

PRIMARY INDUSTRIES MINISTERIAL FORUM

Communiqué

Primary Industries Ministers

19 September 2008

Ministers with responsibility for primary industries met in Canberra on 18-19 September 2008 for the second Ministerial Forum.

The Forum was convened to discuss two critical issues affecting Australian farmers: improving drought policy and the Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme.

In considering these issues, ministers heard the following presentations:

- Bureau of Meteorology (BoM) and the CSIRO – the findings of their assessment of the impact of climate change on the nature and frequency of exceptional climatic events causing drought
- The Productivity Commission – a status report on their assessment of drought business and income support programs
- The Social Expert Panel on Drought – preliminary findings of their assessment of the social impacts of drought on farming families and rural communities
- Department of Climate Change – overview of the proposed Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme and issues related to agriculture.

In considering these presentations, ministers recognised that:

- the frequency and severity of drought will likely increase
- the BoM and CSIRO assessment confirms that the current model for determining Exceptional Circumstances (EC) assistance, based on a 1 in 20-25 year event is no longer appropriate and alternatives need to be examined
- there is a strong role for government in supporting farmers and communities prepare and adapt for drought, including supporting research and development and improving climate information
- EC assistance provides valuable support in times of need but can also create divisions between those who are eligible for assistance and those who are not
- farming families and rural communities need to better prepare for the social impacts of drought
- there is a need to begin preparing agriculture for possible entry into the Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme.

Ministers look forward to receiving the Social Expert Panel's final report by the end of September 2008 and the Productivity Commission's draft report by the end of October 2008 and final report by the end of February 2009.

Improving Drought Policy

Ministers reaffirmed their commitment to improving drought policy. They noted they had made substantial progress in implementing the plan for improving drought policy agreed at the Primary Industries Ministerial Council in April 2008.

Ministers agreed that an improved drought policy should focus on planning for the future and preparing and adapting for the social, environmental and economic impacts of future droughts.

Ministers agreed that to improve drought policy greater emphasis needs to be placed on:

- providing farmers with user-friendly climate projections and season-to-interannual forecasts, particularly for specific rural sectors and at a local scale
- enabling farming families and communities to plan and prepare for the social impacts of drought
- improving the delivery of existing and future drought social support services (counselling, information, events) to farming families and communities
- ensuring that drought policy supports productivity growth of the sector.

Ministers also reaffirmed that implementation of an improved drought policy must include a strategy for managing the transition to new arrangements, and that the rules for EC would not change for those producers currently receiving assistance in existing EC declared areas and for areas where EC declarations are extended.

Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme

Ministers agreed to establish a High Level Officials Group to ensure a coordinated national response to facilitate mitigation and adaptation in the agriculture sector. The Group will consider research, development and extension needs, as well as possible complementary measures and strategies, such as communication, required to facilitate participation prior to possible inclusion in the CPRS.

The establishment of this Group recognises that there is broad scope for collaboration among all jurisdictions in preparing the sector to reduce emissions and to assist it to prepare for possible inclusion in the CPRS.

At their November Ministerial Council meeting ministers will consider a draft terms of reference for the High Level Officials Group and its possible commencement in 2009.

(Ministers from Western Australia, the Australian Capital Territory and the Northern Territory were unable to attend the Forum and sent their apologies.)