

Drought and Poverty in Central Western Queensland

Anti-Poverty Week October 2014

Author: Sandy Paton RDAFCW Committee Member



Supported by:



Disclaimer: While every care has been taken in preparing this publication, Regional Development Australia Fitzroy and Central West accepts no responsibility for decisions or actions taken as a result of any data, information, statement or advice, expressed or implied, contained within. To the best of our knowledge, the content was correct at the time of publishing.

Contents

- Introduction.....2**
- Regional Development Australia Fitzroy and Central West3**
- The vulnerability of primary producers to poverty.....4**
 - Kangaroos4
 - Wild dogs4
 - Property work5
 - The variability and time frames of drought5
 - Impact of ban on live cattle export5
 - Declining land values6
 - Debt and asset ratio6
- Flow on effects for local small business.....7**
- Social impacts of drought 8**
- Assistance available..... 9**
 - Federal Government9
 - Queensland Government.....9
 - Additional support available.....10
 - Churches, services and volunteer groups.....11
- Factors that limit access to support..... 12**
- Current reality 13**
 - Weather 13
 - The human face of drought and poverty 13
- Addressing mental health in drought affected areas 14**
- Ways forward 15**
 - Sustaining existing community resources..... 15
 - Be prepared 15
 - Build resilience..... 15
 - Industry leadership..... 16
- Conclusion 18**
- Reference list 19**

Introduction

The main street in the regional town is lined with dusty four wheel drive vehicles and the people going about their business are tidily dressed in their R.M Williams's boots, Wrangler jeans and Akubra hats. Your initial perception could be that this is a thriving rural community. However, you would be wrong. If you looked again you would note the vehicles and clothes are starting to show the signs of age and wear and tear, and people are spending only on absolute essentials.

This is the face of hidden poverty caused by drought. Ten of the twelve Local Government Areas that make up the Regional Development Australia Fitzroy and Central West area have been drought declared. Nine of the ten have full drought declarations with the Central Highlands region being partially declared.

In Anti-Poverty Week 2014, this short report aims to provide a brief snapshot of the impact of this "hidden poverty" being experienced by many people in the Regional Development Australia Fitzroy and Central West area. (RDAFCW) Information provided draws on local anecdotal and empirical evidence from people living with drought, support workers and the broader communities; government, industry and media reports and existing research on the impact of drought.

Regional Development Australia Fitzroy and Central West

The vast Central Queensland region covers approximately 26% of the state (453,354 square kilometres) and incorporates the statistical divisions of Fitzroy and Central West (FCW), which combine to form the Regional Development Area Fitzroy Central West (RDAFCW). As at 30 June 2013 the estimated residential population of the Central Queensland region was 241,943 persons, 5.2% of the Queensland population

The Fitzroy Statistical Division comprises six Local Government Areas (LGAs):

- » Banana Shire Council
- » Central Highland Regional Council
- » Gladstone Regional Council
- » Rockhampton Regional Council
- » Livingstone Shire Council
- » Woorabinda Aboriginal Shire Council

The Central West Statistical Division also includes six LGAs:

- » Barcaldine Regional Council
- » Barcoo Shire Council
- » Blackall-Tambo Regional Council
- » Diamantina Shire Council
- » Longreach Regional Council
- » Winton Shire Council

With the exception of Rockhampton and Livingstone, all of the RDAFCW LGAs are currently covered by full or partial drought declarations. Under state regulation applying from 15th March 2008 until January 1st 2014 Rockhampton and Livingstone LGAs were identified as the amalgamated Rockhampton Regional Council. Once again identified as two separate council areas, Rockhampton and Livingstone are currently exempt from drought declarations.

The vulnerability of primary producers to poverty

The impact caused by drought is a complex “wicked” problem with more than one contributing cause. The position of primary producers experiencing drought differs from other businesses experiencing liquidity and viability issues.

Even with sound business models and risk management strategies there a number of negative influences that affect only primary producers and further exacerbate the impact of the drought itself.

Currently in the RDAFCW region, many primary producers experiencing drought are also being impacted by kangaroo and wild dogs in pest proportions; ongoing demands of livestock management without incoming revenue; the variability of drought cycles; a flow on impact from the ban on live cattle export and the declining value of rural property balanced against debt drawn down in better times.

Kangaroos

Kangaroo numbers rise and fall depending on rainfall. Research indicates that over the last 20 years, the number of four species (red kangaroos, eastern and western grey kangaroos and common wallaroos) has varied between 15 and 40 million. During drought it takes time before the numbers start to decline and in many areas “artificial waters” such as the dams, troughs and on some properties, open bore drains, enable large populations of kangaroos to survive.

Speaking to ABC radio in August 2014 Barcoo Mayor Julie Groves noted that whilst “drought is a part of nature” even where “people are doing the right thing and destocking their country, the number of kangaroos are just increasing, and that is really affecting the carrying capacity. The ‘roos just come in by the hundreds and thousands” and “as soon as any are culled, more seem to arrive.”

