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Introduction

Much of Victoria received below average rainfall since 2014 and some of the lowest rainfall on record. North West cropping farmers were most affected with many experiencing two or three consecutive poor seasons.

In November 2015 the Victorian Government announced a $27 million Drought Response Package to assist drought affected farmers, small businesses, families and communities. This included $4.15 million to establish a Catchment Management Authority (CMA) led Drought Employment Program (DEP).

The program provided full and part-time employment to drought affected farmers, farm workers and individuals the opportunity to earn off-farm income to support their families, contribute towards local environment outcomes and increase their confidence and skills for the future.

The Mallee, Wimmera, North Central and Glenelg Hopkins Catchment Management Authorities (CMAs) led the implementation of this program.

Over 18 months the program employed approximately 90 individuals as Crew Members or Community Liaison Officers.

Program participants received practical training in first aid, Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation Procedure (CPR), manual handling and agricultural chemicals use. The occupational health and safety aspects of the program have prompted a number of participants to review some of their own farming practices.

Crew members highlighted that upskilling training in chainsaw use, front-end loader operation, Construction Industry White Card Certificate will help them in their own farming and finding off farm employment.

Communities and key stakeholders were generous in their praise about the Drought Crews where they completed significant number of local priority projects such as pest and weed control on public land, fencing of rivers and native vegetation, revegetation on degraded areas and enhanced community spaces. Program participants felt they made a valuable contribution to their local communities.
The **drought employment program** was designed to provide employment for farmers, farm workers and individuals affected by the drought.
led the implementation of the program

Glenelg Hopkins
Total Funding $0.68 million

North Central
Total Funding $0.98 million

Males (2 Aboriginal)
81

Females
11

Mallee
19

Wimmera
32

Glenelg Hopkins
15

North Central
26

Worked more than 70,000 hours
Key environmental achievements

**Fencing**
- 91 km installed
- 30 km removed
- 9 km replaced
- 61 km maintained

**Indigenous revegetation**
- 724 hectares

- Mallee: 105 ha
- Wimmera: 43 ha
- Glenelg Hopkins: 70 ha
- North Central: 506 ha
Key environmental projects completed were:

- **Mallee** drought crews revegetated or maintained more than 200 ha of reserves and parkland.
- **Wimmera** drought crews completed over 4,750 ha of invasive species assessment.
- **North Central** drought crews managed about 3,500 ha of invasive plants and animals in the catchment.
- **Glenelg Hopkins** drought crews maintained or installed about 80 km of fenceline.

### Weed management

**Area managed (ha)**

- **Mallee**: 20
- **Wimmera**: 570
- **Glenelg Hopkins**: 140
- **North Central**: 4,900

**227 ha rubbish removed**
Social outcomes

The employment provided participants with increased financial stability during a difficult emotional time. Participants reported broad personal benefits including:

- boosted **health and morale** from being employed, earning an income and subsequently relieving stress from their farm situation
- forming **friendships** with others in a similar situation
- having an atmosphere where **experiences** and discussions about the future **could be shared**
- getting useful **training and upskilling**
- **increased motivation**
- a **sense of achievement and participation**

64 community groups assisted

83 recreational/visitor facilities installed/replaced/maintained
The economic benefits resulted in increased skilled workers and employment options, a boost to local businesses through material purchases and increased service demand.
Feedback from the Drought Crew Members

• It was good to work with other people for a change after working mostly by myself for the last 20 years.

  The most satisfying part of the program was doing some of the jobs that needed doing in our local towns that were not going to get done otherwise.

  Drought Crew Member
  Wimmera CMA

• We met a lot of people like us in the same boat. As well as the financial benefits, the program helped with our physical and mental wellbeing, which has taken a hit over the past few years. It gave us a purpose to get up each morning.

  Bev, Drought Crew Member
  North Central CMA

• As a younger member of the community, I gained more experience and have increased my chances in finding my next job.

  Youth Participant
  Glenelg Hopkins CMA

• To see that we are not the only ones in drought, seeing that there are far more people being affected by drought in the area, to talk about what they are doing and how they are dealing with it, and what is going to happen for the future, it's really good; it is also a great opportunity to get out, see the countryside and earn some money.

  Jane, Drought Crew Member
  Wimmera CMA

• I would like to thank all involved in this program as it helped all of us through a very difficult time.

  Fred, Drought Crew Member
  Wimmera CMA

• Everyone in town notices that things are getting done and it gives you a lot of pride in the work when you get some acknowledgement from the community – it makes it all worthwhile. I think we've all learned a lot. We've got to know people we mightn't have known well previously. We've learned some new skills; especially our youngest participant who took on the program as a school-leaver until he could find full time work.

  Glenn, Drought Crew Member
  Mallee CMA

• I didn't know anything about it (the environment). I care more now.

