek to strengthen social and community networking, support, engagement, and wellbeing. There are five parts to the program, including grants, activities to strengthen leadership, access to expertise to support community-led activities, mentoring support, and networking opportunities. It is being delivered by FRRR and the [Australian Rural Leadership Foundation \(ARLF\)](#), who are each taking the lead on different program components.

A significant investment is being made in the evaluation of the program, and the effectiveness of the investment mechanism that will provide further evidence of the benefits of social capital investment, with the final report due in August 2025.

The recent FDF investment, and ongoing feedback from communities across the vast expanse of Australia, continues to strengthen the evidence base to assert the need for sustained and locally determined investment in people and grassroots, not-for-profit organisations to meet the future challenges of a changing and less predictable climate, overlaid disasters, and other disruptions.

FRRR strongly endorses the importance and continuation of investment relating to social capital building across communities, strengthening the social networks ahead of disruption, and recommends that a significant focus remains on social capital in future programs, arrangements and grants made through the FDF.

4) Summary of FRRR's involvement with the Future Drought Fund

FRRR has been involved in program design and delivery for the Future Drought Fund since making a tender submission in September 2020. This involvement has been as a delivery partner on one of the foundational programs - *Networks to Build Drought Resilience* - \$4.5 million (referenced as Stage 1) and more recently the *Helping Regional Communities Prepare for Drought Initiative* (referenced as Stage 2, and by contract variation), delivering \$19.6M in a joined-up approach with



the Australian Rural Leadership Foundation, totalling \$23,393,570 (GST excl) of investment from the commencement of the Future Drought Fund in early 2022. FRRR also acted as a consortia partner to ARLF to deliver the Community Extension Grant component of the Drought Resilience Leaders Program.

The Networks to Build Drought Resilience (NBDR) program was designed to build community capacity by strengthening social and community networking, support, engagement, and wellbeing. The program offered three tiers of grants (up to \$20,000; \$20,001-\$50,000; and \$50,001-\$150,000) to not-for-profit organisations totalling \$4.5 million over an 18-month period. The full report can now be found [here](#):

Our continued involvement with the FDF through the Helping Regional Communities Prepare for Drought Initiative is currently underway, having commenced in August 2022. Consisting of five key elements, the initiative is being delivered in a 'joined-up' way with ARLF until January 2025. The primary investment within the initiative will see approximately \$12 million invested into 35 regions at a local level through a co-designed approach to building drought resilience and preparedness, with a primary focus of social drought resilience building capacity and capability, primarily through local not-for-profit organisations. To date, a total of 121 community organisations across 167 grants, in 30 regions across Australia have been supported. A further 65 Small Network Grants are currently under assessment, evaluation in full flight, and an expertise pool is also now established.



Closing comment

While often silent, assumed, and under-resourced in past droughts, the ongoing Future Drought Fund investment has proactively enabled an emphasis on the importance of social connectedness, highlighted the importance of community networks and deep social bonds, and invested in the practical skills, knowledge and community-wide awareness required to be better prepared for drought into the future.

In particular, the investment in the Future Drought Fund's Networks to Build Drought Resilience program, and the Helping Regional Communities Prepare for Drought Initiative is enabling two critical changes to occur within grassroots communities across Australia. Firstly, it has provided accessible and tangible opportunities for communities to come together and strengthen networks as they proactively focus on conversations of 'future drought' and how their community can be better prepared. Secondly, it provides an evidence base supporting an understanding of the importance of investing in social capital when seeking to support communities to adapt to a drying and unpredictable climatic future.

It will be important to ensure that such support in the future is delivered flexibly, enabling a wide variety of community actors to participate, and with a patience that allows for outcomes to be realised over multiple years.

FRRR would once again like to thank the Future Drought Fund is a significant initiative for Australia, and for ensuring 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 require additional detail regarding 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,

Natalie Egleton
Chief Executive Officer