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## *RFCS future focus*

September 2007 no. 17

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### Improved drought assistance measures

On 25 September 2007, the Australian Government announced additional drought assistance measures for irrigators, dryland farmers and small businesses severely affected by the drought.

These new measures make it easier for farmers and small businesses to access Exceptional Circumstances (EC) assistance, provide grants directly to irrigators, and help with the social pressures facing farm families and communities across rural and regional Australia. Additional funding of \$5.236 million was provided to the RFCS Program over three years to June 2010.

For more information about the new measures, visit [www.daff.gov.au/agriculture-food/drought/media/publications](http://www.daff.gov.au/agriculture-food/drought/media/publications)

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### Outreach activities in Victoria and NSW

On 30-31 August, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, the Hon Sussan Ley MP, members of the Victoria RFCS Advisory Committee and staff from the Office of Rural Financial Counselling visited rural financial counselling services in western Victoria and NSW. An outreach tour had been planned for these areas in late June but the trip was cut short due to bad weather.

Ms Ley met members of the service provider boards, rural financial counsellors and other stakeholders, including representatives from local financial institutions and communities in Hamilton, Sea Lake and Mildura.

A big thank you to the executive officers, Bill Pretty, Karen Crook, Lorraine Argus and Brian Dodson, and to the administrative assistants, for organising the visits (in some cases, twice!).

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### State RFCS advisory committees discontinued

Ms Ley has decided to discontinue the role of the state RFCS advisory committees, with effect from 30 September 2007.

In making this decision, Ms Ley noted that a key function of the committees was to oversee the program and service delivery, including performance, resource allocation, corporate governance and compliance. However, Ms Ley also noted that the executive officer role adopted by service providers has strengthened corporate governance, accountability and risk management practices and has effectively removed the need for additional oversight by an external committee. Governments will continue to manage the accountability and performance of service providers.

All independent members of the discontinued state advisory committees will be invited to participate in an independent panel to provide advice, assessment and community feedback to the Office of Rural Financial Counselling on an ad hoc basis.

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One of the first tasks for such a panel would be the assessment of grant applications for the 2008-11 funding period. The panel could also be consulted for advice about issues such as best practice for the national program and skills and training for rural financial counsellors.

Ms Ley thanked all state advisory committee members for their assistance in helping to establish the enhanced RFCS Program management and delivery arrangements in their state, which has directly contributed to the success of the new arrangements across Australia.

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## Executive officer workshop and forum for chairmen

The National Workshop for Executive Officers and the National Forum for Service Provider Chairmen were held in Canberra on 3-5 September.

Issues discussed at the executive officers workshop included:

- remuneration packages for rural financial counsellors
- performance audits
- ARC reports
- outreach events, and
- skills development for rural financial counsellors.

A feature of the workshop was a presentation by Greg Aldridge, clinical psychologist from Beyondblue, on increasing managers' awareness and understanding of depression.

There was a cross-over session for the executive officers and the chairmen which included presentations from officers from the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry's Agriculture Advancing Australia and Drought and Exceptional Circumstances programs. The chairmen's forum on Thursday 5 September included a presentation from the Australian Institute of Company Directors on strategic planning and a discussion about key strategic issues for service provider boards.

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## Revised Diploma of Community Services (Financial Counselling)

The Diploma of Community Services (Financial Counselling), which is the minimum qualification for all rural financial counsellors, is being revised as part of a scheduled five-yearly review of the Community Services training package. The review has recommended that new units be introduced to address the unique issues that affect financial counselling in the rural sector.

The Office of Rural Financial Counselling is working with the Australian Financial Counselling and Credit Reform Association (AFCCRA) - the peak body for financial counsellors in Australia - and with an independent training consultant to develop the content of the new units. The content will cover issues such as understanding farm business structures, working with banking and financial industries and knowledge of cash flow budgeting.

A group of executive officers will be included in a working group formed to further develop the content of the new units, before seeking input from rural financial counsellors. It is hoped the new training material will be endorsed by the Department of Education, Science and Training by the end of June 2008.

## Grants funding for 2008-11

Rural Financial Counselling Service (RFCS) Program grants for the 2008-11 funding period were advertised in the major daily newspapers on Saturday 8 September 2007 and in major rural and regional publications in the following week.

Applications close on 26 October.

Information about the grants, including guidelines and application forms, are available at [www.rfcs.gov.au](http://www.rfcs.gov.au) or you can email [rfcs@daff.gov.au](mailto:rfcs@daff.gov.au) or phone 1800 686 175.

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## From the ARC helpdesk

On Friday 21 September we released a patch to update all ARC databases to version 1.0.39.0. If your database is recording an earlier version, please contact the ARC help desk immediately.

The help desk has received many calls about the nine-month reminder of clients without activity. To remove the client from the reminder window, you must assign **at least one hour** of discrete activity to the client. Alternatively, you can close the client and include an appropriate outcome - this will also remove them from the list.

Finally, could executive officers please respond to the email sent on Monday 24 September asking them to update counsellor and administrative assistant details.

## NEWS

**Drought-related psychological trauma**—Thirty-nine Divisions of General Practice in drought-affected rural and remote areas around Australia will receive funding from the Australian Government to employ community support workers to provide crisis counselling and outreach services for people affected psychologically by the drought. For a full list of the Divisions of General Practice, visit [www.health.gov.au/internet/wcms/publishing.nsf/content/dgpp-trauma](http://www.health.gov.au/internet/wcms/publishing.nsf/content/dgpp-trauma)

**Free personal counselling services**—Free personal counselling services are available to drought-affected rural communities. To make an appointment, phone the Drought Assistance Line on **13 23 16**, the Murray-Darling Basin Assistance and Referral Line on freecall **1800 050 015** or the Farmer Assistance Line on freecall **1800 050 585**.

**Don't beat about the bush!**—Beyondblue's national drought campaign aims to increase awareness of depression, show people where they can get help and provide mental health support for communities. For more information, visit [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)

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