

Sustaining communities through drought

A policy agenda for local government

January 2019



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WHAT THE LGAQ SEEKS

Drought not only affects farm businesses, it affects entire communities. While sustaining farm businesses is an essential component of drought policy, policy settings and programs are also required that enable councils to sustain their communities – and by implication their economies – when impacted by drought.

Recognising that drought impacts whole communities, the LGAQ seeks that the following are key principles of revised or new Federal and State drought policies and programs:

- Preventing a continuing population drain by supporting drought-affected local economies.
- Providing people in drought-affected communities with the opportunity to influence decisions regarding local drought initiatives.
- Local government is recognised and resourced to lead their communities in preparing for, responding to and recovering from drought.
- Financial Assistance Grants to local government are restored to at least 1% of total Commonwealth taxation revenue.

To support communities currently in drought:

- Federal funding for local government to employ drought resilience coordinators.
- Simplified administrative arrangements and eligibility requirements for Federal drought-related funding for local governments.
- Federal Government funding of drought programs for local government is doubled and extended to 2020-21.

To support communities through future droughts:

- A formal partnership on drought between all three levels of government, including recognition and Federal funding of local drought resilience coordinators.
- Federally-led and funded research and guidelines that support local government in preparing drought management plans with and for their communities.
- Federal/State funding for local government to support employment, community resilience and protection of natural resources during drought and when recovering from drought.



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1. INTRODUCTION

The Local Government Association of Queensland (LGAQ) is the peak body for local government in Queensland. It is a not-for-profit association setup solely to serve councils and their individual needs.

The LGAQ has been advising, supporting and representing local councils since 1896, allowing them to improve their operations and strengthen relationships with their communities. The LGAQ does this by connecting councils to people and places that count; supporting their drive to innovate and improve service delivery through smart services and sustainable solutions; and delivering them the means to achieve community, professional and political excellence.

At the LGAQ's Annual Conference in October 2018, the following motion was carried:

That the Local Government Association of Queensland, through a formal submission, call on the Federal and State Governments to adopt a bipartisan, co-ordinated and whole-of-government approach to the impacts of ongoing drought in Queensland communities which recognises the need to address the long-term damage that has been done to rural and regional economies and the importance of relieving the enormous strain on the social fabric of communities in the grip of drought.

Drought not only affects farm businesses, it affects entire communities. While sustaining farm businesses is an essential component of drought policy, policy settings and programs are also required that enable councils to sustain their communities – and by implication their economies – when impacted by drought.

Local government acknowledges and supports the move at Federal and State levels to focus on drought preparedness and resilience. This submission sets out immediate measures that can be taken to assist councils support their communities currently affected by drought, as well as proposing a policy agenda for an effective partnership with local government that would improve the preparedness and resilience of communities when they are inevitably confronted by droughts in the future.

2. DROUGHT POLICIES AND PROGRAMS SHOULD ENABLE COMMUNITIES AND SUPPORT LOCAL ECONOMIES

As reviewed on 1 January 2019, there are a total of 23 councils and five part councils drought declared across Queensland. These declarations represent 58.1% of the land area of Queensland. In addition, there are 175 Individually Droughted Properties in a further 19 Local Government Areas (LGAs). From a community perspective, this drought affects over 400,000 people who are either directly involved in the agribusiness sector or are linked to this sector through the economic and social impact of drought.

While there is no doubt that farm businesses strongly feel the impact of drought, the effects of drought extend far beyond these businesses alone. The flow-on economic impact of a downturn in the agribusiness sector is felt across a community, with all businesses affected by reduced income (except perhaps those businesses predominantly reliant on tourism), with adverse consequences on employment.

Reduced employment opportunities in a community compound the economic impacts of a drought on farm businesses. The result can be a downward spiral in a local economy with substantial impacts on the social fabric of a community, including the provision of services. For example, the loss of students from a school reduces the school population, which can see a reduction in the number of teachers at the school. This in turn can lead to further population loss, as the teacher (and the teacher's family) leaves the community.

