

<b>2010.44</b>	<b>DROUGHT RELIEF POLICY</b>
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**1. PURPOSE**

To provide guidance in addressing the impact of drought economically, socially, physically and psychologically.

**2. SCOPE**

This policy addresses the real impact of drought on people and communities, from suicide, psychiatric, psychological and socio-cultural influences as well economic effect on the shire community.

**3. OBJECTIVE**

That Council recognize the alarming growth in rural based suicide and lobby for prevention strategies and programs to be more widely available within the Shire. Council to develop and maintain a skills/employment audit within the Shire and lobby for Federal and State Governments to provide greater incentives to employers who provide apprenticeships, traineeships and vocational training. A multifaceted approach to increase the population of the Shire should be initiated to maintain effective infrastructure to alleviate the impact of drought.

To follow the policy and procedures attached.

Drafted by:	Community Development	Adopted by Manex:	12 <sup>th</sup> January 2010	Dated:	12 <sup>th</sup> January 2010	GM's Signature:	
MANEX Reviewed:	January 2010	Council Reviewed:	Organisation Policy	Resolution No:	N/A	Pages:	1 of 9



# **MOREE PLAINS SHIRE COUNCIL DROUGHT RELIEF POLICY AND PROCEDURES**

## **Acknowledgement**

This body of work is the result of the professional collaboration between Moree Plains Shire Council's Community Development staff and Mrs. Veronica Barwick, Barwon Division of General Practice.

June 2009

## **Drought in Australia**

In Australia the term drought conjures up an image of desolation, stunted or failed crops, undernourished livestock, skeletal trees and dry water reserve and dams. But what is drought exactly? The term does not simply mean low rainfall although this is definitely a sign of drought. Drought is an ongoing, abnormally dry period where a community's water needs are not being met. The definition of drought however differs according to who is measuring it:

- Meteorologists monitor drought by looking at the rainfall deficiencies,
- Agriculturalists measure its effect upon primary industries;
- Hydrologists examine the groundwater levels, and;
- Sociologists observe the impact a drought has on communities.

## **The impact of drought**

There seems to be an emerging understanding on the part of our policy and the greater community that Australia is the driest continent on earth next to Antarctica. To people living in a rural area droughts are features of life that everyone will experience from time to time. The overwhelming effects are diverse but urban people often summon up an image of dying stock and empty dams. Although these images are often correct with some of the immediate effects being major disruptions to cropping programmes; droughts affect the quality and number of vital breeding stock and greatly reduce farm productivity. This, in turn has a dramatic impact on local and national economies.

Significant environmental damage is also one effect of drought. Vegetation loss, soil erosion, and water quality and salinity all have an adverse impact on the long-term health of Australia's rural environment.

The adverse impacts also have devastating effect on individuals and their families who rely on the land for their income. Some of these include loss of income with a significant marked and sustained increase in the average debt level. A resultant reliance on welfare payments occur, some of which are often disguised as subsidies. These subsidies have the potential to exacerbate debt because financial institutions offer subsidised loans, approved by the State Government, that could eventually amount to \$500,000 (NSW State Government 2009). Once the subsidy period is removed, this increased debt must be serviced at market interest rates; the debt may now be far outside of the borrower's capability of servicing. Failure to service the debt inevitably results in extreme measures being considered, or indeed, imposed by the lending institution such as foreclosure.

These extreme events may now have lead to the manifestation of psychiatric or psychological problems which will be considered below.

## **Drought proofing initiatives**

Contemporary scholarship generally advocates water management and storage initiatives as the answer to mitigating both urban and rural sector drought effects. It cannot be denied that efficient water management and storage is integral to the economic future and sustainability of the nation. However, efforts to 'drought proof' the rural sector must also reflect serious consideration of the socio-economic resourcefulness of rural society. In order to partially address this problem, it is considered necessary that Local Government take a leading role in the development of partnerships with other agencies.

## **A snapshot of Moree Plains Shire Local Government Area**

Moree Plains Shire is one of the largest Local Government Areas within NSW with a total area of 17,927.7 square kilometres and a population of 14,167; the majority of which, 8,305 or 58.6%, reside in Moree (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006). These data demonstrate the sparse demographics of the area revealing a population of 1.3 persons per square kilometre. The Shire boasts a high Indigenous population of 19.4% of the total (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006). Its administration centre is Moree which is 678 kilometres North West of Sydney.

Moree Plains Shire has recorded the highest population decline of any local government area within inland NSW (Barwick 2009). A view over time shows the 1991 census reported the Moree Plains Shire population as 16,950 people. In 1996 this decreased by 1,433 to a total of 15,517 people. In 2001, the Shire recorded an increase of 220 people to total 15,737. However Moree Plains Shire saw a net migration in the 2006 census of 1,570 people to total the current 14,167. Over the last 4 census', (since 1991), Moree Plains Shire has decreased in population by 2,783 people (Census Applications 2006).

