

# NEW SOUTH WALES DROUGHT RESILIENCE ADOPTION AND INNOVATION HUB: SOUTHERN NSW

DR SARA HELY - RIVERINE PLAINS INC.

## KEY POINTS

The Southern NSW Drought Resilience Adoption and Innovation Hub (Southern NSW Drought Hub) will enable regional stakeholders to have a voice in drought resilience activities, collaborate with experts, gain access to resources, and participate in adoption programs such as workshops, seminars and field days.

Riverine Plains Inc. have conducted an engagement process for the Southern NSW Drought Hub and will be funded to employ a part-time knowledge broker for developing projects of benefit to the Riverine Plains region.

The work to date has revealed that while they have learnt lessons from past droughts, there are still many knowledge gaps that could be filled by helping farmers not only in drought, but between droughts.

## Background

The Southern NSW Drought Resilience Adoption and Innovation Hub (Southern NSW Drought Hub) is a consortium of nine regional partners including primary producers, Indigenous, industry and community groups, researchers, entrepreneurs, education institutions, resource management practitioners and government agencies.

It is one of eight hubs being established across Australia to combat drought and create user-driven innovation, research and adoption and facilitate transformational change through the co-design of research, development, extension, adoption and commercialisation (RDEA&C) activities.

The partners in the Southern NSW Drought Hub are the Australian National University, Farming Systems Groups Alliance which includes Riverine Plains Inc, First Nations Governance Circle, Local Land Services, NSW Department of Primary Industries, Rural Aid, University of Canberra and University of Wollongong. It encompasses most of the Macquarie River catchment and lower reaches of the Darling River, the Illawarra and South Coast, Riverina, Australian Alps, Western NSW and includes Canberra, Dubbo, Orange and Bathurst and their surrounding regions.

Riverine Plains, as a partner to the Southern NSW Drought Hub has been funded to appointment a part-time knowledge broker which will assist in gathering and sharing knowledge to southern NSW members and their communities.

Through this partnership, Riverine Plains has conducted an initial engagement process which has provided important insight into what factors build drought resilience. It was found in interviewing 12 farmers that drought resilience is considered a farmer's ability to survive an economic downturn and be flexible in generating income and managing the business in a way that means they are viable post drought. It was

highlighted throughout our engagement process that drought resilience has a lot to do with how they farmed in good years and that planning for an impending drought was important by putting aside reserves of fodder, cash and water when possible. The youngest interviewee believed drought resilience meant keeping a sound mindset and making rational decisions despite stress points making it difficult.

The experience of drought itself seems to be the greatest example of learning on the job as many participants have now implemented several changes to their business to increase their drought preparedness.

### Progress to date

The engagement process for the Southern NSW Drought Hub was completed in November 2021. The people interviewed during the Riverine Plains Inc Community Engagement Survey were all family farmers or agribusiness professionals based in Southern New South Wales. Diversity of business was deliberate to ensure we covered the community and received well rounded information to present to the Southern NSW Drought Hub. Most operations had 2 generations of family active in the business and included a mix of dairy, summer and winter cropping, sheep, cattle and potato farmers. The age of interviewees ranged from 28 to 60 and included an even split of male and female owner operators. All participants had small children or adult children who had returned to work within the business.

### Themes

The interview process conducted by Riverine Plains Inc for the region identified major challenges facing these farmers. These include:

- Mitigating risks of external factors – global commodity markets, availability of inputs (such as chemical, fertiliser, fuel) and the impact water policy has on a farmer's ability to plan for crop and fodder production as well as predicting profitability year on year.
- Sourcing and maintaining labour given the seasonality of peak periods on-farm and the time commitment required of farming staff. This has been exacerbated with our community being on the border with cross jurisdictional differences.
- Time management is a major stressor due to the demands of commercial farming operations and business management. Phone and internet accessibility plays a huge role in a farm businesses ability to operate.

The consensus amongst participants is they deal with these challenges in-house and rely upon each other's experience or education to problem solve. However, external advice and support are often sourced from agronomists, accountants and bank managers as they have an established understanding of the farming businesses. Farmers that utilised these networks often had long standing relationships with these professionals that provide key support.

### Summary

The engagement process for the Southern NSW Drought Hub revealed that in order for the Southern NSW Drought Hub to be a success, it must provide support that is accessible, and farmers must be aware of what knowledge and support the Southern NSW Drought Hub offers. Suggestion for how this could be achieved are:

- Communicate clearly and use existing networks in place such as farming systems groups including Riverine Plains Inc, local councils, schools, banks, agronomists and accountants to create awareness of the Southern NSW Drought Hub.
- Whatever assistance is available, it must be easily accessible to people who are already stressed, time poor and need help yesterday.
- A centralised platform could be created where farmers can register themselves as a primary producer and upload all relevant financial information during good years so when a drought does occur, farmers can simply apply for whatever support is relevant to them without starting from scratch with multiple applications.
- Farmers are time poor when it comes to regulation and industry information, therefore the Southern NSW Drought Hub Drought Hub must streamline everything that is available (be it commercial or government) and become the renowned, reputable source of assistance for farmers.

- By nature, farmers do not ask for help therefore Southern NSW Drought HubHub staff must be able to communicate easily with farmers and ensure there's a level of respect and trust in place so that the customer experience is positive. This also allows the word of mouth will work in the Southern NSW Drought Hub and the farmers favour.
- Localised support can make a huge difference to how people view a service. Whether that's the coordination of a local farmer led support group, or a location people can attend, farmers tend to balk at the idea of a centralised point of contact for assistance.

### **Acknowledgements**

The NSW Drought Resilience Adoption and Innovation Hub is funded by the Department of Agriculture, Water and Environment over four years through the Future Drought Fund.