

**SUBMISSION FROM THE ROCKHAMPTON REGIONAL COUNCIL TO THE QUEENSLAND
GOVERNMENT'S AGRICULTURE AND ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE REVIEWING THE DROUGHT
RELIEF ASSISTANCE SCHEME AND OTHER DROUGHT ASSISTANCE MEASURES**

Design

The initial challenge is to stabilise primary production families impacted by drought. They need money to buy essentials and pay immediate bills.

A major step forward occurred during the 1990's when Centrelink dropped all asset testing, while retaining means testing, to determine social security access.

State drought assistance, as opposed to Federal drought assistance, should focus on keeping farming families and small businesses in immediate service towns trading, so local communities can maintain themselves.

Experience from overseas and in Queensland during the 1990's showed that easy access to normal social security and decreased pressure from creditors allowed normally profitable farmers to practice good quality animal/crop management until the seasons returned to normal.

Queensland has learnt from past droughts it is possible to park normal State Government fees and charges until the drought has finished and normal business activities have resumed. Fees and charges owing to the Queensland Government, such as rental for leasehold land, registration for trucks and farm vehicles etc ,can be parked so landholders and business operators are relieved of their payment during the drought and immediately thereafter. Landholders will pay the parked fees and charges once the drought and recovery times have passed. Payment of the fees and charges is deferred, not waived.

A similar approach was used in the mid-1970's when Central Queensland was ravaged by drought and cattle prices crashed. That approach was quite successful.

In general, Queensland droughts take about two to four years to really get serious, and, once over, the community takes a further two to three years to recover. There's a big lag time going in and coming out of a drought.

The payment of local government rates is a source of major concern for primary producers and small business operators. Like other fees and charges, the payment of rates could be parked until the community has recovered from the drought.

Local Government should lobby the State Government to step in and pay the rates for drought declared primary producers and small business operators in nearby small towns so they can continue to trade. This would remove a significant source of stress from family farms and small businesses and enable small rural communities to continue to operate.

Delivery

The strength of the local government in rural Queensland is its link to the community and the various State organisations. For example, a host of family and social services are sometimes managed on the ground by local government.

As drought deepens, the location of support officers and other family and social service workers can be with the Councils. These support workers should have the capacity to give cash/credit to families

impacted by drought. This money is nearly always spent in the local community, which has a good flow on effect for small businesses.

Most rural Councils also have a pest and land management units which has the capacity to manage unallocated state land and environmental parks (but not national parks) , and used and unused stock routes. These areas have potential for community grazing as required.

There also may be opportunities where local facilities can be used as a focal point for donated fodder and family goods.

To maintain the family farm and local small businesses, drought delivery needs designed to allow families to make good quality decisions. A network of locally based social support workers is critical for this. This compares radically with most financial institutions where the credit manager is remote. It's also important to have someone on hand to interpret written correspondence and documents.

The documentation which applicants need to complete should be kept as simple as possible. Many primary producers find the completion of forms a daunting task.

Opportunities

Freight and feed subsidies should be maintained as they are simple to apply for and quick to respond. The big challenge has always been to give people impacted by drought the support to make good decisions.

If the family partnership is the main client base, then treating that group as a family, with different decision making techniques and life experiences is the key. Most husbands look to their wife as a buffer against the outside world trying to force change on them, while a wife looks to her husband to provide security for the future.

Local government can also provide some administrative support for emergency committees/workshops for fodder drops, donated feed etc.