



SOUTHERN NSW  
**Innovation Hub**

SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE,  
LANDSCAPES AND COMMUNITIES

# PREPARING WITH HINDSIGHT FORUMS

Supporting communities, groups and individuals to connect, communicate and create future change based on drought experience and hindsight.

June 2024



*Figure 1 - sharing experiences at the Deniliquin Preparing With Hindsight Forum*

## Executive summary

Preparing with Hindsight Forums were held in regional communities across Southern NSW in 2024 to facilitate open conversations to support proactive preparation for future droughts and climate variability.

Held in Deniliquin, Bega and Condobolin in February 2024, with additional forums planned for Broken Hill and Mudgee later this year, the workshops gathered together community, service providers and local organisations to share their experiences of previous droughts and make recommendations for the future.

The Preparing with Hindsight Forums explored each community's unique experience of the previous drought, how it impacted people and businesses and what interventions and programs worked effectively. These discussions then led to recommendations for increasing future preparedness for drought and ways to effectively support a community's resilience.

Localised resilience data for each community was also shared, available thanks to the Hub's Early Insights for More Resilient Communities collaborative research project, led by the University of Canberra.

Across each of the Forums common themes emerged when people were asked to reflect on what their experience of the last drought was like, what worked and what didn't in their communities, and what is required to get ready for the next drought. These key themes were:

1. Impacts on the agriculture sector
2. Community and social impacts
3. Economic and financial impacts, including on employment and labour
4. The environment and sustainability
5. Focus on mental health and wellbeing
6. Government responsiveness, support and provision of services
7. Knowledge, learning and preparation for the future.

Some of the most valuable insights gathered from the Forums were the recommendations for what actions need to happen now to prepare for future droughts and climate variability. These ranged from targeted agricultural extension to better small business planning, speeding up government responsiveness to drought, increasing coordination between agencies and departments, and more investment in community development.

The Preparing with Hindsight Forums proved to be a unique opportunity for communities to reflect on their experiences of drought – both bad and good – and simultaneously prepare for the future using the wisdom of the past.

## Table of contents

Executive summary .....	2
Approach .....	4
Insights .....	6
Impacts on the agriculture sector.....	6
Community and social impacts .....	6
Economic and financial impacts, including on employment and labour .....	6
The environment and sustainability.....	6
Focus on mental health and wellbeing .....	6
Government responsiveness, support and provision of services .....	7
Knowledge, learning and preparation for the future .....	7
What worked well in communities?.....	7
Areas for improvement.....	8
Recommendations for future preparedness .....	8
Results .....	10
Deniliquin .....	10
About the region .....	10
Drought learnings and observations.....	11
Condobolin.....	15
About the region .....	15
Drought learnings and observations.....	16
Bega.....	18
About the region .....	18
Drought learnings and observations.....	19
Conclusion .....	22
The impacts are felt economically and socially across communities.....	22
Focus on the environment and sustainability.....	22
Community collaboration and access to support is key.....	22
Effective provision of support and services.....	22
Next steps.....	23

## Approach

Southern NSW Innovation Hub's Preparing with Hindsight Forums 2024 were a series of facilitated workshops held in regional communities across Southern NSW with the purpose of gathering together community members, organisations and service providers for conversations about how to effectively prepare for and support communities during times of drought.

The idea for the Preparing with Hindsight Forums came in the context of predictions made in winter 2023 about the possibility of an imminent dry summer and potential El Nino, prompting the Southern NSW Innovation Hub to organise workshops that would bring people from specific communities together to reflect on past experiences and make recommendations that would increase preparedness for the future.

The Forums were an extension of a previous community engagement project, Preparing with Hindsight, conducted by the Southern NSW Innovation Hub's partner, the Farming Systems Group Alliance. It resulted in the collection of the experiences of a range of landholders through the stages of pre-drought, in drought and drought recovery from the 2018/19 event. It contributed to the Hub's focus on working with farmers and communities to identify ways to increase resilience to drought. One of the main things that project identified was that it is important for communities to come together early when preparing for drought, prompting the Hub to host the Preparing with Hindsight Forums in 2024.

