

3 March 2023

Submission on Future Drought Fund

Rangelands NRM Co-ordinating Group (Inc.) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission on the Future Drought Fund Consultation Draft. We commend the Future Drought Fund (FDF) in acting on the need for an overarching strategy/program/review of program created to further assist primary producers.

Rangelands NRM represents the Western Australian Rangelands Management Unit (MU) covers 28% of Australia. It is the largest Regional Natural Resource Management MU defined by the Australian Government and contains 450+ pastoral stations on 98 million hectares of pastoral leasehold; 50+ First Nations groups and Rangers managing 70 million hectares of determined Native Title areas and 18 Dedicated Indigenous Protect Areas; spanning across 6 subregions from Kimberley to Great Australian Bight and 3 Climatic Zones. Covers 85% of Western Australia / 28% of Australia.

The Rangelands region is unmatched both in its geographic scale, and the vulnerability and challenges faced by its land managers, communities, and rural industries, but also is a region of extraordinary potential for both production and long-term stewardship of unique land and sea assets.

Our team works with partners and enables the integrated land and sea management of threats to assets and sustainable utilisation of the natural resources of the region by working with First Nations and their ranger teams, pastoralists, horticulturalists, irrigated agriculture, conservationists, marine managers, community groups, industry, tourism, universities, resource sector, government agencies (regional, state, national), specialists and stakeholders when co-designing and co-delivering outcomes.

Rangelands NRM has 20 years' experience in Natural Resources Management and is governed by a skills-based Board of Directors that has strategic oversight through a transparent and accountable process and is an Australian Government contractor. Regional NRM perspectives and priorities of land managers and community, and based on its Regional NRM Plan, and strategic priorities.

Rangelands NRM are contracted by the Australian Government to deliver legislative obligations and national and international obligations and priority work in building and securing Australia's natural and human capital as part of the National Landcare Program Regional Lands Partnerships, previous programs including Caring for our Country and other significant programs over the years.

As well as our submission we would like to extend and offer to support the Future Drought Fund where possible. If you would like clarification on any elements of this submission, please do not hesitate to be in touch.

Yours sincerely

Debra Tarabini

CEO

Executive Summary

Generally, Rangelands NRM considers the Future Drought Fund to be an appropriate mechanism by which to allocated funding to a known and persistent threat affecting a broad range of stakeholders. It is a useful model for how other similar threats affecting our natural resources could be managed with appropriate and consistent allocation of resources.

Rangelands NRM is well aligned with FDF particularly around environmental resilience. Rangelands NRM have contributed in various ways to the Future Drought Fund programs and have experiences across the scope of programs across rural, regional, and remote parts of Western Australia.

Rangelands NRM believes there is scope for improvements to the FDF as follows:

1. A review of the governance and delivery mechanisms with a view to 'better align and leverage' and more clearly differentiate roles within the FDF and within broader networks would be beneficial.
2. A more defined, stringent, and coordinated regional approach to the grant process, with consideration for alignment to RLP programs, as much of the funds went to duplicated services, and created confusion in the community and the Rangelands Region.

3. The Drought Hubs have not met expectations, have had a costly impost in terms of time, staff, money, and IP of many of their partners, and should be subject to a revised approach which has a far greater involvement of regional NRM groups.
4. The Future Drought Fund would benefit from a broadened scope of resilience with a changing climate.
5. A renewed focus on the Environmental Resilience Stream. This should consider how the FDF will lead to the long-term outcomes in terms of preserving natural capital while also improving productivity and profitability and using a whole-of-system approaches to NRM to improve the natural resource base, for long-term productivity and landscape health. A clear line of sight is needed between the FDF investment and the desired (environmental) impact and *agricultural landscapes being functional and sustainable, with healthy natural capital*. Unfortunately, this is a difficult priority to measure due to complexity, issues of temporal and spatial scales, and challenges of attribution. However, this impact is fundamental to the success of the FDF as the economic and social impacts are highly unlikely to provide resilience for our Rangelands region if landscapes are not functional.

Responses to consultation questions

1. Are the funding principles, vision, aim, strategic priorities, and objectives of the Funding Plan appropriate and effective?

