

Submission from AgForce Queensland Brisbane, QLD

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SUBMISSION BY AGFORCEQUEENSLAND

SOCIAL IMPACTS OF DROUGHT

INTRODUCTION

AgForce is the peak rural lobby group in Queensland who looks after the interests of cattle, sheep and wool and grains producers. The last seven years have been some of the most difficult in the history of broadacre production in Queensland due to the extensiveness and depth of the drought.

AgForce became a leaders in development of Exceptional Circumstances applications in 2002 when it developed a comprehensive research and data collection process and template for applying for EC. These submissions were then forwarded to the Queensland Department of Primary Industries who added substantial scientific data to the application and lodged this with the Federal Government. As the drought spread rapidly across Queensland this partnership resulted in over 65% of the state becoming EC declared. AgForce also organized the bulk of NRAC tours which proved to be heart wrenching as producers explained their stories.

These drought related activities continued for AgForce with the implementation of Rural Financial Counselors working for the organization. Currently AgForce has a full time drought co-ordinator whose role is to assist producers cope with financial impacts of drought, prepare drought strategies and applying for EC assistance. All of these activities along with extensive branch and regional meetings and phone contact with producers have given AgForce a comprehensive understanding of the impacts of the drought on producers.

OBSERVATIONS OF IMPACTS

- Severe exhaustion evident due to extra workload of drought feeding, de stocking, extra financial stress and lack of resources.
- Depression evident in many situations eg producers crying at NRAC meetings, branch meetings, on phone to staff.

- Lack of socialization a big impact as producers pull back from community interactions due to work loads, exhaustion and general feelings of not wanting others to see them in a down state.
- Erosion of normal resilience has occurred due to the length of the drought. Most producers expect droughts but the severity of this one and the many years it has gone on has eroded their normal ability to bounce back and many have lost confidence in the future.
- Stress due to surroundings. Many women in particular have noted overwhelming feelings of despair due to heavy work loads for their families and themselves. On top of this extensive dust storms in the west and conditions like lack of potable water throughout the state have meant many women have cited the inability to keep houses clean and orderly are causing extra stress. The loss of nice gardens and green lawns in particular have a very negative impact on producers who have worked hard to make their home surrounds nice in harsh conditions.
- Impact on marriages and families are evident and many anecdotal stories of extreme stress or strained relationships due to the movement of one partner to get work and/or for childrens educational reasons and general depression impacts on these families and marriages
- Loss of people in communities as they move on to find other work has long term impacts as they mostly don't return to the community when the drought recedes. This lessens the volunteering capacity of communities and puts more strain on those who stay to keep social activities/community clubs alive.
- This erosion of social capital can lead to lessening of community spirits and/or opportunities for children as there is not as much socialization or interaction available
- Children suffering inadvertent and unintended impacts of parental stress and/or lack of development of adequate socialization skills can lead to negative educational impacts as they are forced out of boarding schools (due to lack of funds)
- Health issues a real concern as physical ailments increase due to stress and long hours. Mental health also suffers greatly in rural and remote areas. There is a distinct lack of services to address these issues.
- Many producers site lack of understanding/perceived lack of understanding from city people causes them to feel that farmers are seen in a negative light by suburban people. This city vs country issue makes difficult times seem worse and can leads to further feelings of isolation and lack of understanding
- Whole issue of maintenance of financial equity are highlighted as the impact of drought on cash flow and borrowings become evident. This has long term impacts on potential retirements plans, succession plans and most importantly the potential feeling that they may not make it financially through the drought

While all of the above portrays the absolute devastating impacts of drought there are some other positive impacts to consider:

(a) Many producers have taken the opportunity during the drought to access professional assistance. This has led to better long term planning of their businesses and made them look closely at their production mix, resources issues and basically take more strategic, educated approach to their businesses, which puts them in a better position in the long term. The involvement of an independent experienced third party provides a good sounding board and can offer families options to move forward.

(b) The fact that the Federal Government is undertaking this review into social impacts provides producers with a feeling of validation that they are important, that the Government has not forgotten them and that maybe some new policies will result which will help make the industry more resilient in the long term.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE

Lessons from the drought are many and varied. However the bottom line is that there are a number of basic social necessities that must be preserved during difficult climatic times and these will be addressed first. Other solutions to broader problems will follow after that and economic/business issues will be discussed in our submission to the Productivity Commission.

(A) SERVICES THAT MUST BE PROVIDED AT ALL TIMES AND CERTAINLY MORE RESOURCES PUT INTO THESE AREAS IN THE FUTURE FOR RURAL AND REMOTE QUEENSLAND:

(1) **Health services** are lacking in many rural areas. While we certainly acknowledge the difficulty in getting appropriately trained staff in regional areas perhaps a more creative solution maybe required where more flyin/flyout arrangements can be put in place or travelling practitioners utilized. A specific working group maybe required at State level to do an audit of the shortcomings in the system and a strategy to address those shortcomings in the future. In line with this one of the most appreciated parts of current EC assistance has been access to a health care card. A policy that allows easier access to such a card in rural and remote regions should be investigated simultaneously with the increased provision of services as discussed.

(2) **Mental health services** also fall into this situation are require an even more subtle approach given the issues and stigma surrounding mental health. The Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health (CRRMHQ) has recently been established in Queensland and some more focus on its activities and resourcing along with its partners may well go a long way to addressing the current shortcomings. A well supported CALL CENTRE run in conjunction with the CRRMHQ could help provide dedicated/coordinated services. Some models are already in place with great results such as the Murilla Services group based in Miles, Queensland so they could be examined as potential models.