If local businesses and employment are not supported, the economic downturn caused by drought can precipitate a loss of the local population, as farmers, business owners, workers and their families leave a community in order to find work elsewhere. Once people have left, it is difficult and often impossible to replace them by attracting people back to the community, even when the agribusiness sector recovers. Where young people are the ones leaving a community, the long-term impact can be acute and the sustainability of a community placed at even greater risk.

Research commissioned by the Western Queensland Drought Committee provides evidence of the downward economic spiral of communities affected by drought and the consequent decline of town populations.¹ This research concluded that:

A significant reduction in turnover was reported by almost all town businesses across the region, linked largely to drought. The impact varies for different business types. Town businesses servicing agriculture face the highest impacts, as they deal directly with graziers and immediately feel the pinch of reduced spending. Shearers and rural workers feel the effects first hand. Main street small businesses, such as the IGA and clothing shops, face the knock-on effect of the drought. ...

¹ Kelly, Dana. 2018. *Beyond the Dust: Impact of Drought on Town Businesses in Central West Queensland and some solutions*. Report prepared for the Western Queensland Drought Committee.

Both retail and tourism businesses said that they have trouble finding and retaining staff, due to the reduced local population because of drought. Skilled people have left town because of reduced employment opportunities, and many do not return. People also leave because of reduced liveability, as many services decline, from lack of medical practitioners to the local gym closing. Population is declining sharply in the Central West. About 1500 people have left over the past five years, out of a total of about 10,500 people; at least partly due to drought. Rural workers are the first to be laid off, and this reduces spending in town businesses, which in turn also lay off staff.²

As an example, in Goondiwindi over the past calendar year the local cooperative has seen a decrease in sales of \$364,000 (a fall of 3%) and a \$40,000 reduction in wages (around 1500 hours) or a decrease of 11% in wages. Although this fall in wages may seem small, it is disproportionate to the fall in sales and would have a material impact on employees, as well as adversely affecting other local businesses as workers' spending power decreases.

While drought undoubtedly adversely affects communities, it is critical to ensure that State and Federal agencies, political leaders, media and non-government organisations do not promote a negative image of drought-affected regions, thereby exacerbating the adverse impacts of the drought on local economies, particularly the tourism sector. Even when in drought, the bush still has much to offer and should be promoted as such.

Preventing a continuing population drain by supporting drought-affected local economies – including local businesses – should be a key component of Federal and State drought policies and programs.

The *Federal Issues Paper on Drought Preparedness and Resilience* suggests that an important theme for future drought policy should be “*informing business and communities*”. During the drought roundtable in Brisbane on 30 November, the LGAQ gave feedback that this element should provide for two-way communication between communities and businesses and the different levels of government, rather than one-way communication between government and communities and businesses.

One of the conclusions of the research undertaken by the Central West Drought Committee is the importance of valuing local knowledge. This research concludes that “*...local people in the Central West region want their voices, their concerns and needs to be heard in decision-making processes*”.³ This statement is typical of sentiment across drought-affected communities. Further, transforming regional governance arrangements to foster local decision-making is critical to the success of future drought policy, including fostering more local input into decision-making.⁴

Providing people with the opportunity to influence decisions regarding local drought initiatives must be a key principal underpinning Federal and State drought policy and programs.

² *ibid*, p. 1.

³ *ibid*, p. 88.

⁴ *ibid*, p 89.

3. LOCAL GOVERNMENT LEADERSHIP AND COORDINATION IS ESSENTIAL

The LGAQ recognises and welcomes the focus of the new *National Drought Agreement* on long-term preparedness, sustainability, resilience and risk management for farming businesses and farming communities in managing drought. However, the agreement is flawed in that it gives insufficient recognition to the role of local government in leading communities in preparing for, responding to, and recovering from drought.

While we note the reference to ‘partnerships’ in paragraph 7(b) of the agreement, this paragraph simply lists local government along with several other stakeholders. As Australia’s third level of government, councils need to be treated as a ‘partner-in-government’ in sustaining communities through drought, rather than ‘just another stakeholder’. In times of social and economic stress – such as when communities experience drought – the traditional social and economic leadership role of councils becomes even more vital to sustaining communities.