Bringing together key stakeholders in each community, the aim of the Forums was to highlight how drought-impacted communities, understand what worked well in response, what didn't and gather recommendations to boost future preparedness.

At the Preparing with Hindsight Forums, each community also had the opportunity to learn about its own unique resilience data, resources and insights. This information is available as part of the Hub's [Early Insights for More Resilient Communities](#) collaborative research project which has developed pilot indicators of changing community resilience.

In February 2024 in-person Preparing with Hindsight Forums were held in Deniliquin, Condobolin and Bega, facilitated by Cindy Cassidy, Director, Southern NSW Innovation Hub. The agenda for these Forums included:

1. Acknowledgement of Country.
2. [Early Insights for More Resilient Communities](#): Professor Jacki Schirmer from the University of Canberra's tailored presentation for each community's local government area (LGA) identifying changes in resilience in the community based on looking at financial resources, social resources, human resources, natural hazards resources, infrastructure and services, ecosystem services, institutional resources, and exposure to natural hazards.
3. Facilitated roundtable discussion, focused on four key questions:
  - a. What was your experience in the last drought?
    - i. Community impact
    - ii. Impact on wellbeing
    - iii. Economic impact
  - b. What happened in your community that worked?

- c. What happened in your community that didn't work?
- d. What needs to happen now to be ready for the next drought?

To date, a total of 36 community stakeholders have participated in Preparing with Hindsight Forums, and future Forums will be held in Broken Hill and Mudgee later in 2024. To prepare for these Forums, maximise attendance and ensure a diverse range of community perspectives are captured, initial online planning meetings have taken place with community leaders in Broken Hill and Mudgee.



*Figure 1: 'Resilience' depends on resilience resources – slide from Early Insights for More Resilient Communities presentation given at Preparing with Hindsight Forums*

## Insights

Themes that emerged around experiences of drought across the discussions that took place as part of the Preparing with Hindsight Forums as common to all communities included:

### Impacts on the agriculture sector

For the agriculture sector, the impacts of the drought ranged from the more obvious like availability and quality of feed for livestock and increased prices and lower availability of irrigation water, to discussions of costly delays from decision-makers in government in declaring drought and providing timely access to supports, subsidies and fee waivers. The strength and resilience of the sector was also evident as many acknowledged that the lessons learned in water efficiency, ground cover maintenance, fodder conservation and natural resource management (NRM) puts farmers in good stead to face future climate challenges.

### Community and social impacts

For communities, the experience of drought is both a time of increased engagement and coming together to support each other and one of hardship and frustration as people leave communities, businesses close or lose employees, water restrictions change the local landscape and sometimes a divide emerges between “in-town” and “on-farm”. To prepare for future droughts and natural disasters it is recognised that communities need to build on the best of that collective spirit of looking after each other but people also want to see increased investment in community networks.

### Economic and financial impacts, including on employment and labour

Reduced on-farm production leads directly to income loss which translates into less money coming into communities and circulating through businesses and people. The drought made it hard to retain skilled staff and even teachers left to help their partners on the farm. The lack of investment in local infrastructure like roads, along with businesses closing and people moving away mean the impacts of drought are still being felt. Supporting further diversification of farm businesses and regional incomes was a recommendation to help prepare for future droughts.

### The environment and sustainability

Investments made in local natural resource management (NRM) projects including shelter belts and on-farm wetlands were acknowledged as some of the most valuable contributions to reducing the negative impact of the drought. The overall dryness of the landscape led to an understandable fear of fire and the drought increased the communities’ overall recognition of the importance of sustainability. A key recommendation for the future was preparation for a drier future climate by improving water security and water storage options – both on-farm and for communities.

### Focus on mental health and wellbeing

Overall mental health and people’s wellbeing was understandably negatively impacted by the last drought these communities experienced. Pressure of all kinds on families increased and some perceived more disconnection and social isolation in people that was compounded by lack of coordination of local support services. Simultaneously, increased awareness of mental health concerns and availability of programs helped people find the help they required, but it wasn’t easy. It was also acknowledged that even when the drought, flood or fire itself ends, the effects linger as people take time to recover and there is a compound exhaustion from experiencing sequential disasters.