Even where producers are trying to manage grazing pressure on their land, large mobs of kangaroos can remove ground cover overnight. In an interview recorded by Centacare Drought Support staff in September 2014, a producer from west of Longreach comments “I feel like this is more like a National Park than a working station now because of how much they’ve [roos] have taken over. I could happily live with 500, even a 1000 here but what’s on here now ... about 4000 ... is just too much.”

Wild dogs

The term ‘wild dog’ is used by the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (DAFF) to collectively refer to “purebred dingoes, dingo hybrids, and domestic dogs that have escaped or been deliberately released”. In Queensland including the majority of LGAs in the RDAFCW, wild dogs contribute to the economic, environmental and social problems - especially for agricultural businesses.

A 2013 report by Australian Wool Industry (AWI) Limited estimated that wild dogs cost Australia economy at least \$66.3 million per year.

In 2013, from 12th of September until the 7th of November a wild dog baiting program was conducted in the RDAFCW LGAs of Barcaldine, Barcoo, Blackall-Tambo, Diamantina, Longreach and Winton, in an attempt to address the issue. However the negative impact of wild dog populations on drought stricken properties is still a major issue in many LGAs.

Whilst the Federal Government is funding pest control money as part of its drought aid package, these funds are not available for fencing. In June this year Barcaldine Regional Council Mayor, Rob Chandler noted that “exclusion fencing should be considered in the funding mix to boost control efforts and consultation is underway to see if a new barrier fence is viable.” Speaking to the media on the issue again in September he added: “The solution, I think, is to hold these dogs up and give us a chance to be able to clean up inside the fence.”

Tenders for a feasibility study for a proposed new wild dog check fence in Central Western Queensland closed on 19 July. RAPAD (Remote Area Planning and Development Board established by various central western Regional Councils) is managing the tender process.

There are some concerns from graziers outside the proposed fence however, that they could be negatively affected by a barrier fence which may funnel wild dogs and kangaroos into adjoining shires and onto their properties. Four councils in western Queensland have been holding community consultation and considering whether to support a multi-shire fence. As at the beginning of October, one shire had voted to support a multi-shire fence; one to support "cluster fencing" by like-minded graziers and two councils were yet to vote.

Property work

Frequently live-stock managers aren't in the position to close the doors on their business and seek income elsewhere, even if off farm work is available. Any remaining livestock requires regular feeding and/or supply of supplements and watering points need to be checked daily. Additionally control of animal pests such as buffalo fly, blow fly, ticks and worms is still required even during a drought and is both an added expense and time consuming as drought weakened animals take a longer time to walk to distant yards for handling.

This necessity to provide ongoing care for animals severely limits the potential for livestock-managers to seek work off property. Where properties are run by couples, one partner may seek off farm earned income, however this can also add to the stress factors already imposed on a relationship by the drought.

On property work may still be required to maintain remaining live-stock welfare even as the income earned from the property declines or is non-existent.

The variability and time frames of drought

The Office of Climate Change notes that: "Queensland's rainfall varies substantially from year to year and decade to decade. El Niño and La Niña events explain about 25 per cent of these variations. Tropical cyclones and variations in coastal wind direction are also important drivers of rainfall. There is no clear long-term trend in annual or seasonal-mean rainfall in Queensland over the last 100 years—the period for which we have reliable rainfall records."

An example of this variability is noted by John Watkins from Pindari south of Springsure who reports that in the past decade, one year he had 5 inches (125mm) of rain and the following year 75 inches (1875mm). Although good falls of rain can carry benefit over until the following year, the time between rainfall events is obviously crucial to the carrying capacity of the land.

Additionally, the impact of drought does not end with good rainfall. Pasture has to regrow; livestock fatten and breed, new stock may need to be bought in; crops sown, grown and harvested and all successfully marketed before any income is returned to the producer.

Impact of ban on live cattle export

The suspension of live animal exports for several months in 2011 has had a catastrophic effect that is still impacting on many primary producers today. Cattle prices dropped as low as \$20 a head for some stock as a result of a reduced market and the drought; whilst the cost of transportation to the point of sale could be \$50 or \$60 per beast.

On August 26th 2014, the Honourable Bruce Scott, Federal Member for Maranoa, which includes a number of areas within the RDAFCW, told the Queensland Parliament that over 700,000 cattle bred for the export market were being exported to Indonesia at the time the ban was announced. This cut the supply line for a product that was tailored specifically for an overseas market, causing a loss of the capital value of the asset, further compounded by loss of livestock in central western Queensland due to drought. This has resulted in a total loss of revenue in many cases.

Mr Scott said: “There is no cash out there. These are pastoral properties with bills still to pay and a limited capacity to continue to borrow”.

In late August 2014, Federal Agricultural Minister Barnaby Joyce, noted that: “We must be mindful that many people were left in an incredibly insidious position through the loss of the live cattle trade, and we should not forget about those doing it tough.”

