

Meeting Update - 20 May 2008

Regional Snapshot

- Seasonal conditions have deteriorated for many areas of the state since the last meeting, with some regions experiencing worse conditions than ever before.
- Farm families and rural communities are anxiously awaiting the outcomes of reviews of the Exceptional Circumstances (EC) declared areas of NSW. With the exception of Bourke/Brewarrina (scheduled to expire 15 June 2008), most other areas of NSW are scheduled to expire 30 September 2008, with the National Rural Advisory Council currently reviewing these areas.
 - Centrelink has advised that there are more than 8600 current EC Relief Payment customers in NSW alone.
- Charitable organisations and other support agencies are reporting continuing demand for assistance, with the complexity of individual cases escalating.

Ongoing Challenges

- The Network is extremely concerned by the combined impact of dramatically escalating input costs and drought on mental health and wellbeing, noting that the prices of the three major input requirements for cropping (fuel, fertiliser and chemicals) have risen by up to 100% in the last 12 months.
- The Network is concerned by the financial, emotional and social ramifications of an overnight cessation of financial assistance measures, particularly for long-term recipients of assistance. Centrelink has advised that 949 customers (nationally) have been on income support since 2002/03, further highlighting the need for expiries to be handled sensitively.
- The Network remains concerned by the short-term funding arrangements for vital support services including Drought Support Workers, noting the essential role that these services play in both early intervention and support.

Key Areas of Activity

- The Network is keen to improve rural communities' access to counselling services, and will be writing to both the NSW and Federal Governments to encourage them to work with key agencies to resolve a number of key issues, such as the cost of counselling; the need for improved communication of existing services; detailed consideration of skills/accreditation issues and the broader issue of the attraction and retention of health professionals in rural areas.
- The Network has reviewed and commended the latest addition to the St Vincent de Paul Society's *Mate Helping Mate* DVD. It is hoped that the expanded DVD will be publicly available from late June 2008.
- The Network will be providing relevant contact information to *beyondblue* for inclusion in its Rural Assistance Information Network (RAIN) Map, which is a directory of relevant services in rural areas. The map can be sourced by following the links from the front page of *beyondblue*'s website www.beyondblue.org.au.
- The Network remains strongly supportive of the critical services provided by Rural Financial Counsellors, Drought Support Workers and others and is keen to ensure these services remain accessible well beyond any physical break to the drought.

Blueprint Update

- The Network has agreed to review the *NSW Farmers Blueprint for Maintaining the Mental Health and Wellbeing of the People on NSW Farms*. The Blueprint, from the Rural Mental Health page at www.nswfarmers.org.au, sets both the strategic and practical agenda for the Network.

Upcoming Meetings/Events

- The Rural Mental Health Network will next in August/September 2008.

