



Australian Government
Department of Agriculture,
Fisheries and Forestry



Future
Drought
Fund



Vic Hub
**DROUGHT &
INNOVATION**

**VICTORIA DROUGHT
RESILIENCE ADOPTION
AND INNOVATION HUB**

REGIONAL DROUGHT CONSULTATION SUMMARY REPORT Part 2

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Introduction

A summary of consultations carried out from October 2023 to May 2024 which aimed to:

1. Identify significant issues and implement actions for drought resilience innovation through codesigned projects with different communities across Victoria (and Australia).
2. Provide a foundation and legacy for ongoing collaboration between the Drought Hub partners

Method

- **Toolkit** developed by the Victoria Drought and Innovation Hub in consultation with its partners
- Different sets of questions for different stakeholders
- 15 consultation sessions, 49 individuals
- Farm enterprises, government agencies, statutory authorities, industry groups, farming communities, health organisations, farm machinery and agriculture services businesses.

Method

Questions framed around the "Drought Cycle"

Setting the scene – Victoria drought hub regional consultations/co-design

Thinking about the last drought:

- What happens(-ed)?
- How did it impact?
- What keep doing or do differently?
- Ideas for doing better in this phase

Thinking about when the drought broke:

- What happens(-ed)?
- How did it impact?
- What do again or do differently?
- Ideas for doing better in this phase?



Thinking about leading into drought:

- What happens?
- How does it impact?
- What keep doing or do differently?
- Ideas for doing better in this phase?

Thinking about when not in drought:

- What happens?
- How is this period changing?
- What keep doing or do differently?
- Ideas for doing better in this phase?

What should the drought hub be working on? Do you want to be involved in co-developing this area?

Outcomes – drought and irrigated farms

- A wide range of crops including almonds, table grapes, citrus, dried vine fruits, and summer fruits.
- Many irrigators, including retired irrigators with a strong sense of civic duty, gave their time generously to discuss in detail the agronomic approaches to managing drought.
- So rich was this information that it will be used to develop a Drought Cycle Matrix for each major irrigated crop in the region.
- This matrix will list, for each of the four seasons, practices that help prepare for and manage drought through the drought cycle.

Outcomes – drought and irrigated farms

A good drought plan includes:

- Annual water budget
- An understanding of the most viable patches for the future
- Trigger levels
- Water availability monitoring
- Water trading strategy

What is a drought for irrigators?

- The weekly median water price peaked at:
 - around \$650 per megalitre in 2008
 - above \$950 in 2019
- Individual trades peaked at \$1,050 in 2007

