

Coordinator General Opening Statement

My name is Shane Stone, and as many of you know I was recently appointed as the Coordinator-General for the National Drought and North Queensland Flood Response and Recovery Agency and Chairman of the Agency's Advisory Board.

On 5 December 2019, Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced the expansion of my Agency's remit to include drought, so we are now responsible for leading a national response to the drought; and continuing to support North Queensland communities as they continue to recover from the wide-spread flooding in early 2019.

In the last few years we've seen the devastation of fast moving bushfires and floods, in addition to the ongoing slow moving and insidious impact of the drought across our nation.

Senators, this country has experienced much heartache since I last appeared before you.

Australians over the summer have suffered great loss. The bushfires were swift and devastating. Resulting in loss of homes, stock, fences, sheds, buildings, water supplies and leaving people, in many cases, without their homes and their livelihoods.

While the bushfires have rightly been the focus of much national, and even international attention, which saw an immediate response from all levels of government, the plight of those living through drought for many years and families recovering from the North Queensland flood event of a year ago have not been forgotten.

Similarly, there was little people could do to prepare for or respond to the North Queensland flood event of early 2019. There was no reference point, we had never seen anything of this size and scale before.

Just a few weeks after the North Queensland flood event, I was visiting some of the worst affected areas around Cloncurry and Julia Creek.

I've detailed for you previously the scale of this event and the devastation it wreaked.

It warrants re-telling so that we don't forget what our friends in the north went through. We owe it to them to acknowledge their stories and stand by them as they continue to recover.

Between 25 January and 14 February last year, North, North West and Far North Queensland experienced twelve days of continuous heavy rain, low temperatures, constant winds and a wall of water in the Flinders and Norman river basin.

The devastation extended from Burke Shire in the west, Winton in the south and as far east as Townsville on the coast of the Coral Sea. 39 local government areas activated disaster funding recovering arrangements.

The effect on the region was catastrophic, totalling an estimated \$5.68 billion in social and economic costs¹. Stock losses were as high as 100 per cent on some properties. There were also significant losses to cropping and horticulture businesses and extensive damage to critical infrastructure.

The flow-on effects to local businesses, communities, economies and the environment were, and remain, significant.

The financial impacts, for primary producers in particular, are likely to be felt for a number of years to come, due to the loss of breeding stock, as well as the cattle, goats and sheep that were being readied for market.

But most important is the human impact. Many farming families had already endured years of drought before their herds were wiped out by the flood and then subsequently returned to drought. People don't come out of such an experience unchanged.

But I am very pleased to say the region is starting to recover. The recent wet season has strengthened the sense of hope on the ground. In my many conversations with people throughout the region, I know the immediate response, including funding for health and wellbeing services; the primary producer and small business grants; and our frequent visits, were a source of comfort and strength.

¹ Source: Deloitte Access Economics: The social and economic cost of the North and Far North Queensland Monsoon Trough (2019)

People on the ground tell us the recent wet means they many are better placed to make use of the dollar-for-dollar \$400,000 Restocking, Replanting and On-Farm Infrastructure grants. So far, more than \$43 million has been approved in this grants program.

This is on top of the \$104.8 million for primary producers and \$12.9 million in \$75,000 disaster recovery grants paid out to primary producers and small businesses respectively.

These grants have been a timely hand up – not a hand out – that have supported the region’s ongoing recovery.

In total, more than \$3.3 billion across a range of measures has been paid or committed by the Australian Government in response to these floods.

Our guiding principle for our work with flood-affected North Queensland communities is “Locally led, locally understood and locally implemented”.

The drought has been with us for a number of years, while it is slower moving it is no less destructive to the individuals, businesses and communities impacted. What it means for farmers is that they have to take a punt on the weather. While our farmers are resilient and plan for these situations, and we have seen many of them manage to date by destocking and good management. This drought is a different beast.

The Australian government’s assistance has been consistently scaled up in response to worsening conditions, and we have worked closely with state governments who are also providing their own complementary funding measures.

Attention has, and continues to be, focussed on supporting people who have experienced one or more of these devastating events.

My agency works on the ground **with** communities, **with** all levels of government, **with** the National Farmers’ Federation and other key agricultural organisations. All of whom share the common desire to support regional communities.

The key to our success has been my ‘boots on the ground’ approach, which Prime Minister Scott Morrison has singled out on many occasions as an example of the public service at its finest.

