

Submission from The Local Government and Shires Association Of NSW

Submission Number: 235

Public Submission received by Email to Drought Policy Review 08/08/08:

Draft submission on *Assessment of the social impacts of drought*

Opening:

The Local Government Association of NSW and Shires Association of NSW (the Associations) are the peak bodies for NSW Local Government.

Together, the Local Government Association and the Shires Association represent all the 152 NSW general-purpose councils, the special-purpose county councils and the regions of the NSW Aboriginal Land Council. The mission of the Associations is to be credible, professional organisations representing Local Government and facilitating the development of an effective community-based system of Local Government in NSW. In pursuit of this mission, the Associations represent the views of councils to NSW and Australian Governments; provide industrial relations and specialist services to councils and promote Local Government to the community and the media.

Purpose:

The Associations note that the Australian Government Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, the Hon. Tony Burke MP, has appointed an expert panel to examine the social impacts of drought on farm families and rural communities as part of its national review of drought policy.

The Associations thank the Drought Policy Review Expert Social Panel for the invitation to make a submission concerning the social impacts of drought.

The Associations note that this assessment will report on:

- The social dimensions of the impacts of drought on farm families and rural communities.
- The objectives, extent and range of Commonwealth, state and territory governments' and non-government social support services, including counselling and advisory services, available to farm families and rural communities during periods of stress and change such as drought.
- Gaps in the application of Commonwealth, state and territory governments' and non-government social support services for mitigating the impacts of stress and change such as drought on farm families and rural communities.
- Possible social support services for mitigating the impacts of stress and change such as drought on farm families and rural communities.

We note this assessment will not examine the appropriateness, effectiveness or efficiency of government business support measures, such as Exceptional Circumstances Interest Rate Subsidy and Exceptional Circumstances Relief Payments, as they fall within the terms of reference for the economic assessment by the Productivity Commission. We understand feedback is sought on the need for or provision of drought specific programs, services, activities, strategies and initiatives available to farm families and rural communities during stress and change caused by drought.

The Associations applaud the Australian Government, the Minister and the Expert Social Panel on the overall drought review and this social impact assessment. This lines up well with the view that has emerged amongst councils in the past year. The Shires Association joined with others in the Rural Alliance to run 2007 Rural Drought Crisis Summit in Parkes (see Appendix 2 for outcomes).

More recently on the motion of the Executive Council the 2008 Shires Conference unanimously resolved ‘that the Shires Association raise with Australian and NSW Government the need for a inter-governmental review and overhaul of the present disjointed and porous system of drought relief measures, given contemporary understanding of the complex social, economic and environmental impacts of drought and the emerging science on climate change.’

In proposing this resolution the Executive noted as follows: ‘The Shires Association has lobbied hard on a wide variety of issues relating to drought relief with both the Australian Government and the NSW Government. What is apparent is the qualifications for, timing, and nature of different measures seem to bear no relation to one another. As Australian society better understands both climate change and the local social, economic and environmental effect of drought, there is an argument that the responses of all spheres of government could better integrated and systematised.’

Drought and social impacts in general

The Panel acknowledges that research indicates that social impacts of drought upon individuals, families and communities may include:

- People being reluctant to get involved in community activities;
- A decline in traditional industries;
- Volunteer stress or burnout, or an inability to even have a volunteering effort;
- The need to and or ability to seek off-farm work;
- Increased financial pressures;
- A decline in the physical and mental health of individuals and their families;
- Dealing with questions of whether to leave the farm and/or problems associated with succession planning;
- A loss of local farm labour;
- An inability to leave the property because of the demands of feeding and water regimes;
- The local economy impact from a postponement of capital purchases as a result of drought; and
- A general increase of working hours with little opportunity for recreation and family time.

To these challenges we would suggest adding the following:

- Differential impacts for ageing people;
- Differential impacts for women;
- Unique impacts for Aboriginal peoples;
- Cultural degradation; and
- Unemployment.

We shall amplify each of these briefly in the following sections.