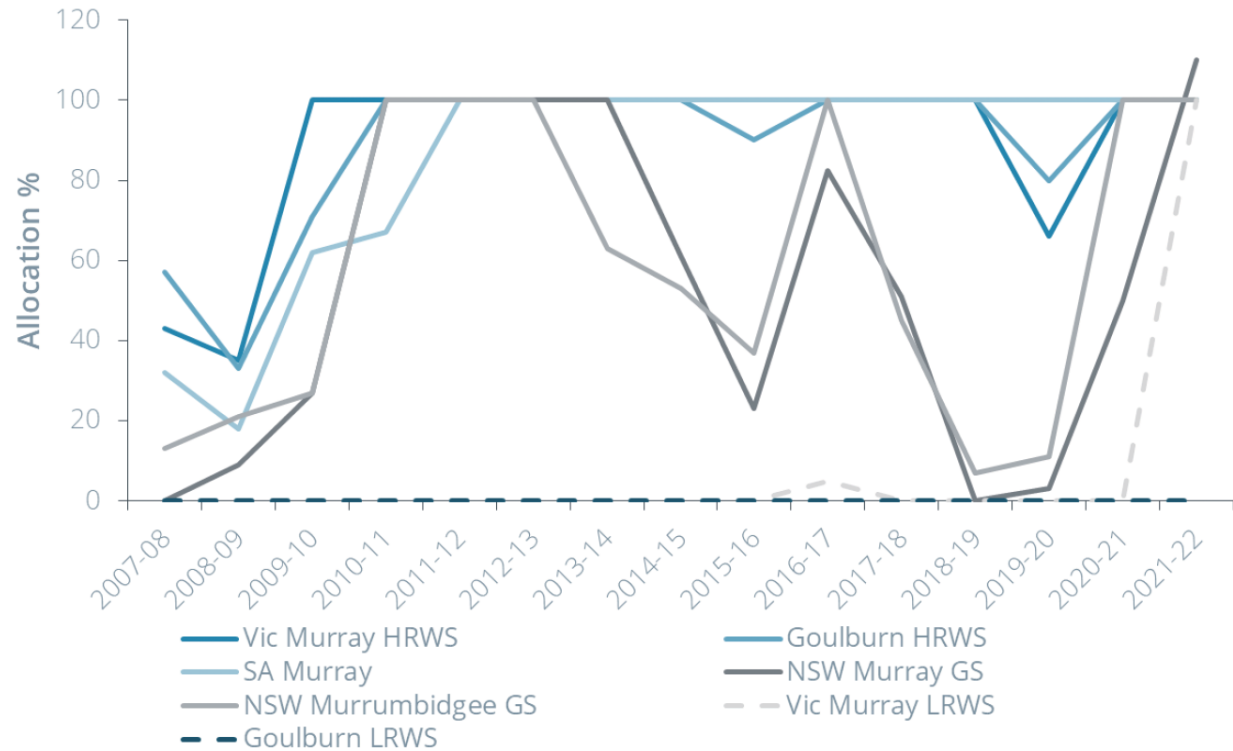


Figure 2: Allocations to selected southern Murray-Darling Basin water products

Source: Frontier Economics and Tim Cummins and Associates: Social and economic impacts of Basin Plan water recovery in Victoria, 2022⁷ (Re-printed with permission)

Outcomes – skilled staff retention

Agribusinesses and service providers told us

- It is difficult to keep skilled employees **gainfully occupied** doing challenging and rewarding work until the recovery starts – when their skills will be sorely needed.
- **Retaining highly skilled workers** would be easier if they could be engaged and motivated through a shared training and exchange system within and between regional industries.
- **Short university courses or other training courses could help too.**

Outcomes – consultations about mental wellbeing

Mental health workers told us

- The challenge during droughts is how to respectfully, and meaningfully, encourage people to look after their health with regards to wellbeing not just mental health.
- Existing mental health services are largely designed for treating severe mental health disorders.
- Drought mental health issues were related to reality-based, financial management decisions and farm management decisions.
- It is difficult to ramp up services in a drought – we need to build capacity throughout the drought cycle

Outcomes – consultations about mental wellbeing

- Rural financial counsellors are now able to refer their clients to mental health experts through an inhouse tailored service.
- Drought 'first responders' want to build up their own skills in mental health first aid.
- Men's Sheds and the Country Women's Association Provide strong support networks.
- Formal debriefing sessions at the start of the recovery phase would help first responders attend to their own mental wellbeing.

Outcomes – coordinating responses to drought

- A key lesson from the 2018-20 drought was the need for better coordination among these agencies.
- Agriculture Victoria helped bring together regional agencies and drought-affected communities for regular planning meetings.
- This teamwork ensured that support was timely, relevant, and targeted to community needs.
- That “Dry Seasons Working Group” led by Agriculture Victoria still exists informally.
- This group has been meeting each year to practice joint responses for the uncertain and drought periods.
- A bit more institutional support could help ensure this habituated coordination can thrive through the constant rounds of organisational and staff changes.
- After a drought, they could be supported to review what worked, what did not work, and what ideas there are for improvement.

Conclusions

- The second round of consultations show that drought is seen as a regular part of irrigation farming in North-West Victoria.
- During the Millennium Drought, low water allocations and high prices for water allocation trade came as a shock to irrigators – no one had experienced anything like that in living memory.
- However, by 2018-19 and 2019-20, when allocation trade prices reached similar levels, irrigators felt more confident in their strategies.
- This did not mean there was less anguish, or that all irrigation businesses survived the drought, but much less land in the region was dried off, and land was brought back into production more quickly.
- A major theme was the need for preparedness to support mental and social wellbeing during droughts. While the region offers support services, it is essential to build mental health skills during the good times.

Responding to findings from the two rounds of consultation

- Horticulture Skills Capacity Framework (completed)
- Think Tank – Farm Decisions (completed)
- Blue Green Algae Management in Water Treatment Plants (completed)
- Improving Water Allocation Forecasts (completed)
- Establishing institutional support for the existing Dry Seasons Working Group
- Coordinating improvements in mental wellbeing skills for the first responders in drought management support (in development)
- Specialist skills retention strategy (in development)

Thank you



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