# Science to Practice Forum 2023

Day 3 Welcome and Session 1 transcript

(Duration 146 mins 51 secs)

8 June 2023

## Introduction

This is the transcript of one of the Future Drought Fund’s Science to Practice Forum sessions, presented by the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry. This transcript is for Day 3 of the Forum, the welcome session and session one, Relationships for resilience.

Learn more about the [Science to Practice Forum](https://www.agriculture.gov.au/agriculture-land/farm-food-drought/drought/future-drought-fund/research-adoption-program/science-to-practice-forum).

## Transcript

[Recording begins]

Pip Courtney [00:00:24]:

Good morning and welcome to the final day of the Future Drought Fund’s 2023 Science to Practice Forum. We’ve had two great days seeing some of the innovative ways Australian farmers and communities are preparing for drought and building a sustainable agricultural sector. It’s great to have your company. I’m Pip Courtney, I’ll be with you until around four this afternoon.

If you are joining this year’s forum for the first time today, all sessions are being recorded and will be available online at a later date—so you can catch up on the great stories and conversations we’ve had so far.

The good news is today’s day 3 program is packed full of insights, reflections, and thoughtful discussions connected with the work of the Future Drought Fund, the Drought Resilience Adoption and Innovation Hubs, their delivery partners and industry thought leaders. To get the day started, Ngunnawal Traditional Owner, Tyronne Bell, is here to welcome you to the Country we’re broadcasting from in Canberra.

Tyronne Bell [00:01:28]:

Ladies and gentlemen, my name is Tyrone Bell. I’m a descendant of the Ngunnawal people and it’s my privilege this morning to welcome you to the Country of the Ngunnawal people. To begin with I would like to let you know that traditional Aboriginal law requires any visitors to the Country being made welcome. This customary tradition has been passed on by all our generations. This ritual forms a part of our belief system. Its purpose is for visitors to acknowledge whose Country it is and then in turn being acknowledged as visitors and made welcome. This welcome custom has happened for thousands of years, and we use it as protection for Country against bad spirits. Being a Ngunnawal Traditional Custodian, it gives me pleasure to invite you onto the Country of my people. [Ngunnawal language].

In the language of my people means: This is Ngunnawal Country. Welcome to our meeting place. Please enjoy. We acknowledge and pay our respects to the Elders past and present. We call Country the Mother, because as a mother cares for her children, so does the land cares for us. This is why Aboriginal people have such close ties with the land. On behalf of myself and my people, I send a warm welcome to everyone here. I’m proud to be Aboriginal and one of the traditional carers of this land. I want you to feel welcome while on our Country. We want you to feel welcome while visiting Ngunnawal Country and ask that you respect the land as we have done for 60,000 years plus.

So in keeping with the Ngunnawal tradition and the true spirit of friendship and reconciliation, treat everyone and everything with dignity and respect. And by doing so, it is our belief that your spirit will be harmonised with your stay on Ngunnawal Country. It’s our belief that our ancestors will then in turn, bless your stay on our spiritual land. May the spirit of this land remain with you today, tomorrow, and always. Once again on behalf of the Ngunnawal people, I welcome you to our traditional Country. [Ngunnawal language]. Always was, always will be Aboriginal land. [Ngunnawal language]. Thank you. Goodbye.

Pip Courtney [00:03:46]:

And good morning to Rosemary Deininger, the Deputy Secretary at the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, who’s here with me at the desk.

Rosemary Deininger [00:03:57]:

Thanks very much Pip and good morning everybody and welcome to day 3 of the 2023 Science to Practice Forum. I’m delighted to be here after such a fantastic 2 days already of this year’s forum, which I hope you are also able to attend. The forum has brought together a wide range of voices of those building a solid foundation of drought resilience across the country.

Before I speak to this and to give you an overview of today’s program and a little bit of background behind this third and final day of the forum, I would l first like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land on which I’m coming to you from today, the Ngunnawal Country. And my thanks to Tyronne Bell for his heartfelt Welcome to Country this morning. As I’m sure you would’ve heard yesterday from the Department Secretary Andrew Metcalfe, we are very grateful and delighted at your attendance at this year’s forum.

Today is the final day of our forum. So, a reminder if you are unable to attend or were interested to revisit some of the great presentations and panel discussions and videos shared yesterday or on Tuesday: a recording and transcript of the entire Science to Practice Forum will be made available in the weeks ahead. It’ll be on our website, agriculture.gov.au.

The Future Drought Fund is one of many government initiatives supporting the agriculture industry in its goal to become a $100 billion sector by 2030. Through the Future Drought Fund, Australian farmers and communities are able to trial and use innovative tools and practices to build a drought resilient and sustainable agriculture sector like we’ve never had before. It’s important we take an evidence-based approach to these activities so we have a strong scientific foundation for climate smart farming.

Over the past two days here at the Science to Practice Forum, we’ve covered a lot of ground, if you’ll pardon the pun, exploring a range of topics and stories that demonstrate the outcomes of the FDF and the 8 Drought Resilience, Adoption, and Innovation Hubs in preparing our landscapes, farmers and regions for drying conditions and future drought.

On day one, we discussed research and development and set the scene for how we are building a sustainable ag sector through improving soil health, innovating at scale, incorporating international perspectives, and looking ahead to the future. It was great to see some examples of the programs run through the FDF and learn about their approach and their subsequent results. I particularly enjoyed the insight into the soil moisture monitoring project in WA, where the installation of soil probes is already having a measurable impact on the way apple, pear and avocado growers are irrigating and fertilising.

Having these kinds of on-farm demonstrations available provides farmers with the information and confidence they need to try the practices themselves. And wasn’t it great to hear from some of the Nuffield Australia Scholars. As many of you saw yesterday during day two, it was nice to hear again from farmers and agricultural advisors exploring practical ways as well as the idea of putting down roots and looking to improve planning for profitability and productivity in a changing climate.

We heard people’s firsthand reflections of farming through drought. We heard about the tools for change. We got to sit in and listen to a new generation of young farmers and with an emphasis on lived experiences and lessons learned, we heard producers discuss their personal experiences with drought.

It’s always a real privilege to hear people share their own stories so that we may learn from them. And I thank all the presenters and panellists and video participants for their generosity of both their time and their spirit. I was also proud to hear from my departmental colleagues about our progress towards drought resilience and the ways in which the Future Drought Fund is supporting Australians to continue to prepare for drought. Droughts and dry conditions bring physical and financial stress, and that’s also accompanied by a mental toll. And that’s why today’s area of interest, the community and policy area and the role that they play in building resilience are so valuable.

We’ll be discussing the importance of relationships, overcoming barriers to change and engaging First Nations farmers, and we’ll hear from the community champions building resilience at a region-wide scale as well as the mental health heroes changing the way we talk—and not just when times are tough.

First up on today’s program, you’ll meet Julia Spicer. Julia is a successful businesswoman and a regional drought resilience champion. Even as her Goondiwindi home flooded last year, she kept working on the Regional Drought Resilience Planning project that won her the Australian Institute of Project Management’s 2022 Government Project of the Year Award.

Julia is Queensland’s first regional Chief Entrepreneur and it’s exciting to think about how she’s now for the needs of our communities at a state-wide level. I’m really looking forward to hearing her insights. Thank you again for joining us here at the 2023 Science to Practice Forum, for being part of our vision for the Future Drought Fund and for helping us to build a drought resilient future. I hope you enjoy today and the sessions ahead.

Pip Courtney [00:09:18]:

Thank you. Rosemary Deininger, the Deputy Secretary. Great to have you here. Time now for some reflections on the past 2 days. For those who weren’t online, you can catch up on the DAFF website in the weeks ahead. These are some thoughts that I put together last night. The spray-on biodegradable mulch, which we heard about in Seeds and Soil Health session on day one, even if it replaces a fraction of the millions of meters of plastic used in horticulture is exciting news. It’s an innovative idea that when commercialised will do so much to help get rid of plastic waste and reduce the environmental footprint of farmers. Soil moisture probes featured in several presentations and they were all great water efficiency projects. But I was particularly taken with the Wimmera trial, which had a focus beyond individual farms. Seventy-two probes across the Wimmera give producers access to real-time regional data to make a host of risk management decisions.

Measure then measure again is what the Home Ec teacher taught me. And I see it in ag more and more. If you don’t measure, you can’t plan. If you don’t measure, you are just guessing. And this project can add more monitors in the region and then spread to other regions to help more farmers make better decisions. Hearing from the Nuffield Scholars about the benefits of overseas travel, study and learning from others around the world was a treat. I really hope those watching today and later online welcome their Nuffield Scholars back with open arms. Don’t be frightened of their knowledge. It’s hard won, and if they’re generous enough to share it, invite them to. I hope the Nuffield trio inspired viewers to apply for the scholarship themselves or encourage someone they know to. The three panellists were a great advertisement for the benefits, thanks to an investment from the Future Drought Fund.

Nuffield ‘s 2024 scholarship program will include scholarships aimed specifically at drought resilience study topics for the first time. Ag is hard enough but having a year group of fellow travellers who’ll be forever connected, who never stop thinking how to do the job better, what a gift to your region or your industry, use it.

Another fantastic story from the day one program, the Agscent tool breath testing cows to see if they’re pregnant is a huge breakthrough. Preg testing is a skill and everyone in ag knows skills are in short supply. This device gets around that and it can ID a pregnancy earlier than a human hand with a long plastic glove. Cattle producers will be impressed too by the early detection—18 days.

Yesterday’s talks on natural capital accounting I found fascinating. I know farmers must enter lots of numbers into an increasing number of columns. There’s no point resisting it.

If you don’t measure, you don’t know. And the new worlds of carbon accounting, net zero carbon positive and negative, biodiversity accounting, insets and offsets will demand it. No one wants to be left behind. And as you can tell, I love stories about ag data. The amount of information Climate Services for Agriculture or CSA has on its platform blew my mind. At the end of day two my mind was spinning. So much good information, so many interesting projects and an exciting future ahead for innovations in drought preparedness. And the farmer of the year, Michael Taylor. Those photos tell the story. Trees offer a multitude of benefits and yes, agroforestry is a new language to get around for sure. But look at the benefits. Never have farmers had so many tools, practices, or data to give them more clarity, save more time, give them more certainty in an uncertain world.

This is my 30th year reporting for Landline and I still don’t want be a farmer. Well, one that makes a profit as it’s just too hard. I finished up day two feeling hopeful about the future as we sought two days of solutions out on farm with farmers leading the change and farmers learn best from other farmers. But there’s more good stuff to come on this final day of the Science to Practice Forum.

Today’s feature speaker comes to you from Goondiwindi in Queensland. Julia Spicer is Queensland’s first regional Chief Entrepreneur. She works with regional communities on a range of projects with a focus on identifying needs in business and implementing creative solutions to address them. She’s no stranger to dealing with the challenges presented by a changing climate. Julia, welcome to the Science to Practice Forum.

Julia Spicer [00:14:28]:

Hello, Pip. I’m really happy to be here.

Pip Courtney [00:14:34]:

What does the word resilience mean to you?

Julia Spicer [00:14:37]:

Ooh, good question. So for me, I think the, the word is around how we want to show up, and what it is that we want to be able to achieve. So, part of the challenge that we sometimes have is being really clear on what it is that we want, and what’s important to us. And if we’re not clear on that, then we can get knocked around a little bit by things that are happening. So for me, I often think of the line out of Alice in Wonderland. If we’re not sure where we’re going, any road will get us there. And I think what I see in communities is the people who have a sense of resilience and who are able to bounce back from activities actually are the ones who are clear on where it is that they want to go. They, they know that they’ve been knocked down or they know that there’s been a challenge. But because they’re clear on their purpose and because they’re clear on where they want to be, they’ve got that ability to pick themselves up, dust themselves off, and move forward. So that would, that’s kind of how I think of resilience.

Pip Courtney [00:15:41]:

Can you tell us about your job? What do you do? As our first regional, sorry, I’m a Queenslander, our regional entrepreneur.

Julia Spicer [00:15:50]:

Yeah, thank you. I’m actually, whilst I live in Goondiwindi, I’m coming to you all today from Cairns. So hopefully it’s coming through loud and clear. I, and I’m actually up here for one of the best regional innovation festivals, Tropical Innovation Festival. So my role as the Chief Entrepreneur is to act as an advocate and champion for the innovation ecosystem across all of Australia. So it is very exciting to be able to deliberately and purposefully put regions front and centre in this role. We know that innovation means—a little bit like resilience—Innovation has a lot of definitions and people see it in a lot of different ways. And we know that innovation in agriculture is different to innovation in MedTech, climate tech, in a range of the whole other sectors that might be going on.

