Australian Government Productivity Commission
Inquiry into Part 3 of the Future Drought Fund Act 2019

Submission from the University of Adelaide, 03 March 2023

This submission is presented on behalf of the University of Adelaide by Professor Laura Parry, Pro Vice-Chancellor (Research Excellence). It is structured around the six questions listed in the Submission Paper released on 10 January 2023, and focuses on the effectiveness, efficiency and appropriateness of Part 3 of the Future Drought Fund Act 2019.

Introduction

The University of Adelaide is involved in contributing to the collective effort of the Future Drought Fund (FDF) through leading the SA Drought Resilience Adoption and Innovation Hub (SA Hub) and leading and/or participating in several projects receiving funding from FDF. This submission draws on our involvement and includes collated feedback from SA Hub members.

The SA Hub has a network of over 60 members and is led in partnership with the Department of Primary Industries and Regions (PIRSA). The SA Hub comprises the Hub headquarters at Roseworthy and five regional nodes at Minnipa on Eyre Peninsula, Port Augusta in the Far North, Orroroo in the Upper North, Loxton in the Riverland, and Struan in the South-East. The location of the headquarters and nodes ensures state-wide coverage of pastoral, low, medium and high rainfall agricultural production zones. The SA Hub has a primary focus on grain and livestock and mixed farming sectors. The Hub also places significant effort into enhancing drought resilience adoption in horticulture and viticulture sectors. This collective focus is targeted to the regions and sectors most at risk from drought and represents the vast majority of South Australia's 2021/22 primary industries' production (farmgate value).

The SA Hub's activities are underpinned by a comprehensive co-design process informed by state-wide consultation. This approach engaged stakeholders from across the agricultural spectrum, including: producers; grower groups; research organisations and researchers; industry peak bodies; government, nongovernment and private extension officers and networks; local government; and agricultural service and equipment providers. The priorities from consultation have been the basis for co-design of collaborative activities.

Building long term drought resilience requires integrated effort across many disciplines with input spanning research, development, extension, adoption and commercialisation (RDEA&C). Outside of the FDF, programs tend to fund discipline sector specific efforts. Through the SA Hub there has been opportunity for greater integration delivering a systems approach spanning RDEA&C centred on achieving successful practice change for primary producers across SA. The SA Hub's impact lies in its ability to foster collaboration and relationships – and, as a result, achieve outcomes – that would not have occurred in the Hub's absence. The Hub has enabled partnerships across the agricultural sector at a breadth and scale not previously seen in SA. By building a large, interconnected network and guiding it in a common direction, the SA Hub has helped forge links throughout multiple regions across farming systems groups, landscape boards, agribusinesses, research groups, industry bodies and producers.

In the first year of operation the SA Hub initiated 15 projects across the State, as well as an additional three Cross-Hub projects, in collaboration with other Drought Resilience Adoption and Innovation Hubs, all of which align with the priorities identified through the Hub's co-design process. This suite of projects comprises a diverse range of activities across the key SA agricultural commodity sectors of grains, livestock, horticulture and viticulture. Projects are delivered through the SA Grower Group network, with project service provision through a broad range of Hub partners.

The Hub has also provided support for participation in other FDF initiatives, including the Drought Resilience Leaders, Networks to Build Drought Resilience Grants, and Regional Drought Resilience Planning programs. This support has included providing connections, linking FDF programs on the ground and delivering presentations, workshops and other content to add value to events.

Overall, the SA Hub is addressing a key market gap by co-designing and delivering projects with partners, which would not have been delivered without its presence. Importantly these projects are effectively leveraging the collective skills and capability of the SA Hub membership. Over recent years, extension

and adoption services supported by government have been reduced to the point whereby significant gaps in the connections between the research, primary producers and supply chains have impacted on effective adoption of enhanced practices. The interaction the SA Hub facilitates with stakeholders, particularly farming systems groups has enabled delivery of a grounded and locally nuanced approach that is considered to be enormously important in accelerating successful on-farm adoption for both drought resilience and national agricultural innovation priorities. This impacts not just one particular farm enterprise but encourages a more holistic community engagement in practice change and adoption uptake (see impact statement below).

Naomi Scholz, Executive Officer, Agricultural Innovation & Research Eyre Peninsula (AIR EP)

The SA Drought Hub has significantly increased the number of organisations we are collaborating with, and this is happening across more regions and projects. AIR EP has always been a collaborative organisation, but the Hub has taken it to the next level. We've developed relationships with groups we've never worked with previously, such as BIGG and Murray Plains Farmers.

We're also able to work across more rainfall zones. For example, through the Hub, we're collaborating with grower groups – such as MacKillop Farm Management Group – that have more experience in high-rainfall areas. This sort of collaboration has allowed us to see if experiences in one region apply in other areas, including the medium-rainfall zone, which has been our traditional focus. This allows us to give value back to growers – the project on tools for pasture forecasting is a great example here.

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1. Are the funding principles, vision, aim, strategic priorities, and objectives of the Funding Plan appropriate and effective?

