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Submission to the Inquiry into the Government Drought Response

I appreciate the work of the Coordinator-General for Drought on this issue. Their report has a good overview of the issues involved and recommendations for action.

Drought and Climate Change

Drought is a serious issue facing Australia and the Australian farming sector and requires significant action leading into the future. We need to build resilient communities, businesses and environmental ecosystems. The impact of climate change on Australia's arid landscape will mean droughts become "more regular, longer in duration, and broader in area."¹ Australia is particularly vulnerable to changing temperatures and rainfall levels with "one of the driest and most variable climates in the world."² Rising temperatures have already meant that "droughts have become hotter" with implications for "water availability for human use."³ There should be more work on mitigating climate change through multilateral emissions reductions efforts. While Australia has a small part of global emissions (some 1.3%), we could leverage a proportionate emissions reduction to encourage other others to do more. Climate change will have a "severe and costly impact on agriculture," but this can be "significantly reduced with ambitious global mitigation."⁴ Such mitigation would "greatly improve the prospects for Australian agriculture" to maintain and expand productivity to meet global demand for Australian produce.⁵

There also needs to be greater research and preparation on climate change adaptation. With a due response, drought is not something we need to be scared about. Australia's farmers are "efficient, innovative, and resilient." With appropriate government assistance and support from consumers,

¹ *Coordinator-General* 2019, 3.

² *Government Response* 2019, 15.

³ *Garnaut Review* 2008, 106.

⁴ *Garnaut Review* 2008, xxxvii.

⁵ *Garnaut Review* 2008, xlv.

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Australian farmers can capably confront any future challenges.⁶ But this does require forward thinking and preparing for drought in advance. The Coordinator-General's report notes that there is already a transition in place from being *reactive* (aiding people currently experiencing drought) to *proactive* (preparing early to mitigate and manage drought).⁷ This is a good approach. The threat of drought will require new and innovative ways of doing farming. With rural "ingenuity and innovation" and the "right government settings," Australian farming can "prosper into the future."⁸ Proper drought preparation will help sustain rural communities and support Australian food security to keep our population fed.

Managing Resources

The management of environmental resources such as water is critical to preparing for and managing drought. There are serious concerns around "water security" with our "finite water resources ... under increasing pressure."⁹ There has been good collaboration on the division of water resources in Australia, including with the Murray-Darling Basin Plan. However, the Drought-Coordinator's report warns that we have "no strategic vision" for the future use of water, including with the impact of climate change on water availability.¹⁰

There are already strong demands on our limited water resources. We should determine the levels of available water and the demand from urban, agricultural and environmental needs. Where the demand is greater than the supply, there will need be to plans to balance competing interests. On the agricultural side, I believe our arable land and water resources should be used for crops and animals that can most efficiently meet our food security and other needs. Crops that are not suited for an arid land could be grown with greater use of water, but that is may not be sustainable. We should discourage the use of land and water for uses that do not conform to our national interest (such as foreign companies using our land for exports in some cases).

Innovation and new technology can help increase water efficiency (thus releasing more water to

⁶ *Coordinator-General* 2019, 3.

⁷ *Coordinator-General* 2019, 4.

⁸ *Coordinator-General* 2019, 4.

⁹ *Government Response* 2019, 16.

¹⁰ *Coordinator-General* 2019, 9.

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be used by other demands). Being creative and innovative with the use of water, including the use of new efficient technologies, will help maximise the benefits from limited water resources. Water efficiency projects can also reduce the amount of water needed for the “same crop or product.”¹¹ Greater understanding of “plant and animal genetics” along with greater “water retention or storage” could also help to increase efficiency and maintain productivity.¹² For example, there is the “Better on-farm water management” program to improve supply and reduce wastage.¹³ The operation of the South Australia Adelaide Desalination Plant also provided enough water to enable emergency water provisions to support farming stock.¹⁴

It is also concerning that there are towns across rural Australia that are running out of water. Low water quality (including from salinity) has meant some local councils are trucking in drinking water from elsewhere for residents. This is financially prohibitive and thus not a sustainable long-term solution. There needs to be ways for communities to manage their water resources so they do not run out. This could include reducing consumption through changing habits and new technologies improving water efficiency. Current urban water supply infrastructure is unfortunately described as “old, inadequate ... and not designed to cope with changing climate conditions.”¹⁵ Hence there needs to be significant investment in modernising water infrastructure and management, including potential use of recycled water. With climate change and increasingly severe drought conditions likely to exacerbate any water pressures we currently face, we will need to adapt and change our lifestyles to meet the new challenges.

Role of Australian public

People living in metropolitan areas may not always appreciate the severity and challenges posed by drought, apart from what they see on the news (myself included). Though, campaigns such as “Buy from the Bush” show that people are willing to support farmers and rural communities. There is a strong, collective solidarity across the Australian public about dealing with natural disasters, such as drought and bushfires. Having something like a drought relief levy on products

¹¹ *Refreshing the Plan* 2016, 22.

¹² *Garnaut Review* 2008, 13.

¹³ *Government Response 2019*, 9.

¹⁴ *Government Response 2019*, 10.

¹⁵ *Garnaut Review* 2008, 378.

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that go direct to farmers is a good way for supermarkets and consumers to support drought management. Even when farms are not enduring a drought, getting a fair deal for their products allows them to save up and invest in drought preparation. Farmer's profit margins have become slim in recent years with rising production costs and stagnant prices (particularly in the dairy industry). With more transparency about the farm gate price, consumers could make decisions about paying more to support farmers. With the generous spirit of Australians, charitable giving is also important for helping drought afflicted communities. As the Drought-Coordinator wrote, the government could facilitate greater coordination between charities to achieve the most efficient possible response to drought needs.¹⁶

Rural Communities

Rural communities depend on farmers, but farmers also depend on the support of rural communities. Responding to the drought also requires supporting rural communities overall. As Minister for Water Resources David Littleproud noted, "Drought doesn't stop at the farm gate" but also affects the "mechanics," "schools," and "local businesses that are so vital to our regional towns."¹⁷ The provision of mental health programs is also important to support farmers and the broader regional community.¹⁸ Financial pressure combined with extreme weather events (such as drought), putting some people in a seemingly hopeless position, can have a serious, debilitating impact on mental health. We should never forget the humans at the heart of our agricultural system. Assistance from government to adapt and manage to drought conditions can help relieve financial and psychological pressures on farmers. The government plan was notably about providing "hope for the future and building resilience."¹⁹

Conclusion

The reports outlined various measures that the government is undertaking to support farmers. I was particularly heartened by Farm Household Allowance that is "Putting food on the table of

¹⁶ *Coordinator-General* 2019, 33.

¹⁷ *Government Response* 2019, iii.

¹⁸ *Government Response* 2019, 10.

¹⁹ *Government Response* 2019, 6.

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the farmers who feed the nation.”²⁰ I would urge the government to remain open to any suggestions from affected rural communities, farmers and environmentalists for how they can improve drought policy. But I commend the government for what they are currently doing and welcome the attention of this inquiry to reviewing and improving drought policy. The drought is a major threat to the Australian landscape, but I believe that Australians working together can adapt and rise to the challenge.

Thank you for considering my submission.

Kind Regards,

Benjamin Cronshaw.

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²⁰ *Government Response* 2019, 6.