

Senate Estimates Opening Statement – March 2021

Senators, I have come before you a number of times both in my role heading up the North Queensland Livestock Industry Recovery Agency, which I took on in March 2019, and as Coordinator-General for drought and the ongoing flood recovery, a role I accepted from the Prime Minister in December 2019.

Last October, I spoke to you about the long-term recovery strategy for the North Queensland communities affected by the 2019 Monsoon Trough, which, supported by a \$58 million grants program, was announced as part of the 20-21 Federal Budget.

The Australian Government has been with the communities of North Queensland in the immediate aftermath of the devastating flood event of early 2019, and as they continue to recover.

To date, over \$797 million has been expended to help the region get back on its feet, in the form of payments, grants and loans, either directly to affected individuals, businesses, communities and councils, or indirectly through the Queensland Government via Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements.

For example:

- \$1 billion in AgRebuild Loans made available to primary producers through the Regional Investment Corporation
- \$232 million to the Queensland Government for disaster recovery, which has been used to jointly fund a range of support measures
- \$300 million (initially) to the Queensland Government to deliver the Restocking, Replanting and On-farm Infrastructure (RRI) grants program (grants of up to \$400,000 with co-contribution)
- \$4.5 million to support education

- \$6.8 million to support mental health, and
- \$5 million for prickly acacia weed management.

For the past two years the Agency has been consulting with people affected by the flood to understand what they need to recover. The Strategy and the funding that we're currently rolling out reflect what they told us.

The Strategy for the North Queensland recovery is a comprehensive blue print for disaster recovery – and I will come back to that point.

Following its release, in December 2020, I travelled extensively through the impacted region, meeting with mayors and councillors to brief them about the strategy and the grant programs that support it.

I knew it was important to get up there and brief the mayors personally. They needed to know this money was for **their** recovery, and that they would have a say in the projects that would be funded,

When we recommended the funding to deliver on the Strategy to government, it came from a deep understanding of the region. This deep understanding continues to inform how the grants are being rolled out.

They are exclusively for the 14 shires hardest hit by the flood event. They reflect what people tell us is needed - not only to get their businesses and communities back on their feet, but to support the region's prosperity and help steel it against future economic shocks.

We've been able to roll this money out quickly, with the assistance of our delivery partners, the Queensland Rural and Industry Development Authority and the Queensland Reconstruction Authority.

Some will have multiple grant rounds:

- \$2 million for 'Resilient Kids', a preventative mental health program aimed at school aged children. This money will go to the Northern and Western Queensland Primary Health Networks to commission service providers. They were invited to apply in December and their proposals are in the final stage of assessment.
- \$20 million for recovery and resilience grants. The first stream - \$857,000 each for the 14 councils - closes at the end of this month. Round 1 of the second stream of contestable grants should be open in the coming weeks.
- \$15 million to improve access to reliable and affordable telecommunications and energy services. Round 1 of this contestable program is currently open with grants of between \$10,000 and \$1 million available.
- \$12 million to support increased skills in disaster risk planning including improved data collection and communication. Grants of up to \$2 million are available through the Queensland Resilience and Risk Reduction Fund, with Round 1 opening on 10 March.
- \$9 million for projects that support emerging industries, expand small-scale industries or add value for existing industries and their supply chains. Expressions of Interest for

these 'Economic Diversification' grants of between \$10,000 and \$500,000 have just closed and successful applicants will soon be invited to submit a full application.

In line with our guiding principle 'Locally led, locally understood and locally implemented', we have established two local working groups – one in the North-West and one in the North-East – to support the implementation of the strategy. These groups provide local ideas and feedback, and ensure that the long-term recovery of the flood-impacted region continues to be locally led and implemented.

One of the initiatives to come out of the working groups has been grant-writing workshops. For some people, the grant writing process can be daunting. These free workshops help community members understand what's needed in a grant application, and improves the chances of putting together an application that will be in the running. The workshops have proved immensely popular – we had more than 50 people at one session – and we're now looking at replicating this around the country.

'Replicating what works' is something my Agency and I are very focused on. Why would you reinvent the wheel, start from scratch, when you can see what's working already? You will see I'll come back to this point.

In the flood zone, we continue to promote the Restocking, Replanting and On-Farm Infrastructure Australian Government grants for up to \$400,000, dollar-for-dollar.

Factors such as the national drought, high stock prices, a poor wet season in 2019-20, COVID-19 and now the grasshopper infestation

across much of the region, have meant a slower uptake of these grants than was originally hoped.

The co-contribution can also put people off.

To address these challenges, we have emphasised that the program is designed to allow recipients to incrementally draw down the funds as circumstances permit. For example, if they have \$25,000 to contribute then they can draw down \$25,000. They can continue applying for funds until the full \$400,000 is used.

We are also making sure people understand that they can continue drawing down the approved funds even after applications formally close on 30 June next year. They have until 31 March 2024 – which will be a little over 5 years since the flood event.

This certainty is important.

When people have been through the wringer, they don't want you to come in, splash some money around and disappear. I get an incredible response in the region. They say, 'You're still here?' 'Yep – here for the long haul'.

This is the value of being on the ground, talking to people, listening, understanding what the problems are and working with them on locally-led solutions for as long as it takes.