(3) **Education** of children must not be compromised. This is a great source of stress for parents in drought times. Most families have little option but boarding school for high school children. Boarding schools also play an important role in the socialization of children. However often in drought times cash flow problems means boarding schools become unfeasible financially so Mothers move into towns away from properties and partners so children can attend local high schools. This has a very negative impact on the families and the children themselves. To reduce the impact of splitting families and removing children from schools a number of options could be utilized:

(a) education rebates for producers who are keeping two homes in operation for the purpose of education and (b) possibility of the extension of HECS style loans for parents of Grade 11 and 12 students to relieve some of the burden.(c) increase in existing levels for travel and education subsidies

(4) At all times access to **basic Centrelink income support safety nets** to provide basic food and clothing need to be kept in place. Given the huge strain on cash flow because of drought many producers appreciated access to the ECRP which allowed them to improve cash flow to pay for basic necessities. It is essential that this type of scheme be kept in place and access remains simple with a higher assets test than the new TIS support scheme. This type of scheme also ensures money flows through other rural and regional businesses who are also feeling the impacts of drought as money dries up in the communities. Anecdotal evidence indicates that about 70-80% of these funds are spent in local communities.

(5) **Internet access** are still second rate in many areas in rural and regional Queensland. If producers are to access internet based health services, the latest climate information, market forecasts and myriads of other personal and business information they must have access to full internet services. The Federal Government needs to ensure all Queenslanders have equal access and so needs to work on the black spots still in the system.

(B) PERCEPTION/IMAGE ISSUES and REVITALISATION OF CONFIDENCE IN FARMING SECTOR

Rural producers often feel misunderstood by their city counterparts. Especially during difficult times producers need to feel a sense of appreciation and understanding of the issues they are up against. Some simple, effective stories about the production of food and fibre and the vagaries of production in a shifting

climate mixed with personal and family stories would provide a great platform for better relationships between urban and country Queensland. Below are some suggestions at how this could be achieved.

- 1) Utilise ABC radio and TV/Landline /Sunrise type programs to promote positive stories and also as a means of promoting a CALL CENTRE number which is discussed earlier in this paper.
- 2) Another issue is that many Government employees, Ministerial advisers and other people who influence rural policy may have had limited exposure to the real people involved in agriculture which can lead to a poor understanding of the issues. A way of addressing this is utilizing (and maybe providing some Government funding) for State Farming Organisations such as AgForce to host visits to properties and rural communities to improve understanding and develop good relationships between the groups. It also provides producers with more confidence in the decision makers if they have seen first hand what some of the issues are.
- 3) AgForce is currently working on a project aimed at school children to promote agricultural careers. This is proving very positive as children are exposed to agricultural type careers which they may never have had access to before. This type of program needs to be expanded further and resourced better to help spread the message and encourage younger people into agriculture.
- 4) In providing services to rural communities Government and industry initiatives need to maintain positive language and badging. For example the drought bus activities have been very popular and anecdotal evidence suggests the bus is a very effective way of assisting producers access a multiplicity of Government services. However re-badging it removes the negative connotations of drought whilst still maintaining positive services.

(C) COMMUNITY/SOCIAL ASSISTANCE

Exhaustion of volunteers in rural communities due to drought and declining numbers has a very negative impact on the social aspects of a community. Many of the sporting/cultural and social facets of rural communities are left to local volunteers and in drought times exhaustion and reduced people in the community means these activities suffer from lack of support. The reduction in the availability of these functions and activities further exacerbates the quality of living in these areas. During droughts families also suffer in their living environments as it becomes hard to stay on top of normal house and gardening requirements further limiting general enjoyment of life. Below are some suggestions for ways to assist communities/families in this regard:

- 1) Utilization of grey nomads/community groups to assist families with house cleaning, yard work etc – all those things which build up when women are helping outside or having to get off farm work
- 2) The Queensland Government has recently set up a three year program specifically aimed at giving rural women a voice. These Rural Women's Symposiums need to be broadened further and used as a vehicle to support rural women further and look for solutions to some of their issues.
- 3) Utilisation of city based Lions/Rotary clubs etc to assist in volunteering to provide support at country type functions. For example utilize Toowoomba Rotary to assist at Cunnamulla Show where the burden on the local communities may be a way of raising funding. This relieves some of the burden on the locals and builds good relationships with urban counterparts.
- 4) Producers often need a break but need to get someone whom they have confidence in understanding their land and resources. Perhaps the development of a register of caretakers which producers can access would limit the difficulty in locating caretakers and encourage producers to get away easier in times of drought.
- 5) Many community activities rely on Local Government for support. These Councils often provide all the manpower for local activities and also contribute significant funds to building community centres/funding sporting facilities and so on. While there are many grants available for these activities from Federal and State Government a review of their funding and an increase in access to these funds (and in preparing the funding applications) may relieve some burden from the local Councils and encourage more community activities.

CONCLUSION

Australia is a dry continent and given future predictions will become increasingly dry. This has significant repercussions for producers and communities in rural and regional Australia. AgForce through its extensive drought work and interaction with producers in Queensland is well aware of the problems and believes the Federal Government review of drought issues is both welcome and timely.

A co-ordinated and fresh approach to the issue is warranted. Health, education and basic necessities all are paramount and there are many ways these services can be improved in the future. Business planning for dryer periods and close investigation of ways to drought proof business is warranted – most of these issues will be discussed via the Productivity Commissions report.

The maintenance and support of communities is vital. Keeping workers in rural areas is paramount and investment by all levels of Government in social, physical and cultural activities helps keep communities vibrant and sustains them in difficult times.

AGFORCE QUEENSLAND