

Issue

The March 2008 drought figures indicate a slight worsening in conditions, with 42.9% of the state now 'in drought' (up from 40.3% in February 2008), with a further 11.6% of the state considered 'marginal' (down from 16%). However, it should be noted that only 45.4% of the state is considered 'satisfactory' from a climate perspective. The vast majority of the state is Exceptional Circumstances (EC) declared until September 2008, with the exception of Bourke/Brewarrina, which is declared until 15 June 2008. The Association is continuing its extremely active role on drought issues, lobbying at both the State and Federal level.

Recent Activities

EC Declarations

- The Association understands that the Federal Agriculture Minister, the Hon Tony Burke, has agreed that every EC declaration in NSW will be reviewed prior to its scheduled expiry.
- With the exception of Bourke/Brewarrina, which is scheduled to expire 15 June 2008, all EC-declared areas of NSW are due to expire 30 September 2008.
- The Association wrote to the Minister in March 2008 to seek the Ministers assurance that the reviews will take place in a timely fashion so that farmers are informed of the resulting decision well in advance of the scheduled expiry dates. The National Farmers' Federation also wrote along similar lines.
- The Association recommended that consideration be given to the length of time some areas have required external assistance and the gap before harvest income. The Association also suggested that in the event that EC declarations are revoked, consideration be given to the introduction of transition measures that would provide farm families with time and support (both financial and non-financial) to adjust to drought recovery – assuming climatic conditions allow this to be physically possible.
- The Association is lobbying for NAMS funding to be maintained or enhanced over the coming months to assist the EC review process (see below).
- The Association is continuing to work closely with the NSW Department of Primary Industries and Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry to ensure there is a regular dialogue on this issue.

National Drought Policy Review

- The Primary Industries Ministerial Council will be meeting 17 April 2008 to agree on a plan for improving drought policy, including a schedule of reviews of drought programs.
- This review was flagged by Ministers at a Ministerial Forum held in Cairns in late February 2008.
- The Association was advised that the review process is expected to be completed by November 2008.
- The Association wrote to the Federal Agriculture Minister, the Hon Tony Burke and NSW Minister for Primary Industries, the Hon Ian Macdonald in March 2008 to express concern that developing a new plan in the middle of the review of EC declarations would lead to increased uncertainty. The Association sought an assurance that the current EC review process is taken into account when developing the plan for improving drought policy and that current programs will remain in place for those areas under review and for areas which are expected to have their EC declaration rolled over.
- The Association also wrote to the Secretary of the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry and Director General of the Department of Primary Industries along similar lines, recognising the important role that that Primary Industries Standing Committee (comprised of Secretaries and Directors General) plays in terms of assisting the Primary Industries Ministerial Council in its deliberations.
- The Association is hoping to meet with key advisors early next week to discuss the issue further.

National Agricultural Monitoring System

- The Association remains strongly supportive of the National Agricultural Monitoring System (NAMS) as a tool to streamline the EC drought application and assessment process.
- The Association has participated in a number of meetings and workshops since the inception of NAMS, not only to contribute to the process but also to educate staff and elected representatives about the operation and effectiveness of NAMS, particularly as it relates to EC applications and declarations.

- At the most recent NAMS workshop, held in Tocal 27 March 2008, participants were advised that the NAMS budget will be cut by at least \$300 000 from 1 July 2008. Given the significance of NAMS to the
- assessment of the 28 EC declarations scheduled to expire in NSW 30 September 2008, this is of extreme concern to the Association.
- The Association has since received advice that the Primary Industries Ministerial Council may be asked to consider putting on hold the further development of NAMS until the outcomes of the planned review of national drought policy are determined, again of extreme concern to the Association.
- The Association has written to the Federal Agriculture Minister, the Hon Tony Burke and NSW Minister for Primary Industries, the Hon Ian Macdonald to request that NAMS resources – both human and financial – be maintained and/or enhanced, particularly in the lead-up to EC declaration review later in the year.

Transport Subsidies and Drought Support Workers

- The Association is continuing to lobby the NSW Government for longer-term funding commitments for Drought Transport Subsidies (which are funded on a rolling three-month basis) and Drought Support Workers (who are funded on a rolling 12-month basis).