Differential impacts for ageing people: While Australia’s population is ageing generally, the rural population is ageing at a faster rate. The lack of employment opportunities in drought stricken rural areas has highlighted the impact of the loss of young people seeking employment in cities, resulting in communities which have older people left behind. These ageing populations need access to health and welfare services. Margaret Alston from the Centre for Rural Social Research at Charles Sturt University, in a report for the Department of Transport and Regional Services, noted that likely future scenarios could include aged people on isolated farms and in rural communities with few services and reduced ability to undertake physical farm work. Health and aged care are increasingly difficult issues for these communities.

The impact of the drought on the aged and people with a disability is closely linked to the impact on society more broadly. In their report, *Social Impacts of Drought, A report for NSW Agriculture* (2004), Alston and Kent referred to several situations caused by the drought, some of which have an impact on the aged.

Other impacts are seen on services for the aged and disabled, as well as other sectors of the population who require assistance, where “drought has made it more difficult to attract volunteers to work in community organisations” (p 55). Interviews with the Condobolin community also showed that older people are suffering exhaustion from working longer, impacting on health services. “Several interviewees reported increasing anxiety in this group and an inability on the part of many aged people to pay hired labour resulting in them working full days on the farm with consequent exhaustion. At the same time there is an increasing need for this group to provide child care for their working daughters and daughters-in-law.” (p66). Similar comments by service providers in the same report supported this view, “The oldies are hospitalised more often because of the drought, stress-related, they become anxious so they go into hospital” (p 67) and “older people are more likely to resist seeking help and may be more socially isolated” (p109).

The report also listed the problems that aged farming couples are facing which require urgent attention (p106). In particular:

- The workload of aged farm couples or aged farmers and their inability to hire labour
- The problems associated with selling or transferring farms, processes complicated by drought
- The need to ensure that Exceptional Circumstances is available to aged farmers
- The need to ensure that the intergenerational transfer of farms is not restricted by drought
- The health impacts on aged farmers
- The social isolation of aged farmers

Differential impacts for women: Rural women play a significant role in communities affected by drought and ongoing climate change. In these circumstances women in rural communities take on critical roles spanning family, business and the community, over and above the already heavy demands made of them. In Margaret Alston’s presentation on Drought – a gendered experience, she reported on a study funded by NSW Agriculture and Premiers Departments in 3 communities with 120 participants. This study found that 75% of women increased their work on the farm, 50% were working off the farm and 38% in remote areas were involuntarily separated from their families in order to find work. Women were found to be under increased pressure to earn income, as well as to monitor the health of their partners, often at the expense of their own health. The social impacts on women need deeper exploration and more contemporary models need to be developed in response to an enhanced understanding. Despite the significant and important role the Country Women’s Association (CWA) plays in responding to drought, the Associations are a little surprised at the seeming lack of a gender analysis of drought social impacts in policy development and subsequent lack of gender-based programs.

Unique impacts for Aboriginal peoples: The Associations are concerned that the social impacts of the drought on NSW Aboriginal communities have not yet been fully explored. The Associations had expected greater coverage on Aboriginal issues in research on drought.

Nonetheless, there are some matters relating to Aboriginal spiritual or cultural heritage that ought be noted. Alston and Kent noted that the drying up of the river at Bourke was of major cultural significance to the local Aboriginal community, due to its spiritual significance (page 56). Matt Rigney from the South Australian Ngarrindjeri community highlighted the drought is exposing Aboriginal burial grounds. Aboriginal communities say they are concerned that receding water levels are exposing ancient burial grounds to damage. Sections of the lakes and rivers have dried up with the drought and left previously protected Aboriginal burial grounds open to the elements. There are burial grounds dotted all the way through this country that are now being damaged by exposure to the elements. Cattle have been walking through burial sites and people have been picking up skulls and bones and taking them home for whatever reason. Aboriginal people are concerned that looting is becoming a problem. There needs to be some kind of protection for sacred Aboriginal burial grounds.

Equally there does not seem to be a great deal of engagement with Aboriginal people on the mitigation measures dealing with the social impact of drought or the wider issue of climate change.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, Tom Calma, has highlighted this seeming oversight. Calma notes with the recent focus on climate change in Australia a national plan of action is greatly diminished unless Aboriginal Australians are meaningfully engaged in the process.

