

## Meeting Update - 13 November 2007

### Regional Snapshot

- Seasonal conditions have deteriorated since the last meeting, with many farmers now facing the reality of a second year without a winter crop, leading not only to financial devastation throughout much of the industry but also enormous pressure on the physical and mental wellbeing of farmers and rural communities alike.
  - 81.9% of the state is currently 'in drought';
  - 10.5% of the state is 'marginal';
  - 7.6% of the state is 'satisfactory'
- The combination of financial pressures, emotional strain, the loss of control over farm assets, government regulations and climate change are causing range of concerns for farm families and rural communities and it is essential that these concerns be recognised and addressed however possible.

### Ongoing Challenges

- The chronic shortage of GPs in many rural and remote towns remains a fundamental problem, particularly when the GP is often the first recommended point of contact regarding mental health.
- The Network is concerned about the capacity of some farm families to meet their boarding school commitments, particularly those in isolated areas with few schooling alternatives.
- The perception of farmers and rural industry more broadly by the general (metropolitan) public remains an issue of concern for the Network, from the impact this has on farm pride to the growing challenge of attracting and retaining young people and/or skilled professionals (including agricultural).
- With a range of support agencies operating across rural areas to varying degrees, the Network highlighted the importance of regular communication and coordination in the field to prevent potential duplication and ensure ideal allocation of resources.

### Key Areas of Activity

- The Network is closely monitoring the recently announced changes to drought assistance programs and eligibility criteria, including exit assistance measures.
- The Network has appointed a Rural Chaplaincy Sub-Committee, which is currently providing advice regarding regional 'hotspots' and/or areas experiencing increased demand for assistance.
- The Network has commended the St Vincent de Paul Society for its inspiring 'Mate Helping Mate' DVD (see [www.vinnies.org.au](http://www.vinnies.org.au)), and will be promoting it widely.
- The Network has been extremely pleased with the roll-out of Mental Health First Aid training across the state and is now seeking the delivery of a three-hour mental health information session as an alternative and/or precursor to the longer, accredited course. A very successful pilot session was recently held for stock and station agents.
- 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 working groups recently focused on improved access to counselling services in particular. The Blueprint 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 in late February 2008.

