

**Submission
No 52**

**SUPPORT FOR DROUGHT AFFECTED COMMUNITIES IN NEW SOUTH
WALES**

Organisation: Bega Valley Shire Council

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29 November 2019

Mr Justin Clancy MP
Chairperson
NSW Legislative Assembly
Committee on Investment, Industry and Regional Development

Dear Mr Clancy

Submission of to the NSW Legislative Assembly's inquiry into Support for drought affected communities in NSW.

The Bega Valley Shire has been a drought declared region since October 2018. We are an agricultural region; we are the home of Bega Cheese and have a large number of businesses participating in the agricultural industry. We have seen, heard and experienced ourselves in Council the impacts the drought is having on our community and Council operations. These include:

- **Economic** – with reduced ability to produce income from agricultural practices landholders in the region are financially being impacted. The main issues mentioned by community are the price of feed and water for stock and the cost of water for domestic users on tank water. This has also had a knock-on effect in the community with reduced disposable farm income, impacting supporting businesses, contractors and services in our region who are now experiencing reduced income.
- **Rate relief primary producers** – the capacity to provide support to assist farmland rate properties with rate relief supported by the State Government would lessen financial barriers for primary producers and has been raised by several Government Ministers and should be progressed as a priority.
- **Council road operations** – due to the prevailing dry conditions of the drought, Council has had to reduce unsealed road maintenance activities. The rural water extraction points used by Council to obtain water for road grading activities have dried up or become unusable because of access constraints. This decision was also made in order not to deplete water any more than is necessary and to share available water with other users and the environment.
- **Road side grazing** – currently insurance costs and red tape are prohibitive to farmers grazing along road sides, most road sides in our Shire have some form of dry fodder that cattle can make use of, the two fold effect is that this would not only help feed cattle that farmers are struggling to feed on their own land, but it would help reduce the fuel loads along road sides and reduce fire potential.
- **Weeds** – this is a constant challenge for land owners and Council and the challenge of managing weeds on public and private land is one that will be exacerbated following the drought. The capacity to work through a funded program with land owners (public and private) and engage local contractors to work on this issue (land ownership neutral) would provide a significant current boost to contractors and farmers and potential to address emerging issues post drought.
- **Fire risk Council assets** – due to the increased risk of fire and reduced availability of water during drought conditions and the location of some of Council's water pump stations, Council is having to invest in large back-up generators suitable for fire conditions.
- **Fire risk community** – The drought has occurred on the back of two devastating fires that occurred in our region in 2018; the Tathra Fires in March which destroyed 73 properties and the Bemboka/ Yankees Gap fire which commenced in August and commenced for 4 weeks destroying 64 properties and burning through 20,000 hectares of land. This has compounded the impacts of drought in these regions but has also elevated levels of anxiety and fear in parts of our Shire. The devastating fire disaster events have also brought with it experience that Council has gained which can also be applied to the drought in regards to a recovery response and supporting the mental health of our community. These include:
 - To recognise that rural farming communities are less likely to attend "town meetings" as opposed to more compact town communities.
 - Farm gate/outreach workers would be more beneficial way of meeting/talking with landholders.
 - Equal distribution of relief funds – not based on overall loss of the community but what each landholder has lost.
 - Recognition of the cumulative impact of drought rather than just the critical incident impact.
 - Provide tangible support when needed rather than a delayed response.
 - Talk, listen, listen and listen to the community and follow up with actions in an agreeable time frame.

Council welcomes any support the NSW Government can provide to rural communities in NSW who are affected by the drought. This support can be in the way of financial, mental health and community recovery and revitalisation post drought. We look forward to the outcomes of this inquiry and are available to answer questions or provide further information if required.

Yours faithfully

Leanne Barnes OAM
General Manager