

PRIMARY INDUSTRIES MINISTERIAL FORUM

Communiqué

Primary Industries Ministers

12 November 2008

Ministers with responsibility for primary industries met in Canberra on 12 November 2008 for the third Ministerial Forum.

The Forum was convened to discuss options for improving drought policy to achieve improved farm productivity and farm family wellbeing. Ministers considered the key messages and implications of the Expert Social Panel's final report on the social impacts of drought and the Productivity Commission's draft report on government drought support released on 23 and 30 October 2008 respectively.

The reports follow the release in July 2008 of an assessment of the impact of climate change on the nature and frequency of exceptional climate events, undertaken jointly by the Bureau of Meteorology and CSIRO.

The findings of the three assessments are that governments need to refocus drought programs to support early investment in preparing for the social, environmental and economic impacts of drought and climate change.

Ministers agreed to the following principles for the further development of drought reforms:

- There should no longer be Exceptional Circumstances (EC) declarations or "lines on maps". Instead, governments should focus on addressing the specific needs of farming families, farming businesses and farming communities.
- Future farm family welfare assistance should require a level of mutual responsibility.
- Government farm business support should assist farming businesses plan and prepare for the future. Farm business support will be based on a willingness by those businesses to prepare for the impacts of drought and climate change.
- For access to the income support system, farming families should have a temporary period of exemption from the normal assets tests for farm assets but otherwise receive the same access rights as the wider community.
- Government policies and programs should support farming communities to prepare for drought and enhance their long term sustainability and resilience.
- Acknowledgement that drought is just one of a number of hardships that can adversely impact farmers.
- Recognition of the important role of farmers as the nation's food producers.

Ministers reaffirmed that the EC rules will not change for those producers currently receiving assistance in existing EC-declared areas.

Ministers agreed a high level working group of officials should report to them on transitional arrangements and business assistance programs early in 2009.

Ministers stressed that the Productivity Commission's draft report is a report for public comment and encourage individuals and organisations to provide their views to the Productivity Commission during its public consultations in November and December 2008.

Ministers will aim to meet again early next year to discuss in detail the recommendations of the Productivity Commission's final report.