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# Future Drought Fund: Natural Resource Management Drought Resilience Program – Grants

Feedback for applicants

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## Overview

As part of our commitment to sharing information with the sector and as an acknowledgement of the time and effort applicants have put into developing applications, the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment (the department) is pleased to share this feedback for the Future Drought Fund Natural Resource Management (NRM) Drought Resilience Program – Grants competitive grant round (the program).

The funding round for the program opened on 29 September 2020 and closed on 30 October 2020.

The grant opportunity received 314 eligible applications. Following the delegate's decision, 66 applications were selected for funding, to a value of \$7,806,394.46 (GST exclusive).

There was a strong interest by stakeholders in the program and successful applications were of a very high standard. All eligible applications were assessed according to the procedure detailed in the Grant Opportunity Guidelines (the guidelines) and outlined in the selection process below.

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 round.

## Program background

The program will provide up to \$10 million to support organisations, farmer groups and individuals undertaking projects which contribute to improved drought resilience of agricultural landscapes. The program is focused on support for experimentation in NRM practices, systems and approaches which go beyond current best practice. This aims to foster innovation and transformational change in the management of natural capital.

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The intended outcomes of the program are as follows.

- Outcome 1: NRM is improved in Australian agricultural landscapes in ways which support primary producers' capacity to prepare for and respond to future droughts and climate change.
- Outcome 2: Primary producers and other land managers are enabled to experiment with adaptive or transformative<sup>1</sup> NRM practices, systems and approaches which can build drought resilience in agricultural landscapes.
- Outcome 3: Increased uptake of 'whole-of-system' NRM thinking and practices – that is, approaches which acknowledge the linkages between the ecosystem services on which agriculture depends, environmental and economic aspects of drought resilience on farms, and the social drought resilience of communities in agricultural areas.
- Outcome 4: Networks are established or strengthened between stakeholders who partner and share responsibility for managing natural resources (including public and private land managers), which improves connectedness and diversity of approaches across the landscape.

## Selection process

An open competitive selection process was undertaken to select a range of quality projects from a variety of organisations.

Applications were screened for eligibility and compliance against the requirements outlined in the guidelines. The Community Grants Hub (the Hub) undertook initial eligibility and compliance checks.

Applications were then assessed against the four assessment criteria and moderated by the department to compile a shortlist.

A Selection Advisory Panel (the panel) was convened to determine funding recommendations for consideration by the delegate. The panel was comprised of a Chair and 4 members with the required expertise and industry knowledge relevant to this grant round.

To recommend funding, the panel considered:

- how well applications scored against the assessment criteria
- how well the project aligned with objectives and outcomes of the program
- the relative merit of an application compared to other applications focused on the program outcome/s, including overall value for money
- how the services and/or project will be delivered and alignment with the guidelines.

Final approval of funded projects was made by the Minister for Agriculture, Drought and Emergency Management.

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<sup>1</sup> Transformation refers to changes in the way the system functions (for example, from crop production to ecosystem services) as a result of implementing these practices, systems or approaches which can be completely novel and innovative or existing ones adapted from different industries, geographic areas or systems.

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## General feedback for applicants

This feedback aims to enable applicants to strengthen submissions for funding under potential future rounds. It is based on feedback provided by the departmental assessment team and the panel during the current competitive grants round, as well as experience and feedback provided by the Hub and the department. Unsuccessful applicants are encouraged to consider how this feedback may apply to their own application before applying for any potential future rounds.

Successful applicants proposed activities which were eligible, appropriate and the panel considered would be effective towards achieving the overall program objectives. They demonstrated their suitability for public funding along with value for money, by providing a detailed proposal, budget and letters of support which met the requirements outlined in the guidelines. Applications included strong responses to all of the assessment criteria.

Common reasons for applications not being selected for funding are listed below.

- Applicants did not meet the eligibility requirements (sections 4.1 and 4.2 of the guidelines).
- Projects did not meet eligibility requirements (section 4.5 of the guidelines), such as:
  - be in a region within Australia and its territories which has been affected by drought, is being affected by drought or at a significant risk of being affected by drought in the future
  - contribute to at least 2 of the 4 program outcomes listed in section 2.2 of the guidelines
  - focused on delivery of public good benefits associated with improved drought resilience.
- Project activities did not meet eligibility requirements (section 5.1 of the guidelines), such as:
  - increasing capacity, sharing knowledge and promoting strategies on NRM skills and techniques with a focus on delivering drought resilience
  - implementing and/or showcasing successful NRM methods which improve management of natural capital to deliver drought resilience in agricultural landscapes
  - establishing demonstration sites which enable experimentation and/or implementation of new practices which support transformational.