Our work with drought-affected communities is underpinned by the principle “Work together. Simplify. Act”.

I work on the premise that you need to get dirt under your fingernails and visit people on their own farms, and in their own homes, to understand what they are going through, and what they need from their Government to get back on their feet.

We had already travelled several thousand kilometres in the worst affected Shires of the flood area, when the Agency's remit was expanded to include drought.

We have now travelled a total of just over 32,000 kilometres through the Northern Territory, Queensland, NSW and Tasmania to develop a deep understanding of the local impacts of drought, while also keeping a close eye on the flood recovery.

We work on a simple formula – 'turn up, listen, act' and while there are localised issues, some general themes are starting to emerge:

- The drought situation is complex because it varies from region to region. For example, in south-west Queensland, they are in their eighth year of drought, so even when the rain does fall they are facing many years of recovery.
- In most areas, there has been some rain, but not anywhere near enough to break the drought. We worked with some farmers over the Christmas break where the bare necessity of drinking water was under threat, which was compounded by the worsening bushfire season. There were towns at the time having drinking water trucked in because supply had run dry.
- In Tasmania we learnt about the flow-on effects of drought outside the farm gate, and how councils have made use of the Australian Government's \$1million drought community programme grants to improve community amenities and generate local employment. An encouraging benefit includes an upturn in tourism as more people choose to stop and enjoy the local food, shopping and activities. It is fantastic to see campaigns such as 'Buy from the Bush' receiving so much support from our friends in the cities.
- We also see different farming practices across the country – in particular our visit to a feedlot at Powranna in Tasmania which provided some really useful insights into how to manage farms sustainably and achieve a high quality return.

- One thing I have picked up from my discussions on the ground is that there is still varied understanding of what support is available for both farmers and their businesses. There is also confusion about the time and effort needed to apply for assistance such as the Farm Household Allowance and Regional Investment Corporation loans. Our future efforts need to focus on improving information and communication into these communities, and my agency is addressing this.
- We also know that no single level of government has all the answers. It's a collaborative effort across federal, state, territory, local government and the community. Recovery in North Queensland, and as the drought breaks across the country, will take many years.

Ours is a true regional Agency and we are currently establishing a national network of Regional Recovery Officers who will be located in rural towns across all states. This team, which I expect to be fully in place by the end of May, will be on hand to provide information and advice on the types of Australian Government support available. The first of these officers have already been recruited in Queensland and New South Wales.

As well as building relationships with drought and flood affected primary producers, local government and regional businesses, the Regional Recovery Officers will be an important conduit between people in our regions and the Australian government. We want the regions to have a strong voice, and these new staff will be reporting local ideas and strategies to improve preparedness for future droughts and flood straight to me, so I can continue to inform the Minister and the Prime Minister of exactly what is happening, and what is needed on the ground.

I am also ensuring that this new team will be building strong networks with other Australian government agencies who have regionally located staff. This will make it even easier for people seeking assistance through our financial and support services to get the help they need.

Senators, there has been some much-needed and welcome rain over the past couple of weeks. For some this has slightly eased the stress for farmers who have seen some water in their dams and water tanks. But make no mistake – this drought is far from over. It will take much more rain and rebuilding for these businesses to recover.

The Australian Government has committed over \$8 billion across the country to support drought response, recovery and preparedness action.

This support is provided through 26 Australian Government drought measures which directly support affected primary producers, communities and local small businesses.

More than ever it's important that all levels of Government work in harmony to support people affected by drought. We have already seen Australian and state government agencies working together with agricultural organisation and charities to deliver Drought Community One Stop Shop events in New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia and Victoria. The Minister has recently announced further funding to continue these high impact, community based activities which has changed the way governments work together, and will build more collaborative foundations for the future.

It's crucial that people know how to access the right support at the right time, whether they are experiencing immediate hardship or preparing their farms for future challenges.

I keep thinking about the many hundreds of people I have now met on my travels, who generously open their homes, and invite me to their properties, to tell me their stories. We have shed a few tears at how unrelenting the struggle appears at times, but talk then turns to when the drought breaks and the plan for recovery. Their strength and optimism drive me to do the best I can in this role.

Thank you.

The Hon. Shane L Stone AC QC

Coordinator-General and Chairman

National Drought and North Queensland Flood Response and Recovery Agency

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