

# THE REALITY OF DROUGHT FOR QUEENSLAND COMMUNITIES



The trope: cue the sun (but not in a good way). Next frame: a parched, cracked land stretches out for kilometres in every direction. A farmer, with deep creases around his eyes, hands in his pockets, kicks the dusty soil into a dirty cloud that disperses as fast as it forms.

It's a bleak and desperate image, and one that is being replayed again and again in our collective imaginations spurred on by Australia's media.

In August this year, Australian radio juggernaut Alan Jones leaned over his microphone with passionate intent and said:

"Can someone in government today declare this a national disaster and apply all the resources of government to addressing the disaster exactly as was done when Cyclone Larry hit Queensland in March 2006?"

## How bad is the drought and what's causing it?

The drought, currently affecting New South Wales and Queensland, is being described by many farmers as the worst drought in living memory. In Queensland, 57.4 per cent of the state is affected.

This year, autumn rainfall across Australia

was 57mm below average; the driest autumn since the 1902 Federation drought. As a year overall, 2018 is not one of the driest on record, there are 19 other years that were drier. Despite this, the current drought has been categorised as severe and the ramifications for farmers and communities have been crippling. Some farmers have been forced to sell stock and others spend long days hand-feeding animals in addition to facing level six water restrictions.

Low humidity, warmer temperatures, higher wind speeds and greater amounts of sunshine all contribute to water loss from soils and plants when rain deficiency is already occurring.

As a phenomenon, droughts are less well understood than simpler weather events. Drought severity indexes include hundreds of metrics to provide detailed representations of what is occurring.

Some metrics are affected by natural cyclical patterns such as El Nino and La Nina. For other metrics, such as precipitation, there is evidence the rapid decline in winter rainfall in southern Australia is directly linked to climate change. Other factors are more difficult to discern from background climate variability.

## What lies ahead?

Going into summer, the World Meteorological organisation (WMO) predicts there is a 70 per cent chance of another El Nino developing in the next three months.

"WMO does not expect the anticipated El Nino to be as powerful as the 2015-2016 event, but it will still have considerable impacts," WMO secretary-general Petteri Taalas said.

An El Nino summer means fewer tropical cyclones but it also means less rain, which isn't great news for Queensland. A hot and dry summer also brings a higher risk of bush fires. For Fire and Emergency Services deputy commissioner Doug Smith, the risk is already clear.

"With above-average fuel loads in that area, low soil moisture, and a low probability of any rainfall of significance, the fire outlook for that part of Queensland is very serious," he said.

## Farming - the constant gamble

Feeding the nation has always been a gamblers game. John F Kennedy was a man who understood this tenet well. He once said, "The farmer is the only man in our economy who buys everything at retail, sells everything at wholesale and pays the freight both ways."



The upfront costs for farmers are staggering; stock, machinery, seed, feed, infrastructure, disease management – the list is endless. Farmers and their families also have the more urban costs to consider on top of this; a mortgage, school fees, doctor’s appointments, etc.

The reality of life when it stops raining means farmers’ finances can be stretched to breaking point. Not only that, the emotional toll of loss of stock through starvation can be heartbreaking.

**How does it affect regional communities?**

While the focus in the media has been on farmers in drought-affected areas, the flow-on effect to towns and communities as a result of decreased income is palpable.

Unemployment due to a weakened local economy is felt keenly by not just farmers but by entire communities; a point not lost on Federal MP Barnaby Joyce.

“Towns also dislike the idea that drought equals ‘only farmer’. The money in the drought towns dries up as well,” he said.

“The discretionary expenditure first, then things like clothes, hairdresser, cafes, restaurants.”

**How can the effects be mitigated?**

The key to boosting these towns, Mr Joyce said, is investment in public infrastructure.

“During drought, it is the best time to start on roadworks, build dog fences... a major road project can keep a town going with the motels booked and the meals sold at the local hotel,” he says.

Water infrastructure, both in farm and major public water projects, show that you have learnt from the climate and are preparing for the future.”

In Balonne, where drought has gripped the town for the past six years, a \$725,000 grant will be used to build strategic wild dog exclusion fencing. The infrastructure will not only improve lambing rates but boost economic growth in the region.

“Our region has been hit by extended drought and generally sheep are better adapted to arid or semi-arid land than cattle, so it makes economic sense to help landholders to make the change to sheep,” Balonne Shire Council Mayor Richard Marsh said.

In Toowoomba, help has come in the form of rates relief by deferring rates and water notices.

Toowoomba Regional Council Mayor Paul Antonio said the decision would provide much-needed respite to residents who have been experiencing hardship.

“The Toowoomba Region has been drought-declared for more than four years,” he said.

“The producers in our area haven’t received significant rainfall in a long time and are in desperate need of a helping hand. While we can only pray for more rain, what we can do is provide assistance to residents with their rates notices.

“Following the 2011 floods we were able to provide assistance to those most-affected and that’s what we will be doing again this time.”

The Australian Tax Office (ATO) has also introduced some conditions to help not just farmers but business owners in drought-affected communities, including waiving fees and interest charges, allowing more time to pay and payment plans with interest-free periods.

Another solution for communities may lie in tapping water sources. While there are differing opinions on the use of groundwater, Queensland has been at the forefront of many new groundwater projects in the past few years, including coal seam gas water repurposing, which has already benefited many rural and farming communities with better access to water, and improvements in their struggling yields (though not without controversy).

Across Queensland and NSW, more than 500 bores and 6500km of bore drains across drought-stricken Queensland and NSW must be re-drilled and controlled if landholders are to put the water to better use.

Federal Government subsidies for farmers wanting more control over existing bores on their land have been available for decades but farmers must first find the money themselves; a challenging task in the middle of a drought.

For the long-term outlook though, Pete Mailler, fellow of the Australian Rural Leadership Foundation fellow and owner of 6000-acre grain and beef arm on the NSW and Queensland border, says there needs to be a different kind of action.

“Weather is a function of climate, so if you believe the weather patterns have changed, and every farmer I speak agrees the weather patterns have changed, then, by definition, you agree the climate is changing,” he said.

“...globally, we have a really important role to show leadership in this space, to try and shore up our operating environment for generations to come.” ◀