

Centacare CQ Response to Agricultural Competitiveness Green Paper

CentacareCQ provides social services to people in the central Queensland region. CentacareCQ's geographic footprint stretches from Bundaberg north to the Whitsundays and west to the northern territory border, with services points in Bundaberg, Gladstone, Rockhampton, Yeppoon, Mackay, Blackwater and Emerald, and delivery of outreach in other parts of the region.

As a social service agency working with citizens in regional and rural Central Queensland, *CentacareCQ* acknowledges the work of the Australian government in supporting communities impacted by drought, and appreciates the opportunity to respond to the Agricultural Green Paper. CentacareCQ is only in a position to comment with regard to Policy idea 17:

Policy idea 17—In drought support

There are community expectations of a role for government in providing appropriate support to farm families and otherwise viable farm businesses suffering severe droughts. The effect of drought goes beyond the business and the land, often affecting the social wellbeing of farmers, their families and their communities. The Government recognises that some stakeholders, such as the National Farmers' Federation (submission IP536), consider that there is a case for the provision of direct farm business support during 'drought events which are beyond the reasonable capacity of farmers to prepare for'.

- a. **Additional mental health support in times of drought**—The Government could develop an approach to provide additional support for mental health in drought-affected areas in the future to complement existing mainstream mental health and social service supports, similar to the recent drought assistance package. This could be in the form of a mechanism to ensure additional funding can be made available for service providers when conditions begin to deteriorate in a community or region. This would ensure farm families have access to these support services, without the Government needing to develop a separate response to each drought. The Government welcomes stakeholder feedback on how to determine that conditions have deteriorated and what additional services are often needed in response.

The Government also welcomes feedback specifically on how the additional mental health and social support services as part of the February 2014 drought assistance package have worked, including whether any improvements could be made.

It is important that prior to introducing funding for supports, government has clear understanding of what is already working in individual communities and contribute to that during drought time, rather than try to introduce new services during the time of crisis. For instance, if group or individual supports such as counselling are already in place, but people have limited money to spend on fuel for trips into town, the solution is not additional counselling services.

Community arts activities have high value in providing opportunities for people to gather and to express emotion in a way that minimizes stigma and maximizes opportunities for shared expression. However, when money is tight, "luxuries" are the first to go and often, community and social events are seen as a luxury. When commissioning support organizations to provide community activities, this needs to include consideration of access, people's capacity to spend the money to get to an

event in a geographically dispersed community. Again, fuel is a cost that people will look to minimize so provision vouchers for access that include covering fuel costs would be an option.

There needs to be better understanding of what are the intensely stressful points during drought. For example, recent feedback from stakeholders was that the most stressful period for them was during the QRAA process to determine viability. This process could be improved by ensuring that social support personnel accompany the QRAA personnel.

Feedback from struggling farmers has included that they can't go in to the supermarket to pick up essentials because they already have unpaid debt. Practical supports for essentials such as pharmacy products and groceries would reduce the stress. This could be an arrangement directly with the businesses in community to reduce the stigma with regard to "charity". Encouraging people outside of drought affected communities, who want to donate to drought relief, to direct spending into the drought affected communities would help ensure that local businesses are assisted as well as farming families. The "farmer's card" is an example of this, but taking it a step further so that people aren't hesitant to step into shops to purchase essentials.

Addiction: while smoking is not encouraged, when someone is under intense pressure, the stress is increased if an outlet such as smoking is cut off; farmers should not be prohibited from purchasing tobacco products during a time of crisis.

A number of regions in rural Queensland do not have reliable internet service. Provision of an online process for application for supports increases frustration rather than reducing red tape. Consideration of the intended target group and the actual situation in rural and remote communities needs to occur before implementing processes that on the surface make processing easier – if it makes supports less accessible, it's only making things easier for the agency staff processing the applications.

Other considerations:

- Financial counselors play a key role in times of drought; locally based financial counselors have the advantage of knowing the community and are able to work hand in hand with social and other support providers.
- Medical practices/ General Practitioners – during difficult financial periods, GPs continue to charge patients "the gap". This discourages people feeling the financial impact of drought from seeing their GP, which in turn means that GPs are not able to determine the mental or emotional wellbeing of these patients
- PBS prescriptions – during drought, perhaps resources could be directed to supplementing these along the same lines as pension or other Centrelink benefits. This would ensure that people with ongoing medical issues can continue to purchase their prescriptions and maintain their health
- Rates – resources could be directed to regional councils in order to be able to reduce rates during drought periods, to provide relief for landholders without reducing the capacity of the council to provide services to the community.