



Submission to  
The  
Agricultural Competitiveness  
Green Paper.  
December 2014

## **Introduction**

The Capricorn Community Development Association (CCDA) is a regional, independent, non-funded, incorporated community organisation that facilitates community to find solutions to its challenges. Its membership includes individuals and organisations from across the broad range of the human services sector.

CCDA was founded 25 years ago and has contributed to the enhancement of community cohesion and social wellbeing in Central Queensland throughout this time. In recent years CCDA has broadened its vision to keep pace with the changing requirements of the Human Services Sector.

CCDA's organisational membership delivers services across a very wide area of Central Queensland, extending to the far west and currently including many drought affected communities. As a community development organisation, CCDA has an outcome focus and a strong desire to see that any government funding and resources provided as drought support, not only assists families in extreme crisis but also builds resilience and capacity for famers, graziers, agri-business and surrounding rural communities, so that they are better equipped to deal with similar situations as they arise in the future.

CCDA acknowledges the work of the Federal Government in seeking to achieve a sustainable and competitive agricultural sector and assist it to reach its potential. We also commend government for being receptive to ideas, feedback and comments from interested parties across the whole of the sector.

CCDA also acknowledges that it does not have the expertise to respond to many aspects of the Agricultural Competitiveness Green Paper but believes that we are appropriately placed to respond to the section on Drought. The Agricultural Sector and the Community Services Sector are very closely linked. The Agricultural Sector is a major contributor to the sustainability of many Queensland communities, but in turn is highly dependent on the Community Service Sector for support in times of crisis, including drought, flood, and industry specific issues such as citrus canker.

## **CCDA response to the Agricultural Competitiveness Green Paper: 8. Drought Resilience.**

As a community development organisation with a strong focus on supporting people to deal with difficult situations more effectively, CCDA strongly backs the National Farmers' Federation submission IP536 and the Eyre Peninsula Natural Resource Management Board submission IP547. In the long term, producers, businesses and the broader community need to be better prepared financially, physically and *mentally* to cope with inevitable drought events. We recognize that in extreme events additional assistance may be required.

Building resilience in communities must be the first step of effective drought support. Whilst there is a strong focus and a number of mechanisms proposed in the green paper to address the physical and financial elements of drought support, the paper only addresses the need for "Additional mental health support in times of drought". Resilience of social and emotional wellbeing are as dependent on preparedness, as financial and physical capacity. It is family, friendships and connection to community that enable people to cope and provide a reason for living, even when in despair. Isolation breeds desperation.

Documented research, previously undertaken, has already clearly identified isolation as a contributing factor in rural suicide. Speaking on ABC Radio's Country Hour in July 2014, Sabina Knight, Director of the Mount Isa Centre for Rural and Remote Health and a member of the expert panel established by the Federal Government, to review the social impacts of drought in 2008, indicated that community events were an effective method of supporting good mental health and building community resilience in drought affected areas.

During the recent drought, service providers have also identified that making support available at community events, rather than holding mental health workshops, is a more effective process. It has been noted that local events "are the hub for the year and the one opportunity for people to get together. The social interaction and coming together as a community is really beneficial for everyone involved."

Formal training that increases the capacity of both professionals and the community to identify and support those experiencing mental health challenges is probably best delivered into communities, prior to drought or major stress events. However additional support may be required following major or prolonged events, such as an extreme drought.

Organisations that already exist in communities, such as churches, agricultural organisations, QCWA, arts groups, sporting organisations, etc. should be encouraged and resourced to support a regular calendar of interactive local events that are consistently available; enabling meaningful connections and relationships to be established and available during drought times.

### *Sustaining Existing Community Resources*

Anecdotal feedback from the landholders, councils, small business and support workers is that whilst all support is welcome in a drought situation, support that taps into and value adds to existing community resources is the most needed and the most appreciated.

For example:

- funding for existing local support organisations to expand their services, rather than bringing in outside providers
- distribution of gift cards that can be used with local small business, rather than bring in products from outside the community - food, toiletries, and items like dog food can be purchased even in small communities and this may make the difference to a business remaining viable or going under

Additionally where practical, support that contributes to keeping employees on properties and puts infrastructure projects into droughted areas will contribute to population stability and community sustainability in the long term.

Closed shops, reduced business opening hours, limited stock, cancelled events or a reduction of support services further create a community sense of despondency.