Declining land values

In the RDAFCW region, only the LGAs of Barcaldine; Barcoo; Blackall Tambo; Diamantina; Longreach and Winton were evaluated in the “Valuer-General’s 2014 Property Market Movement Report”. However the report indicates that the ongoing and combined effects of the continuing drought, global economic factors, changes in bank lending policies, the persistent high Australian dollar, the overseas livestock trade ban, lower commodity prices and rising costs have made potential purchasers cautious. It further notes that this trend is likely to continue until we see an improvement in the weather and an increase of optimism in the broader economic market place. The report adds that in the western pastoral zone, the market peaked around 2008 and has since fallen back to around 2005–06 value levels.

Debt and asset ratio

Declining values for both livestock and land have placed many landholders in the position where the value of their assets is less than the value of debt drawn down in better times, making continued operation unviable.

Flow on effects for local small business

Small business plays a major role in the economic health and social cohesion of all rural and regional communities. There is strong empirical evidence that the drought is also impacting on small business in the RDAFCW region.

A study "*Key Statistics: Australian Small Business*" undertaken by the Australian Government Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research in 2011 and using figures from 2008 -2009 indicated that 22% of small businesses in Queensland were associated with agriculture and 20% were service focused. This makes around 42% businesses in rural communities very susceptible to reduced spending during drought.

In February 2014, Longreach Mayor Joe Owens reflected on the small business downturn in his community noting that: "Some businesses are considering opening only a couple of days a week." In September a landholder acknowledged during a Centacare interview: "At least when it rains we still have an asset they've [small businesses] got nothing ... they're not being recognised I have mixed emotions about it all:"

There is also empirical evidence of business owners reducing staff hours in an effort to keep people employed despite reduced turnover. There are empty shops in many communities and other businesses displaying signs advising of restricted opening times.

Further, the sheep industry still plays a major role in many of the Central Western areas and the economic flow on effects of wild dogs, to the broader community are believed to be substantial with the social and economic fabric of many rural communities being negatively impacted. Employment opportunities and services are also reduced.

Mike Pratt from the steering committee for a wild dog barrier fence, says "For every sheep that leaves this region, either gets killed by a wild dog or is sold, there is \$10 that the local economy misses out on." The Australian Bureau of Statistics most recent figures indicate that between 2008 and 2011, half a million sheep disappeared from central western Queensland alone. This equates to a \$5,000,000 loss to a small local economy, over three years; and the losses are ongoing.

In early September 2014, State Member for Gregory, Vaughan Johnson reported to the Queensland Parliament that: "From the Gulf to Goondiwindi and west of that line wild dogs are out of control ... Small business is on its kneesThis is the worst we have experienced since the 1965 drought". He went on to advise that with the continuing loss of cattle and sheep numbers the largest manufacturing industry in Queensland - (the meat industry) was in jeopardy. The RDAFCW areas of Barcaldine, Blackall and Winton fall within Mr Vaughan's electorate.

Liz Schmidt from the Livestock Transporters Association of Queensland (LTAQ) says the drop in cattle prices is also affecting supporting industries and rural communities. "The whole of the grazing industry and all the chains surrounding it is being affected by this, whether they are helicopter musterers or livestock transporters or the general store that sells the graziers' groceries," she said.

Small business in some areas, particularly the Central Highlands is also being severely affected by the well documented downturn in the resource sector and subsequent loss of jobs.

Social impacts of drought

Families and communities that are living in these localities suffering wide spread drought, are living with devastating change; experiencing loss of livelihood, and facing challenges of loss of lifestyle and identity. Conversations with people currently living in the drought impacted areas of RDAFCW indicate that as expected, the social impacts of drought in these LGAs are similar to those documented in existing research literature.

For landholders, managers, farm workers and contractors in the RDAFCW region these have included:

- » a slide into poverty and in some cases bankruptcy
- » capital purchases, and maintenance of equipment and infrastructure can be postponed – sometimes with consequences that impact on farm safety
- » families faced with decisions about whether to continue to farm – even where the property has been in the family for generations
- » limited available finance forces difficult decisions about prioritising personal and farming expenditure
- » an increase in stress and other negative health impacts
- » an increasing need for off-farm income
- » difficulty in accessing off farm employment
- » forced separation, as one partner moves to take up employment elsewhere
- » women and children taking on additional work on-farm as outside labour hire is unaffordable
- » the daily necessity to feed and water livestock keeps people close to home, restricting opportunity for both outside work or recreational activities
- » intergenerational conflict
- » marital conflict
- » social isolation
- » restricted educational access for children - this is not limited to the ability to pay for the travel and fees related to boarding school, university or other education away from home; families have reported not being able to afford to send their children into the in-reach activities associated with Distance Education
- » ageing couples remaining on farm and delaying retirement
- » drawing down on their “super” to keep animals fed
- » the death and injury of livestock caused by wild dogs also has an emotional impact on producers who whilst already under stress from the drought are further distressed by seeing their livestock suffering

For small business and the community as a whole, social impacts include:

- » population decline especially amongst younger people
- » Lower levels of community and personal resilience
- » reduced access to services
- » a decline in social capital reflected in lower social participation
- » increased job losses and/or reduction of working hours in small communities affected by drought
- » closure of non-essential businesses such as shops selling high end home wares; cafes and restaurants
- » businesses staying open but reducing their stock options
- » expenditure on the business improvements and new equipment being put on hold
- » the pool of volunteers in the larger communities is reduced because landholders with limited access to funds for travel need to remain close to home

Assistance available

There are a number of assistance programs available to landholders and those being impacted by drought. Eligibility criteria may apply.