And so I have the ability to really help between now and June next year, help make sure that innovation is accessible and equitable for everybody. That people see that innovation is not something to be afraid of, but something that we’re all embracing. And I genuinely believe that regional Australia has the solutions to the world’s problems. And I believe that we’re innate problem solvers because of some of the challenges that we have in our communities and in our environment. I’m really keen to work with, across the state and also linking in with some national activities, around this piece of transition and resilience. So how are we making sure that rural and regional communities are brought along on the journey of new industries and new opportunities. And, and in a Queensland perspective that very much looks like the jobs and energy plan, it looks like a lot of the activity that’s happening around renewables. But equally, I was really excited to be able to be part of, in my day job, part of the work that’s been happening through these Drought Resilience Plans.

Pip Courtney [00:17:43]:

Are you saying it’s having an impact already across Queensland?

Julia Spicer [00:17:49]:

The Drought Plans?

Pip Courtney [00:17:51]:

Yeah, the FDF’s work. The last 2 days we had so many projects and as Rosemary mentioned before, getting stuff done at scale is really important. Farmers learn from farmers. Do you think it’s too early to call and say it’s already having an impact?

Julia Spicer [00:18:09]:

Oh, I’m always for making big calls, so that’s no worries at all. I definitely think it has, and I’m going to speak specifically in relation to what I’m seeing across my home part of the world, which is the Darling Downs in South West Queensland, and then I’ll talk a little more broadly around where there’s some opportunities across the rest.

But I think what we’ve seen through the work that has been happening around particularly developing these Drought Resilience Plans at a community level is it gives the community a chance to come together. It gives the community a chance to do a, an audit or a, a stock take of what’s happened over the past few years. And historically, this information has been collected. But it’s been through natural resource management plans or it’s been through local council plans or it’s, it’s maybe been through some of the emergency services planning. But it hasn’t actually all been brought together in one place

like we have seen that come together through these Regional Drought Resilience Plans—to ensure at that regional perspective we are actually engaging and incorporating across all of the sectors. So we’ve found that, it’s been a really good opportunity to bring all of those ideas together, bring all of the project ideas together and have some really interesting leadership conversations around what’s happening with the communities. And out of that has been some really, some really good common themes, I guess.

But, you know, I think from a planning perspective, what this activity has been able to do is really collate and collect the community insight and knowledge. And now what we’ve got is the opportunity to connect these plans to all of the other activity that’s happening through the Future Drought Fund. So we can start to look now and say, ‘Hey, Innovation Hubs that are set up all over the place now, here’s some of the activity, here’s some of the action. If you want engagement and you want things going on, these are the Plans and the ideas that community has brought to us. You know, here’s some activity that you can, deliver on straight away and know that you’re going to have engagement from community’.

Pip Courtney [00:20:22]:

There’s a lot of money to be spent. So, these Hubs, do you think that farmers realise, are they, are they paying attention to what the Hubs are doing, the Hubs in their area, and that there is some serious money there for projects to test ideas and test them on farm?

Julia Spicer [00:20:42]:

Yeah, Pip’s a really good question. So, a couple of things and I promise I will answer it. I guess a couple of the things that we heard loud and clear while I was engaging for the Resilience Plans was this piece around, how do we make sure that we allocate funding rather than offer competitive bids?

From a community perspective, the quote I loved hearing was ‘people are fighting over the same bone’. And when we’re trying to empower and engage and really grow communities, having them compete for funding. And that’s an age-old conversation, having them compete as opposed to know that there will be money. And the project needs to be good and it needs to be well spent, and all of all of that needs to be done well. But how do we get away from offering communities an opportunity to engage and have a conversation about what’s needed without them pitting them against each other to, to access funding?

So I do think, you know, the thing that I think is great around the Future Drought Fund is that there is decent money. You know, we’re talking about massive transformational, wicked problems across Australia. We can’t do that, without decent budget to back that up. And so I think that has been a really good thing that there is decent funding there.

The worst thing would be that that money stays in the bank, like we do actually need to make sure that it does get out and about. And so I think that is then important that we may end up funding things where we don’t know what the outcome will be. And that’s innovation in itself, really. We need to be okay with looking at where that investment might go or funding some projects that might fail. Agriculture does that all of the time.

Business does that all of the time. I actually think we need to be okay with the Hubs trying some things with, with the government trying some things. And if they don’t work, we don’t lynch them over it. We need to be able to use some of this money to be able to invest and trial some different things.

And then the other piece for me, if I can raise it now, is also around what we heard a lot of was, you know, check the draw. There’s a draw somewhere that’s got project ideas already there. And so how do the Hubs then have the opportunity and how do we look at through the programs available through Future Drought Fund, how do we go back to some of the really great projects that either existed historically and were then pulled or cut from state or federal funding rounds or, or programs were, you know, nicely put to sleep.

Are some of those still able to be dusted off, repackaged and run again? And, I think certainly with some of the leadership work we see that happening quite a bit. So how do we make sure that we can look at what’s been really well received in the past? And I’ve got a little bit of, you know, they talk about FOMO and AMO. So I’ve got a bit of Actual Missing Out based on what I heard you talking about in your reflections of yesterday. So, I feel like I’ve missed some conversations I would’ve loved to have heard. But this piece around how do we make sure that we are not duplicating or recreating activity if it already exists somewhere, we just need to actually be able to take it back out of that bottom drawer and look at how we can run that again. And I think some of the Future Drought Fund programs will be able to help us do that.

Pip Courtney [00:24:03]:

Now, you’re Queensland’s first regional Chief Entrepreneur, and we know drought doesn’t just affect farmers, it affects communities, it affects businesses, it affects health. How do you think the Future Drought Fund is doing in terms of moving beyond the farm and looking and trying projects to see if it can help the, the mental health and the financial health of the businesses in town?

Julia Spicer [00:24:32]:

Yeah, so I think there’s a couple of things in that, Pip. And, again, it’s looking at what are the programs that have been delivered to a particular cohort, where maybe others weren’t part of it, and how do we just widen that program out? So, you know, if I think about what’s happening across Queensland, we look at the work that the Rural Financial Counselling Service and the Small Business Counselling Services have provided. Everybody I spoke to who had ever had anything to do with the financial counsellors said they need to stay. They are integral. They started working just with ag producers on farm and then they’ve been able to expand their charter or their program to be able to increase and include town-based businesses, which as we all know is really important. How do we do that more?

How do we make sure that people have got access to that? And maybe now what we need to do is ensure that some of the counsellors, some of the people who are supporting these businesses have some background or expertise in this innovation space to be able to look at where we can really add some value. So, we’re actually, I’m actually looking at how we might be able to through the Office of the Chief Entrepreneur, support some of the work that the small business counsellors are doing so that we can open that up again. Because, again, the project’s great. I don’t want to reinvent the wheel and do a similar thing. I want to add value in where I’ve got the opportunity to add resources to be able to expand that work. And I think that’s part of the work of Future Drought Fund. We don’t want to continually just keep funding the same thing because that will mean that we are missing these new opportunities.

But I do think if there’s things that have worked already and there’s things that we know are having an impact, how do we make sure that this funding actually keeps that going? Because we’ve all lived in communities and we all know examples where, you know, programs are really great and they are set up for three or five years and it takes the first couple of years for everybody to know about it and be part of it and want to engage with it. And then as quickly as it started, it’s gone. And, so, has all of that, you know, community capital that’s been built and some of that, you know, community knowledge. So, I will be really keen to see how we can add to the work that Future Drought Fund’s doing but make sure that we don’t also lose things that are already set up and we know are working well in communities.

Pip Courtney [00:26:54]:

You can drought proof a farm, good operators can drought proof a farm. Can you drought proof the businesses in rural communities? Can you help and bring that expertise as the regional Chief Entrepreneur working with the FDF?

Julia Spicer [00:27:11]:

I would love to, absolutely. So, I’m kind of wearing two hats here. I guess one was as the Engagement Officer for the Community Resilience Plans across South Western Darling Downs. And the other is my role of Chief Entrepreneur. I think if we look at drought proofing, what that’s looked like for some of our on-farm businesses is diversification; is looking at how we can get multiple streams of income from that one piece of land. Whether that’s the natural capital conversation that you spoke about, whether it’s on-farm tourism, whether it’s diversifying production. So, when we think about what’s happened in the agricultural space and those businesses who have drought proofed, if we’re using that term, their business, then what we do is we take some of those knowledge and principles into what’s happening in downtown Goondiwindi, St George, Charleville.

And there was actually some work done that the Murray Darling Basin, through the Murray Darling Basin communities around, you know, how do we support communities? How do we support small businesses in downtown Goondiwindi, for example, if there’s less water allocation to producers. That was the purpose of that conversation. And, what we found after working with about 80 or 90 businesses was a lot of the challenges were the same. And they were all things that we had existing programs to support. It was about plugging people in.

If we think about what innovation is needed, it does mean we need to be looking at where does technology fit. So it wouldn’t be, a regional conversation without us mentioning connectivity. We need to look at what’s the skill base of people that we’ve got, what are the roles that could be delivered in regional communities that currently aren’t, and how do we get a better distribution of roles across Australia in this space now of, you know, being able to work remotely. I think there’s, you know, there’s a range of different things that we could do. But what we want to be able to do is make sure that we bring community with, and that the community feels a sense of, you know, being in control of their destiny.

Pip Courtney [00:29:16]:

When you have a look at what the Future Drought Fund is doing, are there any particular areas that you are especially excited about?

Julia Spicer [00:29:24]:

Yeah, so I’m really excited to look at, you know, some of the opportunities that come from the leadership programs that have been supported and offered. I think, you know, for those of us that have been in agriculture for a long time, we know, you know, putting up a fence doesn’t make more grass. You know, some of our infrastructure, whilst it’s really important, it doesn’t actually change our management practices. And so the leadership conversations, the training and the upskilling, that is…It’s the new ideas that will really help to support and change what’s happening for us across our region.

So I’m really excited that there’s a range of programs around that. And I think the work that FRRR does is always brilliant. So I think, you know, there’s some really great things happening there. I think the Hubs as they start to really expand and understand their role, where they’re able to bring people together to have conversations, to look at what’s working and particularly what’s not working. I think they’re the, they’re the pieces of work that I think always pay dividends. They’re hard to report on sometimes, or we don’t necessarily always have, you know, a great photo opportunity or can list a whole lot of outputs in our reporting.

But I think if we look at the outcome and the conversations that happen as a result and the change that happens long term, I think that is where we get really exciting and sustainable change.

Pip Courtney [00:30:51]:

How do you reach the farmers who need this information the most?

Julia Spicer [00:30:56]:

Look, I think this is where we need to really make sure we’re using the networks and the supports that are existing locally. So, our local councils are certainly something that we can be able to tap into and in regional areas, that’s something that they really do. So, you know, our local councils, we need to make sure that, obviously that comes with resources. But for those of us in regional areas, they really are our first port of call for a lot of the activity that we’re doing. I think when we think about some of our community services, I’ve mentioned the counsellors before, our Landcare and Catchment groups. You know, we’ve actually got some really great networks already, often across the region. What we need to be able to do is value them and make sure that they’ve got the resources to be able to do the things we need them to do.

Pip Courtney [00:31:42]:

So there would be some farmers who would be interested in what’s been happening here for the last two days and, and today, how do you get those people who aren’t going to go online, who think that they’re too busy, how do you encourage them to go online and be part of the conversation, work out that FDF exists, that there’s money and that there’s all these projects and all this information.

Julia Spicer [00:32:03]:

So I think what we can look at is the really interesting conversation that has happened over the period of time with the regional planning is at what point do we have a conversation around who we’re supporting and what that looks like?

So this, this might sound a bit provocative or controversial, but actually when we talk to landholders about different activities, some of them are conscious that not everybody may exist forever. If sometimes we are small businesses in downtown Goondiwindi or downtown Roma or Longreach, you know, something might happen where we actually need to close down. And so how do we actually help people exit gracefully from the industry, if they are not over a period of time, you know, doing things to change. If people are dealing with a whole range of activity, they’ve got all of this support and they’re not taking it up, you know, how do we have the conversation about, you know, is this something that you should be staying?

