



BN20/6361

- 9 DEC 2020

Legislative Assembly Committee on Investment, Industry and Regional Development  
Parliament House  
6 Macquarie Street  
Sydney NSW 2000

Dear Chair, Mr Justin Clancy MP, Member for Albury

**RE: Inquiry in to Support for Drought Affected Communities in NSW – additional information required by DPI's Rural Resilience Program**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide further information about the NSW Department of Primary Industries Rural Resilience Program (RRP) and the opportunity to share our experience on the impacts of drought on farmers and farming communities across NSW.

Below is our response to the additional information requested by the Legislative Assembly, following our interview on the 2 November 2020.

**1. Can you provide the Committee with information about the Rural Resilience Program, the Rural Women's Network and the Young Farmers Business Program?**

**Do you also provide support for non-farmers?**

The RRP is part of DPI's Business and Social Resilience Program which has a strategic goal of; *building stronger primary industries and maximising our connections with individuals, communities and industry by building confidence, connections and skills for farmers and fishers to run healthy businesses*. The Young Farmer Business Program and the Rural Women's Network are the two other resilience programs which operate under the Business and Social Resilience Program.

*Rural Resilience Program (RRP)*

The RRP was established in 2014 and was founded on the work of the Rural Support Worker program which provided drought support for over 20 years. It was identified that farmers needed access to programs and services that built longer-term resilience – hence why the RRP was established.

The RRP works with primary producers across regional and remote NSW to build personal, social and business resilience. RRP staff follow the approach of '*listen, learn and link*' – we **listen** to the needs of farmers and farming communities, we **learn** about programs offered

by other stakeholders or provide opportunities for farmers to **learn** new skills, and we **link** farmers with the support and programs they need.

The RRP is evidence-based and evaluated, with interventions and activities informed by resilience research including the National Wellbeing Survey and Australian Resilience Centre and evaluation results.

The RRP's primary audience is farmers or primary producers and the program engages with more than 6000 individuals per annum.

[www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/rrp](http://www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/rrp)

#### *Young Farmer Business Program (YFBP)*

The YFBP aims to build business skills of young farmers and fishers aged 18-35. It does this through a 'Use, Learn, Connect' approach by developing resources and tools young business owners can **use**, providing informal workshops to **learn** new skills in managing a farming or fishing business and providing opportunities for young people to **connect** and learn from each other. The YFBP was established in 2017 with funding ending in June 2021.

The program implements a comprehensive MERI framework and operates under advice from a Young Farmers Advisory Committee. The program has already engaged with more than 3915 young farmers with 86% saying they have improved connections with other young farmers and 74% improved confidence in making business decisions.

[www.farmtable.com.au/young-farmer-business-program](http://www.farmtable.com.au/young-farmer-business-program)

#### *Rural Women's Network (RWN)*

The RWN has operated for 27 years and filled a critical service gap identified at that time, for rural women across NSW. The RWN aims to;

- **Facilitate and deliver** programs and activities that build women's confidence and skills to manage healthy farming businesses i.e. Agri-Futures Rural Women's Award
- **Promote opportunities** where women can connect, celebrate achievements and share knowledge and experiences i.e. Rural Women's Gathering and Hidden Treasures
- **Capture feedback, ideas and issues** relevant to farming and fishing women and communities i.e. Country Web magazine and active social media presence.

[www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/rural-support/rural-womens-network](http://www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/rural-support/rural-womens-network)

2. **The Committee has heard that strategies and solutions aimed at regional communities need to be localised and what works for one community may not work for another. What are your thoughts and experience on this issue and how**

## **can we promote the use of local skills and leadership to build support networks in regional communities?**

The primary goal of the DPI's Business Resilience Programs is to build stronger primary industries and maximise our connections with individuals, communities and industry by co-designing new products and services that support, define and enhance the growth of farming businesses.