Federal Government

The Farm Household Allowance (Centrelink) is available as part of the Federal Governments Drought Assistance package, however farmers do not have to be drought declared to apply. There are off farm income and net assets thresholds that apply.

The aim of the programme is to assist with basic living costs during financial hardship, until the property returns to profitability, or applicants find off farm employment. For more information and application forms visit www.humanservices.gov.au/customer/services/centrelink/farm-household-allowance or ring their Drought and Farmer Assistance Hotline on 132 316.

Drought Concessional Loans are available to assist farm businesses recover from and prepare for future droughts and return to viability in the longer term. Under the scheme, the Australian Government will provide Queensland with \$100 million for the provision of Drought Concessional Loans in 2013-14 and 2014-15. For more information please see Drought Concessional Loans Scheme.

Applications for the 2014-15 Farm Finance Concessional Loans Scheme opened on 1 July 2014 and will close on 30 April 2015. The Australian Government is providing \$30 million in 2014-15 for Concessional Loans to eligible Queensland farm businesses for debt restructuring. For more information please see Farm Finance Concessional Loans Scheme.

The Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (DAFF) is providing assistance to primary producers through a variety of drought services, including financial assistance, livestock nutrition and animal welfare information, business-management strategies, support for water infrastructure and assistance to help reduce the impact of pest and feral animals. There is also drought assistance information available from DAFF's website or by phoning the drought hotline 1800 025 656.

Central Western Queensland Remote Area Planning and Development (RAPAD), is auspicing the Federally funded Rural Financial Counselling Program for Queensland's Central Southern Region. This is delivered through the registered business Rural Financial Counselling Service Queensland - Central Southern Region. More information on financial counselling can be found at www.rfcsqcsr.com.au.

The Australian Taxation Office (ATO) is assisting people impacted by drought by providing an extension on time to pay tax owing, or negotiate payment by instalments, without incurring interest charges. Information on these and other taxation measures and concessions available can be obtained by phoning the ATO on 13 11 42.

Queensland Government

Drought Relief Assistance Scheme (DRAS) was established by the Queensland Government to assist graziers manage their livestock during drought and to help in the restoration of that resource after drought. DRAS is administered by primary industries officers located with DAFF in Brisbane.

DRAS provides freight subsidies on the transport of fodder and water during the drought; the transport of animals returning from Agistment and animals purchased for restocking after the drought and rebates on water infrastructure purchased for emergency animal welfare needs.

DRAS application forms and information can be found at www.daff.qld.gov.au or by phoning DNRM on 13 74 68 or going to www.dnrm.qld.gov.au.

The Queensland Rural Adjustment Authority CEO Colin Holden indicated that at the 28th July 2014 four and a half million dollars in drought loans had so far been paid out to Queensland primary producers.

Agriculture Minister John McVeigh has made available ten scholarships of \$10,000 for students wanting to attend residential courses at either Emerald Agricultural College or Longreach Pastoral College. Scholarships close on October 17th. More information may be found on the Queensland Agricultural Colleges website www.qatc.edu.au.

The Department of Transport and Main Roads (TMR) in conjunction with DAFF has a drought assistance package covering a range of supports around vehicle loading permits, registration of vehicles, stock grazing, water carting and drought permits. More information can be found by phoning 1800 025 656 or at www.tmr.qld.gov.au.

The Home Energy Emergency Assistance Scheme provides one-off emergency assistance towards home energy bills for eligible households. Information on the scheme can be found at www.qld.gov.au.

Additional support available

Community Service Organisations, Volunteer Groups, Church Groups and Service Volunteer Organisations Clubs are also providing support for drought affected communities.

The *Western Bush Bible* produced by the Rural Financial Counselling Service and Suncare Community Service Drought Relief Program provides information and contact details on many of the assistance programs available in the RDAFCW areas including:

- » Federal and State government programs
- » Queensland Country Women's Association Public Rural Crisis Fund
- » Farmers Card
- » Royal Flying Doctor Service Social and Emotional Well Being Program
- » Anglicare Central Queensland
- » Aussie Helpers
- » Telstra Assistance
- » Centacare – Drought Support Program
- » Suncare Community Services Drought Relief Program
- » Trade Support Loans
- » Legal Aid
- » Sporting Shooters Farm Assist Program
- » After Hours Mental Health Crisis – 4920 6100 – available 24/7
- » Off the Track Training
- » Other Regional Services
- » National and State-wide Social and Support Services.

