

ENHANCING COMMUNITY NETWORKS FOR DROUGHT RESILIENCE IN THE RIVERINE PLAINS

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KEY POINTS

Riverine Plains will be hosting drought preparation workshops across the region looking at enhancing farmers, business operators and community groups capacity to prepare and building drought resilience into the future

Themes emerging from the consultations show that the rural communities in the Riverine Plains region have significant resources to draw on to prepare and build resilience for future drought

By the end of the project, it is hoped that knowledge sharing from the workshops will make these resources more readily available to others.

Background

Farmers, business operators and Indigenous custodians in the Riverine Plains region experience drought differently to other regions in Australia and thus individuals have used a vast range of strategies in dealing with these uniquely regional effects, but with mixed results. The *Enhancing Community Networks for Drought Resilience in the Riverine Plains* project, uses a series of workshops to help people in this region make personal and business connections that

better prepare them for future droughts. It's aim is to build capacity, share knowledge and help improve community resilience to future droughts.

The approach being used is that a series of workshops will be held across the regions where a series of facilitated discussion allow the collection of information to identify gaps in knowledge and help position the community for future climate conditions. To date workshops with facilitated discussions have been held at Gerogery, NSW (35 participants), Noorongong, Victoria (16 participants), Lowesdale, NSW (19 participants), Rennie, NSW (23 participants) and Burramine, Victoria (17 participants).

Gerogery and Burramine are mixed grain and livestock areas in a medium to high annual rainfall zone. The Noorongong area is primarily beef and dairy with some horticulture in a more reliable rainfall area. However, this area is prone to an autumn- winter drought when there is a failed autumn break and cold ground temperatures prevail. Lowesdale is a mixed grain, livestock and irrigation region. Given the range of enterprise mixes being covered by attendees and with the help of facilitated discussion, clear themes have emerged.

Themes that have emerged to date

What worked in the last drought?

LIVESTOCK MANAGEMENT

Planning

Early weaning

Knowing what to do with animals and when to sell off surplus stock and keeping breeding stock.

Progressive destocking

Drought containment feeding or having a sacrifice paddock.

Burying fodder

Knowing the cost of feed (\$/MJ)

Getting information

Setting priorities, especially around fodder and water management.

Maintaining water quality

Making a decision early and sticking to it

Projects such as maintenance

GRAINS & PASTURE PRODUCTION

Planning and getting information using support networks such as agronomist, Local Land Services, Landcare groups and Farming Systems groups

Summer sprays to limit weed growth and conserve moisture)

Good agronomy and good rotations

Making decisions early, such as making hay

Maintaining soil health

Planting a drought-tolerant pasture

Switching markets to take advantage of higher grain prices in the drought

Double cropping irrigation paddocks.

Adjusting the irrigated area sown

Storing grain and fodder on farm and selling grain all year round

Grazing crops that were not going to make grain

Brown manure weedy crops

Projects such as maintenance

BUSINESS / FINANCIAL

Planning, including small group workshops

Keeping an open mind

Maintaining a relationship and getting information and support from an accountant, rural counsellor, agronomists, local land services and banks to make decisions

Taking opportunities during and coming out of drought

Robust financial reserves

Improving financial understanding

Spending time on the business

Having a financial plan when you go to the bank

Knowing your own skills and which things you need to outsource

Communication with the family and within the business

Benchmarking the business

Off farm income and how it fits

Making a cashflow budget and keeping it updated to forewarn of cashflow problems

Making a decision and moving on

Focus on your own business

PERSONAL (MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING)

Maintaining community connection through community sport and events

Using social media, phone calls and having a chat to keep in touch and realise you are not on your own

Surrounding yourself with positive people

Communicating with family

The children of the families felt some of the negativity in the drought and said that social events targeted for them were really good

Getting away

Looking after yourself and exercise

Acknowledge there is a lot of pressure, worry and relationships are stretched

Acknowledge that a lack of water can cause stress

Try to keep spirits up to encourage younger generation

Managing anxiety with things like music or writing things down

WHAT DIDN'T WORK IN THE LAST DROUGHT?

Some baled canola was not good quality.

Weeds brought in with hay

Selling hay and not getting paid.

Cutting hay when the crop was too light and it wasn't worthwhile baling.

Waiting and seeing

What do we need to start doing now to prepare?

