

Drought Issue

The regional presence and technical expertise of Rural Solutions SA consultants was invaluable in assisting rural communities to cope with one of the worst droughts on record. With a hundred year heritage of assisting rural and regional communities through tough times, Rural Solutions SA is aware of the extreme personal and business pressures imposed by drought.

While there are many examples of the contribution made by Rural Solutions SA, only a few are outlined here.

Our regional strength aids drought response

Experienced consultants from Rural Solutions SA teams were at the forefront in delivering a series of drought management workshops on behalf of PIRSA during the prolonged period of dry weather.

Rural Solutions SA Livestock, Land Management & Sustainable Agricultural Systems, Irrigation and Agribusiness consultants had significant input into the coordination and delivery of the "Coping with the Season" workshops held across South Australia.

Our consultants conducted more than 55 workshops, providing informal advice and support to farm businesses and farmer group networks.

Many others were held for River Murray irrigators, including dairy farmers, who were struggling to manage severe water allocation restrictions during the 2006/07 season.

Two series of technical workshops were arranged by PIRSA with support from a wide range of industry associations.

Rural Solutions SA's strong regional presence enabled our people to present information about irrigation and business management issues, including technical and agronomic treatments and irrigation strategies to help avoid yield loss.

Water budgeting and trading options were discussed to help producers



Rural Solutions SA Livestock Consultants, Bruce Hancock & Heidi Goers and David Woodard, Land Management Consultant at Nuriootpa delivered a hands-on "Coping with the season" workshop in conjunction with Truro Agencies for Lower North producers.

manage and evaluate the cost of water against the cost of production. Exceptional Circumstances support, financial and social assistance, and general information on management options were also covered.

Our consultants were joined by people from the Rural Financial Counselling Service SA, Fruit Doctors, Yandilla Park, the Riverland Division of General Practice, agronomists and other specialist presenters.

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Drought impact ongoing



Dr Mike McCarthy, SARDI, delivering a drought workshop in Langhorne Creek

The impacts of the drought will still be felt into the new season, particularly for the State's extensive horticultural industries – and water allocations for the start of the 2007-08 irrigation season are causing concern.

Our Sustainable Horticulture Systems Team continues to provide support for PIRSA in responding to the needs of people who call the Drought Hotline (180 2020).

Rural Solutions SA consultants developed a regional communication forum for industry leaders across the Riverland and continued to deliver elements of the State Government drought program.

They have also provided a range of technical and management services to industry groups through:

- Exceptional Circumstances status case development;
- The development of decision making tools and support information for irrigators;
- Delivery of workshops and field days for irrigators;
- Provision of regional production and economic information to support the Water Security Taskforce and ABARE.

Seeds Services Australia defies drought cutbacks

As a result of the drought, Seed Services Australia has seen its lowest flow of seed samples to certify in the past 30 years.

The inflow of samples for testing was down 32% at the end of the third quarter, compared with the same nine months of the previous year.

This disappointing statistic highlights the virtual failure of annual spring-flowering crops such as cereals, clovers, medics and vetch species, all of which are primarily rain-fed.

But the staff at Seed Services Australia are not to be beaten when it comes to making a success of their business – drought or no drought.

They have expanded the seed certification operation into Tasmania for the first time.

Drought conditions across southern and eastern Australia will impact on seed yields, resulting in a reduction in total samples numbers tested for the full year. Despite intense competition, the team has successfully maintained its certification market share in South Australia.

Livestock Team gives direction

Rural Solutions SA's Livestock Team was instrumental in preparing a Drought Assistance Measures document to assist farming communities.

The document was provided by PIRSA to regional organisations supporting communities in Prima Facie and EC declared drought-affected areas.

Together the current list of national, statewide and locally available grants, the document highlighted the other assistance measures that individuals and communities may be able to access.

The document is available from Rural Solutions SA offices, PIRSA or at www.service.sa.gov.au/drought.asp

Community change leveraged through school studies

Recognising that the personal stress associated with drought can force some primary producers to withdraw from day-to-day interaction with the community and professional bodies, Rural Solutions SA sought alternative ways of providing quality drought information and timely assistance.

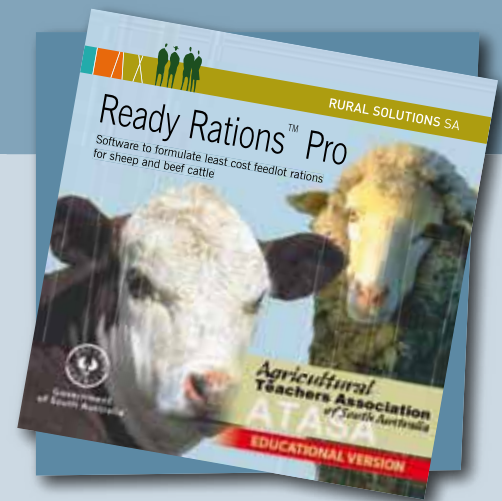
One initiative was formation of a strategic alliance with the Agricultural Teachers Association of South Australia, representing all the private and public sector secondary schools and colleges offering agricultural subjects.