The Western Bush Bible is available at www.futurebeef.com.au

Churches, services and volunteer groups

Funds from church and religious organisations and service and volunteer groups with both broad outreaching networks and a strong local presence in many towns, have been channelled into support for communities (not just for those affiliated with these organisations.) Hay deliveries, gift cards and gift parcels of food and toiletries are amongst the distribution processes.

Industry bodies such as Agforce and National Farmers Federation have information on drought support available on their websites.

- » Agforce: www.agforceqld.org.au
- » NFF: www.nff.org.au

Beds for Bush Kids, established by the Longreach School of Distance Education (LSODE) P & C Tourism Committee aims to support drought-affected remote families with some of the costs of distance education. www.abc.net.au.

Factors that limit access to support

Unfortunately despite the range of supports and assistance packages now available in drought declared areas, there have been some inhibitors to people actually receiving assistance.

Media reports, Farm Industry Body statements and on ground community feedback indicate that producers have experienced difficulty accessing support measures through Centrelink, with people being frustrated by the process and giving up. The Farm Household Allowance, a payment equivalent to the New Start allowance, requires the completion of more than 20 pages of forms. Slow rural internet access may further limit the capacity for people to complete these forms online.

Producers can also discover that if they have assets of more than \$2.55 million they may not be eligible for the allowance which was devised to provide "basic survival" support. The asset value for the majority of grazing properties and broad-acre farms is believed to be around \$2 million. Richard Kinnon from Nogo Station says: "Anyone with a place that is not worth around \$3 million is probably not going to be viable."

Additionally Bruce Scott, Federal Member for Maranoa MP, says: "Some farmers are not claiming the Farm Household Allowance because they are reluctant to go into a Centrelink office" noting: "it's been very difficult for many of them even to take that first step to go even go into a Centrelink and start to fill out those forms."

There have also been instances where applicants for a Centrelink Farm Household Allowance (FHA) claim were not clearly advised about that the off farm assets threshold was \$270,000; or that if those assets were classed as superannuation, they may be assessed differently. A support worker reported that "Clients felt Centrelink Call Centre staff could have saved them from all this unnecessary paperwork and stress if they were given clear eligibility criteria at their first phone contact with the government department."

Further, although \$280 million in concessional loans has been available since July 1st, in mid-September National Farmers Federation (NFF) President Brent Finlay told media that just 17, worth \$11.56 million had been approved across all Queensland.

Rural Support Workers have also indicated that a number of the people they are supporting are not eligible for assistance under some of the currently available non- government programs because they are not land owners, even though they are being impacted by the flow-on effects of the rural downturn.

Current reality

Weather

The 9th September climate predictions of the Bureau of Meteorology (BOM) suggest that the El Niño – Southern Oscillation (ENSO) is still neutral. Nevertheless some models continue to indicate an El Niño is still a possibility in 2014.

The Bureau's ENSO Tracker was still at WATCH status, reflecting a minimum double the normal risk of an El Niño before the end of the year. El Niño is frequently linked to a lower than average rainfall over large areas of the southern and eastern inland of Australia and higher than average daytime temperatures over southern Australia. Such impacts may also occur even when an event is developing, as demonstrated in some localities over the past several months.

The BOM "Climate outlook for October to December" released on September 25th 2014 confirms "The October outlook suggests drier conditions are likely over much of central and eastern Australia."

The human face of drought and poverty

Given the current indicators there is every likelihood that the drought may continue into 2015 in many central western areas. Even if good rainfall does occur, recovery from drought itself is a slow process. At this point in time, despite the assistance available, community feedback indicates that the drought is already having a profound effect on the daily lives of rural people. This is reflected in anecdotal evidence and media reports such as the comments listed below:

- » "We brought in hay but had to take it out of town. Producers had let the registration on vehicles lapse and couldn't bring their trucks into town": Minister of Religion (1)
- » "I had one family refuse assistance. They said they were 'too far gone' for the help to make any difference to them.": Minister of Religion (2)
- » "The local newsagent has had to reduce the hours of his part-time staff. He had to cut two hours each per week from each of three workers; they are single mums.": community member
- » "We have an important family milestone coming up – we should be able to hold a big celebration – but we can't afford it.": Wife from a rural property (1)
- » "You have to start prioritising what you spend money on – even basics like some toiletries have to go." Wife from a rural property (2)
- » "There are a number of people in my area who fall outside the criteria for a lot of the assistance available, and they are really struggling.": Support Worker (1)
- » "The next thing to go will be the private health insurance.": An older couple
- » "Parents aren't buying uniform school jumpers for students – winter is short out here!": Teacher
- » "The drought is now biting so hard that people are questioning which school functions they could afford to attend.": LSOPE P & C speaking to ABC
- » "It's beyond the farm gate now. It has come right into the kitchen, it's come into the home where it's affecting our children, it is affecting their education.": Clare Patterson LSOPE P & C member speaking to ABC
- » "The emotional stress that you go through because these animals have been torn apart. To ride into paddocks and see animals in distress with bits hanging out of them Early mornings, you can hear a lamb bleating from a long way away, and it is just like a beacon.": Rick Keogh, Grazier speaking to the ABC about wild dogs causing more than economic losses
- » "We have got around \$20, 000 in freight concessions out of drought relief and we are extremely grateful for that, but it doesn't go far when you are in (debt) for \$2 million.": Richard Kinnon, Grazier speaking to The Sunday Mail

