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**SUBMISSION: Improving
psychological and social resilience
of farming families and
communities**
**Agricultural Competitiveness
Issues Paper**



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1.0 Introduction: Psychological and social impacts of drought

The Western Australian Council of Social Service (The Council) submits that in developing Australia's agricultural competitiveness policy, little attention has been attributed in the 'Issues paper' to supporting the psychological and social wellbeing of the farming families and communities that are a key element of the future competitiveness and resilience of Australian agriculture. The Council submits that future policy generally and specifically in regard to drought assistance should incorporate a significant element of psycho-social support and assistance as well as economic assistance for farm businesses and farming families. Drought is as much as a psycho-socio-cultural issue as an economic issue for farming families and communities. As Botterill (2003) observed, this was most likely derived from the close integration between farming families and the farming business. Botterill (2003) noted that drought is socially constructed because the one key defining element was the impact drought had on human activity. However the integration of family, farm and business added further to psycho-social impacts of drought resulting in what Alston and Kent (2004) termed 'psychological poverty' which they defined as a "poverty of spirit" that extended far beyond the 'relative deprivation' of poverty that non-farming families experience.

The psychological poverty farming families experienced as a result of drought was found to result in them being more likely to reduce their social activities and withdraw from the community (Alston 1996). Not only did this social isolation cut the families off from their social support networks in the communities but Alston (1996) observed that the depletion of social capital also undermined the communities and support networks.

It could be reasonably argued that this depletion of social capital and support networks in WA farming communities is reflected in the unacceptably high levels of rural suicides in WA which in 2012 was reported at being 18 per 100000 with rural males four times more likely to commit suicide than females (ABS 2012: Trenwith 2012). Such rates of suicide suggest fundamental issues with the psycho-socio resilience of WA farming families and the rural communities that support the agriculture industry. Psycho-socio resilience research indicates that the performance of an organisation/institution particularly one that functions in a challenging context is dependent on the psycho-socio resilience of the individuals that underpin its structures (Cornum et al 2013). This research suggests that in enhancing Australia's agriculture competitiveness, policy should also pay equal attention to the psycho-socio resilience of the farming families and communities that in aggregation underpin the agricultural industry.

About WACOSS

The Western Australian Council of Social Service (the Council) is the leading peak organisation for the community services sector in Western Australia, and represents its 300 members and the over 800 organisations involved in the provision of services to individuals, families and children in our community.

The Council's members are organisations that provide services to diverse population groups across areas including:

- health;
- community services and development;



- disability;
- employment and training;
- aged and community care;
- family support;
- children and youth services;
- drug and alcohol assistance;
- indigenous affairs;
- support for culturally and linguistically diverse people;
- housing and crisis accommodation;
- safety and justice; and
- advocacy.

Our members work for, and to support, the most vulnerable members of the Western Australian community — people whose vulnerabilities tend to put them at particular risk of discrimination. As such we see the Equal Opportunity Act, and related organisations such as the Equal Opportunity Commission, as having an important role to play in protecting vulnerable community members from behaviours and decisions which may otherwise unfairly disadvantage them.



2.0 Overview of responses to drought

Historically drought policy and assistance has focused on the financial and economic responses to the adverse impacts on farm businesses and farming families' capacities to meet their daily needs (Botterill 2003). Drought policy in its most recent form of Exceptional Circumstance (EC) assistance does to a certain extent acknowledged the effects of drought on the psycho-socio wellbeing of affected farming families and communities however the emphasis of assistance is largely economic (Department of Human Services 2014). There is almost a sense that if the financial needs of the farming family unit are met and the farm businesses receive economic assistance then all will be well...including the psychological and social wellbeing of the farming family and the broader farming community. This is despite evidence of significant social issues entailing serious implications for farming families and communities' health, mental health wellbeing and welfare (Alston and Kent, 2004, Alston and Kent ,2006; Drought Review Panel, 2004).

Although the current EC assistance does provide for psycho-social counselling services for farming families, research indicates that male farmers in particular do not use such services (Courtenay, 2006; McLaren and Challis, 2009). Further research also indicates that during crisis, male farmers, rather than seeking professional assistance, will instead turn to family, friends and other farmers for support (Judd et al., 2006; Peck, Grant, McArthur, and Godden, 2002).

Alston and Kent (2004) also noted that a lack of trust in government increased psychological poverty. The mistrust of governments stemmed from previous periods of government intervention and assistance where government expert's advice was found to be inadequate or conflicting, causing dissatisfaction and general discontent among farmers and their families (Stehlik, Gray & Lawrence 1999). This was compounded by the feelings among farming communities that the rest of the population did not understand what they were experiencing (Alston and Kent, 2004).