Is this an industry you should be staying in? Now that’s really easy for me to say and particularly whilst, my computer’s doing crazy things for me on this call. But, you know, that’s what the community says from time to time. Do we keep propping Julia up as a producer who’s not taking advantage of any of these fantastic programs? Or does that need to be something where, where Julia is supported to be able to exit gracefully with dignity and with knowledge that, you know, she has the support of the community and all of the rest of it. But that leadership conversation is a tricky one to have because, you know, the banks end up looking terrible or, you know, we end up with the horror stories. But I actually think from a leadership conversation for industry to be able to be the ones to really look at what that means for them, that would be a pretty amazing outcome of some of this Future Drought Fund activity and work.

Pip Courtney [00:34:12]:

It’s a really tricky conversation to have in drought. But then that need to have that conversation goes away when the drought’s finished and there’s green grass.

Julia Spicer [00:34:25]:

Yeah, correct, correct. But we know that, you know, good decisions are not made in a time of crisis. We need to be able to look at, you know, the ability to be able to step back and plan. At the moment, I think Queensland’s got the least number of councils drought declared at the moment than it’s had in the last however many decades. You know, this is a time now where we can start to have these conversations. We’ve had the planning process of what’s happening through the Future Drought Fund. The Innovation Hubs are set up and ready to roll. You know this gives us a good opportunity timewise to be able to do this.

Pip Courtney [00:34:59]:

Thank you so much form coming to us from Cairns and a great discussion. Thank you so much.

Julia Spicer [00:35:06]:

Thanks Pip. Enjoy the rest of the day.

Pip Courtney [00:35:09]:

And we have Slido telling us where people are checking in from around the country for day 3. And we have people in Toowoomba, Albury, Gold Coast, Canberra, some places I can’t pronounce. Brisbane, Roma. That is really great. Oh, Blayney. Anyone from WA? Maybe they’re not out of bed yet.

Okay. Well, our next session is about the importance of building connections and capacity. So the whole community is ready for drought. We’re crossing to Bendigo in Victoria on Dja Dja Wurrung Country, where we will hear from Natalie Eggleton, the CEO of the Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal, or FRRR for short. FRRR has supported drought affected communities for more than 23 years. Most recently, it delivered the FDF’s Networks to Build Drought Resilience program and is currently partnering with the Australian Rural Leadership Foundation to deliver the Helping Regional Communities Prepare for Drought initiative.

Today, Natalie will reflect on the importance of strong relationships in building resilience and give us examples of how FRRR is partnering with communities to build capacity and create connections.

Natalie Eggleton [00:36:29]:

Thanks Pip, great to be here. And I just loved hearing from Jules as well, it was a beautiful segue into the things that I’m going to talk about today. So, thanks very much for that introduction. Just a brief overview of FRRR for those that don’t know us so well. Let me just go to the next slide with Simon. Thank you. So, we’re a national organisation. Our vision is for a vibrant, resilient and revitalised regional, remote and rural Australia. We’re most well-known for our grant delivery across many, many communities. But we also do a few other things. So, we develop a lot of insights and learning, prepare policy papers, do research, prepare advocacy, initiatives, and we broker a lot of collaborations and funder collectives as well.

And we partner with not-for-profit organisations who have a range of barriers, mostly around tax legislation that prohibits them from raising money for initiatives. So we have a range of services that support activation and mobilisation of more money reaching regional, remote communities.

Our strategy is anchored around three pillars. This strategy’s for the next, the 2020 to 25 period. So we’re coming to the end of that. But essentially, it is anchored around the pillars of people, place and disaster resilience and climate solutions. And the work we’ve been doing in the FDF program is really centred across all of those. Obviously, they’re very interdependent anyway but drought resilience is particularly anchored across those three domains, and hyper-localised, as well as regionalised.

Thanks, Simon, next slide. So our reach over the last financial year, just to give you a sense of where we get to in our grant distributions. In the previous financial year, so just under $20 million to just under a thousand initiatives. Importantly, 62% of that funding was in the context of drought and disaster preparedness and recovery. So, unsurprising given the massive events that we’ve experienced over the last few years with fires and floods. But also a significant amount is around ongoing drought recovery in some regions. And then a lot of obviously emphasis on drought preparedness in the areas where we’ve got time and space, and pretty limited time and space, to do the preparedness work in communities. So the Future Drought Fund initiative and partnership has been a really exciting platform for us to partner with the Australian Government on.

It’s enabled us to scale and, and catalyse the learning that we’ve had over quite a number of years in the work we’ve been doing in communities to strengthen social capital in particular, in recognition of the value of social capital in the broader resilience agenda. So we can go to the next slide, please, Simon. Thank you.

So Networks to Build Drought Resilience was the first initiative that we partnered on. And as Pip mentioned, there’s a second initiative that I’ll speak to a bit later on in the presentation. So the Networks Program was a national grants program funding ranging from $10,000 up to $150,000. It was available to not-for-profit organisations in agricultural dependent regions across Australia. And it had four focus areas so capacity building, really recognising the need to invest in the capacity and the resourcing of not-for-profit organisations, which I think Jill spoke to as well.

The importance of, you know, really putting some capital behind the organisations and the leaders that are doing the work and investing in their knowledge and know-how, as well as. Events as a connection point and as an activation platform to enable better connection, better networking, better knowledge and visibility of innovation practices, shared learning. Training. So really building the capability and filling those gaps where we might have communities that just need to really skill up around a range of things. And I’ll give a couple of case studies, as we go through. And then infrastructure.

We know that in lots of rural and remote communities, the community infrastructure is the hub of the community. It’s the enablement for all of the other capacity building work to happen and all the activation to happen in many rural communities. As I’m sure many of you would be aware and experience in your own communities, sometimes the infrastructure is just not up to scratch.

It might not but have great technology, might not have great climate control, might not have up to standard disability inclusion, access. So it’s really important to make sure that we keep investing in that side as well. So this program covered all of those and had funding allocations to each of those categories. So go to the next one, please, Simon. Thank you.

So, funding wise, FRRR partnered with the Australian Government which contributed the bulk of the funds, and we also leveraged $1.125 million in further funding from other philanthropic organisations and corporates and individuals. So the total package of funding was just over $4 million distributed across 87 initiatives nationally. So within all of those 87 projects, there were a lot of different activities. So, 791 actual activities which included events, training programs, et cetera. And over, or just under, 38,000 people actually directly benefited from that.

So if we think about the reach and the breadth of those grants and how far they got, we were really pleased with that outcome. We had pretty good gender balance in terms of engagement and participation and beneficiaries. And we had a very strong profile preference with the Australian Government and continue to in the second phase of this work around really getting the next generation, of leaders in our communities, particularly our ag-dependent communities, and engaging more diverse, communities as well, particularly with the First Nations lens. So, you know, young people between 45 and 54. Sorry, young people between <laugh>…That doesn’t feel young at all, that feels like my age…15 to 35. So we had a pretty good level of engagement there, you know, six and a half thousand people in that participated, which is impressive, I think, given how busy we are when we’re that age.

And then 23% of participants were also sort of in that middle age group as well. So pretty happy. Bit more work to do in engaging First Nations community leaders as well. So that’s kind of where the numbers landed in the program. And next slide. Thank you.

And geographically, we obviously had a national ambition. Did pretty well in reaching those places, especially in the context of a lot of bushfire recovery. And some of the flooding impacts were starting to be felt in some regions. And some regions were actually still in drought as well. So that’s always an interesting dimension when you’re trying to do preparedness work in the context of existing stress being experienced in communities. So, the map there shows, you know, we managed to get to most of the sort of inland regions, as much as we could.

And the funding breakdown you can see there. Recipients, so grant recipients contributed about 6%, of funding additionally. Our donor partners that we leveraged was another 15%. And then there was quite a lot of in-kind and pro bono support. So 28% of investment back into those communities was through the communities themselves building additional buy-in through donations of time and talent.

So if we move to the next one, I’ll just share some of the case studies. There’s just been some really great initiatives and I really valued what Julia was saying about the need to bring people together, the need to bring networks together to share learning and practice, to really take advantage of all of the great stuff that’s going on. And also to not reinvent the wheel because, you know, if someone’s wondering about something or a way to do something, there’s a very good chance that’s been done before.

And with the isolation that can be experienced, particularly in our more remote areas, and also obviously in farming areas where on-farm work is so busy, it’s really hard to find those spaces that are going to give you the right content that are going to connect you with the right people, that are going to be delivered in the times and the places that are relevant and accessible. So we were really excited by the initiatives that we supported that deal with all of those things.

So the Northern Gulf, which has now renamed itself to the Savannah North Natural Resource Management Group, wanted to run some events that targeted farmers and primary producers to really strengthen their networks and stretch out the sort of knowledge base that they have, and enable them to then kind of be self-organising as a network.

So they engaged over a hundred producers, which was really impressive. Mostly from isolated areas, ran both face-to-face and online forums. And you can see the photo there in one of the sheds of one of the forums being delivered. And two face-to-face events were held, and those events had guest speakers, and then the online forums and workshops were more focused on learning and development. So I guess the tools and the feedback that we got was that that forum and that mechanism really gave them tools, practical tools to think and act in ways that helped them to control or cope with the factors so that were out of their control. And we know that that is largely the case in ag. And they also felt that their understanding of drought resilience strategies improved.

So, you know, their likelihood of being able to adopt new approaches to help their coping skills, but also in their own business practices was really improved. Next slide. Thanks. Thank you. Birchip Cropping Group, which I think is a pretty well-known organisation across the ag sector, they’ve been, you know at the front of innovation for a long time and always doing interesting work and a such a great connector of the sector in Victoria, in particular. So they were really interested in future farmers, how we bring the next generation of farmers in and how we build their connections, their knowledge, and sort of join those dots between generations, and also tackle the question of climate change and how we are actually working with climate change impacts and how we can adapt and innovate.

And so they brought Anika Molesworth to Birchip which was fantastic, and got a really good turnout at their forum. And they also facilitated local discussion groups. So they did the sort of broad, bring everyone together, get the big picture thinking happening, provides an inspiration and some thought leadership, and then some more localised discussions where they could really unpack what things, what the context is and what different farming groups are grappling with and what that means in a drought resilience and preparedness context. So I think what was lovely about this was the slightly disruptive nature of it. And the comment on the screen there, you know, just that ability to plant a seed to something that felt uncomfortable but stretched the thinking enough to then go away and really start to rethink the way they might do things. And that’s what resilience is about, right? It’s about kind of stretching, adapting, reframing to the new future sort of options and future environment that we need to be working in. And again, a really high percentage of respondents who filled in the surveys afterwards said that they had improved their knowledge of drought resilience strategies, which is really important, but critically, had also really strengthened those networks and that next generation of leadership has really started to mobilise together, which is exciting.

Next one. Thank you. So the last case study that I’ll share is a tiny remote community in South Australia, 62 people. So it’s a district, large farming operations around that district. As I mentioned when I started, the role of community infrastructure can’t be underestimated in what it provides for communities, especially smaller and more remote areas that really need a central hub to come together in. So this was literally a pretty small grant to help them fix that hall and that shed, so you can see the before picture where it was a bit of a lean-to out the back that wouldn’t have been used for anything, safe anyway. And the funding we provided enabled them to put that more modern extension on the back, and enables them to use that space far more functionally.

So pretty small, pretty practical. It means now that that facility can be used year round, and it’s being leveraged for networking events for informal, casual events. And interestingly, you know, sometimes the process of doing these projects is as important as the physical output. And this community shared back to us that, you know, the process of doing this project together and then being able to use that facility more has actually shifted some attitudes in the community and has built a stronger culture of collaboration, which, when we’re talking about social capital and resilience, collaboration is one of the critical ingredients. It’s super hard to do though, as I’m sure everyone has experienced. It takes time, it takes patience, it takes often re-going back over things and trying to find the right pathway to get partnerships happening and collaboration and shared learning happening. And so I was really inspired by the way a small piece of infrastructure like this could help to really move them along on that path, on their collaboration.