Councils are the level of government closest to communities. They have the relationships, the knowledge and the experience in dealing with drought necessary for realising the objectives of the *National Drought Agreement*. The LGAQ is therefore deeply disappointed that this agreement does not give stronger recognition to the critical role of local government in leading their communities in preparing for, responding to, and recovering from drought. More than that, it is our strong belief that drought policies and programs will continue to be ineffective in sustaining communities through drought unless local government leadership is given proper recognition and support.

While the provision of health and other services to communities is principally the role of Federal and State governments, local government has a critical role to play in providing intelligence and advice on their community’s needs. Local government also provides the necessary leadership in developing the collaborative relationships and strategy required to ensure that a community drought plan is in place and resources are being deployed where needed.

For drought policy and programs to be effective, local government must be recognised and resourced to lead their communities in preparing for, responding to, and recovering from drought.

4. INCREASED FEDERAL FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE TO LOCAL GOVERNMENT WILL INCREASE COMMUNITY RESILIENCE

The resilience of regional communities to drought is critically affected by the existing level of resources and services available to a community when a drought arrives. One measure that would substantially improve the social and economic resilience of regional and remote communities commonly affected by drought is to increase federal funding available to councils through Financial Assistance Grants (FAGs).

Horizontal fiscal equalisation is the regular process of transferring funding between different levels of government to offset differences in capacity to raise revenue. Local government raises only 3.5% of public sector revenue, while at the same time having responsibility for managing an estimated 33% of public sector assets. Federal funding through FAGs is a cornerstone of fiscal equalisation, providing a critical revenue source for councils, particularly rural and remote councils that have a large infrastructure base (such as roads) and a small rate base.

The LGAQ strongly supports the statement by the Australian Local Government Association (ALGA) that, *“The relative decline in core federal funding to local government has reduced the capacity of councils to develop and maintain services and infrastructure in their communities, which fuels the risk of reducing standards of living in those communities and across the nation.”*

Analysis by ALGA shows that FAGs were equal to around 1% of Commonwealth taxation revenue in 1996. However, despite an annual growth rate in Australia’s Gross Domestic Product of an average 3.47% from 1960 until 2017, FAGs have declined by around 43% in relative terms over the past 20 years, and now amount to approximately 0.55% (2018) of Commonwealth tax revenue. As ALGA goes on to say, *“Additional investment through local government is essential to help maintain the living standards of all Australians by fostering the equitable provision of local government services and infrastructure and maintaining local economic growth.”*⁵