Similarly Ms Bev Manton, Chairperson of the NSW Aboriginal Land Council, spoke on behalf of the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Caucus at the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) in April 2008. At that forum Manton called for the full participation of Aboriginal people in the design and delivery of measure to reduce the negative impacts of climate change and maximise the opportunities for Aboriginal sustainable development in meeting the challenges. Ms Manton said “Climate change raises distinct challenges for Aboriginal people, cultures, lands and resources. It poses a threat to the health, cultures, and livelihoods of Aboriginal peoples in NSW. This occurs in coastal and flood prone areas, salt inundation of freshwater supplies, changes to mangroves and fire regimes, coastal erosion and rising sea levels *as well as for those Aboriginal communities affected by long term drought and desertification*, among other impacts. Aboriginal people have control of 16% of the Australian land mass and a large proportion of the waters” (emphasis added).

Cultural degradation: As noted elsewhere amongst social impacts of drought upon individuals, families and communities are ‘people being reluctant to get involved in community activities’ and ‘general increase of working hours with little opportunity for recreation’. This can lead to local cultural life becoming degraded, unless managed actively.

The social impacts of drought require activities to boost morale and bring people together. “Australian and overseas research shows that direct involvement by communities in arts activity can contribute significantly to individual and community wellbeing”(Mills & Brown, *Art & Wellbeing*, Commonwealth of Australia, 2004). Research by Regional Arts Australia found: “The impact of arts programs in bringing together local communities was seen as a major success in many communities. Themes of inclusion and belonging were strongly emphasised. Community cultural programs contributed to building morale, support and identity in many towns at a time when the effects of the drought were being felt.” (Dunne, A, *National Directions*, 2006)

In NSW there have been a multitude of Local Government supported arts projects conceived especially to alleviate social impacts of drought, such as the Bland Shire Council 2007 West Wyalong Christmas Carnival and the Wellington Percy Street Festival. “The Elvis Festival has become *the* calling card for Parkes. The festival has provided a massive, annual economic boost for the town during drought-stricken times” (*Artreach* Autumn 2007, Regional Arts NSW). Other council backed arts projects have drought as a subject matter, helping to communicate devastating impacts in ways that statistics and reports can not. Examples include the Canowindra Art Network exhibition *Drought*, which toured Canberra and was supported by Cowra and Cabonne Shire Councils.

Resources to assist council community cultural development practitioners counter drought effects are scarce and not widely known – such as the Victorian *Countering Drought – Manual of Creative Community Solutions* (Blau, G, Deakin University, 2006).

Unemployment: Whilst unemployment is implicit in the Panel’s list of challenges, it is not covered separately in the way it could be. Alston and Kent (2004, p103) note that while businesses make major efforts to keep their skilled staff the loss of casual and part-time positions is a direct result of drought in many affected communities. As consequence young people are leaving towns or not returning for university holidays, itinerant workers are not able to find employment and residents such as fencers, cotton chippers and casual farm hands have little or no employment for long periods. The loss of several hundred jobs in cotton chipping in Burke has had serious impact on income for local Aboriginal families.

Tackling the challenges

We concur with the Panel when it observes that how individuals, families and communities deal with these challenges (listed in the panel paper on page 5 and the further challenges we have added)

depends on the provision of services, infrastructure and the way they improve relationships, a sense of spirit and hope. However we are not sure whether the questions are based on a 20th Century conception of drought or a more contemporary conception of what drought appears to be becoming.

It seems that different social responses emerge depending on whether we conceive of the present drought as:

- a temporary cyclical phenomenon, within the normal range of probabilities for Australia that may pass; or
- longer episodes of drought (compared to the last two centuries), alongside a host of other climate changes; or
- permanent and significant decreases in rainfall (possibly desertification), alongside a host of other climate changes.

In the first and second you are likely to use social responses that support drought-affected people until the drought breaks when they can return to some semblance of historical normality. This requires the ongoing refinement and/or expansion of many already familiar measures. In the third you are likely to use social support and actively add development approaches to help drought-affected people adjust to a new reality. This may require new measures including a comprehensive reassessment across spheres of government of how and what support is delivered to communities and what work communities and governments can do together to adapt whole communities to new agricultural and other industry approaches to decreases in rainfall.