LIVESTOCK MANAGEMENT

Improve stock water by updating water system to every paddock

Fencing off dams to improve water quality and increase biodiversity

Updating farm layouts and managing zones

Fire management and pathways around house and sheds

Strategies to stop paddocks eroding

Make decisions earlier to offload stock

Update sheeppyards

Create a stock containment area, a small paddock with good water and shade

Increase silage/pasture stores

Good dogs for ease of stock management

Maintenance

GRAINS & PASTURE PRODUCTION

Focus on soil health, soil fertility, testing your soils and crops to identify the most limiting factor and address that

Multispecies and cover crops

Strategies to stop paddocks eroding

Silage/hay planning

Maintain high phosphorus levels

Building/upgrading on-farm grain storage

Upgrading weigh bridges and trucks

Maintenance

Have bores rather than relying on irrigation water allocation from the river

Carrying over irrigation water to the next year when you don't need it

Building a water storage to take advantage of off allocation irrigation water

Buying more water for irrigation

Consider crop choice and water use of irrigated summer crops

Improve the uniformity of application and infiltration of water from the irrigation system

BUSINESS / FINANCIAL

Spending money to get a good, longer term, strategic plan and then implement it.

Small farmer groups to help plan

Succession transition and starting a conversation about the next generation as a family

Have tough chats

Get rid of “just in time” supply chain, storage and inventory

Conversation with your bank now

Review if the business has the appropriate management structure

Communicate with family members

Spend money on new or existing infrastructure using low interest loans

Put money aside, considering taxes and what is needed now

Strategically diversifying locations of farms

Knowing when it is time to exit farming

Making key decisions when times are good

Consolidating debt

Restructure loan repayments

Carry over financial reserves by using products such as Farm Management Deposits (FMDs) to ensure repayments can be made in a bad year

FMDs can be also be utilised for retirement planning

Consider off farm investment versus on farm

Utilising houses on the farm for younger generation or additional income.

Expanding the operation or taking on a new enterprise for diversity

Identifying different streams of income such as off farm income (eg: contracting)

Looking for opportunities during a drought eg: carting hay, carting water, making hay, feeding lambs, carting livestock

Utilise government grants that can help prepare for future droughts.

Better equity due to high land values provides an opportunity to invest in drought management strategies.

PERSONAL (MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING)

Enjoy the good years

Find something that you enjoy doing

Staying connected and keeping communication open

Nourishing food and sleep

Round robin phoning people

Planning a holiday to get away

Keeping physically and mentally fit

WHAT SUPPORT IS NEEDED?

Support with drought planning from other farmers, farming system groups and the internet. Also, organisations such as Agriculture Victoria, Local Land Services (NSW) regional development, Murray Dairy, Dairy Australia, MLA, Australia Young Farmer Network, Landcare Group, Local Government (Shire), AgBiz Assist and Rural Financial Counsellors.

Bank manager, accountant, stock agent, agronomist and nutritionist (for livestock producers) and other advisors

Employment: encouraging youth to stay in regions through scholarships

Being able to ask for help and not feel stigmatised

Knowing where to access help when needed

Other farmers

Analysis of efficiency of system

Mobile phone towers; poor reception is affecting mental health, businesses and community connection.

Council to maintain roads

Understanding how the drought affects people around you

The flow on effect to retail and local businesses

Maintaining momentum and connection of agriculture to the wider community that has occurred through COVID

Local sporting clubs, gym and exercise groups.

Summary of Key Messages

The engagements clearly show that the community has a deep collective knowledge of how to prepare for drought. However, there is a range of individuals skill's and preparedness for future droughts. While some landholders have started implementing feed and water upgrades (infrastructure) and business and financial management strategies, other farmers have been prompted by the workshop to use the ideas from the workshops to start planning. The participants have identified various support networks for future droughts, including Rural Financial Counselling Services, other farmers, Farming Systems Groups, Landcare groups, agronomists, stock agents, accountants, friends and family. This project will continue with workshops to be held with different landholder groups in the region over coming months. The outcomes from the project will be circulated via social media and through the Riverine Plains newsletter.

Acknowledgements

This project is supported by FRRR, through funding from the Australian Government's Future Drought Fund.

Thanks to our Gerogery event hosts Daniel and Stirling Moll and speakers Kevin McCrum (NSW Rural Financial Counselling Service) and Jennifer Pegler (Murrumbidgee Local Health).

Thanks to the Noorongong Landcare Group for hosting at the Noorongong CFA shed and speakers Carl Fraser (AgBiz Assist) and Greg Ferrier (Agriculture Victoria).

Thanks to our Lowesdale hosts, the Taylor family and speakers Alison Gregory (Rural Financial Counselling Service) and Denis Watson (Department of Economic Development, Jobs, Transport and Resources).

Thanks to our Rennie hosts, the Marshall family and our speakers Alison Gregory (Rural Financial Counselling Service), and Bernadette McKenzie (Belmores Chartered Accountants).

Thanks to the community for participating at the Burramine Hall event at Burramine. Speaker notes were provided by Maryanne Black (AgBiz Assist), Bernadette McKenzie (Belmores Chartered Accountants), and Eric Nankivell (Farmanco).

Participants at the Drought Preparation Workshop hosted by the Noorongong Landcare Group at the Noorongong CFA shed