Moree Plains Shire is recognised as the pre-eminent agricultural shire in Australia (Young 1991) with high agricultural productivity and limited industrial diversity, resulting in the whole community being affected by the varying seasons and commodity prices; the most recent drought resulting in a migration of families seeking alternative employment opportunities. This challenge is exacerbated by the progressive technological advances and mechanisation within the cotton industry and the decrease in the production of cereal crops and stock. These decreases are demonstrated by the decline in the number of itinerant workers who routinely stayed in the area for periods of between three and six months. As Moree's economy is relatively large but highly specialised with a strong focus on being amongst Australia's best agricultural centres, there are evident weaknesses in this approach. The volatility in the area's economy is highly likely to have serious implications for the continued provision of services and on the capacity to attract and retain new business and both skilled and semi/unskilled employees (Barwick 2009).

Rural residents face issues during drought that, although evident within the general population, have a far greater impact both economically and socially than the larger demographic. In order to address these most significant and fundamentally disabling consequences it is necessary to identify the impacts rural people and their lifestyles suffer under the adverse conditions being experienced.

### **Addressing the impacts of drought: a synopsis**

**Suicide:** A fundamental and disturbing general opinion by acknowledged scholarship (Suicide Safety Network Inc 1999; Allen 2000; Australian Bureau of Statistics 2000; Commonwealth of Australia 2000) that middle-aged male suicide, particularly in rural areas is at an all time high. It is also acknowledged that this statistic will continue to rise as the population ages. The female suicide rate data is less than 25% of the male rate (Hoogland and Pieterse 2000). Even more disturbing however is the paucity of data to provide attempted suicide rates (Baume 1994).

**Causes of suicide:** Some factors considered in this body of work which influence suicide in rural areas include:

**Psychiatric influences** such as depression, substance abuse and alcohol abuse;

**Psychological influences** such as self-esteem, coping with crisis, relationships, coping skills, loss and grief (particularly loss or possible loss of the farm, for example), feelings of worthlessness, depression, isolation, alienation, guilt and shame, and;

**Socio-cultural influences** such as unemployment, marital status, economic cycles, demographics – rural or urban, societal values and societal expectations (Hoogland and Pieterse 2000).

What is evident from the perspective of people suffering from the results of drought, particularly those who live on the land, a number of the above factors have profound resonance. Feelings of inadequacy, worthlessness, depression, alienation and guilt and intense shame are to be expected when one is about to lose one's way of life and means of providing for one's family.

These feelings are intermingled with depression, isolation and alienation (the belief there is no-one to whom one can turn), which compounds into relationship problems and possibly alcohol and substance abuse; further complicating matters.

## **Recommendations**

1. That Council recognise the alarming growth in rural based suicide generally but also within the older male cohort specifically;
2. That Council lobby for suicide prevention strategies and programmes to be made more widely available within the Shire;
3. That Council support the Area Health System in its efforts to provide support through regular forums and counselling approaches;
4. That Council support efforts to educate the community about mental health generally and in accessing local free psychological services;
5. That Council develop partnerships with mental health agencies and practitioners to address the growing crisis of mental health needs in the Shire, particularly targeting the rural and remote sector;
6. That Council lobby for additional training of mental health professionals and the need for increased staffing within this sector of the Area Health System. Consideration could be given to recruiting and training educational professionals and offer incentives to work in rural and remote areas;
7. That Council lobby for general education, training and personal development such as Mental Health First Aid and suicide/depression awareness forums for example in schools and adult education or workplace settings (Barwick 2009). A focus to be placed on males during their school years to encourage them to take a greater interest in their general and mental health and self esteem;
8. That Council support the targeting of individual crisis intervention for example, on farm counselling and further referral as considered necessary (Barwick 2009);
9. That Council disseminate the Rural and Remote Services Telephone Directory developed by Council staff and the Barwon Division of General Practice Community Support Drought Worker (mental health professional), Mrs Veronica Barwick (**attachment 1**);
10. That Council fund, in partnership with other agencies within the relevant community of practice general skills in home financial and farm management, relationship skills and community participation. This educational process could be achieved in part through awareness forums;

11. That Council further develop the building of social capital, including bonding and linking but particularly the social bridging capacities of women;
12. That Council acknowledge and support the cultivation of local community initiatives (Barwick 2009).

### **Economic considerations**

The loss of productivity, skills base decline, the loss of farms, the resultant increase in unemployment multiplied by the number of employees on the property and the subsequent impost on the public purse has a multiplying effect on both the local and national economy. More and more, in this region, properties are sold to international conglomerates and international State bodies (China for example). This practice, although financially prudent, fails to preserve the social fabric of the area and reduces the economic advantage to the Shire.