  Drought Crew Member
  Glenelg Hopkins CMA
Feedback from the Drought Crew Members

- “It was good to work with other people for a change after working mostly by myself for the last 20 years.”
  - Drought Crew Member
  - Wimmera CMA

- “The most satisfying part of the program was doing some of the jobs that needed doing in our local towns that were not going to get done otherwise.”
  - Drought Crew Member
  - Wimmera CMA

- “To see that we are not the only ones in drought, seeing that there are far more people being affected by drought in the area, to talk about what they are doing and how they are dealing with it, and what is going to happen for the future, it’s really good; it is also a great opportunity to get out, see the countryside and earn some money.”
  - Jane, Drought Crew Member
  - Wimmera CMA

- “Everyone in town notices that things are getting done and it gives you a lot of pride in the work when you get some acknowledgement from the community – it makes it all worthwhile. I think we’ve all learned a lot. We’ve got to know people we mightn’t have known well previously. We’ve learned some new skills; especially our youngest participant who took on the program as a school-leaver until he could find full time work.”
  - Glenn, Drought Crew Member
  - Mallee CMA

- “We met a lot of people like us in the same boat. As well as the financial benefits, the program helped with our physical and mental wellbeing, which has taken a hit over the past few years. It gave us a purpose to get up each morning.”
  - Bev, Drought Crew Member
  - North Central CMA

- “As a younger member of the community, I gained more experience and have increased my chances in finding my next job.”
  - Youth Participant
  - Glenelg Hopkins CMA

- “I didn’t know anything about it (the environment). I care more now.”
  - Drought Crew Member
  - Glenelg Hopkins CMA

- “I would like to thank all involved in this program as it helped all of us through a very difficult time.”
  - Fred, Drought Crew Member
  - Wimmera CMA

- “Flexibility was a very positive/beneficial aspect of the program. I was able to work my hours around farm work and family commitments.”
  - Drought Crew Member
  - Mallee CMA

- “It changed my attitude to the environment. I used to be a bloke who cut down trees, not planting them.”
  - Drought Crew Member
  - Glenelg Hopkins CMA

- “I really enjoyed working on this program. I have made a difference spotting noxious weeds and rabbit warrens. I hope now that the Shires and Councils will follow this through with eradication programs as some areas were very bad. I would like to think our work, time and the government’s money is being used to its full potential. Thank you for the opportunity to work on this worthwhile program.”
  - Drought Participant and Team Leader
  - Mallee CMA

- “My involvement in the Drought Employment Program has grown my confidence and helped me become known in the community. As a stay-at-home-mum I was able to earn my own money, have adult conversations, get out of the house, meet new people and become more connected to my community.”
  - Karen, Community Liaison Officer
  - North Central CMA

- “Our family noticed our improved happiness. The pressure lifted a little bit. We probably didn’t appreciate the environment in the past but when you’re involved in something like the DEP you do look around and say ‘well that is beautiful’ and take care of it.”
  - Colin, Drought Crew Member
  - North Central CMA

- “I enjoyed meeting people in a similar situation as myself and just talking and networking with other growers from around the region. The most satisfying part of my job was seeing the difference we made to the area where we worked.”
  - Drought Crew Member
  - Wimmera CMA

- “The program allowed a bond to form between Crew Members from different backgrounds.”
  - Drought Crew Member
  - Glenelg Hopkins CMA
...participants feel they have made a **valuable contribution** to their local community

...improved skills and knowledge in environmental management

...apart from the financial benefits, the program **helped** with their mental health

• What a **fantastic job** the Birchip Drought Crew did at the hospital; they are lovely guys and **great workers**.

  CEO of Birchip Hospital
Feedback from project partners

President of the Lake Lascelles Committee extended his appreciation to the Mallee CMA Drought Crew for the sanding, painting and oiling work on local facilities and buildings.

Aileen, President of Ararat Regional Bio-links said, “We are very grateful indeed for their services along the Cemetery Creek.”

Glenelg Hopkins Drought Crew Leader Perc O’Brien said, “Aileen’s dedication to Bio-Link area was inspirational.”

When you see the passion she has for the area, it changes your whole outlook. It’s great that we can put a smile on their faces,” O’Brien added.

“To be able to help out in this way and see their gratitude is very rewarding,” he said.

The Lake Tyrrell Committee Chair said, “we are extremely happy with the fencing at Lake Tyrrell and how it blends into the environment and includes bike access points.”

The Cheetman Salt Works Manager was also happy with fencing that keeps tourists out of leased areas.

“The fencing has already been a success with no tourists getting bogged in the Lake since the bollards have been installed,” the Manager said.

“thankful”

“rewarding”

“extremely happy”
Summary

The Drought Employment Program has generated multiple benefits such as:

- Participants have gained short term employment opportunities, attained new skills and knowledge, established new friendships and networks with their local communities.

- Drought Crews have undertaken significant environmental works to improve and enhance local parks, reserves, waterways and protect significant habitats for native Flora and Fauna.

- Drought Crews have contributed significantly to their local communities in terms of improvement to local amenity and infrastructure as well as community cultural projects.

Project partners and communities have expressed great appreciation to the contribution by the Drought Crews.

'a win-win program'