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- Projects included ineligible activities (section 5.4 of the guidelines) under the grant funding component, such as:
    - business-as-usual activities for the participants or beneficiaries of the project
    - activities which are reasonably considered to be the same as ones which are already underway, or activities which are so closely related they could not reasonably be considered additional to those already underway or completed
    - activities (including purchases of equipment or materials) which could reasonably be considered part of a land manager's ordinary responsibility.

This does not mean private funding (as a project co-contribution) could not be used for these items or activities as part of the project, provided the applicant considered this would augment the project. Clear explanations of these were required in the budget justification.

- Responses did not provide enough detail about how the proposed activities would achieve the project and program outcomes and explicitly link them to drought resilience (for example, very short responses or responses which contained multiple activities without clearly articulating each activity).
- A budget was not included in the specified format, on the mandated template or an unrealistic budget was presented - in particular, management costs associated with the project, private benefit gains, and cash and in-kind co-contributions. Some applications had what would be considered as 'hidden' ineligible budgets limits (for example, under project management, administration, etc.). These applications were either deemed ineligible or scored poorly against the 'suitability for public funding and value for money' criteria of the application.

### **Writing and providing details**

Before beginning any application, it is critical to read and understand the guidelines to ensure the application meets the program objectives and outcomes, and provides a demonstrable public benefit by linking project activities and outcomes to landscape-scale resilience.

When writing applications, it is important to remember the assessors will only have the information and details the applicant provides to assess the application.

Applications should clearly and concisely address the assessment criteria. It is difficult to assess poorly written, and/or overly lengthy applications. It is also important to avoid repeating the same information for each selection criterion. Careful editing is advised. The use of sub-headings and dot points may also assist to improve the readability and clarity of applications. Getting someone other than the person drafting the application to read and edit before submission can be very helpful and is highly recommended.



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A number of applicants did not effectively use word limits in their applications, and/or provided excessive background information but not enough detail on the proposed project. For example, low scoring applications often lacked sufficient detail to describe the:

- *project activities* – applications which provided limited or no details about the project activities and their appropriateness to program outcomes did not score well. From what is written, assessors and the panel need to be able to determine what the project will do, how this will directly contribute towards the program outcomes and deliver public benefits. Higher scoring applications clearly articulated the importance of the project and the activities, how they would be performed and how this would contribute to program outcomes
- *project effectiveness* – applications which did not clearly outline the effectiveness of the project to achieve the program outcomes did not score well. Applications which provided evidence of monitoring of measurable contributions to the project achievements and showed how much and when the project would achieve the program outcomes, were generally rated well by assessors.

## Criteria specific feedback

### Criterion 1 – Alignment of the project with the purpose and outcomes of the NRM Drought Resilience Program – Grants

Strong applications:	Quality responses clearly provided:
<p>Described the proposed project and its objectives.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ What do you want to achieve with your project proposal?</li> <li>▪ What is the proposed project's objective?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ detailed information to clearly identify the aims and purposes of the project.</li> <li>▪ how the project would be delivered, including having appropriate governance structures in place.</li> <li>▪ detailed information of how the proposed project aligns with the grant program objectives and outcomes (focused on delivery of public good benefits associated with improved drought resilience across agricultural landscapes).</li> <li>▪ a description of the expected results from the project.</li> <li>▪ an adequate explanation on how the results of the proposed project would achieve the program's objectives and outcomes.</li> <li>▪ the importance of the project and the activities, how they would be performed and how this would contribute to program outcomes.</li> </ul>
<p>Explained why you want to achieve the objective.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Why is it important and worthwhile?</li> <li>▪ What will happen if you do not do your proposed project?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ adequate information with evidence, including quantitative data or anecdotal evidence, to justify the importance and need of the proposed activity in the proposed location (is in a region within Australia and its Territories which has been, is being, or is at significant risk of being affected by drought in the future).</li> <li>▪ a succinct explanation of the need for the project, defined the project's objectives, what the proposed project aims to achieve.</li> <li>▪ a description of the benefits of the activity for improving drought resilience of agricultural landscapes</li> <li>▪ an explanation of the importance of the project and the impacts of not carrying out the project.</li> </ul>



**Criterion 2 – Effectiveness of the proposed project activities to achieve the proposed project and NRM Drought Resilience Program - Grants outcomes**