These ongoing stresses place an ever increasing strain on the social and emotional wellbeing of those effected.

Addressing mental health in drought affected areas

Documented research, previously undertaken, has identified isolation as a contributing factor in rural suicide. The isolation caused by the reluctance of producers to spend on non-essential items like trips to town or a social or community event, is an added burden on those already coping with debt, dying stock and no income.

Speaking on ABC Radio's Country Hour in July 2014, Sabina Knight, Director of the Mount Isa Centre for Rural and Remote Health and a member of the expert panel established by the Federal Government, to review the social impacts of drought in 2008, indicated that community events were an effective method of supporting good mental health and building community resilience in drought effected areas.

Currently Suncare has a Drought Relief Program Coordinator, Ingrid Miller from Stonehenge, south west of Longreach, whose role is to conduct and support community events. Ms Miller says they've been making support available at community events, rather than holding mental health workshops. She added that local events "are the hub for the year and the one opportunity for people to get together. The social interaction and coming together as a community is really beneficial for everyone involved."

The Suncare role, along with a number of other support programs is due to end on December 31, 2014.

As well as access to local and face to face services, additional ongoing support for families can be found by contacting the following organisations:

- » The Australian Centre for Agricultural Health and Safety provides a website at www.aghealth.org.au which contains checklists and support information related to farm business, family farms and personal issues to support people on the land
- » Rural Mental Health Support Line 1800 201 123
- » Lifeline : 13 11 14 or to access a data base for where to go for help see www.justlook.org.au
- » Kids Help Line 1800 551 800 or www.kidshelp.com.au
- » Beyondblue 1300 224 636 or www.beyondblue.org.au

Ways forward

As of September 2014 the majority of the RDAFCW region remains in drought. Nevertheless, there are strategies available that can enable communities to move forward.

Sustaining existing community resources

Anecdotal feedback from the landholders, councils, small business and support workers across RDAFCW, is that whilst all support is welcome, support that taps into and value adds to existing community resources is the most needed and the most appreciated.

For example:

- » funding for existing local support organisations to expand their services, rather than bringing in outside providers
- » distribution of gift cards that can be used with local small business, rather than bring in products from outside the community - food, toiletries, and items like dog food can be purchased even in small communities and this may make the difference to a business remaining viable or going under

Be prepared

Acknowledging that drought has had an ongoing impact on land management in Australia since settlement and will continue to do so is an important step in enabling people to move forward. It enables them to recognise that they need to prepare their land, their livestock, their business, their communities and themselves for the next inevitable decline in rainfall.

In early September 2014, the Queensland Farmers Federation (QFF) called on Federal and State Governments to commit to long term reform that works with industry on measures that help farmers prepare for drought ahead of the event.

On September 12th during a visit to central western Queensland, Deputy Prime Minister Warren Truss reflected that: "So much can be achieved by making minor adjustments to packages and making things more accessible."

Build resilience

Resilience is frequently simply identified as the capacity to "bounce back" from a negative experience. However real resilience also requires the abilities to think positively, anticipate and plan for the future, respond proactively, seek out opportunities and undertake actions that will make a meaningful change.

Individuals and communities can contribute to building their own resilience, and need opportunities to do so before a crisis such as drought emerges.

One such initiative has been developed by the Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal (FRRR). With the aim of encouraging the development of local resilience FRRR, a philanthropic organisation, has developed a program called Tackling Tough Times Together (TTTT). TTTT has made funds available to support drought affected communities in NSW and Queensland to access the resources they need to support one another through drought.

Priority is given to organisations run by, and based in the regions over those delivering services to, but not based in the listed regions. Projects led by local communities are also given preference

The Objectives of the program are to:

- » Enhance the mental health and wellbeing of drought-stressed rural and remote communities
- » Reduce social isolation by facilitating strong social cohesion and connection
- » Build community capacity to cope now and in future droughts

Grants of up to \$10,000 are available across most of Queensland. A small number of grants valued at up to \$50,000 are also available for larger-scale projects that have a broader impact.

Funding is to enable community based activities that both help to relieve current stressors and symptoms, but most importantly, build capacity and resilience for the future. They may also be used to support activities that engage people in being active, exploring options and creating something that will stand the test of tough times.

The Queensland component of the program is funded by the Tim Fairfax Family Foundation.