Thank you. So in terms of what we’ve learned, the networks program has concluded, and we’re just in the final stages of wrapping up the acquittals, etcetera. It’s really reinforced the role that not-for-profits play in a region’s resilience. We know that there are a whole range of players in the ecosystem of a region, but the not-for-profit sector in all of its diversity and shapes and sizes is a critical part of the enabling environment for long-term resilience building work supporting community-led initiatives. It’s a term that’s talked about a lot and bandied around a lot. What community led actually means is, you know, it’s a fundamentally empowering process. It’s something that puts community knowledge and know-how in the driver’s seat and provides scaffolding for that community leadership to turn into action. That’s our sort of interpretation of community led initiatives.

And so that, it doesn’t always go to plan, doesn’t always look shiny, can fail, but the process of investing in community led processes and initiatives is really important and transformational and enables long term momentum. Philanthropy is an important player, and leveraging philanthropy. There is money out there that wants to be put to good. There are philanthropists looking for platforms and FRRR’s able to play that role in leveraging and brokering some of those relationships in. And that’s been really powerful to see the interest in this work, through this program. And the themes of interest that really came up and kind of started to have some really interesting energy was around the role of women in ag, which we know, women play very dynamic roles in our farming communities and in businesses.

The next generation, as I’ve mentioned a couple of times, agriculture and from a First Nations perspective and country management, and a food production perspective. And again, the importance of networks and how much that is the fabric and the glue of long-term resilience work. So as far as the next initiative goes, we’ve gotten started, with the ARLF as Pip said, as a collaborative initiative, as the stage 2 of this sort of social capital side of the FDF work and model. So that program, we do love a long name at FRRR, Helping Regional Communities Prepare for Drought, is a place-based model of building drought resilience from the ground up. So it harnesses all of those key points that I’ve noted above about the role of not-for-profits, community led processes, leveraging and harnessing those networks and sort of areas of momentum.

So we’ll be working in 35 regions, in a co-designed process. Ideally, they will line up with the Regional Drought Resilience Plans. Not all of those are complete, so there’s a bit of a sequencing process there that we’re managing, and that includes funding leadership programming, coaching and facilitation and access to skilled expertise that we’re brokering. So it’s quite a rounded initiative. And then alongside that, there’ll also be a national small grants program, to make sure we’re kind of still capturing that breadth. So we’re communicating the announcements of the regions as they come online, and we are really just starting to get the momentum going with the co-design plans at the moment. So the idea with co-design plans is that communities will identify initiatives that they are wanting to use the funding for through those initiatives, through those plans.

They will link up to the Regional Drought Resilience Plans as well and compliment and feed into each other. So we’ll be getting funding on the ground soon and activating soon. So the key insights that we’ve been getting through the initiatives so far, as we’ve been getting going, is that there is a strong appetite despite the amount of capacity constraint, depletion, and in some cases saturation of activity, there is still a really strong appetite for communities to plan ahead at a community level in addition to on-farm level. Many play a role. The diversity across a community is really important, and it’s really important to leverage all of the capabilities and roles that different organisations and different players and leaders have in communities. And it is wider than the farmer, as I think was spoken about in the previous session as well.

Building local agencies. So I mentioned that earlier, really, I mean that’s not an easy thing to do, as outside organisations trying to bring resourcing into communities, but creating processes and spaces that enable local communities to actually lead together is critical. And it will be one of the critical indicators for long-term success in these initiatives, the ability to keep on leading and to keep on mobilising together. And the really important recognition, that local financial and economic viability, of farmers, viability of local organisations and the sustainability of local environment are all critically interdependent. And we need to be actually understanding what that looks like at each local level and investing across all of them, so that we’re getting good outcomes and sustainable change. And then, you know, the common experience of drought is different in different communities, and the approaches that will be being taken by communities are quite diverse. But there are those common themes about connectedness being informed, having good information and networks and information and that sense of belonging, which we might take for granted, but it’s actually a glue. It’s a really important part of our social capital and our social fabric. And so investing in the technical stuff is important, but let’s never forget that just in investing in people belonging, celebrating their place, celebrating their communities and their identities is actually a really important thing too.

Just onto the next one and final one before we wrap up. So we have produced a learning report on the first iteration, the Networks to Build Drought Resilience Program that’s available on our website. And we’re happy to share it with the team at the FDF Science to Practice Forum as well, if you wanted to distribute it to participants. We’re also producing case studies regularly and sharing those on our social platforms and our newsletters. And we’ve got a pretty significant evaluation program underway in partnership with Nous for the second stage. So the place-based initiative and our website is there. Welcome anyone to reach out to us if you want to learn more or be connected with any of the initiatives that are being supported as well. Thanks very much Pip.

Pip Courtney [00:58:32]:

Thanks, Natalie. That was fascinating. I was just wondering how can strengthening the social capital translate into financial benefits or resilience?

Natalie Eggleton [00:58:46]:

Yeah, it’s a great question. The tangible benefits of investing in people, I think been a vexed thing for a long time. I mean, in really simple terms, a strong community that is able to self-organise, leverage resources, plan well together, collaborate, will ultimately be able to generate better economic results for its region. Their health of their business sector will be stronger, they’ll need less outside support is generally the research and the literature. And you know, just the ability to regenerate is kind of what happens when you invest in social capital and regenerative capacity means that you can build new capital, you can build new opportunities, you can seek out new revenue, seek out new investment opportunities into a region, for example. So I think the links are there. And traceable.

Pip Courtney [00:59:54]:

We’ve got some questions, a lot of questions coming in for you on Slido here. Here’s one. How does the team track the updates of the project and decide the usefulness of the project?

Natalie Eggleton [01:00:08]:

So I’m assuming that’s individual initiatives that are supported or go with that assumption, unless, you know, otherwise Pip, so we, I mean, we make a thousand grants a year. So we’ve got pretty good systems in place in terms of tracking. All of the grants have a grant agreement. We, you know, when organisations apply, there’s activities that they outline that they will deliver and outcomes that are tagged to those initiatives, or intended outcomes. So we have interim reporting, where those organisations feed back to us how they’re going. Each of them has their own individual evaluation and monitoring processes as well. So there’s a lot of data being collected and then our team are in regular contact as well in terms of sitting down and chatting through what the sort of outcomes are. And we obviously then have to report that back into the Future Drought Fund to be part of the aggregate impact story for the Future Drought Fund investment. So I hope that answered the question, in terms of how we, I think the second part of the question was about selecting them. Is that right, Pip?

Pip Courtney [01:01:20]:

Uh, yes. How do you decide the usefulness of the projects?

Natalie Eggleton [01:01:26]:

Oh, well, yeah, that’s really about the qualitative and quantitative outcomes and linking that back to the Future Drought Fund strategies. And sometimes that’s not known immediately. I mean, there are short term benefits and then there’s the longer term piece as well. So the first sort of line of evaluation we do is just the first line and then we follow up over time as well.

Pip Courtney [01:01:51]:

What are the, here’s another question, what are the biggest pressures FRRR is responding to right now impacting regional communities? Is that post-Covid burnout, the slowing Australian economy, flooding, climate events, any regions of Australia where these pressures are highest?

Natalie Eggleton [01:02:09]:

Definitely all of the above and in very intersecting ways. So cost of living is something we are hearing a lot about. We are receiving significantly more requests for funding from food relief agencies than we have in the past, as an example. A lot of initiatives around energy security, just, you know, basic sort of quality of life issues. We are hearing a lot about the strain on community leadership and not-for-profit organisations, as the cost of living is increasing, their costs are going up, but their revenue is not. So there’s a significant pressure on not-for-profit organisations to keep funding, and provide services locally. But their capacity is actually really under pressure. And we have some concerns about how that is sort of playing out. And we’re trying to ramp up our funding to support the resourcing and the capacity of organisations themselves, not just the projects.

The other one is obviously climate, so the flooding impacts, but I’d say even more so the cumulative effect of, for some regions, drought, fires, floods, and Covid in the middle of that, is creating a couple of interesting environments that are presenting a lot of challenges. And it’s kind of, in some ways, about a saturation of input. Like there’s a lot of money, there’s a lot of activities, there’s a lot of programs, a lot of projects and not enough people to deliver them. So there’s a depletion of resourcing and capital at the same time as a lot of capital coming in, which is presenting really challenging circumstances. And of course, we all know about the challenges in getting skilled labour. So recruiting new people is really hard. So all of those are sort of building a bit of a storm of sorts. And I’d say that some of those East Coast regions, and slightly inland regions are where we’re noticing it the most.

Pip Courtney [01:04:16]:

It was a question I asked Julia, is it too early to say that the investment of dollars in drought resilience, whether it’s in farm mental health or local businesses, are you starting to see a change? Are people feeling more comfortable about what happens when the next drought arrives? Are they feeling less anxious? Is it too early to call that, or to measure the impact after three and a half years?

Natalie Eggleton [01:04:44]:

Yeah, I would say the anecdotal, and some of the insights we’re getting from the grants that we’ve funded are that the readiness is building, and the investment is having an effect. I guess we won’t really know until we are in it, in terms of how we are able to work differently. But the sense that we are getting is that these sorts of supports are helping and the increase in knowledge, the increasing confidence and capability, understanding of drought resilience and all of the things that can be done, I think there’s a real maturing happening as well. And so I have confidence that it is making a difference, but I think it’s really important also to recognise that this is never set and forget. We don’t do it once and then assume we’re we are done, that we’re resilient, we’re ready. It’s, you know, this is a constantly evolving landscape. We’re learning all the time. There’s new innovation all the time. So you know, I feel like we’re just getting started.

Pip Courtney [01:05:43]:

Building local agency. Does that mean if all this funding dried up overnight, that those communities can just keep going? That they won’t need constant injections of funding for stuff that’s happening in town? Stuff that’s happening on the farm in the mental health space like that surely would be the goal.

Natalie Eggleton [01:06:03]:

It’s one of the assumptions, yes, but I think we need to be careful in assuming that we’ll, that these communities will never need ongoing support again. Because I think generally, the size, remoteness, scale of remote communities means that the economies are not usually large enough to sustain all the activity. But what I would like to see is the type of support from outside of communities changing. So at FRRR, we talk a lot about wanting to move from filling gaps to actually helping communities to innovate and think differently about the future and really harness what they’re doing for different outcomes for the future. And so, you know, ideally through doing this work, what we stopped doing is just coming in and rescuing and filling gaps when things go wrong, that kind of coping strength is embedded. And what we can do is come in and really help to bolster and give them momentum and add, kind of get behind them in a more strategic way.

Pip Courtney [01:07:08]:

Natalie, thank you so much for talking us through what you are doing or what the organisation’s doing. I love the idea that you can give a very small community a little bit of money to fix the back of their hall, and it has such a big impact. That’s a great return on investment. Thank you so much for sharing your insights today.

Natalie Eggleton [01:07:27]:

Thanks Pip.

Pip Courtney [01:07:30]:

That was Natalie Eggleton, CEO of FRRR. First Nations farmers often lack support to develop their land. That’s changing thanks to support from the FDF’S Networks to Build Drought Resilience Program, bringing First Nations farmers along the Murray corridor together to share advice and knowledge ahead of the next dry.

[Video voiceover begins]

Neville Atkinson [01:08:15]:

Aboriginal society has existed in Australia, in this dry continent, you know, for over 80,000 years. So you know, developing a personal, intimate knowledge of this country and its natural assets, we’d obviously have learnt something out of that. I remember as an example, my grandfather, so we would be out collecting eggs, I remember him saying that you don’t take them all, you take one cuz otherwise if you take ‘em all, they’re not gonna be there next year. Same applies to getting sustenance from the land. If you don’t respect it and treat it right, it’s gonna give up on you.

Jeanette Crew [01:09:07]:

I’m a [traditional language] woman. We own a property, northwest of Deniliquin. We are using saltbush as our signature ingredient in different products. Recently we were talking about it to one of the neighbours who said, I’ve got a bit of a wasteland down on the back of my property down near the river, and I thought, well that’s not actually wasteland. That’s probably the most valuable for us because most of our medicines grow there. So to other people it’s waste to us, it’s not.

Gay Therese Baker [01:09:44]:

My property is on the back of Mount Murramurrangbong State Forest. We have a beautiful eastern view with the northern aspect. It’s only five acres, and I’m establishing a native food farm in conjunction with Dookie University. Native foods are perfectly adapted to our Australian conditions.

Chris Nicholson [01:10:10]:

This project is particularly important, to the First Nations farmers or Traditional Owners because over time a lot of these Traditional Owners have acquired agricultural land but haven’t had the support to actually develop that land.

