

## **Submission from Mr Anthony Archer Bothwell, TAS**

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### Submission to the Drought Policy Review Expert Social Panel

I would like to reiterate and expand on the statements I made to the panel yesterday in Bothwell in the public meeting

I thanked Minister Burke for selecting an expert panel comprising members, rural people can have confidence in and who have their best interests at heart. It was the selection of these people which prompted me to attend the meeting.

- Many of my fellow farmers commented that the outcomes of this committee were predetermined and would reflect the murmurs coming from Canberra. These seem to intimate that climate change means drought events will become more common and this should be sheeted home to farmers to deal with without broader community support.

I commented on my own experience dealing with “the drought support bureaucracy” and will expand on this now.

This experience has been mainly positive. I found Centerlink staff to be very helpful where they could be. A major issue for our application became the existence of a gravel pit on our farm which precluded some support and lead to us using the appeals process which, while it did not produce a good outcome, certainly provided an improved outcome.

- A major anomaly exists where assets or income can be held by a different entity(in this case by a company) which is recognised as legitimate by Centerlink and the tax office but is excluded by the drought policy rules
- In any event this income should not be classified as off farm income as clearly it is derived from the same asset
- I am not aware of an appeals process which can address these anomalies
- A similar anomaly exists for people with rented cottages or houses on farms or those working to support their families as contractors off farm

Recommendation: an appeals process be instigated to address anomalies and equity concerns

As a minimum eligibility rules should be no more difficult than existing centerlink requirements

Accessing Center Link support

- The Centerlink Rural Liason officer Janine Walker is always helpful and compassionate and deals with families under pressure with empathy.

I feel the employment of a person in this position of this calibre has been a very good step in helping farming families deal with what other wise would be a much more confronting position

Recommendation: Centerlink continue with its policy of a suitable person as a drought liason officer

#### Accessing Interest Rate Subsidies

**We would like to support the retention of the interest rate subsidy** as a very valuable tool in relieving potentially calamitous forced sale positions which would other wise be imposed by lending institutions

- Our dealings with the necessary application for an interest rate subsidy were much more onerous. With out the help of the rural financial counselling service we would have found it very difficult to continue with our application for an interest rate subsidy. We recognise the importance of accountability when dealing with public funds but believe a much simpler application process would better serve the community and save considerable expense and stress on the applicants  
recommendation : The information required in the interest rate subsidy application be simplified

After 6 months of working on our application and its final submission , its turnaround by the Tasmanian Department of Primary Industry was very prompt  
I feel much of the problem lies with the state departments desire to meet real or perceived federal requirements and this could be stream lined

- The maximum level of interest rate assistance available has not changed for many years. It originally provided a safety net allowing farmers breathing space to recover.  
Recommendation The interest rate subsidy should be increased in value to reflect the changes in the CPI since it was originally introduced and should be indexed going forward
- I expressed concern that much of the federal policy in regard to drought seems to derive from policy makers who are not accountable or accessible to electors

The concepts are flawed which determines much of federal drought policy for example;

- 1) Drought is no longer regarded as a natural disaster  
This does not reflect the position or impact on the ground and makes rural people feel cheated by “weasel words”
- 2) The Drought definition suggests these events only occur once every 25 years  
This again does not reflect the true position, communities in crisis need support and to be treated with compassion. These events are no more predictable than fire flood earth quake or cyclone (some areas are more prone than others but this does not diminish the impact on those effected)

The implementations of these “policy settings” make people already under pressure feel abandoned and not valued

Recommendation: Drought be reclassified as a natural disaster with more responsive guidelines used for its declaration

There is a lack of empathy when implementing new policy settings and the impact on small communities

Federal policy changes particularly environmental policy changes should not be implemented until the drought has ceased in the affected area ( delay in implementing policy to allow communities to adapt is as important as additional financial support )

If areas are to be reserved for the public good during drought,( the creation of reserves or wetlands) denying access or usage to communities which have come to depend on the areas concerned affected parties should be compensated as a matter of urgency. It is important to include local government , businesses , schools and community groups along with farmers in those offered adjustment

A classic example of this occurred this year when the Tasmanian Government appealed to Federal Minister Peter Garrett to allow a release of water to both ensure a spawning of the Golden Galaxid fish and for down stream communities. The Minister refused the release.

Irrespective of the validity or other wise of this decision **small communities should not have to bear all the burden for federal decisions and social factors should genuinely be taken into account when making these decisions**

### **National competition policy needs to recognise and address these issues**

State governments also have a responsibility here.

Our local hospital which recorded losses of only \$100,000 per annum has just been closed resulting in a reduction in services and aged care facilities. The service will now have to be provided at greater expense in urban facilities distancing patients and their families

The implementation and timing of this change could not have been worse .Again a lack of empathy with a community under stress

The federal government should encourage the state governments to produce and implement a drought policy which is adequately resourced and equitable

There are a large number of differences between state government’s responses to drought.

Irrigators in other states in E/C declared areas do not have to pay for the unused portion of their water allocations. Our business has not had any water for 18 months but still have to pay \$14,000 in annual water fees

A long term national inter governmental plan to assist communities in crisis needs to be developed and implementation strategies agreed which deliver relief in a much more timely fashion

**The decision to declare a drought crisis situation needing to be declared should be devolved to a local level (local government). With the frame work in place to provide much earlier support which can be quickly increased as the event increases or spreads.**

**Anthony Archer  
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