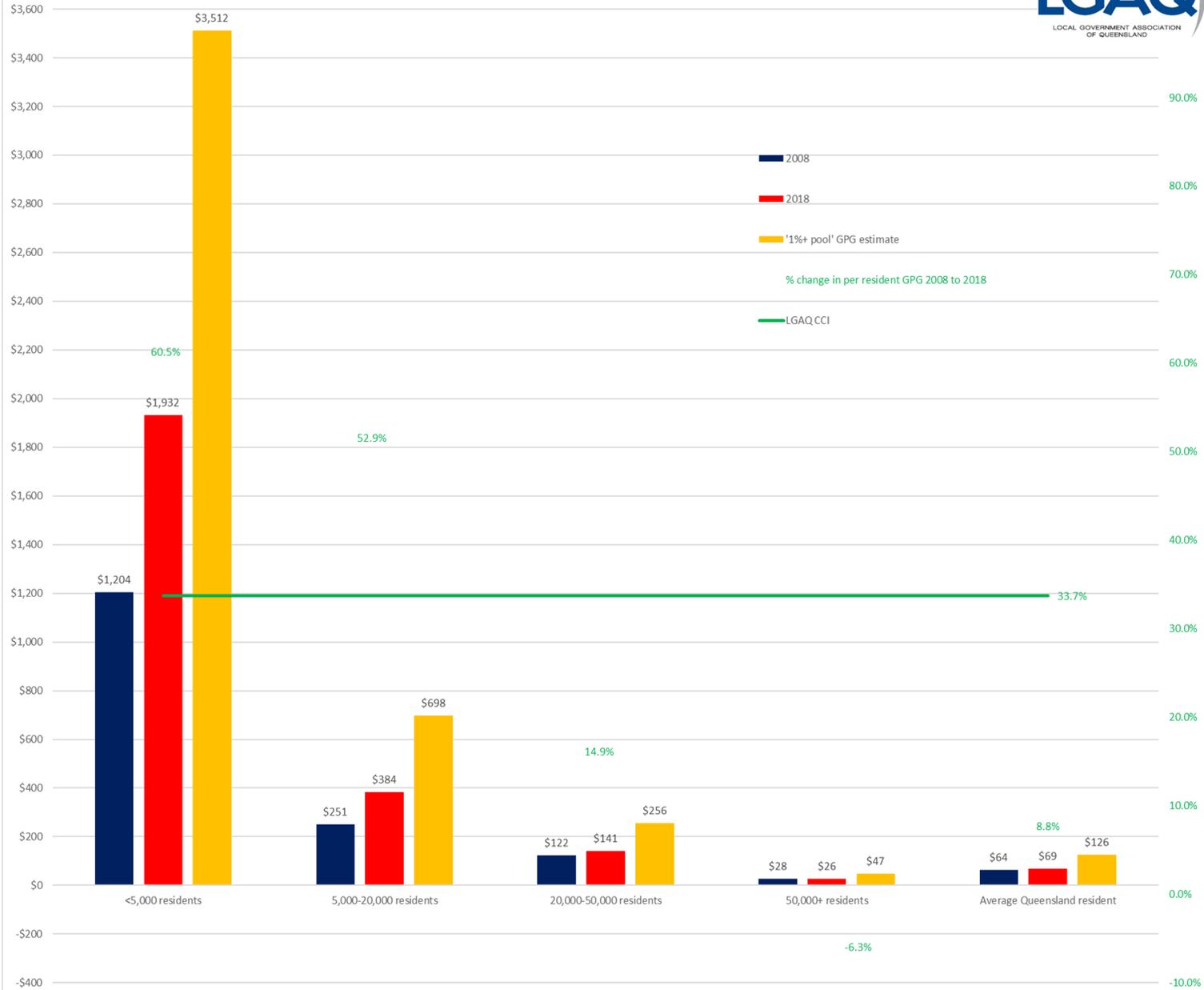
In Queensland, analysis by the LGAQ of per resident distributions of FAGs shows that, if FAGs were increased to 1% of federal taxation revenue, this would lead to a per resident increase in funding of more than 50% for councils with populations of up to 20,000 residents. Rural and remote councils affected by drought are precisely the communities that would feel the benefits of such an increase in funding, not only through the provision of improved infrastructure and services, but also through increased employment opportunities.

To increase the resilience of rural and remote communities to the impacts of drought, the Federal Government should restore Financial Assistance Grants to local government to at least 1% of total Commonwealth taxation revenue.

88-89.

⁵ <http://allpoliticsislocal.com.au/initiative-1/>

2008-2018 change in the average Queensland General Purpose Grant received per resident by council LGA grouped into population segments compared with an estimated 1%+ FAG pool GPG grant per resident
 (2008 to 2018 changes compared with the change in LGAQ's C



5. GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORK FOR MANAGING DROUGHT

To improve the preparedness and resilience of communities when facing the inevitable challenge of drought, it is essential that local government is a partner with the Federal and State Governments in drought policies and programs aimed at sustaining communities and local economies affected by drought.

While there are differences between drought and natural disasters – including the speed, geographic spread and timeframe of the event – there are nevertheless attributes of the governance arrangements used for responding to natural disasters which could inform governance arrangements for improving community resilience and responses to drought.

Disaster management governance arrangements empower local communities to prepare for and manage disasters when they occur, while at the same time ensuring that communities can draw upon Federal and State resources when the impacts of a disaster are greater than a community can manage on their own. Overall, these arrangements ensure that government, non-government and private sector resources are deployed efficiently and effectively in meeting the needs of local communities.

