

OPINION

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centralised voice. We need stronger state involved and putting their views forward to

DONATIONS WON'T SOLVE CRISIS

BLESS their generous hearts, the kind folks donating money to help farmers feed starving animals. But crowd funding the cost of trucking grass over hundreds of kilometres is not a sustainable rural policy. Further, if El Niño kicks in this year on top of the current drought, a looming calamity of which there seems to be an even chance, there will be no hay for trucking anyway.

Some commentators argue that graziers should build resilience to drought into their business model so that they don't rely on handouts from taxpayers. Unfortunately, current market settings aren't structured to make that easy. Graziers are expected to cover the costs of maintaining their natural assets, upon which their production depends, out of the income they receive from the sale of food and fibre commodities. But the income they receive is determined in markets disconnected from their cost of production.

The profitability of broadacre agriculture has been declining for many years, as evidenced by the steady rise of outstanding farm debt. Prime among many contributing factors is the relentless rise in the cost in Australian dollars of running a farm, not matched by a commensurate rise in prices received. This reflects the weak bargaining position of farmers as price-takers in product markets that have no resemblance to the competitive markets of textbooks. It is difficult to set aside a drought reserve when the surplus in the good years is meagre.

What advice would Queensland's scientists give to the new Prime Minister in crafting a contemporary drought policy?

First, nourish those agencies that help farmers on their journey to self-reliance by translating scientific and other knowledge into terms relevant to them. This includes the Bureau of Meteorology, CSIRO, ABC and the regional catchment bodies. Encourage the state departments of agriculture, lands and water resources to reinstate their networks of farm advisors who have been downsized or dismissed during the past



Royal Society of Queensland president Dr Geoff Edwards says we need to nourish agencies that help farmers on their journey to self-reliance.

three decades of budget penny-pinching. Second, etch into the minds of those charged with preparing a new drought policy that a sustainably profitable rural enterprise utterly depends upon a healthy rural landscape. The environment comes first. Healthy floodplains, for example, depend upon healthy catchments far upstream. Third, reinvigorate the stock routes and remove cross fences so that drovers may readily transfer animals from droughted localities to agistment in districts with fresh grass after the rains come. Fourth, fund the states to map landscape vulnerabilities and land-use potential. There are parts of the continent that arguably should be dedicated towards forestry, national parks or carbon sequestration rather than pastoralism. Condemning graziers to eke out a living from sheep or cattle on worn out land is cruel. In any case, instruments like carbon credits are already in circulation and if they are to serve any worthwhile purpose, they need steering towards localities where they can yield the most benefit.

Fifth, confront climate change. Remember that rainfall variability is now played out on a landscape on average one degree warmer than historically, a large difference for natural systems. We are entitled to expect more from our parliamentarians than paralysis. The Prime Minister might convene a week-long dialogue involving all parliamentarians on the current state of climate knowledge and its implications for rural policy. Schedule briefings from scientists, farmers, economists, policy analysts and a range of other experts. It is not necessary to invoke the spectre of climate change to conclude that broadacre agriculture is facing formidable challenges, but on the other hand, to simply ignore it is to risk large adjustment costs in future. There is a considerable risk that if good spring rains arrive, pressure to recalibrate rural policy will diminish. Let us take advantage of the opportunity presented by the dry weather to place the inland pastoral enterprises on a pathway that is both profitable and sustainable. – Dr Geoff Edwards

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