Neville Atkinson [01:10:24]:

We’ve put an application in for the Future Drought Fund to support the conversation that we’re already having, but needed to broaden that out on resilience, food sustainability, farming practices that are now, and what that might look like going forward in terms of you know, addressing drought and you know, also addressing their own relationships at a local level, providing jobs, opportunity, training and development, and get an economic outcome that improves their lives as well. So we had that conversation. We brought together all those different Aboriginal farmers and connected partnerships we had along the Murray corridor, New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and Southwest Western Australia.

David Crew [01:11:11]:

And I think that’s one of the big things that Outback Academy has been able to do, is to draw people together to actually build that relationship and trust that we can have proper communication and open and honest communication, not just a presentation of ideas.

Chris Nicholson [01:11:27]:

Future Drought Fund has enabled the various Drought Hubs to collaborate together. It sort of diminishes those borders and allows us to share information across all three states. We’ve been able to provide extension advice and on-ground support to our Traditional Owners as they sort of develop business plans for their property about how they’re going to manage those properties into the future. Particularly during dry seasons, we’re incorporating Traditional Knowledge and modern day science in agriculture together for a better outcome

Jeanette Crew [01:12:01]:

Through our involvement with Outback Academy, we’re going to get some bees, we gonna get some beehives. We’ve done some training in beekeeping, so that’s gonna be quite an exciting thing to go through.

Neville Atkinson [01:12:14]:

The uniqueness of our model is we’re connecting all these farmers up together. They don’t operate in isolation.

Gay Therese Baker [01:12:21]:

It’s been really, really brilliant to be involved with Outback Academy and other farmers for the social networking and to know that you are not alone as an Aboriginal farmer. I’m now part of an Australian-wide, a worldwide organisation that little old me on my five acres can say yes, this is where my honey’s going so people can track me down, all over the world. That’s the opportunity that they’re giving me.

[Video voiceover ends]

Pip Courtney [01:13:18]:

That was Gay Baker owner of Gap Track Flat Native Foods, speaking about the difference the support she received from the FDF made to her and her business. Now we’re crossing to Catherine McGufficke from the Australian Rural Leadership Foundation, or ARLF for short, and Dr. Chad Renando from the Rural Economies Centre of Excellence. Catherine and Chad are presenting on the Drought Resilience Leadership Program delivered across Australia by the ARLF in 2021 and 2022. The program was a national investment by the FDF in leadership development for rural communities to enhance drought resilience. Here to share some of the stories and insights from the program and the communities that participated are Catherine and Chad.

Catherine McGufficke [01:14:08]:

Thanks Pip. Good morning everyone and welcome. I’m joining you from Ngunnawal and Ngambri Country this morning in a very wet and rainy camper. Chad and I are here today to talk to you around the work of the Drought Resilience Leaders Program and the lessons that we’ve learnt, and the work that we’ve done with communities and people who are stepping up to become leaders in their communities across Australia. What I wanted to start by doing really though, is acknowledging that, and it’s a really common theme from Julia’s conversation and Natalie’s conversation, is really acknowledging the collaboration that this program brought to life in order to bring leadership development to communities across Australia. So the program was delivered in partnership with FRRR and RECoE. ARLF very much working in a consortia with those two organisations.

And really, all three of us are very passionate about creating a thriving rural regional and remote Australia. And really enjoyed working together and being able to bring out different areas of expertise together to deliver the program. I’d also like to acknowledge their delivery partners, who also played a really key role in the delivery of the program. So that was the National Farmers’ Federation, the Australian Resilience Centre, and the University of Southern Queensland. So as you’ll hear, as I talk from an ARLF perspective, we are very much about network leadership and collaboration. And that was really borne out in the way that the program was designed and designed and delivered. A little bit about the ARLF, and RECoE before we dive into the program itself. We are a national not-for-profit organisation.

We specialise in leadership development programs and support for people who are passionate about rural, regional and remote Australia. And our purpose is really about developing leaders, in order for them to contribute to a thriving rural, regional and remote Australia. And we’ve been doing that work for 30 years. We’re very proud of our 30-year history, and we continue to evolve the work that we are doing. So at the moment, we run four flagship programs, where we bring people together from across the country to develop their knowledge and networks and understand their leadership behaviours. We’ve got four of those flagship programs, but we’re also increasingly working. And our partnership with the Future Drought Fund has really helped us embed that, increasingly working in communities, doing place-based leadership programs where we’re working in communities to develop their leadership networks and their understanding of what leadership looks like in a community context, and leaving them with the networks and the skills and the behaviours, and the collaborations, that will allow them to continue to lead and build resilience in the future, which is what Natalie’s also been talking about from FRRR.

In terms of RECoE, the Rural Economy Centre of Excellence. Just getting my connection back, we, the Rural Economy Centre of Excellence, is a collaboration across four Queensland research institutions, who again, are really around how do we help communities thrive economically, moving into the future.

RECoE have been really deeply involved with the Future Drought Fund. So the Regional Drought Resilience planning that Julia talked about this morning, RECoE have been leading that program and working really collaboratively and closely across Queensland to run those Regional Drought Resilience Planning processes and are continuing to do that, and have also been part of the partnership with ARLF to deliver the Drought Resilience Leaders Program over the last 18 months and 2 years. A little bit about the work that we’ve been doing for the Drought Resilience Leaders Program, before I hand over to Chad to share some insights and some stories. The program was made up of three, four components or three components. The Drought Resilience Leaders Program, so a leadership development program delivered in 12 regions across the country, where people who lived or worked in those regions were eligible to participate.

And that was a series of leadership workshops, all designed to be delivered face-to-face, but of course with Covid, many of them had to be delivered in a blended way. But really about building people’s understanding of, you know, what is leadership if it’s not about a role that you play or a role that you have in an organisation, what is leadership and what are the leadership behaviours that allow you to demonstrate leadership and really make a contribution and a difference in your community? The people who participated in those programs were then eligible, in partnership with FRRR, to apply for a community extension grant. And that was really around, what are some activities that you, on your own or in collaboration with others on the program, could do to really start to build community resilience for your community.

And we had a number of people take up that opportunity that was also really great, because it helped people put into practice all of the things that we’ve been learning about and discussing. And for many, was the opportunity to really test themselves in a way that they hadn’t beforehand. In addition to that, we ran a national mentoring program, which was very much around, wasn’t bound by region. It was open to anyone who was passionate and committed around about building drought resilience. And it matched people who were experienced in working through drought, building businesses, working through or working to build the resilience of their community with people who were really curious and wanted to extend themselves and wanted to learn about what might I be able to do differently moving forward. And that was, again, that was a national program, so open to all, regardless of what region they worked in. Chad’s going to talk to you about some of the things that we saw around each of those different elements of the program, but it is just important to kind of remember that there was three different opportunities that people could participate in that really helped them develop and learn about themselves and develop leadership behaviours in a different way, in a way that suited them.

I’m going to hand over to Chad now to talk a little bit about what we saw in terms of the evaluation work that RECoE’s been doing with us. Over to you Chad.

Chad Renando [01:21:22]:

Yeah. Awesome, excellent. Thank you Catherine. And thank you so much for the opportunity to be able to present and to share a bit of the insights. It was really just an incredible opportunity, a national program so diverse. We used 10 different survey instruments, interviews, case studies, observations, about 750 metrics, 120,000 data points to say what is the impact that we actually had. And I’m going to share with you insights from four main areas. And the first area is around that national impact. And yes, it was a leadership program for individuals, but the first thing we really wanna highlight is the value of that network. The space between what we call the nodes, the relationships and very intentional about really encouraging that boundary spanning activity. You know, encouraging mentors from different NRM regions. Even as we had the clustering around the cohorts, as you see there in green, is from leadership program, and the red aspects as far as the grant programs. And as a result of the program, we created 3,200 connections and the majority of those knew that didn’t exist before. With over 610 leaders and 470 towns really seeding across the nation some of this value and this impact. Next slide please.

And so when we think about it, it’s obviously the network between, but it is also those individuals. And when we think about how we had an impact on the individual people, one of the areas is obviously leadership skills. And we asked people before and after the program, so how would you assess this leadership skill now? And we didn’t necessarily give them what they rated last time as far as this time. So it was fresh every time. And we did see across the different leadership skills. These are the kind of practical, tangible things I do, such as how do I manage conflict? How do I manage talent and staff? How do I address complexity? And across the board we saw an increase, and predominantly with the one where they were working with others such as far as communication, critical thinking, really rated high.

But across the board we saw an increase. Next slide please. But it’s not just my skills that I have, but who I am as a leader and more of those characteristics and the attributes. And this one is really interesting in that we saw some people go up and some people go down. And as we looked into the qualitative data behind it, the reasons for that, you know, some people did have an increase in certain characteristics or attributes, but other ones decrease because their understanding of leadership concepts change. What I know as far as my ability to adapt or my awareness changed, what I, and sometimes their entire leadership context changed as a result of going through the course. They were in a certain role and they had a greater awareness. And so maybe they moved into a different role, and they advanced in there.

And they also might have changed their leadership context, you know, so for example, using a schooling perspective, if somebody’s in grade school, they moved into high school, well what worked for them before may not work. And so they had to change and adapt and part of that tension was what we were going for. And we assessed that using the arrow left six A framework, where we looked at the different characteristics across the leadership scope. And we created an instrument set to assess that. Next slide please.

And the other aspect we want to talk about is the diversity. Because we know that not all leaders are the same, they have a whole bunch of differences that we can look at and say, well, how was that experience for the differences that we saw, from gender and age to First Nations people to geography, and were the differences between different regions differences based on your industry or your professional position or your leadership program experience. And in particular, in the leadership program, it was interesting and what people got out of it was significantly different, depending on if they’d been through a leadership program before or a mentoring program before or if this was their first one. And one of the big takeaways here is that we need that pipeline going. It’s not the just set and forget or great, now we did this whole leadership program and now we’re gonna move to stage 2 or stage 3.

We have to keep that pipeline going through. Really interesting on the gender one where we had a significant percentage of younger age women going through the program while the mentors were more predominantly older men. And that’s, you know, on the one hand it’s good that we’re, that younger women are going through leadership programs, but how do we ensure that pipeline of young men going through, so that we maintain that equity and the balance in the regions? And that’s for future generations as well. Next slide please.

So that was a lot around the national impact for the individuals and the network itself. The second point I want to highlight is the integration of the program. So we saw a significant impact, in terms of if, for people that went through the mentoring program and through the leadership program, they rated significantly higher as far as their ability to access new networks, both in their local peer network and boundary spanning into new networks external to their community. If they went through the leadership program and the grants program, they rated significantly higher on what they thought about their leadership response to drought. And not just that, but also we have to consider that it’s not just the leaders to the different programs, but also that expanded network where we had an average of 3.3 community organisations that the leaders were members of. And so we had that broader impact as well. So there’s real value in stacking the experience, not just training the individual, in addition to maybe just not just a mentoring program and not just a grants program. But when you combine all of those three, when you develop the person, give them access to external networks and mentoring, and you give them something they’re passionate about, that means something to them to actually put all this in practice, that’s where the real change that we saw happens. Next slide, please.

So the third point I wanna highlight is this is a bit of a leadership journey. We asked people when they started what they hope to get out of it, and then asked them at the end what they actually got out of it and what was the impact. And when they started, we assessed what they said based on a categorisation of saying, is this something for you personally? Is this something for your profession? Is this something for your career and your sector overall? Is this something for your community? Or is this something what we refer to as collective impact? And it was a range of what they wanted to impact when they started. And then we assessed what they said, what they actually got out of it. And predominantly, it was personal. But you started seeing the shift as people started gaining that collective impact.

And this is expected and it’s good that we saw some of this even after three months, but we are aware that collective impact, which is effectively these challenges that we face as a society, and drought being part of it, is so complex, no single in person can address it. So I need to work with other people. And so what we’re looking for is, as we go forward 1, 2, 3 years from now, if we go back to these same individuals, we hope to see that, and a continued shift towards a broader collective impact approach, even as they continue to develop personally, professionally in their career and in their community. And the final point I’ll make with you, the fourth insight that we saw, I’ll put as more of a question, is that it wasn’t just drought that they wanted to address. So when you looked across the cohort, we saw so many variances of particular focus areas from mental health to young people to women to specific aspects of agriculture that they wanted to impact. So the question now is what can we do with this mobilisation of people? What do we wanna inject in that to focus their attention? So I’ll hand back over to Catherine to finish off the points.