Disaster Management Governance Arrangements

In Queensland, disaster management arrangements comprise a four-tiered system: three levels of government – local, state and federal and disaster districts. Disaster districts is an additional state government tier between local and state levels that *“help[s] promote collaboration and effective coordination of disaster risk planning, services, information and resources”*⁶.

Local governments – through their respective Local Disaster Management Groups (LMDGs) – have primary responsibility for responding to a disaster at the community level and are responsible for the development and implementation of their Local Disaster Management Plan (LDMP). The use of LDMGs – and their integration with relevant State and Federal agencies – enables strong and effective partnerships to be formed between government, non-government organisations, affected industries and local community.

The structure of these arrangements enables local government to draw on support from their district committee and relevant Federal and State agencies where there are gaps in local government capacity or capability and additional resources are required.⁷

⁶ <https://www.disaster.qld.gov.au/dmg/rr/Pages/default.aspx>

⁷ Ibid.

To be clear, the LGAQ is not arguing that drought should be referred to as a natural disaster; instead, we are arguing that, as with a natural disaster, there is a need for communities to be empowered to prepare for and respond to drought when it occurs. Moreover, when the severity of a drought moves beyond the capacity of a community to manage on its own, it is vital that there is a clear mechanism for drawing upon Federal and State resources – and coordinating the deployment of these resources – according to local needs and priorities.

Two critical components of disaster management arrangements are the establishment of local disaster management committees (LDMC) and the appointment of a disaster management coordinator. A councillor (often the mayor) chairs the LDMC, which comprises emergency services personnel, representatives of relevant functional departments and non-government organisations. These committees support and coordinate disaster management activities for their respective local government areas (LGAs). To support the work of the LDMC, the chair appoints a local disaster coordinator who has the following functions⁸:

- to coordinate disaster operations for the local group
- to report regularly to the local group about disaster operations, and
- to ensure, as far as practicable, that any strategic decisions of the local group about disaster operations are implemented.

Drought affects each community in unique ways and drought plans, programs and service delivery need to be shaped according to the individual needs of each community. Moreover, given the range of social and economic issues facing communities there is a tremendous need for coordination of programs and service delivery to ensure that resources are being deployed efficiently and effectively. This requires two-way communication from the local level to State and Federal Government agencies to ensure that services are responsive to community needs and communities and businesses are kept informed about program and service delivery options and other drought-related information. In addition, there is a need for communication between communities so that each can learn from and support each other as they prepare for, respond to, and recover from drought.

One area that could be looked at more closely is the process by which a local government area (LGA) becomes drought declared. For example, one council has given feedback that they were not aware that a drought declaration had been made for their LGA until the Mayor was contacted by the media for comment. This is clearly unacceptable when such a declaration has significant flow-on affects to landholders, businesses and the community generally.

⁸ Section 36, *Disaster Management Act 2003*.

The LGAQ believes that adaptive drought responses require governance arrangements that are effective in vertically connecting all three levels of government and horizontally connecting local stakeholders. To achieve this outcome, it is critical that Federal funding is provided to local governments to appoint drought resilience coordinators, with these coordinators recognised at all levels of government as an authoritative voice on local needs, the point of coordination for deploying Federal and State resources and an essential resource for supporting local government in drawing together, coordinating and supporting stakeholders at a local level.

To support communities currently affected by drought, Federal funding is required to appoint local drought resilience coordinators.

To prepare for future droughts, a formal partnership on drought between all three levels of government is required, including recognition and Federal funding of local drought resilience coordinators.

6. PREPARING COMMUNITIES FOR DROUGHT

The Federal Government's *Issues Paper on Drought Preparedness and Resilience* indicates that research by the Bureau of Meteorology (BoM) and the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) concludes that:

1. Australia will spend more time in drought as average temperatures are expected to increase, with more heat extremes and fewer cold extremes, and lower than average rainfalls in southern Australia.
2. The nature of droughts will change, with a greater frequency of extreme droughts and less frequent moderate to severe droughts projected for all regions.