Other resources to assist in building community and individual resilience include:

- » www.community.gov.au
An Australian Government website that provides a directory of information on services and useful websites. Directories include: For Community Groups; Community Development; Community Information and Services; Get Involved; Internet Tools and Tips.
- » www.resilnet.uiuc.edu
Resilience Net provides information to assist children and their families overcome adversity.
- » www.resilienceinstitute.com.au
The Resilience Institute provides consulting, assessment and training to assist individuals and organisations develop resilience.

Industry leadership

Pro-active Industry leadership is essential in establishing a more sustainable future for RDAFCW.

The beef industry 'renewal summit' held in Longreach in August 2014 aimed at "bridging a farming business into the next rain event" provides an excellent example of rural leadership already at work in the region. Interested stakeholders could attend the summit in person or engage in an online forum on the Kidworth Case Study.

Some ideas explored for ensuring a better more sustainable future for the industry included:

- » Advice to producers to "look at diversification, from the way they sell produce to the way they finance their business" and "come up with a regional brand" was put forward by Professor John Cole, Executive Director for the Institute for Resilient Regions at the University of Southern Queensland. Professor Cole indicated that change would come "through farmers being better organised and business savvy to work with foreign investors."
- » A proposal from Chief Executive Officer for the Primary Industry Capability Alliance, Richard Fitzgerald that Australians could learn a lot from New Zealand. He reminded producers that future success in agriculture required investment in the next generation. Mr Fitzgerald further noted that "... New Zealand's primary industry works together more cohesively perhaps than the Australian industry."
- » The notion of Professor Roger Stone from the University of Southern Queensland's that there is no such thing as an average year. Professor Stone said that Australia had the most variable climate on earth, also commenting that farmers had to be tough to survive. Noting that even with farming systems that could capture the benefits when they come, they have to be able to jump off when things went the other way. Professor Stone said Australian producers need to develop a resilient farming system.
- » The necessity of maintaining relationships with key stakeholder following a business crisis was highlighted by Victorian tomato grower and Chief Executive of Nuffield Australia Jim Geltch. Mr Geltch told the story of his family losing their entire tomato crop in the 2011 floods, but surviving by communicating with all of the stakeholders in their business. He suggested that key aspects that people should be considering after a crisis impacting on their business were "communication and building relationships".

Summit participants were also asked to identify ways of changing the operating environment of the imaginary Kidworth Station, which has been experiencing the difficulties of drought, depressed stock prices, debt, and lower land values and destocking, over the past seven years. They were asked to review Kidworth's financial downturn and scrutinise its business strategy enabling it to move into 2015-16 with a positive operating environment.

Strategies such as this "renewal summit" not only give people a valid reason for coming together; they also encourage people to engage in constructive and strategic thinking in a supportive environment.

At a national level, in an attempt to slow the recent tide of forced property sales, receiverships and bankruptcies, Federal Agricultural Minister Barnaby Joyce has scheduled urgent crisis talks with rural leaders and major banks on September 23rd 2014. In August 2014, Minister Joyce was advised that 25% of cattle stations were already in the hands of the bank or overwhelmed by debt.

Conclusion

Drought does not end when the rain falls. Even if it rained today, it will take primary producers and their properties several years to recover; drought will continue to remain an ever-present threat in the RDAFCW region.

Factors that can mitigate the impact of this and future droughts are:

- » being well prepared for the inevitable
- » building resilience in people and communities
- » learning from past and current experiences
- » Federal and State government support that is timely, strategic and accessible
- » approaches that encourage people to come together and build social networks of support
- » sustaining existing resources in the community
- » industry leadership
- » diversification

The effective implementation of these mitigating strategies can only be achieved when Federal, State and local governments, industry and business leaders, landholders, service providers and other stakeholders work together collaboratively, to achieve a sustainable agricultural industry and thriving rural communities.

Drought is an inevitable part of Australia's weather pattern and will continue to affect the rural sector consistently but not predictably. This fact alone, means that if we don't want our rural sector to be constantly on the edge of, or drifting into, poverty we need to find better ways to supporting and maintaining it.

Reference list

ABC Open

www.open.abc.net.au/explore/61295

ABC Background Briefing

www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/backgroundbriefing/2013-05-19/4691596