Catherine McGufficke [01:28:57]:

Yeah, thanks Chad, and I think I’ll just talk a little bit about the personal impact for people going through the program. One of the really fabulous things was to sit at the back of the room and see people, the light bulb going off for people, and they started by saying, I’m not really sure why I’m here. Someone suggested that I come along to a leadership program. I don’t really see myself as a leader. And just the light bulb going off for them as a result of the conversations and the challenges and the activities that they were doing to go, oh, actually I am a leader and now, I know why I am here and now I know what I can do to even more contribute so I can step into that and have that confidence, was really fantastic to be able to see for people as they were going through the programs and the mentoring program as well. It was really surprising to me the number of people who at some point resisted applying to go through the program because they didn’t see themselves as a leader, whereas actually everyone around them saw them playing a really critical role and was suggesting that they be part of the program and saw them as a leader, but actually their self, their view of themselves, they saw a leader as someone who had a position of leadership and who could make decisions. Whereas actually, a lot of the work that we do in our program is very much around the behaviours of leadership and that each and every one of us can play a role and can step into that.

And it was really great to see those light bulb moments come on for people through the program. Just a little bit around the sort of journey of leadership, and I think Chad touched a little bit around the numbers. The impact of the program was different for people who had been through a leadership development program or a mentoring program and those who hadn’t, and the importance that that means in terms of communities being able to continually build a pipeline of people who are investing in their understanding and their own personal view of leadership and what that means and what they can bring to their community. I was really proud of the fact that for the leadership development program, 54% of people who did those programs around the country hadn’t been part of the leadership development program before.

And that’s really the value of those place-based activities and place-based leadership development. We know there are some regions that have excellent local leadership programs, but there were many that we went to who had always had to leave their communities to go and develop their leadership. And being able to bring that to people just really made a difference. And then 64% of people who were part of the mentoring program had never been part of a mentoring program before. So the value of the investment and the investment by the Future Drought Fund for those people, and making, you know, quality programs accessible to them and seeing how from an individual perspective, that started to shift people’s thinking, and as Chad said, the long-term contribution that can make to communities over the next 2 and 3 years is going to be really interesting, and we are really curious to see how that continues to play out for those communities.

A little bit about, and this really builds on what Natalie talked about as well in terms of the work that we’ll be doing alongside FRRR over the next 2 years. So, you know, we learned a lot around the 21 and 22 around what works for communities and what we could do differently. And we’ve really enjoyed being able to collaborate with FRRR and with the Department to redesign what the program is going to look like and really put much more, and this really speaks to what Julia was talking about this morning, really put much more control in the hands of communities, not just from a grant activity perspective, but also from a leadership perspective. Allowing communities to choose what they would like, what they need based on what they already have, what their leadership pipeline might look like, what’s worked or hasn’t worked for them in the past.

So working alongside FRRR to work in those 35 regions to bring leadership activities to them in a way that suits their leadership development needs. We’re also running the national leadership mentoring program again and I’m really excited to be able to talk to you about a new initiative that we’ll be holding and launching in August, which is called Drought Ready, which is a national network that will join up people who are passionate about community resilience. So anyone who’s passionate about building community resilience to drought can join the Drought Ready network and it’s really a platform and a way of people learning from one another and organisations learning from one another. So what Natalie talked about this morning is often that there’s great ideas happening in communities, but that’s not shared across the country or that’s not necessarily accessible to people who might be grappling with a similar situation in their own community.

So the purpose of this network is really to join people up so they can learn from one another, what’s worked, what would people do differently, what leadership challenges are you coming up against and where can you get support from someone who may be going through something similar or have cracked that challenge in the past. And how can we learn from one another, what didn’t work in the way that we expected? And how can you help organisations in other communities learn those lessons before they get part way through, or get all of the way through? So, we are really excited not just to be working in 35 regions around the country, but to be able to launch the Drought Ready network. As said, it’ll be launched in August if you’d like to put in to learn more about that, you can use the QR code on the screen or you can go to our website and fill out an expression of interest and you’ll be added to our communications list and we’ll make sure that you’ve got information about that when we get closer to the launch. You can also follow us on our social media channels to be able to find out more about that as well. So I think that was everything we wanted to talk through. Happy to take any questions. Thanks Pip.

Pip Courtney [01:35:58]:

Thank you Catherine and thank you Chad. We’ve got time for one question. Look, when I go to rural communities, I see the leadership roles falling on the shoulders, particularly volunteer roles, on not very many people and they wear many, many, many hats. I think one person chaired 10 committees. Do you think you’ve unearthed new faces, new leaders? And do you think that is going to really be important for these rural communities, many of whom don’t really have succession planning in place for the next generation of leaders?

Catherine McGufficke [01:36:33]:

Yeah, that was a really common theme that we heard in all of those programs that we were part of was volunteer fatigue and a generation of volunteers wanting to hand over to a new generation, but looking behind them and not necessarily seeing those people there. I absolutely think that as part of the work that we’ve been doing, people are starting to understand the difference between what, or not necessarily understanding the difference, but actually being able to understand what they can bring and start to see themselves as leaders in a way that they didn’t beforehand. And see that leadership is as much about behaviour, as it’s not necessarily being in a formal position. So yes, I think there’s definitely a new generation of people who are, as a result of this work, starting to think about themselves differently.

I was really surprised by the number of people who would say, oh, I’m not a leader, this is not for me, and actually loved it and really thrived when they were part of the conversation. So I absolutely think that we’ve started to plant the seed for many people and open people’s minds that leadership is about many things and each of us have a different set of behaviours that we can bring to that. And that leadership is a collaborative effort. It’s not just about one person. So yes, I do, it is my hope that we’ve unearthed a new generation of, or a new group of people who may want to start to get involved and lead those community organisations in a way that they didn’t beforehand because they assumed that to be a leader, they needed to fit into a certain box, as opposed to they’ve already got quite a lot of the tools and the behaviours that they need.

Pip Courtney [01:38:24]:

That’s great news. And I think there’ll be a lot of people in their sixties and seventies in rural communities who’ve been doing jobs or had the same position for 10, 20, 30, 40 years, who’ll be going, thank you Catherine, thank you Chad. So thank you both so much for your insights today.

Catherine McGufficke [01:38:44]:

Pleasure. Thanks very much.

Pip Courtney [01:38:49]:

We know drought does not pay attention to lines on a map, and that’s why the FDF is working with State and Territory governments to develop Regional Drought Resilience Plans in the Murraylands and Riverland area in South Australia. Preparing a drought plan has helped the community build resilience to multiple climate shocks. Let’s take a look.

[Video voiceover begins]

Emily Jenke [01:39:34]:

Drought tests everything. It tests relationships, it tests businesses, it tests community structures. It is the ultimate test of resilience.

Hannah Loller [01:39:49]:

My experience of drought in this region is that it’s not an uncommon occurrence to have low rainfall years. We are set up as businesses to adapt to low rainfall, but when multiple periods of low rainfall fall together, our financial ability to cope is stretched.

Ben Fee [01:40:13]:

While we were focused on drought, what we were hearing from people was that it was more than drought. It was actually about building resilience to multiple shots to the system.

Emily Jenke [01:40:21]:

So this year in this region, drought and flood all in the one year and then impacts of climate change are just going to make that worse and worse.

Ben Fee [01:40:29]:

We’ve also got the remnants of a flood that recently came through. It’s the single biggest natural disaster that the state’s ever seen. So that has had a massive impact on our people as well.

Hannah Loller [01:40:41]:

People withdraw, they stop communicating, they stop meeting and it challenges the fibre of what a country community is about when facing those times.

Ben Fee [01:40:53]:

This really is a great partnership between the Federal government through DAFF, the Future Drought Fund, through the State government, through PIRSA and through our local bodies, the LGA, the Landscape Board, and the RDA in Murraylands and Riverland. What we all agreed as partners within in region was that it was better that we took a step back and actually lifted the voice of our communities.

Hannah Loller [01:41:15]:

It’s about our collective community being able to manage through that climate variability from the perspective of both physical assets, the land management, the financial ability to keep going, but most importantly, the emotional tools to come out from those periods of adversity, and be able to thrive again.

Emily Jenke [01:41:39]:

Murraylands and Riverland’s Resilience Plan was designed and written by the community.

Hannah Loller [01:41:44]:

But what was fabulous about the planning process was it took a grassroots approach. We went out and heard the less heard first. We reached to those informal leaders of the region and heard their voices to bring a collective voice up through the Plan, which gave it great power.

Ben Fee [01:42:05]:

We held kitchen table conversations led by individuals across community. We heard things, we were then pulling out those themes and understanding, hey, there’s some commonalities here.

Emily Jenke [01:42:16]:

This actually was a blank sheet. And so everything was written by the community. So even defining resilience, what resilience is and looks like, the components of resilience, and then the things that we needed to do to move towards being a more resilient region.

Ben Fee [01:42:35]:

So what we committed to was developing an enduring process. This is not about another document that sits on a shelf. This is actually about getting people genuinely involved.

Emily Jenke [01:42:44]:

I think just the conversation about resilience helps people move towards being more resilient.

Ben Fee [01:42:53]:

There ended up being four themes. So Leadership in Action was the front runner theme. The next one was around Productive and Collaborative. So where we have productive systems, we actually really need to be banding them together because often there’s isolation within that and we don’t learn as much, but also we don’t form as much support, social support. Then there was the Prepared and Proactive, and the last one was perhaps the most important one, which is Together a Community. How do we get those individual community networks actually starting to network together to really start to draw strength from each other and build from that strength?

Hannah Loller [01:43:30]:

I’m really passionate to see the MR Plan live on and have a legacy, and I’ll do what I can through my role in local government and advocating for the community to be part of any responses. Incorporating informal leaders of our community and ensuring that agriculture is here and thriving.

Andrew Meddle [01:43:53]:

We are going to take the Plan forward in a way that focuses and aligns with the Board’s own Regional Landscape Plan.

Ben Fee [01:44:01]:

And what we’ve done as a Regional Development Australia, Murraylands and Riverland body, is our board of nine board members actually sits with the Plan in the middle of our board table. Every single meeting and everything we do is measured against that community voice through the Plan.

Andrew Meddle [01:44:18]:

So we’ll be leading on an action in the next year looking at climate change, reassessing the data, the trends, and looking at what that should or could translate into threats for our region for its productivity and for our resilience. We’re also going to be looking at another project that came out of the Plan, which is around new methods of agricultural production that really focus on soil health and biomass.

Emily Jenke [01:44:44]:

We know that we’re going to keep getting droughts, we’re going to keep getting floods, they’re going to be worse. And I think this work around resilience building is something that needs to be consistent. So the Future Drought Fund, I think, is actually really fundamentally important to the future of our Australian regional communities.

[Video voiceover ends]

Pip Courtney [01:45:28]:

That was Community Engagement Specialist Emily Jenke from Democracy Co., reflecting on the impact of the FDF’s Regional Drought Resilience Planning program. Here to expand further on the Plan are Ben Fee and Analise Gates from Regional Development Australia, Murraylands and Riverland. Ben is the Chief Executive of the group and Analise is the Marketing and Strategic Reporting Manager. I’ll hand over to you both to share more details about the Plan.

Analise Gates [01:45:58]:

Thanks so much Pip. It’s such a pleasure to be able to present our Plan at the Science to Practice Forum for 2023. So as you heard, drought really does test everything. So our approach to the system was to continue that collaborative approach working together with the Murraylands and Riverland Landscape Board and the Murraylands and Riverland Local Government Association. Through funding through the FDF, we were able to really achieve some broad regional collaboration in order to formulate a new Regional Drought Resilience Plan. So the collaborative approach that we took, if we can get the next slide, Simon.

Excellent. Our collaborative approach that we took engaged over 550 people from across the Murraylands and Riverland region. We conducted a series of interviews, these were direct one-on-one individualised sessions, and overall as a region, our community contributed more than 4,000 hours to building our Regional Drought Resilience Plan. However, what we quickly learned through this regional collaboration was, again, it was more than just drought. We really took a holistic approach and focused on the various systems across the region and how they were interconnected and how they did interrelate to one another. We really took the opportunity to listen to what our community was telling us. We engaged on a deeper level and we took the opportunity to connect and bring together our regional leaders with our community members on a new level. Through this engagement process, we were able to effectively share experiences, understand the struggles that were really happening in real time, and hear from our community about the realities of what is actually needed in our region in order to develop regional resilience.