<b>Strong applications:</b>	<b>Quality responses clearly described:</b>
<p>Demonstrated this through.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ identifying the proposed project activities. What will you do?</li> <li>▪ Identifying which grant activities (section 5.1) the proposed project activities will meet</li> <li>▪ describing how the proposed project activities will contribute to (at least 2 of) the NRM Drought Resilience Program – Grants outcomes</li> <li>▪ outlining proposed timeframe for grant activities</li> <li>▪ describing who will participate and undertake the project activities</li> <li>▪ describing how each proposed project activity will contribute to achieving the overall project outcome/s</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ how the proposed activities will be conducted</li> <li>▪ which methodologies or approaches will be followed to achieve the expected results of the activities</li> <li>▪ all the activities to be undertaken across the one year timeframe and where they will occur</li> <li>▪ how the proposed project activities will achieve the aims</li> <li>▪ the feasibility of the methodology used for the activities</li> <li>▪ how they were pushing the boundaries (going beyond best practice) of land management in their regions. This usually involved, for example, introducing new methods of farming, changing grazing practices, or rehabilitating landscapes to improve water retention, increase carbon retention and reduce salinity</li> <li>▪ their ability to deliver projects of comparable outcomes, scope, budget and complexity</li> <li>▪ a strong focus on the implementation, monitoring and reporting of the project and ability to clearly demonstrate project outputs and outcomes are measurable</li> <li>▪ the roles and responsibilities of all organisations involved in the project (including project partners or co-contributors)</li> <li>▪ how the project outcomes will be promoted to the broader community and maintained into the future.</li> </ul>



**Criterion 3 – Project proposal suitability for public funding**

<b>Strong applications:</b>	<b>Quality responses clearly explained:</b>
Explained how the grant amount requested is appropriate to the outcomes which your proposed project will achieve.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ the innovativeness of the proposed practices, methods, tools or technology which will be trialled, developed or implemented.</li> </ul>
Described the public benefits that will occur because of the proposed project including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ the benefit to the community from achieving your objective</li> <li>▪ the value your proposed project will add that would not occur without the project</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ how the development of the innovative practice is farm-ready, meets the needs of Australia’s farmers and land managers and will be adopted by them</li> <li>▪ the expected public benefits of the project activities, including quantitative measurements of:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- expected community involvement, such as number of farmers, groups etc.</li> <li>- anticipated changes to natural resources (for example,, benefits to soil health, or area of the land rehabilitated).</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Clarified whether the project will have consequent private and or public benefits, and if so, described these benefits and the beneficiaries. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Who will benefit from your proposed project? What benefits will flow to each beneficiary?</li> <li>▪ How is the private benefit proportional to the private contribution to the cost of the proposed project?</li> <li>▪ How will your activity build on, align and complement existing regional NRM drought and climate priorities?</li> <li>▪ What is the need for your grant activity in your chosen location?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ how the proposed project budget will correspond to the project scope and activities and how it is value for money</li> <li>▪ how the requested funding amount is appropriate considering the scale of the activity and the project outcomes</li> <li>▪ who (if any) will contribute to the cost of the project and the extent of their contribution (cash and in-kind co-contributions) and how the cash and/or in-kind contributions will add value to the delivery of the project</li> <li>▪ if there will be a private benefit resulting from the project and:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- what the private benefits are, how they have been valued and who beneficiaries are</li> <li>- whether the public benefits resulting from the project exceed any private contributions.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>





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#### Criterion 4 - Applicant suitability

Strong applications:	Quality responses clearly explained:
Described their experience with projects of comparable outcomes, scope and budget and explained how they are capable of implementing, monitoring and reporting on their proposed project.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ the level of capability to implement and manage a government funded project and outline appropriate governance structures in place</li><li>▪ their experience, by providing examples of previous projects of similar outcomes and budget.</li></ul>
Described how they would engage with relevant stakeholders including, where relevant, Indigenous and culturally and linguistically diverse groups and communities in proposed project activities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ the appropriate level of skills or access to relevant expertise to implement, monitor and report on the proposed project.</li></ul>
Described how you would promote project outcomes to land managers and the broader community. Applicants clearly addressed how they would maintain proposed project outcomes into the future.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ the ability to engage with relevant stakeholders, experts and communities to deliver the proposed activity.</li><li>▪ a thorough understanding of the relevant stakeholders and how they will be involved to make the project successful.</li><li>▪ a clear extension pathway to promote the project outcomes to other landholders and the broader community (this could involve a local Landcare or farming systems group or similar).</li></ul>