



22nd January 2019

Ms Ann Palmer
Secretary
Senate Finance & Public Administration Legislation Committee
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Ann

Submission to the Senate Finance and Public Administration Legislation Committee

**Future Drought Fund Bill 2018
Landcare Australia and the National Landcare Network**

About Landcare

Landcare is a grass-roots movement that started more than 30 years ago when local communities mobilised to repair degraded natural assets, including farming land, public land and watercourses. It has expanded significantly since then, with more than 5,000 groups now in action across Australia. The movement includes Landcare groups, farming systems groups, 'Friends of' groups and indigenous land management groups. Landcare groups work across a diverse range of landscapes, typically focused on sustainable agriculture and better management of natural assets such as soil, water resources, native vegetation and habitat.

Landcare seeks to build resilient, healthy and productive landscapes cared for by resilient, healthy and engaged communities. The social capital of Landcare's volunteers and their communities are one of Australia's greatest assets.

The Landcare community is involved in a range of activities, including:

- developing and promoting sustainable farm practices
- restoring native habitats and vegetation communities
- controlling invasive weeds and pests
- sharing local natural resource management skills, knowledge and information

About the National Landcare Network and Landcare Australia

The National Landcare Network (NLN) is the representative body for Landcare groups across Australia and works to provide a voice for Landcare at the national level. The NLN is made up of representatives from each State and Territory, who come together to share their successes and support one another in overcoming challenges. The NLN shares the experiences of Landcarers across



Australia, and advocates for the Landcare movement to enable it to continue its essential work building resilient and productive landscapes, and protecting our natural environment.

Landcare Australia is a not-for-profit organisation with a vision of all Australians actively caring for the natural land and water resources that sustain us. For 30 years, Landcare Australia has worked collaboratively with federal, state and local governments, corporate partners and sponsors, and individuals, to build capacity and support for the Landcare community to better manage Australia's crucial land and water assets.

Submission

Landcare Australia and the National Landcare Network welcome the opportunity to make a brief submission on the Future Drought Fund Bill 2018 (the Bill).

It is encouraging that the Bill proposes that the Australian Government will build a substantial capital base to support and enable land managers and rural communities to better manage the periodic impacts of drought. It is particularly pleasing to note that the on-going annual funding from July 2020 will continue to support improved drought resilience, even in non-drought years. This commitment recognises that periodic drought is a characteristic of our climate, rather than an exceptional event, and drought resilience is a continuum of improvement.

This submission is based on the premise that the characteristics of drought and its socio-economic impacts, particularly in regard to rural communities, are well accepted, and have been expressed by many other commentators in the past.

Our brief submission will focus on two key issues:

1. Consultation and systematic planning to guide the investment for minimising the impacts of drought in Australia.
2. The source of expertise to advise on allocation of the Agriculture Future Drought Resilience Special Account.

Consultation and systematic planning to guide the investment to minimise the impact of drought

It is very encouraging that the Bill will establish the capital reserves to enable continued investment in supporting drought resilience from July 2020. The Bill provides a strong opportunity for Australia to create the support framework to develop drought resilience for rural communities.

The Bill (Section 21) proposes that funding from the Agriculture Future Drought Resilience Special Account will be used by the Minister to make contractual arrangements and grants of financial assistance related to drought resilience. The Bill (Section 31) proposes that the Minister for Agriculture and Water Resources must develop a Drought Resilience Funding Plan, which will be a key reference for guiding the annual allocation of \$100m in funding held in the Agriculture Future Drought Resilience Special Account. Each Drought Resilience Funding Plan will have a maximum four year term, but can be replaced with a new plan at shorter intervals.

The Bill has a strong focus on funding arrangements. However, the Bill gives limited attention to planning and evaluation arrangements to ensure the funding will be effective in improving drought



resilience. A well-structured planning and evaluation framework will ensure that the funding will be optimally allocated over the on-going funding cycles.

As a key determinant of how annual funding is to be allocated, we suggest that each Drought Resilience Funding Plan should be developed by drawing on the experience and expertise of key agricultural and rural organisations.

These organisations, such as the National Landcare Network/Landcare Australia are embedded within, and represent, the communities and land managers impacted by drought. Landcare groups, networks, co-ordinators and volunteer members have been at the forefront of dealing with drought since its inception, and working to build capacity to manage and recover more quickly from drought events. We, like other key rural-focussed organisations (eg; NFF and RDCs), are well placed to capture and provide extensive and timely guidance on strategic priorities for improving drought resilience.

The Bill (Section 32) proposes that each draft Funding Plan will be exhibited for consultation, prior to adoption by the Minister. We recommend that the collective experience of key rural-focussed organisations should be used to inform the draft Funding Plan, rather than delaying opportunities for input until the proposed consultation process when the draft is completed.

Pre-draft input could be achieved through creation of a Drought Resilience Working Group or similar. The Working Group would have the key objective of establishing the long-term planning to improve drought resilience. Once the longer term planning is completed, the Working Group would provide input on the necessary staging to be captured in each draft Funding Plan, and respond to emergent issues/opportunities to ensure effective currency of the Plan.

Source of expertise advising on allocation of the Agriculture Future Drought Resilience Special Account

The Future Drought Fund Bill 2018 (Section 28) proposes that the Minister must seek advice from the Regional Investment Corporation Board on whether the Minister should make the contractual arrangements or grants (Section 21).

It is unclear why the Regional Investment Corporation Board, responsible for governance of an entity currently focussed on building and managing loan portfolios, is the only source of advice to the Minister on the annual allocation of drought resilience funding.

We suggest the scope of advisory organisations be expanded to include those with significant expertise in drought related issues, that regularly consult with and represent a well-established, regionally diverse network of on-the-ground practitioners and rural communities. Expanding the organisations to enhance the diversity of expertise and experience when reviewing proposed annual funding allocations will ensure that the funding is well targeted and making material progress towards drought resilience. This may be undertaken through the proposed Working Group or a similar entity, but should encompass organisations of similar capability, reach and experience.

Conclusion

Developing and supporting drought resilience across rural Australia is critical for the sustainability of agriculture, communities and natural assets. Well established consultation, planning and review arrangements are essential to ensure on-going drought resilience funding is targeted effectively.



Landcare Australia and the National Landcare Network look forward to the implementation of much stronger drought resilience, on the basis of well informed, practical and effective planning, review and evaluation. We are committed to the principles of collaboration and supporting partnerships between government, the agriculture sector and rural communities on this important issue.

Yours sincerely

Dr Shane Norrish
CEO | Landcare Australia

Mr Jim Adams
CEO | National Landcare Network