

Meeting Update - 6 August 2007

Regional Snapshot

- Whilst some regions have seen a slight improvement in seasonal conditions, the vast majority of the state remains seriously drought-affected, with the winter crop in peril if significant rainfall does not occur in the next few weeks.
 - 76.5% of the state is currently 'in drought'
 - 13.9% of the state is 'marginal'
 - 9.6% of the state is 'satisfactory'
- Drought and its whole-of-community ramifications is likely to feature at each of the NSW Government's Rural and Regional Taskforce public meetings taking place over the coming months.

Ongoing Challenges

- The Network is keen to ensure that the new management structure for Rural Financial Counsellors include flexible management arrangements. Demand for counselling services remains very strong.
- Increased support services will likely be required in the first half of 2008, with Exceptional Circumstances (EC) drought support due to expire in March 2008 for much of the state.
- The Network is concerned that the ongoing drought has not helped in terms of building a positive view of farming from a city perspective. The Network is concerned that this may be a key reason why it is so difficult to attract and retain health professionals, and may be an explanation why enrolments in agriculture-related courses are at an all-time low for many tertiary institutions.
- Securing long-term funding commitments from the NSW Government for drought assistance programs and services (eg Transport Subsidies; Drought Support Workers; Farm Family Gatherings) remains a key concern for the Network.

Key Areas of Activity

- The Network will respond publicly to the report on Medicare-funded psychological treatments, in particular reported service problems and the need for detailed data.
- The Network is continuing to work closely with the Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health on the activities associated with the Drought Mental Health Assistance Package.
- The Network is currently considering the evaluation of the NSW Farmers Association Mental Health First Aid Program, which highlighted improvements in mental health literacy and reduced stigma associated with mental illness in rural communities.
- The Network is currently working on the development of a 2-3 hour mental health information session as a precursor or alternative to the 2-day accredited mental health first aid training course.
- A Network Working Group will consider ways to improve access to drug and alcohol programs and services, with a report to be provided at the next meeting. A second Working Group has been established to consider ways to improve access to counselling services.

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*, particularly through the above-mentioned working groups.

Upcoming Meetings/Events

- The Rural Mental Health Network will next meet 13 November 2007.