These projections indicate that farmers and communities need to be prepared for drought as a normal part of the Australian landscape. In Queensland, this conclusion is widely accepted by councils and their communities, however more work is required to assist councils in leading their communities in preparing for drought.

The *Issues Paper on Drought Preparedness and Resilience* suggests that two important themes for future drought policy should be “*informing business and communities*” and “*incentivising good practice*”. Through experience, communities have gained significant knowledge on effective ways to respond to and recover from drought and this knowledge needs to be collected and made widely available so that communities can learn from each other in preparing individual community drought management plans. Once prepared, Federal and State Government funding programs can be tied to the development and implementation of these plans, thereby incentivising councils and communities to prepare for drought. Again, it is local government that will need to play the lead role in preparing their communities for, responding to, and recovering from, drought.

In collaboration with the Queensland Government, the LGAQ is already working with Queensland councils to help them identify the work they need to do with their communities to adapt to the impacts of climate change. Thus far, this work has focused on climate adaptation plans for coastal councils (through QCoast₂₁₀₀) and improved governance frameworks for managing climate change impacts (Queensland Climate Resilient Councils). These programs demonstrate the capacity of councils to help their communities manage the impacts of climate change – including drought – when a properly structured and resourced program is put in place that assists councils and communities access the knowledge and tools they need. Being well-prepared for drought when it occurs will enable early action and measures to be taken that can lessen the overall impact of drought on affected communities and regional economies.

To prepare for future droughts, the Federal Government should lead and fund research and guidelines that support local government in preparing drought management plans with and for their communities.

Queensland councils are serious about adapting to climate change

The LGAQ has played a leading role in assisting councils to plan for the impacts of climate change on council operations and on their communities. Two programs – QCoast₂₁₀₀ and Queensland Climate Resilient Councils (Q CRC) – demonstrate the capability that councils have to support their communities in managing the impacts of climate change.

QCoast₂₁₀₀

QCoast₂₁₀₀ provides funding, tools and technical support to enable all Queensland coastal local governments to progress the preparation of plans and strategies to address climate change related coastal hazard risks over the long-term. QCoast₂₁₀₀ facilitates the development of high quality information enabling defensible, timely and effective local adaptation decision-making across key areas of planning and operations such as:

- Land use planning and development assessment
- Infrastructure planning and management including roads, stormwater and foreshores
- Asset management and planning including nature conservation, recreation, cultural heritage values and other public amenities
- Community planning
- Emergency management.

QCoast₂₁₀₀ is accessible to coastal local governments irrespective of their current level of planning, capability and resourcing. Beyond the life of the current funding, the program approach is designed to build knowledge, professional capability and networks between the private, research and State and local government sectors that will continue to deliver on-ground results for Queensland.

For more information visit <http://www.qcoast2100.com.au/>

Queensland Climate Resilient Councils (Q CRC)

Without the right governance arrangements in place, decision-making - particularly in diverse and complex organisations like councils - loses focus, and high priority goals and objectives suffer. The LGAQ and the Department of Environment and Science (DES) have established a partnership to support Queensland councils to plan for and respond to climate change.

The Q CRC is a five year program working with Queensland local governments to strengthen internal council decision-making processes to respond to climate change. This program assists councils to lead and support their communities and local business to get on the front foot in adapting to the impacts of climate change.

For more information visit <http://qcrc.lgaq.asn.au/>

7. FUNDING FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT IS ESSENTIAL FOR SUSTAINING LOCAL ECONOMIES AND POPULATIONS

From an economic perspective, councils are usually major employers in drought-affected regions and – if provided with appropriate funding – can provide an important, job-creating boost to local economies that will enable a community to retain its population during drought. As well as creating jobs, this expenditure will provide an important source of funding for maintaining community infrastructure, as well as assist in responding to the impacts of drought on the natural environment, particularly through projects aimed at controlling weeds and feral animals.

The LGAQ therefore welcomes Federal drought funding to local governments through the *Drought Communities Program*, as such funding is an essential component of an effective drought response. This funding is important in assisting councils create jobs that will sustain their economies and assist in preventing a ‘population drain’ due lack of employment opportunities caused by the impact of drought on farm businesses.