We note that the Panel has posed a series of questions on the five themes of i) Education and training, ii) Community development and sustainability, iii) Families, iv) Employment and professional development and v) Mental and physical health.

The questions in the education and training area are as follows:

- What is your experience of drought and its affect on educational and training services in rural Australia?
- In what ways could education and training programs and policies be better adjusted to address the specific impact of drought?
- What types of successful initiatives have you or your organisation accessed or developed to overcome the barriers of drought on education and training?

Similar questions are posed for each of the other four themes.

Whilst the Associations and our member councils are deeply concerned about drought and its social impacts, as the Associations are not research institutes or direct service organisations we are not well placed to comment on all five of the themes. In particular we can offer little insight into the questions as they relate to i) Education and training or iv) Employment and professional development, given that councils are not deeply or directly involved in these types of services.

Community development and sustainability

Ways community development and sustainability programs could be better adjusted to address the impact of drought and successful initiatives to overcome the impacts of drought on community development and sustainability

Initially, it must be recognised that drought affected communities constantly express concern about the importance of infrastructure to community survival and revival. One of the agreed outcomes of the Rural Drought Crisis Summit held on 25 September 2007 in Parkes was to call for *increased funding for councils to maintain and improve local infrastructure* (emphasis added). Several studies have recognised that efforts are needed to support local infrastructure. One is the *National Financial Sustainability Study of Local Government* (Pricewaterhouse Coopers, 2006). That paper called for a Local Community Infrastructure Renewals Fund to support councils in the “funding of renewals work across a range of community infrastructure assets including community centres, aged care facilities,

libraries, health clinics, sport and recreation facilities". Social and other impacts of drought are clearly exacerbated when communities are struggling with poor or non-existent infrastructure.

In dealing with drought gender impacts the Associations suggest there is room to examine the results of the Victorian Government's strategy as relates to Women and Drought and assess whether through a future joint Australian/State Government program this can be taken nationwide. Under this strategy, Community Engagement Officers - Women and Drought have been employed in the Department for Victorian Communities (DVC) Local Teams. These officers facilitate opportunities for rural women from across their respective regions to meet, share information about local activities and approaches, and develop supportive networks to deal with drought and climate change. There is also a focus on connecting rural women to State and Local Government agencies involved in drought and climate change responses. The Community Engagement Officers - Women and Drought:

- Build networks and support knowledge sharing across regions;
- Increase interaction and involvement between individuals and community groups;
- Build relationships within and across communities and organisations;
- Plan for the future;
- Build on local strengths and assets; and
- Identify opportunities for new and improved links to drought information.

However, given the problem in attracting and retaining a variety of public servants to rural and remote NSW, whether in drought or not, there may be room to focus such positions locally within councils.

In dealing with drought impacts on cultural wellbeing, the Associations suggest there is ample evidence to support setting up a future joint Australian/State Government funding program to use arts as part of the drought response. To date in NSW the myriad of arts projects to counter drought impacts have not had the benefit of a specifically funded and targeted program, such as the successful Victorian State Government Drought Social Recovery Strategy. Whilst current feedback from councils and Regional Arts Development Officers is overwhelmingly positive about the use and potential of the arts to alleviate social and cultural disadvantage caused by drought, a specific program of arts funding and assistance is yet to be created for NSW.

In dealing with drought impacts for Aboriginal peoples especially with the exposure of Aboriginal burial grounds and other cultural heritage, there may be the need for both i) a stronger heritage policing regime and ii) community education strategies. There is a need for research in this area and a provision of education following from the research findings. The Associations suggest the best way to minimise the impact on Aboriginal sites of significance is for the Australian and NSW Governments to engage with the relevant Aboriginal representative bodies to seek their advice on the best way to protect Aboriginal burial grounds with policing regimes. Thereafter the issue needs to be dealt with locally, with regulatory bodies and Local Aboriginal Land Councils working together to educate the wider community about the significance of and care for these sites.

