

Meeting Update - 14 May 2007

Regional Snapshot

- The ongoing drought is causing elevated stress levels across much of the state, with seasonal conditions deteriorating across many regions. The impact of drought is being experienced right across rural communities – not just within the farm sector.
 - 84% of the state is currently 'in drought'
 - 9.3% of the state is 'marginal'
 - 6.7% of the state is 'satisfactory'
- The Network observed the breakdown of community structure/spirit/worth as a major contributor to social dislocation on many rural communities, particularly when farm families are tired and financially stretched.

Ongoing Challenges

- Securing ongoing funding for important support services, notably Rural Financial Counsellors and Drought Support workers was highlighted as critically important.
- Many farm families are now struggling to meet ongoing costs such as local government and Rural Lands Protection Board rates, leading to calls for rate rebates.
- It appears that self-assessment continues to be a problem, with many farmers and small businesses assuming they are ineligible for drought assistance measures.
- Exceptional Circumstances (EC) drought assistance eligibility criteria continue to be problematic, with the Network expressing concern about the off-farm income test in particular.

Key Areas of Activity

- The Network is currently considering the NSW Farmers Association submission in response to the Productivity Commission review of regulatory burden, with a focus on advocacy for improved regulations.
- Network members are participating in as many Farm Family Gatherings as possible.
- The Network is writing to the Human Services Minister commending Centrelink's efforts in ensuring regular communications with rural communities, particularly via outbound calls and its new Drought Bus initiative.
- The Network is keen to highlight the importance of current, instructional material being made available to media outlets regarding coverage of suicide-related incidents, with Mindframe (www.mindframe-media.info) identified as a useful resource.
- The Network is continuing to promote Mental Health First Aid Training as an important resource for rural communities seeking to undertake an accredited course. Participation rates have been extremely high to date, however, some target groups (such as stock and station agents) require a shorter course due to time commitments.
- Network membership is continuing to grow, with the Divisions of General Practice and Nurses Association highlighted as possible future partners.

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*. Further work is required on the drug and alcohol programs and services sections over the coming months.

Upcoming Meetings/Events

- The Rural Mental Health Network will next meet 6 August 2007.