Overall, the University of Adelaide considers that the Funding Plan has been effective and appropriate to enable the development and delivery of highly collaborative and impactful projects targeted towards enhancing drought resilience.

The funding principles have also enabled activities at the farm, region, state and national level. One example of this is the Cross-Hub project titled "Managing rangelands for drought resilience", which spans all of Australia's rangeland production systems.

Funding principle 17, namely the knowledge sharing requirement, has on occasion impeded the development &/or contracting of some programs of work that are otherwise highly consistent with the Vision, Aim, Strategic priorities and Objectives of the Drought Resilience Funding Plan. A future Funding Plan may benefit from options to depart from the Knowledge Sharing requirement for specific programs or activities. This would enable rather that impede greater collaboration.

2. Do the programs, arrangements and grants focus on the right priorities to support drought resilience? If not, what should the programs, arrangements and grants focus on and why?

The University of Adelaide's primary involvement in contributing to the delivery of the programs informed by the Drought Resilience Funding Plan has been as a lead of the SA Hub. The establishment of the eight Drought Resilience Adoption and Innovation Hubs within the FDF Better Practices program has enabled the establishment of a national architecture to co-design and deliver highly effective activities targeted at enhancing drought resilience. This occurs within-Hub and at a multi-Hub level. Overall, based on SA Hub Member feedback, the Hub's program has been very well designed to support drought resilience.

Enhancing drought resilience preparedness requires integration of effort spanning regional and community resilience, enterprise financial and productivity resilience, and personal resilience. The FDF programs span these areas but there may be scope for greater integration of effort in future programs. Currently, these have often been delivered with some level of cross-program awareness of content within each program but with limited opportunity to plan from early stages for integration of effort to maximise impact. An opportunity exists to strengthen the delivery model and alignment across FDF programs.

During the current funding plan some grant rounds have often been brief and on occasion poorly timed relative to sector needs, e.g. southern cropping sowing timing. We believe greater project development timeframes coupled with longer projects and programs of work would likely deliver greater efficiency and impact.

3. Should the scope of the Fund be broadened to support resilience to climate change? Why or why not?

The University of Adelaide would be strongly supportive of an expansion in scope of the Fund to support resilience to climate change. Moreover, in development of a business case for the Innovation aspect of the SA Hub the feedback from Hub Members was highly supportive of such scope expansion. Many of the priorities and activities of the SA Hub already enhance both drought resilience and climate resilience along with enhancing stewardship of natural capital. Given this we believe such expansion is appropriate.

4. How could the Fund enhance engagement with and benefits for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people?

The University of Adelaide would support expanded effort in engagement with and benefit for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people using trusted and established networks. Moreover, such effort may achieve greater results with longer timeframes, e.g. beyond the 4-year planning timeframe that currently exists. To date the SA Hub network had provided the opportunity for engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through existing trusted relationships contained with landscape boards within SA. This has been effective at identifying opportunities for co-design of SA Hub projects integrating traditional knowledge.

SA Hub stakeholders appreciate that there is extensive traditional knowledge about land and water systems. Each First Nation group requires appropriate engagement in relation to their traditional lands, and the SA Hub understands that extensive dialogue and preparatory engagement is required to establish trust and mutual engagement, to then allow commitment to, and co-design of, agreed opportunities to be progressed for shared benefit. This level of engagement also requires a long-term engagement. Whilst initial work has begun with, for example with the implementation of yarning circles within the SA Hub, the timeframes require a longer-term approach. Were a longer-term approach possible, as discussed elsewhere in this submission, the program would seek to extend opportunities across several environmentally sensitive regions of SA.

5. What opportunities are there to enhance collaboration in planning and delivering drought resilience initiatives, including with state and territory governments?

The University has observed a strong collaborative intent within SA. This occurs at the Hub level and across FDF programs. For example, in SA there is a single Advisory Board which spans the SA Hub, Farm Business Resilience Program and Regional Drought Resilience programs. However, despite the collaborative intent and single Advisory Board the Hub Members have identified some inefficiencies and missed opportunities in delivery of the Funding Plan 2020-2024. These mainly relate to lack of scope for alignment and/or integration of effort across the program and sub-program level. Early planning of programs and consideration of opportunities for alignment and/or integration may enhance opportunity for higher impact across-domain collaboration, i.e. across region and enterprise (personal, productivity, financial). Through their collective network the eight Hubs and their stakeholders across Australia would be well placed to assist with the planning and delivery of such integrated effort.

6. Are there any other changes needed to improve the effectiveness of Part 3 of the Act? Who needs to do what to make those changes happen?

In development of a business case for the Innovation aspect of the SA Hub, the feedback from Hub Members outlined that enhancing drought resilience and/or climate resilience are both urgent areas for consideration but will require a program of longer than 4-years. The SA Hub stakeholders believe there is a strong case to argue for up to 8-10 years commitment, with major performance reviews every 4 years. This will be necessary if the potential value and impacts of SA Hub (& other Hubs nationally) are to be realised.

The University of Adelaide also acknowledges that engaging formally with an extensive number of stakeholders can be challenging. We suggest that the complexity in agreements could be revisited to enable more efficient engagement.