In regions where we are nearer the desertification end of the spectrum, the Associations suggest that there is room to begin to explore community adaption (or adjustment) schemes not just farm and business adjustment schemes. Just as a farm or an agricultural sector may need to adapt significantly to permanent, significant decreases in rainfall in a region or locality, so may the communities. Just as farms or agricultural sectors in such regions or localities may need assistance to adapt, so may the communities.

Whilst there are a variety of approaches those centred on community development practice may be useful. In turn whilst there are a number of community development approaches, one worth exploring is Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD). ABCD has similar elements to the Women and Drought approach discussed above. ABCD is an approach using skills and strengths already present within the community, rather than obtaining help from outside institutions. "Asset-based" refers to a positive approach which encourages community members to make progress for themselves, as opposed to a traditional needs-driven approach which makes the community dependent on

institutional help. The first step in the process of community development is to assess the resources of a community through a capacity inventory or through other processes of talking to citizens to determine what types of skills and experience are available. The next step is to consult with the community and find out what improvements the citizens would like to make. The final challenging step is to determine how the citizens' skills can be leveraged into achieving those goals. Whilst this approach seeks to avoid making communities dependent on institutional help, there is still a role for Australian and State Governments to jointly fund running the process locally.

Finally, the Associations contend there may be room to help communities adapt to lengthening drought or permanent, significant decreases in rainfall through equipping all Australian and NSW Government staff shifting to or continuing to work in affected areas with skills and knowledge to work sensitively with the affected communities on these issues.

Families

Ways programs and policies could be better adjusted to address the specific impact of drought on families and successful initiatives to overcome the barriers of drought on families

In their paper, *Coping with a Crisis: Human Services in Times of Drought* (2004), Alston and Kent recommend some models of rural service delivery in times of crisis. They recommend that rural service models must be culturally appropriate, taking into account the general reluctance of rural people to seek help. The Rural Financial Counsellors are a good example of such a service that has been effective in providing support to rural families in crisis. The research further indicates that rural services that facilitate access to isolated people through outreach or dial-in access are more effective at reaching those in need. Extending the short term contracts of drought support workers to enable long term planning was also recommended (NSW Department of Primary Industry (DPI) Drought Support Workers are located at the NSW DPI offices and provide immediate personal support, basic information and referral to other appropriate services. There have been repeated calls for this amongst councils over the years since this research).

Alston and Kent also suggest that interagency cooperation between government and non-government service providers would assist in providing comprehensive services to small rural communities affected by disaster. Competitive tendering for government funds has brought about fragmentation and inefficiency of service provision in small communities. Charities and non-government organisations are seen by Alston and Kent as filling in the gaps of government funded service provision, masking inadequate funding. Other suggested approaches are to devolve responsibility to the local level, which may result in staffing and resourcing that better reflects local needs.

Finally in discussing impacts on – and support to – families it needs to be acknowledged there are lingering concerns about whether trying to ameliorate farm families poverty is necessarily the most appropriate model. Whilst we appreciate these are more central to the Productivity Commission review we believe the Panel should be alerted to them in the current context. Dr Linda Botterill (quoted in Davidson) notes “Linking government support to [drought] declarations raises thorny matters relating to definitions, eligibility and lines on maps and often leads to politicisation of the issue. A support mechanism for farmers based on individual need rather than specific events – such as HECS-type income-related loans – would help solve this problem”. Davidson (2004) suggests improving farmers access to welfare support would help address the concern of farm poverty. He believed handling of farmer welfare issues as part of structural adjustment policy has resulted in a series of policies with a primary objective of industry adjustment rather than alleviating poverty caused by drought and other factors.

Mental and physical health

Ways mental or physical health programs could be better adjusted to address the specific impact of drought and successful initiatives to overcome the barriers of drought on mental and physical health

One of the agreed outcomes of the Rural Drought Crisis Summit held on 25 September 2007 in Parkes was to call for: Increases in Mental health support:

- On the ground mental health resources – volunteers or other support staff needed to visit homes in drought affected communities;
- Short training courses to teach delegates how to deal with mental strain; and
- A fact sheet for individuals to recognise symptoms of mental strain and referral contacts.