When we took on drought, that was a different task. In some ways, the floods were easier – there's an event you can point to and say that's what we're dealing with.

But with drought, it's a long, lingering cancer that spreads across the country.

Every state and territory defines drought differently, but there are some common themes. One of those is the despair that settles on people who've been experiencing drought for three, four, five years – or even more.

We knew we had to get out there and start talking to people.

We immediately got to work on putting together a national team that would be on the ground, out in the regions. We recruited local people with lived experience of being on the land, people who'd grown up in the bush, worked on properties, run rural businesses; people who know their communities and are known by their communities.

In August 2020, at the Bush Summit in Cooma NSW, the PM launched our national network of Regional Recovery Officers.

The Agency currently employs 19 RROs and we are currently expanding this network.

People who have been hit by a disaster, people who are struggling under the heavy weight of prolonged drought, they want to talk to a person, someone who gets it.

They don't want to have to ring a call centre or spend hours filling out an online form. Yes, those things are sometimes necessary as well, but having a human face they can talk to can make a huge difference.

When someone talks to their local RRO, they're not just getting drought or flood assistance.

If they come to us and need help with bushfire or COVID-19 or some other issue, we don't say 'that's not us – we can't help you'. We make sure people get the information they need and we direct them to the help and support that's right for their situation.

This is what makes us different.

Since early 2019, I have personally travelled more than 44,715 kilometres in this job. The majority of my time is spent on the road, seeing with my own eyes what the situation is in different parts of the country. Talking to people, finding out what the issues are.

But even racking up all that travel, we realised, when we took on drought, that I can't be everywhere. So the RROs are my eyes and ears. They hear about what's working and what's not on the ground and send that information back. The feedback from our RROs goes to the highest levels of Government.

In addition to our RROs in the regions, since our very earliest days I have made it a priority that everyone who comes to work for this Agency has to get out of the cities. They have to get mud on their boots and dirt under their fingernails – because you can't fully understand what people in the regions are experiencing unless you get out there.

This is what sets us apart and helps us achieve our outcomes.

Staff of the Agency have travelled more than 440,000 kilometres and since June 2020 we have engaged with more than 25,500 individuals.

One of the ways that we are out in the regions, supporting rural Australians is through our Drought Community Outreach Program, in partnership with Rotary.

These outreach events bring together all levels of government, charities, not-for-profit and agricultural organisations, to support farmers and rural and regional communities living through the immediate and longer-term effects of drought.

The pandemic put a bit of a spanner in the works – we haven't been able to run as many of these events as we would have liked by now.

Yet, as at this week, we've run 29 outreach events in Western Australia, South Australia, Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland and Tasmania.

The outreach events are an excellent opportunity for farmers, families and rural communities to enjoy a free barbecue, catch up with friends and neighbours, and find out what support is available.

Recently, in South Australia, we partnered with Mary O'Brien, the founder of 'Are you Boggled Mate?' This is an organisation that is breaking down the stigma of asking for help when you're struggling with depression. Her talks, which were held alongside the outreach events, helped to spark those important but difficult conversations about mental health.

Recovery from a disaster – whether its drought, flood, fire or whatever – it's about more than getting back on your feet financially. It's about people's mental wellbeing, as well.

I had a woman come up to me in country NSW. She's a mother and a wife and she said, 'Every time my husband took his rifle and went down the back paddock – he'd tell me he had to go and put down some stock – I wouldn't know if he was going to come back.'

She said, 'Your people came and found him a way forward, they give him hope and a way through to tomorrow'.

That's what you've got to do. You've got to deliver hope.

For some people, they may never have spoken to anyone before, they might be on the bones of their backside – but they're still proud and they don't want charity.

My recovery officers and the outreach team will listen – really listen – and then direct people to where they can get the information and support they need, whether that's us or another government agency, a not-for-profit organisation, a health service, or whatever.

Senators, although there has been pleasing rain in some parts of the country over recent months, many parts of the country remain in drought.

Long-term rainfall deficiencies continue in parts of south-west to central Western Australia, greater south-eastern Queensland, pastoral South Australia and parts of the Northern Territory and central Australia.

While soil moisture has increased across areas of southeast Australia and Queensland, decreases in soil moisture are still being observed across much of Western Australia and parts of the agricultural districts of South Australia.

For those areas that have seen recent rain, more is needed and soil moisture needs to replenish.

We live in a drought cycle.

For example, the country has experienced a prolonged period of below average rainfall with deficiencies affecting much of Australia since early 2017 and some areas since 2013.

When one drought ends, another one begins. That's Australia.

Floods, fire, drought, all sorts of calamities – that's who we are.

What we – and the Government – are doing now is focusing our efforts towards lessening the impact of future disasters.

Through the Future Drought Fund, the Australian Government is funding projects that allow farmers and rural communities to invest in mitigations that will mean that down the track, when one dry season extends into another and another, there won't be that same sense of despair and hopelessness.

There'll be greater certainty about what their plan is, and it will be more of a matter of putting that plan in place.

Yes, there'll still be disasters that require the Government to get in there and help out. But we also have to make sure farmers and rural communities are better prepared for the future disasters that will inevitably come their way.

We are driven by hope and optimism, and that's what we want to give to the people of rural and regional Australia.