2.1 Previous and current delivery of psycho-social support to farming families

The Federal Government's Drought Pilot conducted in WA in 2010 did to some extent acknowledge the complexity of the psycho-socio-cultural elements associated with the impacts of drought on farming families with the implementation of the Beyond Farming pilot program. This program was developed around a group of ex-farming volunteers whose role was to mentor farmers and their families as they considered choices related to exiting farming. While the program's overarching message for farming families was that: 'There was life after farming', it became apparent during the pilot phase that male farmers and their families faced a complex raft of issues and a large range of considerations that exceeded simply making a choice to leave farming and what to do after farming. These responses are reflected in various literature and research sources and include:

- Loss of sense of place and identity (Kuehne, 2012)
- Loss of sense of belonging which has been shown to contribute to elevated levels of depression and suicidal thoughts among male farmers (Bailey & McLaren, 2005; McLaren and Challis, 2009)



- Losing the sense of utility derived from the social capital of the family farm business (Arregle, Hitt, Sirmon, & Very, 2007)
- Male farmer's sense of failure and humiliation related to self-perceptions of having the role as the one to overcome issues and solve problems (Alston and Kent 2008).
- Difficulty in transitioning into a different social/work environment based on culturally different values and beliefs (DAFF, 2014)

During the course of the Beyond Farming pilot it was found that these issues and perceptions needed to be overcome before farmers and their families could begin to contemplate a future whether it included involvement in the agriculture industry in a different form or exiting farming and agriculture altogether. Despite the expected objectives of Beyond Farming being limited given its nature as a pilot program; at the conclusion of the Drought Pilot, the program nevertheless was deemed to have addressed a gap in the farming psycho-social support networks assistance delivery to farming families. Representatives from organisations and groups such as Regional Men's Health, Rural Community Support Services and the Rural Financial Counselling Service as well as facilitators, developers and researchers involved in the Farm Business Resilience pilot program attested to the **intrinsic value** of the Beyond Farming program presence in the Drought Pilot. Equally supportive were the peak industry organisations of WA Farmers and Pastoralists and Graziers in addition to several shire councils in the south eastern, eastern and north eastern Wheatbelt regions of WA.

As a result of this support the WA State Government continued funding of Beyond Farming at a reduced level and scope through the Department of Agriculture and Food WA (DAFWA) after the Department of Agriculture Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF) ceased funding at the conclusion of the Drought Pilot. However DAFF did provide ongoing support in allowing use of its Beyond Farming IP in the continuation of the program. With DAFWA funding, the Beyond Farming program has continued over the past five years to work with and support farming families who are in crisis and/or facing major life choices and transitions. In that time the program has continued to evolve to develop a model of support and assistance for farming families and rural communities that works collaboratively with other organisations providing family support and farming/industry groups. This includes both rebranding the program as Farming and Beyond; and further development of the program as an intermediary between farming families and farming support organisations. A key element of this approach is establishing a cohesive reciprocal process of referrals within the farming/rural support and industry networks.

3.0 Improving the psychological and social resilience of farming families

In this submission The Council has focused on addressing the omission of the importance of supporting the psycho-social resilience of farming families during and in the period after a drought event. This is an additional issue that should be considered in reference to: *Issue Nine; Assessing the incentives for investment and job creation*. This issue should be regarded as integral element in both responding to the impacts of drought and maintaining and sustaining the psycho-socio resilience of the farming families that significantly contribute to the Australian agricultural industry. Given the benefit the Beyond Farming program and in its other form as Farming and Beyond has delivered to the wellbeing of WA farmers and their families facing life changes and transitions as a result of



drought and other associated issues the Council submits that the following be considered in the drought issues paper:

- The psycho-social impacts of drought be recognised and addressed as equally as important as the economic impacts of drought in that reduced psycho-socio resilience of farming families and communities could have long term adverse effects of the competitiveness of Australian agriculture;
- The psycho-social impacts of drought be recognised as a socio-cultural construct being that drought impacts on the psychological wellbeing of farming families and rural communities and psycho- social responses and support be structured with a sensitivity to farming families and communities socio-cultural values, beliefs and traditions;
- The psychological, social and economic impacts of drought can be long term. Therefore those who deliver counselling and support services need to understand and preferably have experience of farming/rural culture;
- Leaving farming is not just a process of exchanging one job for another but involves a complex set of social and psychological issues and responses that need to be recognised and addressed with patience and sensitivity;
- Delivery of psycho-social support for farming families and farming communities should be via a multi-disciplinary reflexive collaborative approach through both formal and informal farming/rural support networks;
- A program such as Farming and Beyond which can act as both a support for farming families and a referral linkage between farming families and professional support and counselling be considered as an intrinsic and permanent element of psychological and social responses in future policy responses to drought.



4.0 Conclusion

The Council thanks the Agricultural Competitiveness Taskforce; Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Agricultural Competitiveness Review. The Council contends that maintaining and sustaining the psychological and social resilience of farming families will play an important role in contributing to the overall performance of Australian agriculture and the industry's future.

The Council concludes that in order for Australian agriculture to become more competitive and remain viable, more attention needs to be paid to the wellbeing of the farming families and communities that are the foundation of the industry.

Should the Commission have any questions or concerns about this submission, or should the Commission require any further information, please contact Chris Evans, Program Officer Farming and Beyond at WACOSS on (08) 9420 7222 or chrisevans@wacoss.org.au



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