NSW mental health services are under-resourced and it is worse in most rural areas, with staff often having to travel long distances to see patients. Although one-third of the population live in rural Australia only 8 per cent of psychiatrists and 12 per cent of psychologists in Australia practice in rural areas. It is widely appreciated that better mental health facilities and services are needed in rural communities. There is a need for training in suicide awareness and prevention for rural doctors, nurses, hospital casualty staff, police officers and others. So there is the background need to improve mental health services throughout rural NSW.

The NSW Government announcement in December 2007 of an extra \$2.1 million to assist drought-stricken communities in NSW tackle mental health issues is a welcome addition. The package – i) extends the appointment of 6 mental health workers ii) provides for an extra 2 mental health workers in the Far West and Far South of NSW and iii) includes a further 50 Mental Health First Aid sessions.

On top of that background need there is the need to fully appreciate the effects of drought. The mental health effects of drought are not well understood in Australia. In the absence of basic indicators of the change in the rates of suicidal behaviour in rural populations it is almost impossible to determine the best practice for suicide prevention. Therefore there is the concurrent but urgent need to accelerate research into the mental health effects of drought and then develop evidence based responses.

Conclusion

The Associations believe the drought review represents an opportunity not only to revisit the 30 plus Australian and NSW Government Drought Assistance measures to explore and fix the gaps, but to go further to build a 21st century vertically and horizontally integrated intergovernmental response.

Current drought support programs offered by Commonwealth and State governments appear to focus on addressing the economic difficulties faced by farmers in the event of drought. Examples of these measures include Exceptional Circumstances Payments, Farm Management Deposits, Rural Financial Counselling and other assistance for farmers to respond to climate change.

While there are some measures in place to address the social impacts of drought, such as social and emotional counselling under the Family Relationship Service Program, mental health information packs and unemployment benefits, policies specifically targeted to developing communities, addressing heritage impacts and providing social services are lacking. This is a reflection of the limited empirical research that has been undertaken so far on the extent and complexity of the social impacts of drought. Once research has been undertaken, then the specific needs can be identified and appropriate training and other responses developed.

To circle back on our opening, we believe the purpose of the overarching review matches the intent if not the words of our most recent conference resolution: that intent was that the ‘Australian and NSW Governments review and overhaul of the present disjointed and porous system of drought relief measures, given contemporary understanding of the complex social, economic and environmental impacts of drought and the emerging science on climate change’.

The Associations will be making a submission to the Productivity Commission’s Government Drought Support review, which will highlight the importance of further economic assistance.

Equally from a social perspective the Associations stress there is the need to factor the following measures into a new intergovernmental Drought Assistance and Adaption system:

- Recognition of the importance of a Local Community Infrastructure Renewals Fund to support councils in the funding of renewal work across a range of community infrastructure assets including community centres, libraries, health clinics, and sport and recreation facilities, to underpin other drought responses;
- In dealing with drought gender impacts, a joint Australian/State Government program modelled on the Victorian Government's strategy as relates to Women and Drought;
- In dealing with drought impacts on cultural wellbeing, a joint Australian/State Government funding program to use arts and cultural development as part of the drought response;
- In dealing with drought impacts on Aboriginal cultural heritage, Australian/State Government cooperative action to put in place i) stronger heritage policing regimes and ii) community education strategies;
- In regions approaching desertification, Australian/State Government funding program for community adaption schemes, based on community development approaches such as Asset-Based Community Development;
- In dealing with drought impacts on families, generally building on the strength of existing rural service models that are culturally appropriate for rural citizens and harnessing interagency cooperation between government and non-government service providers to assist in providing comprehensive services to small rural communities;
- Continuing to focus on enhancing on the ground mental health resources through existing Australian/State Government service and grant funding systems; and
- Providing Australian/State Government funding to accelerate research into the mental health effects of drought and then develop evidence based responses.

The Associations recommend the establishment of a Council of Australian Governments (COAG) or Agricultural Ministerial Council mechanism to take the suggestions from each of the component reviews to produce a contemporary reworking of Drought Assistance and Adaption mechanisms.