The Funding Plan is appropriate as it covers the funding principles, vision, aim and strategic priorities. Its effectiveness is difficult to measure, as it has not had sufficient time to see the effect it is possibly having in creating change. There has been considerable effort and resources in establishing the Fund and foundational systems and processes, and the objectives are long term, and broad in scope. We suggest the change in agricultural sector performance, natural capital, and community wellbeing to the FDF (effectiveness) may be evident in the long term and at whole of region scale.

Whilst the principles are extensive, and we do consider there are opportunities for improvement:

- Not to duplicate or replace existing Commonwealth funding programs and improve the coordination or integration of existing Commonwealth Government policies, frameworks, and programs where they meet the Fund's purpose. The FDF program seems to be siloed from the Regional Landcare Partnership, Department of Agriculture, Climate Change, Energy, Environment and Water, which could benefit from the collaboration. Rangelands NRM as do most NRM's already undertake a number of the activities that Hubs were charged with;

Extension and Adoption, Soil Coordinators, leads in regional locations, drought and rehydration activities, production activities, innovation and working closely with farmers/pastoralists and a plethora of stakeholders.

- The 54 NRM organisations across Australia have sophisticated governance, integrated relationships with all stakeholders including grower groups, universities, First Nations, and government and have delivered comprehensive programs/projects in community in an orientated and collaborative way, based on identified need through extensive consultation with community (Regional Plan).
- Deliver programs through a land manager(end-user) focus with strong co-design approach with land managers and other community stakeholders, underpinned and supported by organisation who are already deliver complimentary programs with land managers.
- Additionally, focus on building capacities, capabilities and collaborate with existing farmer/grower groups, Indigenous organisations, industry and NRM networks in the delivery.
- The Regional Landcare Program, recognise that Regional NRM's are well placed, already have the governance and structures with 20 years on ground relationships with stakeholders, including extensively with First Nations.

2. Do the programs, arrangements and grants focus on the right priorities to support drought resilience? If not, what should the programs, arrangements and grants focus on and why?

The priorities as outlined in the Drought Resilience Funding Plan are appropriate and suggestions for improvements are focussed more on delivery. Some re-consideration of the allocation of funding between program areas may increase the effectiveness of delivery across the three objectives.

There is a definite skew of programs toward increased profitability and economic resilience with far less focus on social resilience and a sustainable natural environment. People and environment underpin profitability and economic resilience; whilst this is part of the program it is somewhat lost/buried.

Technology should be just complimentary to improved management not the shiny thing up the front being funded for its own sake.

There is a need to further embrace variability across Australia, across institutions, regional agricultural and social systems, and across whole of landscapes. It may be beneficial to revisit priorities and program allocations when Regional Drought Plans are complete. Alignment of program delivery with (quality) Regional Drought Plans may identify differentiated opportunities

across the country. Note however, it is important that Regional Drought Plans acknowledge and identify synergies with other current plans in the region, such as Disaster Risk Mitigation Plans, Regional NRM Plans, and other social and environmental plans.

The natural resource management grants have been well coordinated and projects are underway. The fail-safe approach to these grants was well regarded by end-users working in highly variable and unpredictable landscapes. Increasing the emphasis on this area of the program will achieve the longer-term outcomes of food security and landscape protection. Greater coordination could further improve this area. One that has deeper understanding of the land managers, stakeholders, linkages, and gaps across the landscapes in a region. This has been attempted through formation of Drought Hubs and associated Nodes across 8 regional areas of Australia.

The experience of the Hubs has been quite unsatisfactory. Financially the hubs have been a drain on the sector with a lack of appropriately qualified staff, who have leaned heavily in on their regional partners, including extensive contributions of in-kind, has resulted in partners having to forgo their own work as a result.

The intent of the Hubs is supported; however, the implementation has not met expectations. These include issues with real and perceived duplication of services and reliance and under-acknowledgement on NRM Regional Organisation networks, capacity, reach, contacts, and events. For example, Rangelands NRM provided significant unpaid support to the Northern Hub in the establishment phase of its development that has continued into program delivery. Conversely, despite repeated offers to gain access to background information and details of projects undertaken by regional NRM groups to inform the priority project areas for WA, this information was not gathered to inform the planning, adversely affecting the impact and efficacy of the program.