The program has identified guiding principles based on our experience and evaluation results, to ensure our work is effective and meets local needs. These 'enablers' inform our approach and include;

- A wide staff footprint across NSW
- Resilience thinking
- Client-centric programs
- Effective stakeholder engagement to co-design solutions; and
- Evidence-based approaches

The program uses a flexible approach with activities customised to meet local needs. Employing local staff who have local trusted relationships is key to sub-programs such as the RRP and their on-going success.

A resilience approach is about enabling individuals and local communities to develop their own solutions and develop skills, so they can be personally prepared for adversity and have a business plan in place to manage risk effectively.

Listed below are some examples of activities implemented by the RRP which have shown to be effective in building local engagement and developing local skills and leadership.

- **Strengthening farming networks and creating new groups:** The RRP has supported the development of Women in Dairy by building skills in governance, public speaking and strategic planning.

After 12 months this group has;

- Coordinating state conferences
- Increased the number of local groups from one to four; and
- Activated support to farmers in the Mid Coast region during the 2019 Bushfires.

- **Resilience workshops:** The RRP facilitates workshops to build resilience, confidence and leadership of farming men and women. These are Tune Up For Fellas and Shaping Our Futures Together.
  - **YFBP subsidies for workshops:** The YFBP has been subsidising course fees for young farmers to attend additional training in leadership and holistic agriculture. In 2020 four young farmers and one fisher were subsidised to attend the Australian Rural Leadership Foundation Trail, with great feedback received from the participants who would not normally be able to afford this opportunity.
  - **Supporting Rural Service Support Networks (RSSN):** RSSN's meet regularly to address the needs of communities. RSSNs operate with a core group of agencies that work directly with farming communities but invite additional stakeholder's dependant on current issues being experienced. These stakeholders could include (but not limited to) Rotary, CWA, Show Societies, Local Government and Stock and Station agents.
- 3. What is the level of cooperation and communication between all levels of government in the development of recovery and resilience strategies for regional communities? How does the department identify areas of duplication across the various government and non-government agencies that provide rural support?**

In NSW Regional Drought Taskforces were established as drought conditions intensified. The task forces were a way of bringing regional Govt agencies staff together to identify issues, explore options to address them, discuss collaboration across agencies and to better inform decision makers with regionalised information. These have been an effective model to enhance collaboration across NSW departments.

The Rural Resilience Program utilises the Rural Service Support Networks (RSSN) which exist across to NSW to better understand localised issues.

When the RRP was formed in 2014 there were 14 RSSN across NSW. RSSN's are local networks with participants from rural service providers including the Rural Adversity and Mental Health Program, the Rural Financial Counselling Service, Local Land Services and key industry groups. These groups meet every quarter (or more frequently if required) to discuss local issues and co-design activities to address these issues. Issues raised at RSSN's are usually reported through each agency represented.

RRP staff and stakeholders recognised that local cooperation and communication between all levels of government, Non-Government Organisations, Industry and community groups was essential to co-design activities and avoid duplication of services.

Increasing the number of RSSNs is a priority project for the RRP, with 26 RSSNs now operating across NSW. These RSSN's will be an essential network in the future to ensure collaboration and communication in the development of recovery and resilience strategies.

When drought conditions significantly deteriorated (about two years ago) there was limited cooperation and communication across the government and community sector. RRP staff witnessed many agencies coming into communities running events and workshops without local input on whether this event was what the community wanted. This resulted in low attendance, duplication of services and resources not being allocated to where they were most needed.

However, with greater promotion of the RSSNs through the Regional Drought Taskforces, cooperation and communication appears to be improving. However, this will be critical in the future.

#### **4. Many farming families are multi-generational. Are you seeing younger families seek assistance more than older, more experienced farmers? Have you noticed different needs from different groups of farmers?**

The needs of individuals and communities are varied and dependent on many factors including age, experience, capacity, openness to new ideas and change, finances and personal resilience. The overlap of stage of the business cycle and family life cycle can compound; impacting the assistance family businesses need during adverse events such as drought.