## Government responsiveness, support and provision of services

In terms of official responses to the drought – from governments and other national organisations – a number of positives were highlighted by participants in the Preparing with Hindsight Forums. The financial support and assistance offered through household allowances, waiving of fees for rates and vehicle registrations, vouchers to support local businesses, grants and schemes like the Rural Assistance Authority and Farm Innovation loans and transport subsidies were all mentioned.

The increased collaboration and communication between organisations, agencies and levels of government was also acknowledged as a positive contributor to ensuring support and services were received where they were needed most. One piece of feedback that emerged across the communities however was that support took too long to be activated. Being slow to declare the drought had an impact and some policy guidelines weren't entirely suitable.

Greater support for the businesses in the regions that aren't directly farmers was also highlighted as an opportunity. In addition to speeding up the response, other ideas for improving the experience in future included enhancing communications between service providers – government, private sector, charity, healthcare – and better continuity through levels of government.

## Knowledge, learning and preparation for the future

Increasing local knowledge and enhancing communities' preparedness for drought was a theme heard at all the Forums. However, a contradiction emerged where communities both felt they were generally unprepared for the speed and severity of the last drought but also considered that the planning and preparation that had taken place, particularly on-farm, helped significantly.

Ensuring the availability of reliable information, including improving weather forecasting and analysis was mentioned as important. As was increasing technical training in drought preparedness for extension organisations and farming systems groups. Improved business planning – for farms and other small businesses alike – was recommended.

There was an overall sentiment that decisions need to be made quickly if they're going to have an impact and that the 'right people', especially farmers, need to be in the room when solutions are being developed. Managing perceptions of the drought, both within the community and in the broader media landscape was also raised as an issue. In some instances, national reporting on the drought meant decreased tourism to a community which compounded economic impacts.

## What worked well in communities?

- Increased support services, mental health programs, and community initiatives were effective.
- Financial assistance, low-interest rate schemes/loans, and grants helped mitigate some of the worst economic impacts.
- Sustainable agricultural practices such as fodder conservation and local NRM (natural resource management) supported long-term sustainability.

- Improved communication and collaboration between organisations, agencies and community members facilitated better support for the people who needed it.

*“Recognition of the importance of sustainability.”*

*“Increased mental health awareness and programs.”*

*“Financial assistance.”*

*“Networks supporting one another and sharing information.”*

### Areas for improvement

- Timely government responses and suitable policy guidelines were lacking.
- Greater ongoing financial flexibility – from governments and banks – is needed to allow more time for recovery.
- More understanding of the flow-on effects for the towns and businesses impacted by drought, both cash flow and skilled labour.
- Social cohesion was impacted by a lack of youth engagement during the drought.
- National media coverage sometimes misrepresented local conditions, discouraging tourism and visitors which compounded the economic impact.

*“Make decisions early.”*

*“Better continuity through levels of government.”*

*“Lack of reliable sources of information.”*

### Recommendations for future preparedness

- Improve water security and water infrastructure.
- Increase on-farm water storage capabilities.
- Improve regulations for on-farm water storage.
- Government to respond quickly to droughts – declare drought early.
- Make it easier to interpret and analyse Bureau of Meteorology (BOM) information.
- Support diversification of farm incomes.
- Invest in networks and programs that support local communities.



- Increase local resources for agricultural industries e.g., Extension Officers.
- Tell more good news stories about regional Australia – don't just focus on communities when there is a crisis.
- Increase consultation with farmers before implementing drought policies and plans.
- Help businesses (farms and others) develop drought preparation plans.
- Improve collaboration between service providers aiming to help communities (government, private sector, agencies, charities, community groups)
- Improve regional infrastructure, especially water storage.
- Make it easier to access mental health support.
- Ensure easy access to financial support services for eligible businesses and people during times of drought.
- Build on the gains made in past droughts to enhance productivity e.g., water efficiency practices.