Some of these shortcomings may be attributed to Hub capacity, as it has proven difficult to recruit sufficiently skilled and knowledgeable staff (which conversely also exists in Rangelands NRM), inadequacies in governance arrangements associated with starting new entities, and the institutional location and their culture have impacted on the culture of the Hub and the ability to deliver high quality programs with modernised approaches to community-level extension, adoption, engagement and collaboration. The inability of the hub, to qualify high quality valuable projects, created from the ground up and not top down was evident. The lack of understanding of contractual arrangements, including in-kind arrangements, has created problems in program delivery.

The notion of a university as a lead has created problems with the Northern Hub as they do not have the same land manager, community focussed experience Regional NRM and other adoption focussed partner organisations have, nor did the Northern Hubs university have a background in drought / agriculture / horticulture etc, so had no existing research that could be applied. The expenditure of public funds has been large with poor facilitation and coordination of program logic, project selection, transparency and trust building for effective collaboration and outcomes. This has eroded Rangelands NRM and partner confidence in the Drought Hubs.

Rangelands NRM has supported the actively contributed to Future Drought Fund Plan/program:

- actively participating in the Northern Hub Committee as well as contributing significant in kind and actual funds and resources.
- providing information and knowledge access for the Hubs with rich knowledge and experience in sustainable agriculture, climate change practices, technologies, and community level knowledge transfer.
- delivering programs including the Natural Resource Management Drought Resilience Program — Landscapes stream and the Regional Drought Resilience Planning.
- acting as delivery Nodes for the Drought Hub.
- Work across other Commonwealth programs, in particular Regional Land Partnerships, with strong intersects with the FDF.

The program needs to be an open tender/grant and not Hub centric. With significant funding available to the hubs without the same scrutiny and rigor applied to other programs, provides for concern. A more efficient way to manage the program is if it were to continue would be to engage the regional NRM groups who already deliver the regional activities, cover all activities, and already have the national, state, regional and local relationships.

Programs targeting Farmers need to be communicated more clearly, the risk is that farmers are inundated with opportunities and need to work hard to understand what is on offer and what the requirements are, and if they are applicable. Research has repeatedly shown that Regional NRM Organisations are a trusted source of information by farmers (preferred source of information over government or universities) working in close partnerships with their local farmer groups and trusted specialists. The trusted independent advice provided by NRM regions is important to farmers to support the understanding of sustainability (including carbon and biodiversity components), leading practice and applicable technology within a local and regional context. This is becoming increasingly important as it is hard for farmers to make sense of what it all means for them (i.e., there is a lot of information and programs out there, and many government initiatives and market-based

opportunities that can often be confusing). NRM Regional Organisations have successful experience with peer-to-peer supported learning. This requires facilitation and with operational funds to support trialling and demonstration projects. The intent for this work is in the Plan, in the pathways to impact, but is yet to be realised in FDF program delivery.

Overall, we need to ensure investment and projects are designed around effective and on-going support for farmers/pastoralists and recommend a more collaborative approach from within government departments would see FDF objectives align with Agriculture, Water, Environment, Climate Change and stop the duplication, land managers are fatigued by over servicing and people turning up with a new shiny idea, they want results.

3. Should the scope of the Fund be broadened to support resilience to climate change?

Why or why not?

It is appropriate for the scope to be broadened to climate change. Most of Western Australia is not formally categorised as being in 'drought' but has suffered the most severe long-term reductions in water availability in Australia. In the rangelands region, the Gascoyne and Murchison should be considered in the remit for the FDF as it a drought affected land system (particularly when considering a more accurate index for drought) and also a subject to climate change. It is an already semi-arid environment and with loss of landscape function and potential effects of climate change, it is closer to tipping points of drought than ever before. Conversely and perversely, increased sporadic and localised summer flooding is also greatly affecting some areas in the State.

Many strategies designed to enhance natural capital and increase farming productivity will also enhance resilience to other effects of climate change e.g., climate variability, movement of key species due to drying, warming climate, increased (agricultural and environmental) pests and diseases etc, and this provides further incentive to map current investments in Climate Change with the FDF and identify a more appropriate boundary for the FDF and leverage opportunities.

