

DROUGHT

- The Minister for Agriculture, Food and Fisheries, Hon. Rory McEwen MP, has lead responsibility for coordinating all matters relating to drought. Minister McEwen attended the November 2006 meeting of the Minister's State/Local Government Forum to outline new drought initiatives and discuss how State and Local Government can work together to assist drought affected communities.

State Government Response

- On 25 October 2006, Minister McEwen announced a \$4 million drought assistance package for South Australia's farming communities. This assistance was increased in November with the announcement of an additional \$1.16 million in financial relief for irrigators, in addition to \$12 million to meet SA's contribution to interest rate subsidy assistance in EC declared areas and \$2.4 million worth of resources from State Government agencies to focus on the overall drought response.
- In February 2007, the State Government boosted assistance for South Australia's drought affected farmers to more than \$33 million with the announcement of further relief measures. This includes a new \$13.8 million package of further business support measures and concessions for farmers in EC areas to develop and implement business plans for their futures. Producers on EC Income Support payments and Farm Help are eligible to receive up to \$540 in energy concessions and remissions. This comprises a \$190 flat rate for council rates or Pastoral Leases, a \$190 flat rate for water and sewerage charges, \$120 per annum for energy use and a \$40 flat rate for the Emergency Services Levy.
- Initiatives to assist rural industries and communities affected by the drought include:
 - Assistance in the preparation of Exceptional Circumstances applications in the form of grants to assist in the development of case studies to support applications and through the provision of PIRSA staff resources to support regional; groups in application development.
 - Community Support Grants for group activities that support rural communities in areas affected by drought conditions.
 - Stamp duty relief for farmers who are refinancing loans.
 - Financial mediation services to assist in negotiations between banks and primary producers.
 - Drought information workshops across the State dealing with production issues, land management, rural financial counseling and mental health issues.
 - A Drought Telephone Hotline (180 20 20) to provide a single point of contact for people to obtain information on drought related matters including access to local rural finance counsellors, maintaining land condition and obtaining mental health support.
 - A free self-help book for people in rural areas experiencing depression or other mental health issues.

Local Government Response

- In response to concerns raised by councils, the Local Government Association (LGA) has met with Minister McEwen and Ms Carol Vincent, General Manager of the SA Farmers' Federation, to determine the most appropriate actions for Local Government in relation to the drought.
- In November 2006, the LGA sent a Drought Information Pack to all regional councils. The information pack outlines the process for preparing EC applications and provides information on drought support services.
- It is proposed that councils offer 'on the ground' support by locally promoting resources such as Regional Development Boards, NRM Boards and the SA Farmers' Federation branches, to farmers to help prepare Commonwealth EC applications, providing local venues for people to prepare EC applications, and disseminating supportive information such as "Taking Care of Yourself and Your Family".
- The LGA also has a dedicated drought web page on its website. The site is designed to provide South Australian councils with information on the drought and the associated impacts on their communities. The site provides links to key drought support services and specific Local Government information.
- To maintain close communication with the State Government, the LGA is also participating in the Premier's Industry Leaders Forum on Drought and assisting in the approval process for Community Support Grants applications.

Exceptional Circumstances Assistance (EC)

- On 24 January 2007, the Australian Government announced that EC drought assistance has been declared for the areas of Western Eyre Peninsula, Central Eyre Peninsula, Upper South East and Murray Mallee. Eligible farmers and agriculture-dependent small businesses in these areas will be able to apply for income support and interest rate subsidies up to 31st March 2009.
- A prima facie case also exists for the Lower Eyre Peninsula, meaning eligible farmers and small businesses can continue to apply for interim income support for up to 6 months. Farmers and small business directly dependent on farmers in the four new EC declared areas along with the existing South Australian EC regions of the Central North Pastoral, Central North East Pastoral and Upper North Cropping region may be eligible for EC assistance.
- Five applications for EC assistance have recently been submitted to Canberra for consideration. These cover the regions of the Mid North, Yorke Peninsula, Clare, Light & Barossa, Fleurieu Peninsula and River Murray Corridor.
- The State Government is assisting other regions to lodge applications for EC assistance with a further two applications expected to be submitted to the Federal Government.
- To help promote and increase awareness of EC support available, the Rural Financial Counselling Service of SA, PIRSA and Centrelink conducted a series of information sessions in EC declared areas throughout February. Farming and small business enterprises were provided with business information on EC eligibility criteria, the application process and assistance available to landholders and eligible small businesses to develop their individual applications.