*“Improve policy guidelines so they can help in a suitable way.”*  
*“Don't forget the lessons learned –*  
*the water efficiencies, preparedness, trigger points for drought*  
*management and farm business plans.”*



Edward River Council's largest towns by population are:

1. Deniliquin – 7,862
2. Mayrung – 171
3. Blighty – 138
4. Conargo – 117
5. Pretty Pine – 59

As of the 2021 Census, the population of Edward River Council LGA is [8,456](#).

The major industries in the Edward River Council LGA include:

- Agriculture
- Irrigation Farming
- Cotton Farming
- Livestock Farming
- Manufacturing and Processing
- Tourism

### Drought learnings and observations

*Question 1:* What was your experience in the last drought?

*Answers:*

- Increased irrigation water prices and decreased availability
- Tightening budgets
- Hard to retain skilled staff and reduced available hours due to seasonal conditions
- Increased prices post-drought including labour, inputs and stock
- Decreased quality and availability of feed
- Reduced stock prices caused a reluctance to sell
- Increased family pressures including financial, educational and labour
- Decreased mental health
- Poor quality infrastructure including roads, ramps and public toilets due to changing priorities
- Smaller landholdings bought out by larger organisations
- Financial pressure encouraged buybacks
- Organisations adapted their businesses for clients and staff wellbeing
- General lack of preparedness
- Next generation left the region, leading to no take up of succession opportunities
- Growth of community support services

- Sheep and cattle prices held up
- Community connections increased
- Looking after ground cover
- Recognition of the importance of sustainability
- Summer cropping was heavily impacted
- Allied health growth – kept “normal” and community sector sustained
- Bank support was good
- Impact on schools - increased school leavers
- Difficult to retain quality teachers – many left to help partners on the farm
- Increased acceptance of housing and mental health support

**Question 2:** What happened in your community during the last drought that worked?

**Answers:**

- Ag wellness group – coordinated agencies together for support services, mental health, knowledge of the finance space
- Off-farm income opportunities meant local jobs were filled – teachers, nurses, childcare workers
- Communication - MLA, RGA, MDA
- Access to farm household allowances
- Low interest rates
- FMD (foot and mouth disease) – future planned
- Community events
- Containment areas for stock
- School support including waived fees, provision of uniforms, wellbeing etc
- Acknowledgement from more city areas e.g., Buy from the Bush
- Continuation of sporting groups
- Vehicle registration on farms were waived
- LLS rates waived
- Low debt and feed resources helped recovery
- Drought vouchers to support visitors/business - initiative of government
- Food Bank - RuralAid
- Co-ordination of services to increase collaboration
- Investment in local NRM projects and interest - shelter belts, on-farm wetlands
- Stock and domestic water rights retained

**Question 3:** What happened in your community during the last drought that didn't work?

**Answers:**

- Lack of water allocation and reliability
- Withdrawal of key services e.g., extension officers
- Freight subsidies for hay increased costs
- Media coverage misrepresented the drought – focus on the national- not local-level
- Lack of retail and ag supply services as businesses weren't supported
- Lack of knowledge for youth to help and understanding stressed parents
- In town water restrictions - minimum water savings, extreme impact on mental health
- Impact for gardens, sports grounds, public areas
- Lack of understanding re: the actual strength of the agricultural sector
- Lack of community understanding of a 2-year drought (can cope) vs 3-year drought (dire).
- Lack of support for local businesses to retain skills labour and business cash flow
- Closure of businesses
- People were reacting to conditions as they arose - lack of planning
- Lack of positive representation – didn't celebrate wins or strengths in the positive

**Question 4:** What needs to happen now for your community to be ready for the next drought?

**Answers:**

- Don't forget the lessons learned - water efficiencies, preparedness, trigger points for drought management and farm business plans
- Community business skills
- Diversified farm income – investment off-farm
- Invest in community networks
- Prepare for a drier climate and less water storage
- More effective use of farm resources and storage
- Re-invest in community development e.g., justice reinvestment projects
- Diversification i.e., land holdings and infrastructure for diversification
- Modelling of final buybacks in water allocation for future farming
- Understand impacts of carbon trading and balance sheets - informed/non-biased
- Support plan for small local businesses
- Increased coordination between town and farm - support secondary businesses in town
- Better communication between services - government, private sector, RFCS, health etc.
- Farmers need to be in the room to have the conversations on the “solutions”
- Investment in technical training for extension orgs, non-profits, FSGs



## Condobolin

A Preparing with Hindsight Forum was held in Condobolin on 12<sup>th</sup> February 2024 with eight community stakeholders in attendance from local businesses, farming systems groups, farmer/primary producer organisations, support service providers, local Landcare and State Government organisations.