4. How could the Fund enhance engagement with and benefits for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people?

Rangelands NRM has a 20-year track record in working with Indigenous groups and rangers, who are a large land and sea manager and stakeholder in the Rangelands region. We developed exemplary practices that ensures their participation aligns with their self-directed governance, plans, and programs for their country. The FDF could focus on engaging and working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to deliver benefits is an intent of the program. There is much to be gained in supporting Indigenous leaders in this area, identifying opportunities for co-design of projects, and

considering the impacts of drought and climate change on indigenous communities and their wellbeing e.g., access to water, impacts of drought on traditional practices and cultural sites, obligations to care for country, land and sea-based economies including emerging environmental and co-benefit markets.

An essential requirement for enhancing engagement, is to make more of the existing organisations and networks, leverage trusted relationships through delivering a coordinated approach, which:

- i) engages more effectively and not waste time and money. Elders, senior rangers, group executive officers and coordinators etc are already stretched. Leveraging built relationships is key to success.
- ii) Sufficient time and resources are allocated for coordination and engagement for co-design by Traditional Custodians and their host organisations and affiliates.

5. What opportunities are there to enhance collaboration in planning and delivering drought resilience initiatives, including with state and territory governments?

As the foundational systems, processes and delivery mechanisms are considered by this Inquiry, strategic consideration of opportunities for adjusting delivery mechanisms and partner and network roles is strongly recommended.

The Drought Hubs, for example, have proven a major investment and most are in establishment phase and are yet to deliver full value, we suggest that on-ground investment was relatively low. Suggested areas for continued improvement involve identifying opportunities for increased efficiency and effectiveness (considering capacity and capability across all organisations in the network, including NRM Regional Organisations) and differentiating roles more clearly and adjust program delivery to increase opportunities for leverage (and stronger engagement).

Are there any other changes needed to improve the effectiveness of Part 3 of the Act? Who needs to do what to make those changes happen?

At the time of this inquiry, there are many pressing matters related to NRM that require attention from the Australian Government and which may well enable greater efficiencies and stronger achievement of intended outcomes for the Future Drought Fund.

- High priority is the role of Regional NRM organisations and NRM planning in the environmental markets, including the ERF and carbon market, and the emerging biodiversity market particularly the Australian Government's Nature Repair Market.

- Regional NRM planning provides a way to provide a landscape-scale approach to help minimise perverse outcomes and maximise benefits, and to manage cumulative and cascading effects. The regional approach was established because previous project-based initiatives were seen to be delivering uneven outcomes and were not at a sufficient level needed to bring about whole of system and whole of landscape change.
- A high priority for Regional NRM Organisations is the current design and commissioning of projects for the next iteration of the Regional Delivery Partnerships Program.
- A next step in the ongoing reform of the way that water is managed in Australia via further National Water Reform and potential roles of Regional NRM planning in informing water management.
- There is a pressing need to address biosecurity issues and particularly the environmental impacts of pests and diseases in an integrated way.

It is worth taking this Inquiry opportunity to reflect on the FDF after the initial 2 years and consider processes and systems to administer and evaluate the programs.

We recommend adjusting the long-term governance of the FDF to involve all the NRM Ministers (Agriculture, Climate Change, Water, Environment, Indigenous), the FDF has siloed itself from the agricultural and environment programs that should work together, and not duplicate works that are already being undertaken. The current arrangements include only Agriculture Ministers and may skew the focus of the Fund and potentially miss synergistic interactions across a range of Australian and State Government programs and initiatives that address climate change, biosecurity, environment, water, and agriculture.

Regional NRM organisations are willing partners to assist the Australian Government to achieve effective responses to drought and climate change with regionally tailored application. Regional NRM organisations work with all land managers and their community groups and support with expertise and stakeholder networks covering the entirety of the Australian continent.

These relationships and approaches should be thoroughly reviewed (e.g., post consultation) by the FDF in conjunction with other Australian Government agencies (Agriculture, Climate Change, Water, Environment, Indigenous) and where possible leveraged in partnership with FDF and other key organisations. Rangelands NRM believes that proper and due consideration could achievement of multiple environmental, agricultural, social, and economic outcomes.