References:

- Alston, Margaret and Pincott, M, *Drought – A gendered experience*, Powerpoint presentation for Bureaus of Rural Sciences Seminar, 2004
- Alston, Margaret and Kent, Jenny, “Coping with a Crisis: Human Services in Times of Drought” in *Rural Society*, Vol 14, Number 3, 2004
- Alston, Margaret and Kent, Jenny, *Social Impacts of Drought*. A report to NSW Agriculture, February 2004 Centre for Rural Social Research, Charles Sturt University
- Alston, Margaret *Social Impacts of Drought, A Report prepared for the Department of Transport and Regional Services*, 2003. Centre for Rural Social Research, Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga
- Blau, Grace, *Countering Drought – Manual of Creative Community Solution*, 2006, Deakin University, Victoria.
- Calma, Tom “Extract of speech Caring for Culture, Caring for Country” *National Indigenous Times* 7 August 2008
- Davidson, Steve, “Dried-up ideas: our changing approach to drought” in *Ecos* July-August 2004
- Dunne, Anne, *National Directions: Regional Arts*, 2006, Adelaide.
- Kent, Natalie, *ArtReach*, Autumn 2007, NSW.
- Manton, Bev *Speech at UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues – (UNPFII) 22 April 2008*, UN Headquarters, New York Produced for the Aboriginal Peoples and Torres Strait Islander Peoples of Australia Compiled by FAIRA on behalf of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Caucus at the UNPFII.
- Mills & Brown, *Art & Wellbeing*, 2004, Sydney.
- PricewaterhouseCoopers, *National Financial Sustainability Study of Local Government*, 2006, Sydney.
- Rigney, Matt Ngarrindjeri Aboriginal community, *Stateline Broadcast* 30 May 2008, Leah MacLennan reporting and posted 31 May 2008, ABC news
- Sartore, Gina-Maree, Kelly, Brian and Stain, Helen J, “Drought and its effect on mental health, How GPs can help” in *Australian Family Physician* Vol 36, Number 12, December 2007
- University of Newcastle, Faculty of Health, *Wisdom of the Drought, a Consultative Conference*, December 2003

Appendix 1: Terms of Reference

Terms of Reference

Assessment of the social impacts of drought

Background

Government assistance for drought events is guided by the current National Drought Policy (NDP). Under the NDP, drought assistance or support is intended to be a short term measure to help farmers prepare for, manage and recover from drought. The objectives of the NDP are to:

- encourage primary producers and other sections of rural Australia to adopt self-reliant approaches for managing a changing climate
- maintain and protect Australia's agricultural and environmental resource base during periods of extreme climate stress; and
- ensure early recovery of agricultural and rural industries, consistent with long-term sustainable levels.

Although self-reliance is a key objective, the NDP also recognises that there are rare and severe events that are beyond the ability of even the most prudent farmer to manage. The Commonwealth Government provides support to farmers and rural communities under the Exceptional Circumstances (EC) arrangements and other drought programs. The state and territory governments also participate in the NDP and provide support measures of their own.

To be classified as an EC event, the event must be rare, that is, it must not have occurred more than once on average in every 20 to 25 years. Australia is experiencing a drought that has been unprecedented in its geographic extent, length and severity. Some areas have been drought declared for 13 of the last 16 years, leading to some recipients receiving EC assistance since 2002.

Climate change will bring with it significant challenges for Australian agriculture. Climate change is expected to increase the frequency, severity and length of drought periods in future. It will also have impacts on rural communities that are dependent on primary industries.

Australian primary industries ministers have agreed that current approaches to drought and EC are no longer the most appropriate in the context of a changing climate. They agreed that drought policy must be improved to create an environment of self-reliance and preparedness, and encourage the adoption of appropriate climate change management practices.

To improve drought policy, ministers agreed to consider:

- relevant social dimensions and policy responses to drought and Exceptional Circumstances
- the provision of accessible social welfare support, including eligibility criteria
- the effectiveness of business support payments
- the effectiveness of financial risk management strategies, including Farm Management Deposits
- the effectiveness of preparedness policies; and
- cost-benefit analysis of state and federal drought assistance.

