Future Drought Fund: Drought Resilient Soils and Landscapes Grants Program

Feedback for applicants

Overview

Applications to the grant opportunity opened on 1 December 2021 and closed on 11 January 2022. The grant opportunity received 144 applications. There was a strong interest in the program and successful applications were of a very high standard. Applications were rigorously assessed according to the procedure detailed in the Grant Opportunity Guidelines.

This feedback is provided to assist grant applicants to understand what generally comprised a strong application and the content of quality responses to the assessment criteria for this grant opportunity.

Following the assessment process, 26 applications were selected for funding, to a value of $23,109,559 (GST exclusive). The selected applicants provided well-written responses to all the assessment criteria. The proposed activities met all the program's eligibility requirements and clearly demonstrated how they would contribute to its outcomes, as outlined in the Grant Opportunity Guidelines.

The decision to award grant funding to projects was made by the Drought Minister based on the recommendations of the program's independent Selection Advisory Panel. When assessing applications, the Panel had regard to whether the proposed project is in scope, as well as alignment with and the extent to which the project meets both the Future Drought Fund's Funding Plan and the Program's objectives and outcomes. The Panel also considered the relative value of the grant sought.

This feedback aims to assist applicants to understand what generally comprised a strong application, and how they can improve their chances of success in future grant opportunities.

Feedback

Broadly speaking, strong projects clearly supported drought resilience and had well-designed methodologies. Applicants demonstrated that they are well-placed to deliver, achieve meaningful impacts and promote outcomes of the project with broader audiences and across wide geographic areas. Evidence of strong, effective partnerships was also clear in these applications.

Contribution to program outcomes and demonstration of improved drought resilience

- The successful applicants showed a clear understanding of the objective of the program to trial and demonstrate how scaling of particular practices (or combinations of practices) to improve management of natural capital can build drought resilience. They also acknowledged that the program aims to create and communicate an evidence-base and case studies that contribute to scaling out the successful practices.

- Stronger projects were clearly focused on demonstration to drive adoption. Some lower ranked applications included a heavy emphasis on applied research and/or development, which was not the focus of the program.

- Australian Government grants are funded by public money and suitable projects were selected on the basis of their understanding of the objective and aims of the program. Successful applicants proposed activities which were eligible, appropriate and considered effective for achieving the program objectives. They demonstrated their suitability for public funding, value with relevant money and met the requirements outlined in the Grant Opportunity Guidelines. Successful applications included strong responses to all assessment criteria (more below).

- Many applicants could have more clearly articulated how their project would contribute to program outcomes. The connections to drought resilience were often implied and relied on the reader making assumptions. Strong applications clearly explain the connection, mechanism and specific link between their proposed activity and better drought resilience.

- Low ranking applications often lacked sufficient relevant detail and evidence to describe project outcomes and activities and how the project will directly contribute towards the program objective and outcomes. Applications that provided limited details about project activities did not rank highly compared to those that did.

- Higher ranking applications more clearly articulated the project activities and what they would deliver, making stronger arguments, backed with some evidence, for the proposition they put forward.

- In any future applications for similar grants, we suggest you closely consider:
  - checking the Grant Opportunity Guidelines to ensure your proposed project is a good fit for the program
  - addressing all the criteria outlined in the Grant Opportunity Guidelines ensuring the application clearly demonstrates how the proposed project meets the program's outcomes and linking project activities to those outcomes
  - outlining the reasons that the project will provide the best value for taxpayer's funds to deliver benefits to agricultural communities.

Answers against selection criteria

- Each applicant was required to meet the following criteria:

  - contribution to the drought resilience of Australian agriculture

  - ability of the project to deliver and demonstrate impact at scale

  - value for money in the use of public funding

  - capability to deliver the project.

- Strong applicants comprehensively explained ways to improve drought resilience. Drought resilience was the primary focus in these applications, not one that is secondary or ancillary to other aims such as sustainability.

- As part of this focus, strong applications clearly articulated links between proposed activities and drought resilience, productivity and profitability.

- Applicants also outlined pathways to share outcomes of the project with other farmers, land managers, regions or areas. In addition, strong answers included clear monitoring and evaluation approaches and communication strategies.

- Strong applicants clearly demonstrated the ability of their project to deliver and demonstrate impacts at scale. They provided details of how the project will reach broader audiences, cover larger geographic landscapes and lead to adoption beyond its life.

- Strong applicants provided evidence of support from relevant stakeholders and community members, including from Indigenous communities. There was evidence that applicants leveraged existing networks (producer, farming systems, NRM groups) and previous projects. Most proactively secured interest from their local regional Drought Resilience Adoption and Innovation Hub.

- Strong applicants demonstrated value for money and public benefits from the project. Where relevant, they clearly acknowledged private benefits and succinctly outlined how these are outweighed by public benefits, including by large co-contributions that in some cases were higher than the requested funding. Importantly these applicants emphasised and showed evidence of interest from agricultural communities and their willingness to engage in the project.

- Strong applicants clearly demonstrated their capability to deliver the project by articulating the roles, skills, expertise, qualifications, and credentials of participants and/or consortia members. Applicants explicitly demonstrated how all these attributes add value to the project.

- Successful applicants also outlined their organisations' history in administering projects of the size and type proposed.

- Strong answers listed potential/perceived risks that could occur during the course of the project, the consequences of these risks and what measures they would put in place to mitigate those risks.

Writing style and level of details

- Applications needed to address the selection criteria clearly and concisely. The best applications were succinct, written in plain English, and clearly outlined the purpose of the project.

- Higher ranked applications clearly articulated exactly how well the grant activity would meet the assessment criteria. This allowed the assessors to compare across projects and identify those with clear methods for achieving program objectives and outcomes.

- Scientific jargon was generally avoided. Where absolutely needed, technical terms were clearly explained in plain English. The proper and discerning use of sub-headings and dot points in some applications assisted in improving their readability.

- Poorer applications did not have these elements. Lower ranked applications were not clear and often included additional text that obscured the key points.

- A number of applicants did not effectively utilise the word limits in their applications, providing either too little detail on the proposed project or too little relevant detail. Lower ranked projects often lacked sufficient information to describe how the grant activity would meet the assessment criteria and, consequently, the objectives and outcomes of the program. These applicants generally ranked low for these reasons.

Budget and correct attachments

- Successful applicants attached all required documents and clearly showed how they met different administrative and infrastructure caps detailed in the guidelines.

- For highly ranked projects, the costs related to these capped expenditure items were shown in separate budget lines and clearly identified in the provided budget template. In comparison, lower ranked applications did not clearly identify all capped expenditure items, with some appearing inseparable within the budget.

- Poorer applications were not as clear, with many having inseparable costs under headings that would otherwise be described as admin or infrastructure related. These elements all contributed to non-compliance and/or ineligibility of some applications.

- Some included ineligible budget items or activities which in turn lowered their ranking compared to other applications.

Eligibility requirements

- Several applications were from organisations that were not eligible to be lead applicants, rendering their application as non-compliant and non-eligible.

- A full list of ineligible organisations was provided in section 4.3 of the Grant Opportunity Guidelines. It is important for applicants in future rounds to check these sections.

Individual feedback

Individual feedback is available to applicants by contacting the Community Grants Hub (details below) within **20 business days** of having received the outcome notification letter.

Please note: Individual feedback will not be provided after this timeframe.

Phone: 1800 020 283

Email: support@communitygrants.gov.au

When seeking individual feedback, applicants must include their legal entity name, application ID and the project activity title. The Community Grants Hub will endeavour to respond to individual feedback requests within **30 business days** from the date of the request for feedback.