ABC Rural Reports

www.abc.net.au/news/topic/drought

www.abc.net.au/news/2014-09-04/qld-ag-scholarships/5719950

www.abc.net.au/news/2014-09-03/some-farmers-too-proud-to-claim-drought-aid-funding/5715322

www.abc.net.au/news/2014-08-28/cattle-supply-shortage/5703534

www.abc.net.au/news/2014-08-26/farm-card-2608/5697970

www.abc.net.au/news/2014-08-22/beef-summit-longreach/5689676

www.abc.net.au/news/2014-08-22/mayor-says-plague-roo-numbers-a-big-headache-for/5689604

www.abc.net.au/news/2014-08-21/climate-expert-offers-hope-of-improved-outlook-for/5686106

www.abc.net.au/news/2014-07-29/bush-bible-outlines-support-for-drought-hit/5630912

www.abc.net.au/news/2014-07-28/drought-loan-update-audio/5629900

www.abc.net.au/news/2014-07-24/suncare-drought-relief/5622008

www.abc.net.au/news/2014-06-11/fears-wild-dog-epidemic-threatening-to-destroy-qld-wool-i/5514396

www.abc.net.au/news/2014-09-12/qld-hockey-joyce-drought-tour/5738830

www.abc.net.au/news/2014-09-19/wild-dogs-will-destroy-sheep-sector-unless-fence-built-west-qld/5757004

ABC News

www.abc.net.au/news/2013-05-06/live-export-ban-a-disaster-for-northern-australia/4671318

www.abc.net.au/news/2014-09-07/hope-beds-for-bush-kids-campaign-will-help-mini-schools-qld/5724656

ABC QLD Country Hour

www.abc.net.au/news/2014-07-03/mental-health-rural/5568540

Audio: Drought relief Coordinator, Ingrid Miller discussing mental health support

Alston, M., Whittenbury, K., Haynes, A. 2010. 'The social impacts of declining water availability and ongoing drought in the Murray-Darling Basin'. Gender, Leadership and Social Sustainability Research Unit, Department of Social Work School of Primary Health Care, Monash University .

www.med.monash.edu/glass/research/glass-short-report-final

Agforce

www.agforceqld.org.au

Australian Government: Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research. Key Statistics: Australian Small Business: Commonwealth of Australia 2011

www.bywaterstimms.com.au

Building Resilience in Rural Communities

www.uq.edu.au/bluecare

Bureau of Meteorology

www.bom.gov.au/climate/enso

www.bom.gov.au/climate/ahead/archive/outlooks

Farm Online

www.farmonline.com.au/news/agriculture/cattle/beef/creative-thinking-for-northern-beef/2707862.aspx

Foundation for Rural & Regional Renewal

www.frrr.org.au/cb_pages/tackling_tough_times_together.php

www.frrr.org.au/cb_pages/frrr_eneews_-_september_2014.php

www.frrr.org.au/grants/tackling_tough_times_together_-_round_3

Houghton, D. 2014, 'Outback Queensland is facing extinction'. The Courier Mail, p 36. Saturday September 13th.

Neales, S., 2014. Banks called in for farm summit. The Weekend Australian, 30-31 August, p.6

Madigan, D., 2014. "Farm Aid Dries Up". The Courier Mail, p. 19. Sunday September 21st.

Monk, A. 2000 'The Influence of Isolation on Stress and Suicide in Rural Areas: An international comparison' Rural Society Volume 10, Number 3, 2000. Centre for Rural Social Research, Charles Sturt University. ISSN: 1037-1656

Office of Climate Change. Queensland rainfall—past, present and future

www.longpaddock.qld.gov.au/about/publications/pdf/walker-report-summary-brochure.pdf

Pople, A. 'Statement on the kangaroo industry'. Department of Zoology University of Queensland.

www.kangaroo-industry.asn.au/morinfo/pople_background.pdf

SBS

www.sbs.com.au/news/article/2014/02/13/drought-hits-home-across-nsw-qld

South Western NRM Ltd.

www.southwestnrm.org.au/content/wild-dog-management-advisory-committee-notes.

Regional Development Australia Fitzroy and Central West

www.rdafcw.com.au/wp-content/uploads/RDAFCW-Business-Plan-201314.pdf

QFF Weekly Bulletin 2nd September 2014.

www.qff.org.au/weekly-bulletin-september-2-2014/

Scott, B. 2014 – 'Impacts of Drought and Labor's Live Cattle Export Ban on Farming Families: Adjournment Debate,' Delivered to Federal Parliament Federal Delivered August 26, 2014

www.maranoa.info/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Impacts-of-Drought-and-Labor%E2%80%99s-Live-Cattle-Export-Ban-on-Farming-Familie....pdf

The long paddock

www.longpaddock.qld.gov.au/about/publications/pdf/walker-report-summary-brochure.pdf

The University of Queensland and University of Southern Queensland, 2008. 'Building Resilience in Rural Communities Toolkit.'

www.uq.edu.au/bluecare/docs/toolkit_v5.pdf

Thompson, L.J., Aslin, H., Ecker, S., Please, P. and Trestail. C., 2013. 'Social impacts of wild dogs — a review of literature.' ABARES, Canberra, prepared for AWI Ltd.

Wildlife Preservation Society of Qld.

www.wildlife.org.au/news/2013/wilddogfence.html



Supported by:



**Regional
Development**
Australia

Fitzroy and Central West Inc.

25 Yeppoon Road
Parkhurst Q 4701

PO Box 307
Rockhampton Q 4700

P: 07 4923 6217
E: ceo@rdafcw.com.au

www.rdafcw.com.au