### About the region

Before European settlement, the Wiradjuri people inhabited the area. Condobolin's name is suggested to originate from the Aboriginal word Cundabullen, meaning “shallow crossing”, or from the Wiradjuri word for “hop bush” or “hop brush”. Explored by John Oxley in 1817 and Thomas Mitchell in 1836, the Condobolin run was established by 1844.

The town of Condobolin was proclaimed in 1859. Agriculture, particularly wheat, barley, canola, wool, sheep, and cattle, has been significant, with expanded production after the damming of the Lachlan River in 1935.

[Lachlan Shire](#) local government area (LGA) is at the centre of NSW and today its economic base includes agriculture, manufacturing and health services provision. In addition, a small but successful manufacturing sector operates out of Condobolin and Lake Cargelligo producing product for the global market. Lachlan Shire Council also manages the largest road network of any local council in the State.

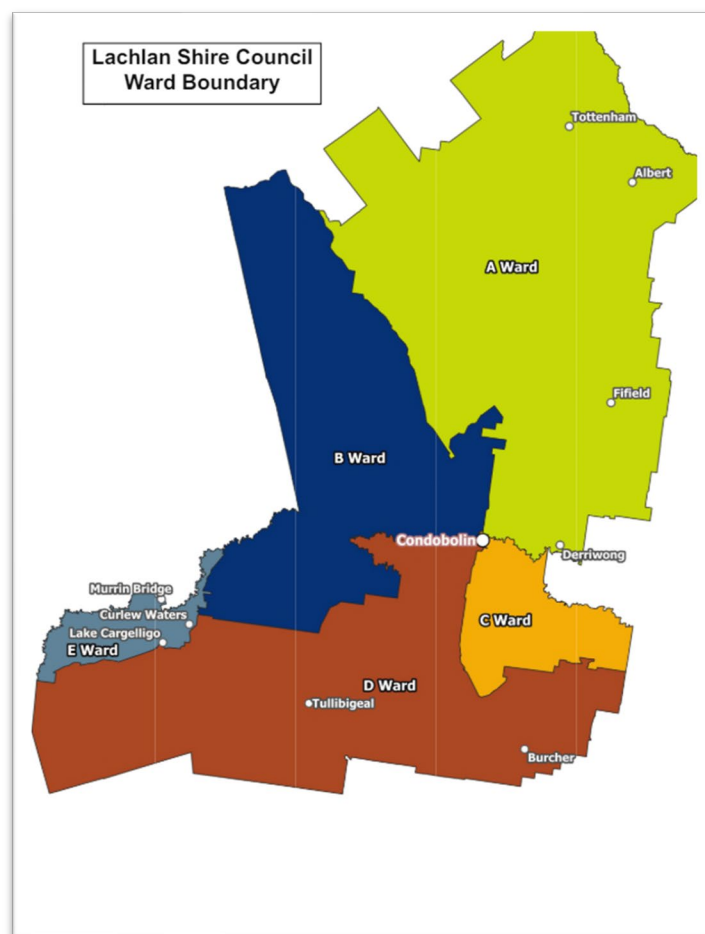


Figure 3: Map of [Lachlan Shire](#) Local Government Area (LGA)

The [Lachlan Shire's largest towns](#) by population:

1. Condobolin – 3,486
2. Lake Cargelligo – 1,479
3. Albert - 900
4. Tottenham - 299
5. Fifield – 287

As of the 2021 Census, the population of Lachlan Shire Council LGA is [6,094](#).