This assessment, by an expert panel, will analyse the social dimensions of the impacts of drought and the range of current government and non-government social support services available to farm families and rural communities during periods of stress and change. It will also take into consideration the cultural and social issues that may impact on the capacity of farm families and rural communities to improve self-reliance and preparedness and better manage change.

This assessment, as part of a review of drought policy, will support the Productivity Commission's inquiry into the appropriateness of current government drought business support and income support

measures. The Commission's inquiry will also be supported by an assessment by the Bureau of Meteorology and Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation of what a changing climate means for drought in Australia and the appropriateness of using the concept of exceptional climatic circumstances to trigger the availability of assistance measures.

Scope of the assessment

This assessment will report on:

- The social dimensions of the impacts of drought on farm families and rural communities.
- The objectives, extent and range of Commonwealth, state and territory governments' and non-government social support services, including counselling and advisory services, available to farm families and rural communities during periods of stress and change such as drought.
- Gaps in the application of Commonwealth, state and territory governments' and non-government social support services for mitigating the impacts of stress and change such as drought on farm families and rural communities.
- Possible social support services for mitigating the impacts of stress and change such as drought on farm families and rural communities.

This assessment will not examine the appropriateness, effectiveness or efficiency of government drought business support and income support measures.

Appendix 2: Rural Drought Crisis Summit 2007

Wednesday 3 October, 2007

RURAL DROUGHT CRISIS SUMMIT COMMUNIQUE

On Tuesday 25 September 2007, the Shires Association of NSW, the NSW Farmers Association, representatives from councils, federal and state governments, industry organisations and community groups attended the Rural Drought Crisis Summit in Parkes.

Outcomes of Summit

At the summit, attendees agreed that a revised package of assistance is required for NSW communities affected by the prolonged drought.

This package needs to be flexible to respond to circumstances which constantly change and include a long term commitment from all spheres of government to work together to 'Drought proof' NSW communities.

To achieve this goal a number of suggestions were made about the way forward.

Rural Alliance Meeting

A follow up meeting of the *Rural Alliance* was held on Tuesday 2 October, 2007. Attendees sifted through the suggestions made at the summit to work out which were most urgent and feasible.

An analysis of the Federal Government's announcement of a \$714 million extension to the drought assistance package was also undertaken.

Collective Outcomes

1. Rural Alliance to write to Federal Government to congratulate them on extension to drought assistance package, and request clarification of commitments and immediate implementation.
2. Rural Alliance to drive drought support campaign in short to medium term.
3. Drought Taskforce made up of relevant stakeholders to be established in the medium to long term.
4. Rural Alliance to seek meetings with Governments to discuss priority needs.
5. Rural Alliance to seek meeting with Australian Banking Association to discuss debt/ re-borrowing issues.
6. Awareness to be raised about importance of drought affected communities making use of rural counsellors, rather than doing their own EC and other assistance applications.
7. Awareness to be raised about the importance of hampers and other donated goods being purchased locally (in the drought affected area), to support struggling economies.

Priority Needs

- A minimum 15% uncapped rate subsidy for farmers and businesses which qualify for Exceptional Circumstances payments.
- Long-term funding and job security for Rural Financial Counsellors and Drought Support Workers.
- Support to reduce burden of accumulated debt on affected farmers and businesses.
- Increased funding for councils to maintain and improve local infrastructure.
- Increase in Mental health support:
 - a) On the ground mental health resources – volunteers or other support staff needed to visit homes in drought affected communities;

- b) Short training courses to teach delegates how to deal with mental strain; and
 - c) A fact sheet for individuals to recognise symptoms of mental strain and referral contacts (to be pursued by NSW Farmers Association).
- Strategies to retain core breeding stock.
 - A replanting grant if the drought breaks.
 - Strategies to improve sustainability of drought affected communities.
 - Compensation for irrigators and other affected industries.
 - Waiver of fixed water charges for irrigators who have had their allocations reduced due to drought.
 - Decentralisation of businesses and other above incentives to retain people in the bush.
 - Streamline of drought assistance paperwork.

The Rural Alliance consists of the NSW Farmers' Association, Local Government and Shires Association, NSW Business Chamber, Country Women's Association of NSW, Australian Livestock and Property Agent's Association.