### *Inhibitors to people seeking support during a drought event*

In future, government support for those experiencing drought must effectively address the current inhibitors to people seeking support. These include:

- Stigma associated with both financial and emotional distress
- Cost – of travel for business, pleasure or physical and/or mental health support; admission to events; professional advice – including medical
- Extremely complex paper work to access assistance i.e. The Farm Household Allowance, a payment equivalent to the New Start allowance, requires the completion of more than 20 pages of forms. There are many documented reports of people just giving up on the process.
- Poor communication around eligibility criteria for support. There have been instances where applicants for a Centrelink Farm Household Allowance (FHA) claim were not clearly advised that the off farm assets threshold was \$270,000; or that if those assets were classed as superannuation, they may be assessed differently. A support worker reported that “Clients felt Centrelink Call Centre staff could have saved them from all this unnecessary paperwork and stress if they were given clear eligibility criteria at their first phone contact with the government department.”
- Problems associated with poor phone and internet connections – long forms for assistance can’t be completed before the connection drops out
- Stress experienced when reaching the point of admitting that you need help
- Criteria around gun licensing that may require a doctor to notify authorities if he believes a person may be suicidal – During drought a gun is frequently an essential tool in the humane management of drought affected livestock.
- Empirical evidence indicates that many rural people are reluctant to formally register for any form of assistance, (not just financial but also associated with mental health and family support.) When it comes to social, emotional and family support, opportunities for people to receive “cup of tea” counselling and support from appropriately skilled and experienced people in a safe setting of their choosing (rather than one mandated by a service agreement) and not requiring documented registration, may generate a greater uptake. An identified need is there. Phone services such as Lifeline and the Drought Call

Back Service provide welcome support but not a local presence on the ground, in times of immediate crisis.

- Rural Support Workers have also indicated that a number of the people they are supporting are not eligible for assistance under some of the currently available non- government programs because they are not land owners, even though they are being impacted by the flow-on effects of the rural downturn.

#### *Holistic approaches.*

Government can only effectively support industries and communities to survive drought events when it addresses matters holistically. The strategies being utilized by both state and federal governments should dovetail and not overlap.

#### *Intervention and support.*

All tiers of government, (federal, state and local) need to work with industry groups, community and financial services, community leaders and other stakeholders to:

- identify what works and what doesn't;
- pinpoint and agree upon appropriate points of intervention and additional support
- highlight gaps in existing local services, support or resources – prior to crisis.

Further, interventions must be timely and appropriate, based on feedback from communities about: what is already in place; what is needed and what isn't; approaches that have been demonstrated to be effective and those that aren't.

#### *Provision of additional assistance for prolonged and severe drought.*

All interventions to address the physical and financial consequences of future droughts should be molded around the encouragement and rewarding of best agricultural and financial practice. Taxpayer support needs to be on a "hand-up not a hand-out" basis.

CCDA also believes that:

- a starting point for the definition that is "beyond the reasonable capacity of farmers to prepare for" is one that exceeds past records and that assistance

should be made available where drought occurs where it has never occurred before.

- Eligibility should be determined on both a regional and individual basis. Financial criteria may be considered but need to be realistic and factor in the median worth of viable properties. For example, assets of more than \$2.55 million may not be eligible for the allowance which was devised to provide “basic survival” support. The asset value for the majority of grazing properties and broad-acre farms is believed to be around \$2 million. However there is a perception that a place that is not worth around \$3 million is probably not going to be viable. Additionally many farming families maintain a house in town, as an alternative to boarding school. Property owners are frequently asset rich, and cash poor – particularly during and following drought or a crisis such as the ban on live cattle export.
- For financial and physical support that is targeted at supporting people to stay within the industry, individuals should have to demonstrate previous prudent risk management and preparedness measures; or demonstrate a willingness to undertake such strategies, where droughts are an acknowledged part of the weather cycle. However, crisis support should also be available to assist people to exit the industry in a dignified manner. Emotional, wellbeing and family support should be available to all, regardless of their financial assets.
- Support should definitely continue for a recovery period after drought has broken. Families aren’t out of drought until they have a cash flow.

- **Conclusion**

It is in everyone’s best interest that the agriculture sector remains a significant contributor to the economy and local communities. Drought does not end when the rain falls. Even if it rained today, it will take primary producers and their properties several years to recover. Drought will continue to remain an ever-present threat in many areas of Australia.

Factors that can mitigate the social impact of this and future droughts are:

- being well prepared for the inevitable
- building resilience in people and communities

- learning from past and current experiences
- state and federal government support that is timely, strategic and accessible
- approaches that encourage people to come together and build social networks of support
- sustaining existing resources in the community
- Industry leadership
- Diversification

CCDA also supports the following stakeholder proposals to address the financial and physical impacts of the drought:

- Introducing accelerated depreciation for new water and fodder infrastructure;
- Encouraging multi-peril crop insurance;
- Improving climate information

The effective implementation of these mitigating strategies can only be achieved when Federal, State and local governments, industry and business leaders, landholders, service providers and other stakeholders work together collaboratively, to achieve a sustainable agricultural industry and thriving rural communities.

Drought is an inevitable part of Australia's weather pattern and will continue to affect the rural sector consistently but not predictably. This fact alone, means that if we don't want our rural sector to be constantly on the edge of, or drifting into, poverty we need to find better ways to supporting and maintaining it.

### **References.**

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