The major industries in Lachlan Shire include:

- Agriculture
- Livestock Farming
- Cotton Farming
- Mining
- Retail and Services
- Health and Education Services

### Drought learnings and observations

**Question 1:** What was your experience in the last drought?

**Answers:**

- Lack of reliable sources of information including BOM, guidelines and policies, funding opportunities etc
- There was engagement among a broad range of community members
- There was collaboration between agencies
- Fodder conservation

**Question 2:** What happened in your community during the last drought that worked?

**Answers:**

- Increased mental health awareness and programs

### Community looking after community – religious and other organisations/donations

- Government support e.g., suicide prevention
- Fodder drops
- Financial assistance
- Flow of information and resources greatly improved
- Neighbour bonding

- Community events
- Farmers were prepared e.g., fodder conservation
- Networks were supporting one another and sharing information
- Local agencies worked well with community and each other to deliver support

**Question 3:** What happened in your community during the last drought that didn't work?

**Answers:**

- Banks were okay during but not after the drought, when farmers most needed flexibility
- There were differing expectations between townspeople and farmers
- Timeliness and quick access to services
- Government departments took too long to act
- Policy guidelines weren't always suitable
- A lot of young people and skills left the region
- Flow-on effects of drought were felt in town including lack of services
- False perception of the effects and recovery of drought, floods, fire etc
- Water policy – long term effects on citrus and fruits, no crop = no income

**Question 4:** What needs to happen now for your community to be ready for the next drought?

**Answers:**

- Need to focus the conversation not just on the negatives
- Accelerate technical uptake
- Increased community acceptance of change programs – ESG (environmental, social and governance) and climate reporting
- Improved policy guidelines so they can help in a suitable way
- Encourage farmers to bond with community
- Make suitable support available
- Ensure the people getting help are those that really need it

## Bega

A Preparing with Hindsight Forum was held in Bega on 28 February 2024 with 13 community stakeholders in attendance from local businesses, farming systems groups, farmer/primary producer organisations, support service providers, banks, and State Government organisations.

### About the region

The Bega region was traditionally inhabited by the Yuin-Monaro Aboriginal people. Bega town lies at the foot of Mumbulla Mountain, named after Yuin elder King Jack Mumbulla, also known as Biamanga. Bega is known for its dairy industry, with the town gazetted in December 1851 and later relocated south of the river due to flooding. Dairy farming expanded in the 1860s, overtaking cattle farming.

In 1882, the Municipality of Bega was created, and the Bega Dairy Cooperative Limited was established in the late 1890s. Bega Cheese, produced by The Bega Co-operative Society Limited, is now well-known globally.

The [Bega Valley Shire](#) local government area (LGA) is also known as the Sapphire Coast and is located at the south-eastern extremity of coastal NSW, Australia. The Shire is predominantly rural, with many townships and villages.

Land is used primarily for conservation and timber production. The next biggest land use is agriculture, particularly dairy farming. Fishing, oyster harvesting, tourism and retail are also important industries.



Figure 4: Map of [Bega Valley Shire](#) Local Government Area (LGA)

The Bega Valley Shire's largest towns by population are:

1. Bega - 5,013
2. Merimbula – 3,544
3. Eden – 3,348
4. Tura Beach – 2,921
5. Bermagui – 1,865

As of the 2021 Census, the population of Bega Valley Shire LGA is [35,942](#).

The [Top 5 Industries](#) in Bega Valley Shire include:

1. Construction
2. Manufacturing
3. Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing
4. Health Care and Social Assistance
5. Accommodation and Food Services

### Drought learnings and observations

**Question 1:** What was your experience in the last drought?

**Answers:**

- Farmers didn't make quick enough decisions – expected government support
- There was an overconfidence going into the drought – resulting in low preparedness
- Support was provided to feed high levels of stock
- Brown Mountain tax – buying feed
- Compounded exhaustion from sequential disasters lead to burnout and overwhelm
- Pressure on families
- Fear of fire due to dry landscape
- Less money coming into the community meant less money circulating
- Increased interest rates
- Low commodity prices - challenges for bringing feed into the region
- Impacts were rapid
- People seemed disconnected – lack of local coordination and social isolation
- Agencies were reactive rather than proactive
- Lack of knowledge and resources available

