

## Meeting Update - 19 February 2008

### Regional Snapshot

- Seasonal conditions have changed markedly since the last meeting, with some regions having experienced severe flooding after consecutive years of drought. Despite significant rainfall across some regions, limited availability of irrigation water remains a concern for many, particularly in the Riverina.
- The effects of drought are expected to be seen over at least the next few cropping periods, with the effects of the cash drought expected to remain until returns from successive, successful harvests begin to come in.
- Dwindling financial reserves as a result of drought and increased fuel, fertiliser and input costs are serving to limit many farmers' abilities to invest in crops at a time when it is needed most.

### Ongoing Challenges

- The Network remains concerned about mixed messages being portrayed about agriculture in the media, particularly suggestions that the drought is over. For farm families still suffering from drought, as well as those suffering from the cash drought, this only serves to reinforce a disconnect between city and country NSW.
- With the vast majority of Exceptional Circumstances (EC) declarations in NSW due to expire in September 2008, the Network is keen to ensure realistic timeframes and exemplary communication regarding any possible extensions or the transition away from EC assistance to alternate financial and non-financial support measures.

### Key Areas of Activity

- The Minister Assisting the Minister for Health (Mental Health) met with the Network, providing an opportunity to discuss the importance of maintaining community avenues to allow the sharing of personal (mental health) stories; addressing rural health workforce issues; the need for a three-hour mental health information session in rural areas; the importance of rural chaplaincy; and the Network's views that the overall stigma around mental health is decreasing.
- The Network will continue to work closely with the Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health on the Drought Mental Health Assistance Package, which was extended and expanded in December 2007 and will now include drought recovery, as well as climate change and responding to rural crises.
- The Network is seeking the development of a NSW Police rural mental health position and will be working with NSW Police on a range of issues including firearms management and encouraging local interaction with Mental Health Contact Officers.
- The Network is considering a project proposal regarding veteran farmer/family member suicide and self-harm.
- The Network remains strongly supportive of the critical services provided by Rural Financial Counsellors and Drought Support Workers and is keen to ensure these services remain accessible well beyond any physical break to the drought.

### Blueprint Update

- Network participants are continuing to implement the key actions outlined in the *NSW Farmers Blueprint for Maintaining the Mental Health and Wellbeing of the People on NSW Farms*, with Blueprint items regarding firearms and the need for improved access to counselling services a particular focus at present. The Blueprint is available from the Rural Mental Health page at [www.nswfarmers.org.au](http://www.nswfarmers.org.au) or directly at [www.aghealth.org.au/blueprint](http://www.aghealth.org.au/blueprint).

### Upcoming Meetings/Events

- The Rural Mental Health Network will next meet 20 May 2008.