In 2017 the RRP commissioned the University of Canberra to analyse the resilience and vulnerability of NSW farming communities using data from the National Wellbeing Survey. This survey identified vulnerable industry groups and areas across NSW, including irrigators, farmers in the far west and North-west of NSW and farmers aged 41-49. These communities have been a focus for the RRP. The methodology for this research is currently being replicated with a final report expected by the end of 2020.

From our experience with the Young Farmer Business Program at the 2019 conference, young farmers were very positive about their future in agriculture and appeared to be more open to new ideas, learning new skills and accessing information and support.

The challenge with the current drought has been that many communities in the North-west and Western parts of NSW have been managing drought conditions for over six years. Some farmers were also impacted by bushfires and floods. Many farmers prepare for one adverse event (drought) effectively, but their ability to manage multiple adverse events or 'cope' and recover is reduced due to the cumulative impacts. For example, one dairy farmer who is a client of the RRP was managing drought, flood and bushfire in a 12-month period.

Other aspects which increase the needs of individual farmers include limited access to services, IT and internet connectivity issues and poor farm business viability.

The NSW Government has been responsive to modifying programs where required to accommodate the needs of key demographics. An example was the modification to Rural Assistance Authority products for new entrants to the industry in the previous 5-years, with eligibility flexibility. The capacity of a new entrant to the industry to have the financial capacity to meet the previous criteria was difficult, as equity is generally low and their capacity to be fully drought prepared is limited. Additionally, current land values and societal norms is shifting the model of farming businesses where off-farm income is a preparedness measure; especially during drought.

**5. In times of drought what are your thoughts on communities using water for a social purpose such as watering the local sporting ground? What are your thoughts on the impact this can have on people's wellbeing?**

Resilience research indicates that farmers who have good access to social resources, such as sports grounds and parks can have improved levels of resilience.

Watering sporting grounds and parks during drought is a difficult issue and would require greater consultation with local Councils (who manage these parks) and local community sporting groups.

Having access to green spaces that people can enjoy during droughts can boost morale and wellbeing.

It is important for communities to be involved in deciding how limited water resources are best utilised in/on their public assets. This can be more complex and challenging in communities where tensions over water use are high, such as in communities like Brewarrina, Menindee and Pooncarie. A sensitive approach to working with communities to make decisions is strongly encouraged.

**6. What is the current level of staff to support the Rural Resilience Program? Is the level of staff adequate to support the Program across New South Wales?**

The RRP currently operates with five ongoing Rural Resilience Officers, two temporary and two casual Rural Support Workers. An RRP coordinator is also employed at Tocal.

Ongoing Rural Resilience Officers are strategically located across NSW (South, North, Riverina, North West and Far West) with Rural Support Workers activated in areas impacted by droughts or other adverse events (currently placed at Bourke, Dubbo, Coonabarabran, Condobolin and Tamworth).

Over the last three years, the RRP staff have been heavily involved in supporting communities through drought, bushfires, and COVID-19. This has meant the programs focus has been on providing support to impacted communities and linking primary producers with support services and assistance measures. This intense focus over the last 3-years has meant the team

has had to re-direct its focus away from long-term resilience building measures and activities. Looking ahead into 2021 and a shift

RRP staff have also been an important conduit into communities due to their local knowledge and relationships. They have assisted many external service providers who generally struggle to infiltrate the local community and are often on short-term contracts and have limited time frames to implement activities.

The team also provide support to primary producers impacted by biosecurity threats, to enable their recovery and provide support during animal welfare cases to ensure individuals are linked with support services including mental health and financial counselling.

The RRP would benefit from additional ongoing resources to work with communities on longer-term resilience and preparedness initiatives and a dedicated recovery team to support primary producers during natural disasters and their recovery.

If you require any additional information, please don't hesitate to contact Pip Job Director of Engagement via phone [REDACTED]

Yours sincerely

[REDACTED]

Brett Fifield  
Deputy Director General  
Engagement & Industry & Assistance  
9 December 2020