**Question 2:** What happened in your community during the last drought that worked?

**Answers:**

- Additional support received from experts and techs in the field
- Grants e.g., Rural Assistance Authority
- Individual preparedness e.g., feed stored
- Transport subsidies in the 2018/19 drought
- Waving of fees, interest, fines etc - case-by-case
- LLS drought workshops – needed for a broader audience
- BEMBOKA Community group – grass roots support
- Dairy were generally better prepared than beef
- Farm Innovation Fund loans

**Question 3:** What happened in your community during the last drought that didn't work?

**Answers:**

- Lack of feed for livestock
- Loss of income
- Impact on mental health
- Perception that there's no end or no relief
- Normal de-stocking processes didn't "pay"
- BOM predictions may mislead people
- Preparedness workshops held too late
- Inability to access feed and increased cost of feed
- On-farm water storage – regulations and approvals
- Access and availability of support services
- Grant misappropriation
- Protection of on-farm water assets
- Transport connections
- Absentee and hobby farmers weren't caring for stock
- Government messaging on subsidies came too late
- Slow to declare drought with no subsequent support
- Not enough allied or mental health services available
- Moving populations – tree/sea changers
- Region struggled with access to services – housing/childcare/health
- Lack of local knowledge on conditions



**Question 4:** What needs to happen now for your community to be ready for the next drought?

**Answers:**

- Improve water security on farms - funded by government and public/private partnership
- Rapid government messaging and drought support subsidies
- Improved extension and focus on fodder conservation - value of different feed stores
- Retention and transfer of local knowledge in governments but also farmer-to-farmer
- Better continuity through levels of government
- Education on business practices
- Where to source quality stock food
- Make decisions early
- Targeted extension and adoption
- Local feed supply development
- Individual drought plans - farms and small businesses
- Improved BOM forecasting/weather analysis and interpretation – suitable for farmers interpretation
- B-Double access
- Diversification of income on- and off-farm

## Conclusion

The Preparing with Hindsight Forums shed light on the multifaceted impacts of drought on communities, revealing common themes that resonate across Southern NSW.

1. Impacts on the agriculture sector
2. Community and social impacts
3. Economic and financial impacts, including on employment and labour
4. The environment and sustainability
5. Focus on mental health and wellbeing
6. Government responsiveness, support and provision of services
7. Knowledge, learning and preparation for the future

### The impacts are felt economically and socially across communities

We learnt that in times of drought, while the agriculture sector faces significant challenges from the decrease in overall production this then produces significant knock-on effects for communities, businesses and social structures. Decreased spending leads to economic strain across a region, social divisions can arise, and mental health challenges accompany these. Skilled labour shortages are also a feature of droughts, and the impact can linger long after the drought declaration is over.

### Focus on the environment and sustainability

The environmental toll of drought also can't be overlooked, and recent droughts have brought into focus the importance of sustainability and water security in agricultural industries and regional communities alike. Water and the environment are also connected to community wellbeing, with less access to green spaces and waterways for sport and recreation linked to wearing down community resilience.

### Community collaboration and access to support is key

The participants in the Forums identified that managing the impacts of drought effectively comes down to preparedness, awareness and the provision of vital services and support mechanisms. Droughts and other natural disasters bring communities together to support one another but effective coordination of and easy access to support services – both economic and psychological – is crucial.

### Effective provision of support and services

Recommendations for improving a community's resilience in the face of drought and other climate variabilities range from making sure government's respond more quickly to increasing water security, spending on community development and striving for more collaboration across agencies and departments.

## Next steps

The Preparing with Hindsight Forums were an important opportunity to acknowledge the significant challenges posed by drought, learn from past experiences and most importantly capture the ideas and recommendations that will build community resilience and preparedness.

Plans are underway to organise two further Preparing with Hindsight Forums to be held in Broken Hill and Mudgee later in 2024. Initial online meetings have been held with community leaders to confirm key stakeholders to be invited to ensure robust discussion and diversity of viewpoints.

Following these additional Forums, this report will be updated to include feedback and insights from Broken Hill and Mudgee. In-depth localised presentations of the Early Insights for More Resilient Communities project are also being planned as follow up for the regions where Forums have already been held.



**Australian Government**  
**Department of Agriculture,  
Fisheries and Forestry**



**Future  
Drought  
Fund**



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