Thanks Simon, next slide. Excellent. So from this perspective, we continue to be guided from our community and we quickly learned that the commonalities existed, whether it be from farmers in ag, whether it be from our horticulture industry, whether it be from our tourism sector or various other industries that make up the Murraylands and the Riverland region, through the collaborative approach, we quickly developed our four key themes, which continued to become focus areas as we further developed the MR plan. Our connected and resilient communities quickly told us what they did need to become more resilient. Through the Murraylands and Riverland plan, we quickly learned that community is there to support each other by coming together. As we heard earlier today, it’s become very evident that we can create resilience in a networked approach.

So our four common themes that we quickly discovered were our Together Community, our Planned and Proactive, our Productive and Collaborative features and Leadership in Action. So through our four themes, we soon learned that Together Community was reflective, to allow us to enable and support the development of a connected and inclusive community. Our Planned and Proactive sessions soon told us that we could create a proactive and adaptive, along with an innovative system of planning for and leveraging disruption. This became very evident in our abilities. Through our recent floods across our Murraylands and Riverland region, our Leadership in Action area focused on developing a system of leadership and nurturing our leaders across the region, whether they be formal or informal. As previously touched on, we also quickly identified that leadership fatigue and volunteer fatigue was becoming more and more evident. So in order to build a resilient system, we need to support these leaders across region to develop the next generation and our productive and collaborative futures. Again, also focused on creating those conditions to thrive now and into the future. So by developing these four common themes, it provided a more of a focused approach for our region to continue building our regional resilience, whether it be to drought or any other incidents that we may encounter now and into the future.

I’m going to quickly flick over to Ben and he’s going to chat you through our next stages, through our persist, adapt, and transform areas of regional resilience.

Ben Fee [01:50:52]:

Thanks, Analise. It has been quite a process really that we’ve been working through with our project partners, the Landscape Board, and also the Local Government Association. What we find is that we get really, really busy. We’re doing lots of stuff just to try and keep up, which keeps us going in a persist frame. It’s the stuff that we struggle with every single day. If we are looking at a world that’s becoming increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous, which is the world that we are seeing in our region, and the reason for us going into the Regional Drought Resilience Planning program. We are seeing that these shocks to the system are no longer what they used to be. We are needing to adapt. So how do we adapt? Well, we’re not saying that it’s a linear process. What we are seeing is that in order to adapt, we actually need to make an [evolsive] transform step before we can actually then flick back, adapt and move on with a new level of persisting.

So let’s take the floods for example. Right throughout the Murray-Darling Basin recently and up further through the East Coast of Australia, we’ve had really significant floods. How does that relate to a Drought Resilience Plan? Well, as you saw in the video, it certainly does because communities at the local scale were making decisions based around what they saw at the ground level and asking for governments and bodies like ours to do something fundamentally different. So there was transformation that was occurring from a community level right through the government in the way that we have responded to the recent drought. That has then with those transformative actions, shifted us back to a level of adapting to a new way of persisting. What we need to do though is to continue doing this over time. And what we’re seeing is that each individual group, each individual node in that network has their own solutions.

What our current systems struggle to do is to listen and is to recognise within the systems that they operate where they are persisting, just how to adapt to what is being heard on-ground. So if we just wrote another plan, nothing would change. Our challenge right now is having developed a process that has, through the Future Drought Fund in partnership with our State government, PIRSA and our local partners listening to community, how do we then take that forward? How do we then go from the Plan and keep this evolving? So it’s an enduring process where we learn from the local level, we do the transformations that we need to do, which then have us adapting and constantly moving ahead of the times to make sure that we can deal with this increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world. So Pip, I’m going to put it out to the audience out there, what can we do as a network through the Science to Practice Forum, through this wonderful opportunity we’ve got with the Future Drought Fund, to actually learn from each other so that we can keep transforming and we can adapt the ways that we need to in an increasingly uncertain world?

Pip Courtney [01:54:36]:

That’s a great call. Thank you both so much. It’s been very interesting to see what you’re all up to. Over there in SA. Ben and Analise, it was very detailed and we’re sorry, but we’ve run out of time for questions. But if anybody wants to go and have a look again, just wait till the whole forum is up online because it was a great little video as well, before you started talking. Thank you so much.

Now we are crossing to the northwest coast of Tasmania where Veronica Terry and her husband Rob farm potatoes, swedes, carrots, broccoli, and grains. Veronica is also a finance professional and certified economic developer. While Veronica and Rob have always grown grain and potatoes, other farming activities over the years have included contract grain and potato harvesting, spray contracting, and even winter dairy. Cow agistment agriculture is an important part of the Tasmanian economy and in her role at Regional Development Australia Tasmania, Veronica creates and enhances economic opportunities in her region. Can farmers work towards environmental resilience, financial opportunity, and financial resilience all at the same time? Veronica is combining her love of farming and finance to find out if using drought resilience can inspire innovation in ag finance. Over to you, Veronica Terry.

Veronica Terry [01:56:01]:

Thank you Pip. I’m coming from Pataway in Burnie, northwest coast of Tasmania. And thank you for the opportunity to talk about what is one of my favourite topics of conversation, using drought resilience to inspire innovation in agricultural finance. So I work with RDA as well, and RDA is an Australian government initiative. It was great to see Ben Lee from RDA Murraylands and Riverland on the previous presentation. We have around 50 RDAs around the country and we are designed to support economic opportunities and attract investment. So based on the northwest coast, agriculture is an important part of our economy. We have 16% of Tasmania’s farmland and create 41% of the state’s agricultural output. And I see ag finance as an important way to create opportunities and increase productivity in my region. So why do we need innovation in ag finance?

I’d like to start by just referring to the KPMG and National Farmers’ Federation report Talking 2030, which is about growing agriculture into a 100 billion industry. And in this report it talks about access to capital and how that is a key industry driver and how making our farms investible is essential as we seek capital for growth. And reading a quote here, ‘access to capital is perhaps the most important element in achieving the National Farmers’ Federation’s 2030 goals of a hundred billion in farm output’. And yes, this may seem an interesting thing to say, considering we’re coming off 90 billion of agricultural output this year as reported by ABARES. However, we are talking about drought resilience and now is a fantastic time to talk about financial resilience. So the debt to equity structure that we currently tend to lean towards most, you know, on a regular basis with our banks, does have its limitations.

And it does, I think, hold us back when it comes to growth improvements and productivity. And it stops young farmers getting into agriculture. It can be inflexible in difficult years. And to be frank, from our experience, it makes the hard years even harder when you need to meet repayments with little to no income and it can get pretty miserable. Risk management is actually something that we’ve already discussed at this forum. So we had Kerry Battersby from the Queensland Farmers’ Federation, she was talking about financial products and how they can be used as a buffer or a hedge against weather events, to mitigate risk and losses and to smooth income volatility, which is fantastic. So we’ve already covered that in the Science to Practice Forum. Then we’ve got investing for productivity, investing to protect our asset, protect our environment. And we’ve heard from Willie Brown from the Narwietooma Station and he was talking about investment in their landscape.

And I’ll quote him and say, ‘it’s a win-win for everyone. It’s a win for the environment, it’s a win for us because we get more kilos on our beef because we’ve got more grass’. And then we had Dr. Daniel Mendham from the CSIRO, he spoke about their work with Private Forest Tasmania in UTAS at Formosa at Cressy, where the internal rate of return when investing in their landscape was around 19% and shelter increased pasture production by 30%. So we can see all of those benefits. Why do we need innovation in ag finance? We need diversity of people. We need young people, we need ideas, enthusiasm, knowledge. And on the first day we heard from Joshua Gilbert, Worimi producer and I’ll quote him. He said, ‘we need to not just think about the diversity of commodities, we need to think about the diversity of people’. So these are all wonderful reasons to innovate in agricultural finance that we’ve already discussed at this forum. So why do investors need us?

Agriculture can generate a profit comparable to other asset classes. And when I look at that now, I actually think that that comparable is probably a little bit too humble. So you may have noticed the Rural Bank, Australian Farmland Values 2023 report came out, and I’ll use Tassie as an example, where compound annual return for land over the last 20 years was 10.9% per annum, and that’s only capital growth. So just for fun, I went onto the Australian Super website, they’re the biggest Super Fund in Australia. Makes sense. What’s their high growth option doing? So I found their returns for the last 10 years of their high growth option was 9.73%, and that is including capital growth and income. So our income goes up and down, so does shares. If we only break even based on those numbers, we are still actually performing better than a high growth superannuation fund investment option.

Maybe we need to be collectively more interested in how we can convert our hard work into our opportunities. So then we’ve talked about volatility. I think we all know about that, and that’s another great reason to attend the Science to Practice Forum and talk about drought resilience. We also have a low correlation to other asset classes, and we all know about diversification. We diversify our crops and we diversify our markets and how we sell our crops. So it shows that we’ve got a lot to offer. We can provide investment returns, diversification, and make investors happy, and we’re already doing a lot of the hard work. Next we talk about alignment of drought resilience and investor objectives. So all of this has been covered in this forum, so we are already doing some fantastic work. The building blocks are already there to innovate in agricultural finance, and there’s lots going on.

ESG has been mentioned a number of times, and that’s a fantastic assessment framework. And it’s used to assess sustainability and ethical impact of a client of a company’s activities. Triple bottom line. So that one is a measurement of success. So we are talking about people, we’re talking about profit, and we’re also talking about the planet. Impact investing. This is more to do with the motives of investors and generate where investors are interested in generating positive social or environmental impacts alongside financial returns. So this is all great investment language and investment language creates investment opportunities. And once again, we’re already doing the work. And our hard work in these areas is also, a great way to ensure we don’t end up with a stranded asset. If you want to delve a bit deeper into this, then you can look at the TCFD task force on climate related disclosures, and that shows, this is really language that banks are familiar with.

And while Australia doesn’t have mandates, we do have strong wording around this. New Zealand, Canada, the United Kingdom, their financial institutions have to do TCFD reporting. So if you’re interested, that’s worth delving into a bit more. And we are looking at biodiversity and carbon. Clearly those have been addressed comprehensively during this forum. Biodiversity is falls into the task force of nature related financial disclosures. So once again, if you want to delve a bit deeper, that’s the place to go, the TNFD. That is more to do with biodiversity and, and we have heard about Forico’s work with their natural capital accounting, which is fantastic. And this is just language. This is language that opens doors and creates opportunities and people can’t invest in something that they don’t understand. So finance is a tool. We need more tools in our toolbox.

Why use a spanner when you can use a rattle gun? You wouldn’t use a spanner to hammer a nail. Where are you at? What do you need? Look at cash flow, risk management, expansion. There are products already out there that we can be looking at that help us manage our business and create financial resilience. So have a look at those other tools that are available to you. What role do you want to play? Do you wanna play the tune that’s set for you by your financial institution? Or would you like to be a conductor of wealth? Choose who you partner with financially, choose the products that meet your needs and understand what you have to offer.

So how do we move forward? I’d like you to explore and really, we’re already exploring. We’re exploring ESG options. We’re exploring carbon, we’re exploring biodiversity. They have, and as Willie mentioned, it’s a win-win for the environment and it’s a and it’s a win for, from a profitability perspective, look at your options that there are banking options out there that provide you with discounts because of the work that you are already doing with carbon capture and biodiversity. And there are ways of managing your annual financial risks. Know your worth because what you do matters and investors want what you have. Keep learning information is a great way to create transparency, create a common language, and create an understanding so that people can invest in you and with you. So your drought resilience progress does have real world economic benefits, and you can talk to your bank about that and you can talk to a number of other institutions about that. And moving forward, I do think that the corporate agriculture, the ABS and ABARES do have an opportunity to lift the sector and by quantifying and sharing our good news stories because we are doing great things and we’re going places. And I’d like to really thank Rob Walters, Jared Greenville and Joe Edwards for your interest in pursuing this conversation with RDA Tasmania. And I’d like people to please reach out to me if this is a conversation you’d like to participate in. So thank you very much.