Schools provide genuine focus and influence within the wider community across our regional and farming

areas. Rural Solutions SA was able to leverage that positive relationship with the community to provide a much-needed drought service.

Our people are providing agricultural schools with practical outcome-oriented training in the formulation of least-cost livestock rations using the Ready Rations Pro decision-making software, which helps farmers to work out the ration and the economics.

In this way, Rural Solutions SA influences the next generation of farmers and ensures the information is rapidly communicated to the parents and other community members during the immediate drought crisis.



Supported by PIRSA funding, this strategic alliance with the Australian Teaching Association also permits Rural Solutions SA to use the schools' computer teaching facilities for farmer and community training workshops.

South East not immune from this drought

The 2006-07 drought was a highly unusual situation for farmers in the South East because many producers had never seen such conditions on their properties. Neither had their parents or grandparents.

Rural Solutions SA's Keith office, with the help of consultant Brian Ashton, co-author of *Feeding & Managing Sheep in dry conditions*, helped about 400 people at seven initial "Coping with the Season" workshops.



Tarnya Brooksby and Tara Crommelin from the Keith office with Brian Ashton, from Pt Lincoln, at the Lucindale Field days display.

The Keith office also recognised the need to provide updates on technical information, and produced two editions of a 'Coping with the Season' newsletter.

With the bad conditions continuing into 2007, Rural Solutions SA joined forces with Country Health SA and the Rural Financial Counselling Service to provide the drought response stand at the Lucindale Field Days.

In April, field crop consultant Tim Prance provided follow-up sessions around the Upper South East in association with local Ag Bureaus, providing information and discussing ways in which farmers could plan better for future dry conditions.





Tasmania benefits from SA know-how

Like much of Australia, Tasmania faced severe drought. For the first time, farmers had to put sheep and cattle into containment areas to reduce erosion on their paddocks.

Livestock Consultant with Rural Solutions SA at Port Lincoln, Brian Ashton visited Tassie to assist farmers to learn how to confine sheep as a drought management option.

The trip was organised by Warren Hunt of the Tasmanian Institute of Agricultural Research. Warren is coordinator of the AWI-funded 8X5 Wool Profit Program.

The first workshop was at Oatlands in the Midlands. "It was amazing," Mr Ashton said. "Thirty five people registered and seventy turned up. They were really interested and asked questions continuously during the four-hour workshop."

A second workshop held at Swansea on the East Coast was attended by thirty people.

"These people are in a really difficult situation," Mr Ashton said. "I was told

before I went that things were bad, but there is nothing like seeing it and talking to people".

"Some farmers have already run out of paddock feed and stock are losing condition. If this stock is not removed, severe damage will be done to the paddocks – and no one wants that."

The workshops explained the nutrition and management needed to get sheep and cattle through. The farmers were very positive and keen to learn. Several said they would select sites for the containment areas immediately and start construction within a week.



Producers with Brian Ashton, Rural Solutions SA, and Warren Hunt, 8X5 Coordinator, inspect a potential containment area site in the Tasmanian Midlands.



Producers with Brian Ashton, Rural Solutions SA, and Warren Hunt, 8X5 Coordinator, at the Swansea drought workshop, on the east coast of Tasmania.

Producers helped by our drought advice

Workshops, response to drought hotline enquiries and media articles were the main tools for Rural Solutions SA Soils and Land Management consultants who provided advice and information to producers during the drought on behalf of the Department of Water, Land and Biodiversity Conservation's (DWLBC) Land Management and Revegetation Group.

Their work covered matters such as:

- Surface cover required to protect against wind and water erosion.
- When stock should be taken out of paddocks to protect soil.
- Quantities of fertiliser needed in the season after drought.
- The role perennial plants such as native grasses and saltbush can play in long-term protection against erosion.

Our consultants were also commissioned by DWLBC to prepare 'Soil and Land Management Condition during the Drought' reports for the South East, SA Murray-Darling Basin, Mount Lofty Ranges, Eyre Peninsula and Northern and Yorke regions in November and April.

These were based on land condition monitoring survey data we had collected on behalf of DWLBC and were in addition to the monthly reports on land condition provided to DWLBC.