Other important considerations include the loss of skills important to the well-being of the local area. Often, many farmers have great ability in a number of areas such as mechanical and general engineering, livestock husbandry and grain development, grain cleaning and marketing for example. These skills have, in many cases, been learned 'on the job' therefore the individual may not possess accredited qualifications.

### **Recommendations**

1. That Council develop and maintain a skills/employment audit within the Shire. Note: Council's HR staff developed a skills audit in May 2009;
2. That Council lobby for Federal and State Governments to provide greater incentives to employers who provide apprenticeships, traineeships and vocational training;
3. That Council develop a Business Unit to provide employment brokerage for people not catered for under the existing Government funded agencies who generally concentrate on the long term unemployed;
4. That Council, as an adjunct to the above Business Unit offer training in the various skills required within the Shire; examples of these might include General Induction Cards, Traffic Control, work ready skills, customer service, interview techniques, career planning, resume writing, grooming, interpersonal skills and first aid; all of these training packages could be procured and offered without becoming an RTO if licenced to the provider;
5. That Council develop a partnership with a Peak Body such as the NSW Farmer's Federation or the NSW Department of Primary Industries to research value-adding, alternative crops, changes in agricultural methods and sustainability initiatives within the Shire but, more specifically, for individual farmers;
6. That Council develop a partnership with a Peak Body such as the NSW Farmer's Federation or the NSW Department of Primary Industries to provide Mentors for individual farmers who find themselves in crisis;
7. That Council develop a partnership with a Peak Body such as the NSW Farmer's Federation or the NSW Department of Primary Industries to provide Mentors for individual female farmers who are, or who's partners, are in crisis;

8. That Council develop a partnership with a Peak Body to research a co-operative approach to farming within the community of practice. This methodology could have such advantages as shared machinery, shared cropping results, shared land use to maximise productivity and others. Clearly the legal ramifications would require some clarification however this issue would be included in the partnership brief;
9. That Council lobby the NSW TAFE system to provide local bridging courses for displaced rural workers who are otherwise skilled in various areas such as welding, mechanical repairs, heavy vehicle driving, plant operations, for example, so that these skills become accredited with the minimum of bureaucracy. This intrinsically implies the acknowledgment of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL);
10. That Council support and promote the recognition of 'women's skills' advocating for societal change in this area. Many skills held by women have often been honed through on the 'job learning' and are frequently not considered of value in the male dominated workforce, also, and not uncommonly, by the women themselves (Commonwealth of Australia 1991), and;
11. That Council actively seek recurrent funding through its Grant Officer for its initiatives to 'drought proof' the Shire.

### **Social considerations**

The potential loss of the development of social capital, particularly by women, should be of concern to any community. This statistically significant loss is realised when families move away from their neighbours whom they may have known for many years to an urban area and where they have little, if any, social connectedness. Feelings of connectedness take many years to develop, if at all, when the migrants are in their latter years.

Males are often the most difficult cohort to access when health issues are being discussed or promoted. Health is defined as a complete physical, mental and social wellbeing; not merely the absence of disease or infirmity (Williamson 1995). Health statistics show that being male is a risk factor for premature mortality from infancy to old age and many myths exist in relation to what represents appropriate attitudes and behaviours for men. Some of these are the personal beliefs about masculinity and attitudes that place work and other commitments above health issues. 'The Aussie Bloke' culture, 'she will be right mate, can kill or put men at risk' (Denner 2001, p. 2).

The population of Moree Plains Shire Local Government Area is declining at an alarming rate. Between the Census' of 1991 to 2006, 2,783 residents have been lost from the economy (Census Applications 2006). The Australian Bureau of Statistics have projected the Shire's population up until 2022 and a consistent decline is predicted (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2008). In order to mitigate further losses a determined effort to attract new residents is recommended. These residents could be recruited from various backgrounds and ethnicities who would possess many of the area's required skills and who would also develop businesses in the Shire resulting in further employment opportunities.

### **Recommendations**

1. That Council initiate a multifaceted approach to increase the population of the Shire.

2. That Council fully support local community initiatives which bring the population together. This would stimulate the development of social capital.
3. That Council, during its deliberations for low cost housing, consider the needs of displaced rural workers as a cohort who may be in need of such provision;
4. That Council develop partnerships with the Hunter/New England Area Health Service and other appropriate members of this community of practice to educate the male cohort about the need to take positive measures about all facets of their health;
5. That Council lobby the Area Health Service and State Government to increase the number of male counsellors who have a knowledge or understanding of rural life to cater for the gender specific needs and attitudes of men;
6. That Council develop a partnership with appropriate health professionals to educate males, particularly young males, about the social problematic of 'male identity' issues, and;
7. That Council encourage and financially support education workshops about the workplace hazards of farming including the diseases that may be transferred by stock.

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## **HISTORY**

Original Policy – Moree Plains Shire Council Drought Relief Policy 2010

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On:

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