

Sustaining community wellbeing in drought

Loddon Mallee: Sustainable development network



Fresh approaches to assist drought-affected communities

By publishing these case studies Victoria's Department of Human Services aims to share what has been learnt from the State Government's *Sustaining community wellbeing in drought* program funded in the 2007–2008 financial year.

The program, involving 19 Primary Care Partnerships (PCPs) in 47 rural and regional local government areas, was part of the department's broader drought response.

The department is keen for others to be inspired by positive experiences gained from it.

The Loddon Mallee Region Sustainable Development Network, convened in 2007, aimed to improve communication and coordination between state government, local government, agencies and corporations in initiatives related to drought, renewable energy and climate change.

The network linked senior managers from a range of government departments with drought coordinators, drought initiative service providers and local communities.

The approach succeeded in providing local workers with up-to-date information and expertise through forums and workshops and enhanced the communication between agencies, local communities and government funding bodies.

The network also developed a strategic framework for a coordinated regional response to long term climate change projections. The framework outlines

key strategies to mitigate, adapt, adjust, manage risk and identify new opportunities, such as renewable energy, over the next 30 years.

The region

The Loddon Mallee region has farmers with access to irrigation and farmers who do not, with the latter known as dry land area farmers. By 2006, after two tough drought years, local dry land area farmers were experiencing failing crops and loss of income.

Needs differed in communities across the region as farmers with access to irrigation were initially not affected as much as the dry land area farmers. Drought support services such as counselling were allocated accordingly.

When irrigation quotas were reduced in 2007, the effects of drought became more widespread.

It became increasingly apparent that the impact of drought would not be short term, and that to adjust to long term negative effects of climate change, communities needed leadership and support.

Background

Victoria's Regional Management Forums were established in 2005 to facilitate collaboration between Victorian government departments and local government in each of Victoria's eight administrative regions.

Each forum comprises local government chief executives and senior state government department representatives. The forum role is to:

- Identify and address critical issues facing the region
- Encourage cooperation between departments and with councils

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- Work with statutory authorities, businesses and local communities to deliver key priorities.¹

In regions where the impact of drought was identified as a critical issue, the forum established working groups to examine the coordinated and effective use of funds to support, strengthen, inform and coordinate initiatives for communities in the region grappling with drought.

The Loddon Mallee Region Sustainable Development Network started out as a climate change working group, but the Regional Managers Forum developed it into a network in 2007.

Convened by a representative from the Department of Primary Industries, the network aimed to improve communication and coordination between state government, local government, agencies and corporations in the area of drought, renewable energy and climate change.

Its members included representatives from Department Of Planning And Community Development, Department of Sustainability and Environment, Department of Primary Industries, Department of Human Services and the Northern Central Management Catchment Authority.

Planning and coordination

The first stage of the Loddon Mallee Region Sustainable Development Network's planning was communication and education. When both state and Commonwealth funding first became available, a wide range of staff were appointed to roles such as drought coordinators and drought support officers.

However, as many staff had limited knowledge of drought and climate change, the network facilitated education for them through workshops, forums

and information sessions, provided links to training opportunities, and provided web-based information and a newsletter.

The need for a structure for networking and coordination was crucial as there were ongoing changes in services, funding streams, initiatives and staff roles. The network became a source of feedback to government about the issues encountered with initiatives, and provided a forum for problem solving.

Drought counsellors, financial counsellors and women's networks, for example, communicated problems they found in the community to the network through their representatives.

Reflecting and learning from experience, the network was able to identify both the elements of successful drought support

models and service gaps, and link funds to appropriate agencies, communities and projects by approaching government on behalf of agencies and partnerships.

An example was the use of Centrelink data about the number of applications for Exceptional Circumstances payments in order to assist in identifying priority locations for drought counsellors.

A strategic planning workshop was held in September 2007, and a climate change forum in May 2008. As a result of these events and other planning processes a Strategic Framework—coordinated by the network for the Regional Managers Forum—was developed to guide high-level regional response to climate change projections over the next 30 years.

Figure 1: Strategic framework for Loddon Mallee Regional Managers Forum



¹ Wear, A. DPCD, Victoria's Regional Management Forums: A Comparative Review, p1. 2008.

Collaboration and communication

The Loddon Mallee Region Sustainable Development Network has sought to identify potential alignment of regional priorities with funding opportunities and priorities of the state and federal governments. It provides a mechanism for dialogue between these parties to inform the development of whole of government priorities in relation to climate change, and enable the achievement of those priorities at the regional and local level.

The link between the four Primary Care Partnerships* in the network was initially provided through the Department of Human Services (DHS) drought coordinator position and when this position ended, departmental primary health program advisors took up the role.

Figure 2: Intergovernmental roles

Federal/State

- State government departments collaborate at the statewide level
- Federal drought initiatives link with State programs

Regional

- Regional Directors and leaders respond to drought issues at the regional level, based on specific needs of the region and regionwide resources

Local

- Primary Care Partnerships bring together community members, local councils, health services and other agencies to coordinate local resources for the purpose of tackling local drought issues based within the local service system

Summary of strategies

Strategies of the Sustainable Development Network initiative included:

- Three workshops held for local government drought support officers to improve coordination and communication on developing issues
- Three workshops held for the broader drought response network
- Expert speakers on drought, climate change and renewable energy at community events such as forums and field days
- A drought newsletter which kept local agencies informed of the latest developments
- A Department of Primary Industries-hosted website providing access to a wide range of information and resources about drought and climate change
- Development of the Strategic Framework, coordinated by the network for the Loddon Mallee Regional Managers Forum
- Networks and communication systems established to facilitate regional planning and coordination for future climate change and sustainability initiatives
- Participation of a range of government workers, including DHS drought coordinators, in a CSIRO course on climate change, which equipped them to provide informed support to agencies and planners.

Lessons learned

Critical success factors in the approach taken in the Loddon Mallee region included:

- consistent leadership by the Department of Primary Industries, which convenes the Sustainable Development Network
- access to support and training for government and agency staff to understand the broad spectrum of drought and climate change issues. For example, staff including local government drought coordinators, a Women's Drought Community Engagement Officer and the DHS drought coordinator
- cross-government and sector forums and workshops which developed links and networks and provided creative problem solving opportunities
- well informed personnel in the DHS region to provide up-to-date information to Primary Care Partnerships and member agencies
- agencies having flexibility in capacity to expand part time roles and respond to funding fluctuations without needing to recruit new staff or lose staff in order to provide services more immediately and retain corporate knowledge.

Some of the challenges included:

- the impact of travelling distance on forum and meeting attendances
- changes in drought funding and services requiring coordinators to continually update communications to agencies and stakeholders
- managing staff turnover.

* Northern Mallee PCP, Southern Mallee PCP, Bendigo-Loddon PCP, Campaspe PCP.

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The future achievements and benefits of the Loddon Mallee Sustainable Development Network for PCPs and community health will be influenced by the quality and durability of links between the network, PCPs and agencies.

Conclusion

The Loddon Mallee Region Sustainable Development Network provides a case study example of governance arrangements dedicated to high-level drought coordination and networking.

The network provides a forum for region-wide communication and education with drought staff, towards informed planning and practice.

A key outcome of the network, the coordination of the development of a long-term strategic framework, will inform a coordinated regional response to climate change projections for the next thirty years.

The information contained in this case study, in particular the **cross-department collaboration and coordination**, adds to the body of evidence available to services and practitioners across Victoria.

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Please go to <http://www.health.vic.gov.au/pcps/> for further case studies.