Pip Courtney [02:08:12]:

Thank you Veronica, from Tasmania. Veronica, we’ve run out of time for any questions, but that’s a fantastic presentation and I reckon if we have a chat in 10 years’ time, the financial language around agriculture will have completely changed. We’ll need a new dictionary. So thank you so much for giving us some insights. We’re crossing now to Albury to Dale Stringer from the Southern New South Wales Drought, Resilience, Adoption and Innovation Hub. Dale is the Chief Knowledge Broker at the Hub, based at Charles Sturt University. He’s going to share the innovative approach the Hub and its key partners have taken, drawing on existing relationships and engagement ecosystems across the region to create a more collaborative and effective approach to building resilience. That includes the creation of the Southern New South Wales Knowledge Broker Network, hosted within partner organisations who work together to share, support, collaborate, and learn.

Dale Stringer [02:09:09]:

Thanks very much Pip. And yeah, g’day everyone, my name’s Dale Stringer, I’m based with the Southern New South Wales Drought and Innovation Hub here at Charles Sturt University in Albury and my presentation today is Using the Knowledge Broker Network for Disruptive Design. So, and look, I think to start with, it’s just fantastic to have seen the presentations today and note the strong theme, around the people side of drought resilience, both from a community and social perspective, but also the value of focusing on the people side for the environmental and agricultural outcomes as well. So I think the Hubs themselves are a disruptive, well, put in place as a disruptive mechanism, to help change the way that regions and industries collectively come together to improve clients’ or our, the farmers or stakeholders in our region, improve the way they prepare to deal with and recover from drought.

And in Southern New South Wales, we identified that in order for us to play a significant role in that space, there was a few key issues we, or a few key things we really wanted to address. One was about how do we, given the footprint, how do we have a good strong connection, understanding of the issues, the priorities and the values of people, across that footprint properly, how do we avoid duplication? Julia Spicer pointed out earlier that duplication and competition aren’t a productive way of going about that. So how do we avoid cluttering an already busy space? How do we proactively develop solutions with people who are most affected by drought, and how do we involve them in developing the solutions? And how do we also create a legacy of improved outcomes?

So, the Drought Hubs are funded through to June 24 at the moment. So how do we ensure that the legacy of drought resilience building continues on after that? And so the challenge we saw is both logistical, given the footprint all Hubs have that sort of issue and also relational. So how will we as a small group of people coming together, how do we manage the relationships and draw the best from the way we go about it? And so we invested in the Southern New South Wales Knowledge Broker network. And this was a really conscious investment by the Hub in the people and the skills and the time required to really get it right, rather than invest directly in projects.

So something we thought long and hard about, and to do this, we engage with the networks that exist. So across our region, we have really strongly connected, well-functioning organisations that have the strength of relationship and the trust with people, to be able to find some of those answers around priorities, understand the value. So the first port of call really was to make contact with those people and then bring them together in a network that enables us to draw on those strengths. We started out with about 18 different Knowledge Brokers placed in organisations around the region up now to close to 25. And that’s purely through, people seeing the momentum building and joining in, to sort of be involved, and that’s not 25 individuals working with their local communities, as such, but 25 sets of experiences, sets of skills and qualifications and professional networks that are all being brought together under the banner of the Hub to make sure that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

So, not only do all those organisations and the Hub come together as individuals, but the sum of the parts is larger because we are learning from each other. And sharing that experience, building that capacity through working out how to fill the gaps collectively and capitalise on the strengths of each other. So what does that look like? So, to bring the Knowledge Broker network together and get some momentum supported, we have five sort of key activities and enabling processes. And the first one’s really building capacity and co-design. We have a strong belief that genuine co-design is a great way to do business. But it’s often misunderstood. And I don’t think a lot of the time we talk about co-design, but actually, getting it implemented takes time and takes skills.

So we, we are trying to build the capacity of the organisations, all the Knowledge Brokers across our region, in the mindset, change in mindset necessary to facilitate proper co-design, and also some of the skills. So some of that’s physical skills, or personal skills around facilitation. Some of it’s around documentation processes, and some of it, the big one’s around mindset. Secondly, we come together regularly to really build that personal linkage around the network. So we meet fortnightly online, but then we also come together as a group, to really try and get to know each other and get to know each other’s organisations and learn from each other. We have an online collaboration platform that helps us collate information. It’s a central point that’s a directory for people. It’s a central point of resources.

We can share knowledge on there. There’s a discussion, you know, it’s a discussion forum, a shared calendar of activity. So that’s really important, in supporting that network as well. We have support resources, so we actually have some technical, co-design experts who work with our Knowledge Brokers to make sure that they are supported in the process of co-design and they can be checking in regularly, about whether, you know, to build their confidence in their ability to do it. We have administration support and the operational support around that Knowledge Broker network as well. And we also have co-design articles or, you know, how-to’s for certain steps of that process to really build the confidence in that network and the individuals.

And then we also come together with ideas for ‘em. So this is really, the network forms the core of the ideas for us, but they are also open to other parts, other stakeholders. But we find them a really good way of the Knowledge Brokers and others sharing the ideas that they’re hearing in the community, sharing the priorities that they’re working on, whether it’s in response to an investment call or whether it’s just a general ideas sharing. And we find that really helps to increase collaboration sometimes with partners that we previously wouldn’t have thought of collaborating with. But certainly in between the partnerships formed through the network, also to help to structure projects better. So it’s in quite an open form and we’re building the trust in the network to be able to provide honest feedback.

So we find that that’s a really strong label. Those things add up to a really supported network where we can be free with our ideas and be constructively critical on those sorts of things as well. And this helps us all come together to put together a much deeper understanding of what’s required by our communities to help address drought resilience, but importantly, who needs to be involved. So it really helps us understand who is out there, what skills are out there, and how we can get better local impact, how we can work most effectively together. And from all that, we’re developing project proposals, building funding prospectus and business cases to really drive the heart of building resilience, because they have input and buy-in, they’re structured and designed locally, but they have that support of the broader network.

So what does this all look like? Well picture this, if we can get it all right. But the outcomes that we need, and I think we can achieve, include creating a legacy of co-design. So not just a co-design process because it has to be done because we’re involved in a Hub, but a practiced and supported ability of partners to keep rolling this out beyond the life of the Hub, and create an accepted way of doing things, with people, rather than two people. And something that’s both at the organisational level and the community level. So the organisations have got to be skilled at it, but then the communities have to be accepting of it and trust the process as well. We also have a better way of identifying and analysing key issues.

So the network really comes together to, you know, comes together at a central level, but it’s a real web and a network of contacts on the ground. So we’re really identifying those key issues and bringing them to bear in a way that they can be properly pulled apart and dealt with. We want a legacy of more collaborative and impactful responses to those issues that are being raised. So, you know, working groups, working together, farmers having an active role, inputting into what these responses look like. Researchers, you know, actively designing programs around these needs and working with the producers and the deliverers of the outcomes to generate a better outcome because people are engaged, because they’re bought into the process and ultimately influencing how investment comes into invest in these better outcomes because we believe that the impact will be greater, the buy-in will be greater and the investors can have faith that investing in programs that come through this model will be more impactful than the current, you know, competitive or, you know, top down approach that we often see.

So that’s what we hope we’re building through the network and what will live on beyond the Hub timeframe. So, just in closing, to reiterate again, this has been a really conscious investment by the Hub. We think that the projects will come, they are coming and rolling out, so projects are flowing through and being rolled out through this process. So there is on-ground action happening. But we believe that this is setting ourselves up with a sustainable and systemic investment that will really improve the way we do things. And it’s not a short-term action, but we think the impact will gather momentum and will be really meaningful. And just finally, I’d like to just acknowledge all the partners in the network. There’s some of them there and there is also a lot of the industry involvement as well, but it’s been a real challenge to pull together and the commitment that each of these agencies, farming systems groups and others have shown to getting a better outcome’s been fantastic. So just to acknowledge their commitment and cooperation in that partnership.

Pip Courtney [02:21:45]:

Thank you, Dale. We’ve got a question here coming on Slido. Because it’s a new way of, it’s a new process, any unexpected results?

Dale Stringer [02:21:56]:

Yeah, we’ve had some unexpected results, particularly in the interaction between network members and the sort of incidental capacity building. So we are finding, for instance, with the farming systems groups, that they are making changes to their own internal business structure as a result of partnering with others and seeing different ways of doing things, doing collective approaches and sharing of resources, even that perhaps mightn’t have happened before. And just in increasing collaboration, not just in the drought space, but we think we’re seeing that amongst partners across the board. So it’s actually filtering out into the rest of their business as well, not just in the drought resilience space.

Pip Courtney [02:22:42]:

That’s great news, Dale. Thank you so much for your time. See you next year. Bye.

Dale Stringer [02:22:48]:

Cheers.

Pip Courtney [02:22:49]:

Thank you. Okay. And before we head to lunch, here’s another example of a Regional Drought Resilience Plan. This time it’s in the Wimmera region of Victoria, where they’re building drought resilience in the community by focusing on small business owners. Enjoy the video. I’ll see you after lunch.

[Video voiceover begins]

Chris Sounness [02:23:31]:

The Future Drought Fund, Regional Drought Resilience program for the Wimmera Southern Mallee, I think is all about preparation. Resilience is about preparation, not the response.

Dr Cathy Tischler [02:23:41]:

A lot of the resilience work that’s been done to date has focused on the land and to an extent agriculture, which I think is really important. But we’ve gotta challenge our thinking in that space a little bit more and look at how we create resilient communities as a whole. I think we’ve actually got to do more to prepare all the people in our communities for times of climate variability.

Chris Sounness [02:24:05]:

The biggest challenge in our community isn’t actually the farming systems. We have 23 small towns under a thousand people, and they’re the ones that are most impacted because when the drought hits, the farmers spend tend to spend less money locally.

Dr Cathy Tischler [02:24:18]:

Small business owners are very independently resilient, but we also felt that small businesses experienced significant hardship through the millennial drought and other drought periods in our recent past. And we felt that they were largely expected to get on with business on their own. And a number of them spoke about other businesses that had had folded up and left the area during times of drought.

Chan Uoy [02:24:52]:

The next drought is around the corner. We know that. So as a business owner, I guess we’ve, you know, had to diversify. So for example, we’re not just a gift shop, we are also, you know, wine bar, we also accommodation. So we have to be flexible and versatile to adjust to the circumstances, the crisis and the environment. Also, as a community member, you need to support each other, boost morale and have community engagement, and also create activities that people can forget the hardships for a while.

Dr Cathy Tischler [02:25:24]:

A really important consideration for us going forward is how do we maintain the vibrancy and the diversity of business in our community when we’re experiencing periods of drought and we’ve got that localised cash flow tightening?

Chan Uoy [02:25:39]:

My first time coming to Dimboola from Melbourne, I really thought, where’s everyone? How do I bring customers to a sleepy town? The goal was to create something really quite bold, quite out there, quite imaginative. So I came up with a steampunk event. Dimboola was a 19th century railway town. It’s got the architecture, it’s got the intimacy of the street scape to host a street party. We had nearly 4,000 people. We had three stages, 12 bands. We had a multicultural flash mob from the Wimmera Development Association. So 55 different cultures performed the Time Walk flash mob. That was quite phenomenal according to locals who had lived in the Wimmera all their life. Ultimately the event was about creating joy for the community.

Chris Sounness [02:26:30]:

We want our kids to think it’s a great place to live, grow up, but also that they can see some educational opportunities and they can see some great career opportunities locally.

Chan Uoy [02:26:42]:

I think the Drought Resilience Plan is really important for the area because you need a backup plan. You know, when you’re too dependent on agriculture, which is what the region is all based on, you need plan B.

Chris Sounness [02:26:53]:

Our Plan clearly articulated how we can build that resilience in our towns. Drought, I suppose, is what brings to the surface, some of the underpinning challenges our communities face. And often we try and tackle those challenges in the middle of drought, which is actually possibly the most challenging times to tackle it. And that’s why this program I’m so excited about and the funding from the Federal government, because it’s actually doing the preparation work, tackling it when we’ve got a chance to think about it, rather than actually under the pressure of trying to respond.

[Video voiceover ends]

[Recording ends]

**Acknowledgement of Country**

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of Australia and their continuing connection to land and sea, waters, environment and community. We pay our respects to the Traditional Custodians of the lands we live and work on, their culture, and their Elders past and present.

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