Although the LGAQ welcomes the Federal funding, feedback from councils indicates that considerable ‘red-tape’ is making access to funding difficult and has delayed deploying this funding on job-creating initiatives. The longer funding is delayed, the more vulnerable communities are to losing people from their communities.

For example, Lockyer Valley Regional Council (LVRC) consulted with its community on initiatives that could support local businesses during the current drought. Stakeholders agreed that a ‘buy local’ card would be of widespread assistance and, when discussing the issue with departmental officers, LVRC was initially encouraged to go forward with this initiative “*as council knew what was best for their community*”. Some weeks later, LVRC was advised that eligibility requirements had been tightened and this project was no longer eligible for funding, even though it is based on a similar – and successful initiative – operated by Longreach Regional Council. While LVRC is moving to put in place other projects, they believe these projects will be less effective in supporting the economy, as funding will not be as widely distributed across local businesses.

The Queensland Government’s *Works for Queensland (W4Q)* program provides an example of what Federal Government drought funding to local governments can achieve when it comes to supporting local employment. The aim of the W4Q is to “*support councils to undertake job-creating maintenance and minor infrastructure projects relating to assets owned or controlled by local governments*”. The program commenced in 2016–17 and is funded until 2020–21 for a total a \$600 million. Thus far, more than 600 projects have been approved and councils estimate the works will support, sustain or create almost 5,700 jobs in regional towns and cities battling high unemployment. In terms of administrative arrangements, the Federal *Roads to Recovery* program provides a precedent for an allocative funding model with simple, but effective acquittal arrangements.

In addition to simplifying administrative arrangements and eligibility requirements, the seriousness of the current drought and the difficult recovery ahead is such that more funding will be required for longer to support local economies affected by drought. Accordingly, while the LGAQ notes that the current funding allocation for the *Drought Communities Program* is allocated over two years to 2019-20, we ask that this funding is doubled and extended to 2020-21.

To support communities currently affected by drought, simplified administrative arrangements and eligibility requirements are needed for Federal drought-related funding for local governments, with this funding doubled and extended to 2020-21.

As with other natural disasters, there is a need to establish drought funding arrangements that are automatically triggered according to the severity of the disaster and its impact on local economies, communities and the environment. In the case of environmental measures, local government often has a critical role to play in managing weeds and feral animals that can have a devastating impact on native flora and fauna during drought if not managed effectively. Drought can also increase the strain on councils as environmental health teams deal with increased environmental protection complaints, mostly stemming from dust, as the dry weather sees dust particles released more quickly and easily by animals and traffic. Again, funding is not only required in responding to drought, but also through the recovery phase.

To support communities affected by future droughts, Federal/State funding is required for local government to support employment, community resilience and protection of natural resources during drought and when recovering from drought.

8. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The LGAQ acknowledges and supports the move at Federal and State levels to focus on drought preparedness and resilience. Our aim in this submission is to set out immediate measures that can be taken to assist councils support their communities currently affected by drought, as well as proposing a policy agenda for an effective partnership with local government when communities are confronted by future droughts.

The LGAQ cannot emphasise enough that drought not only affects farm businesses, it affects entire communities and drought policy and programs are required that enable councils to sustain their communities – and by implication their economies – when impacted by drought.

Recognising that drought impacts whole communities, the LGAQ seeks that the following matters are made key elements of revised/new drought policies and programs:

- Preventing a continuing population drain by supporting drought-affected local economies.
- Providing people in drought-affected communities with the opportunity to influence decisions regarding local drought initiatives.
- Local government is recognised and resourced to lead their communities in preparing for, responding to, and recovering from drought.
- Financial Assistance Grants to local government are restored to at least 1% of total Federal taxation revenue.

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- Federal/State funding for local government to support employment, community resilience and protection of natural resources during drought and when recovering from drought.

9. LGAQ CONTACT

Should you require further information on the matters raised in this submission, please contact Ms Sarah Buckler, General Manager – Advocacy, on: phone 07 3000 2240 or email Sarah_Buckler@lgaq.asn.au.