



ABN 91323005375

Catholic Women's League Australia Inc

Member Organisation of the World Union of Catholic Women's Organisations (WUCWO)
NGO Consultant (roster) status with the Economics and Social Council of the United Nations

"To make Jesus, our loving Saviour, and Mary, our Blessed Mother, better known and loved"

Submission from the Catholic Women's League Australia

Federal Government's Response to the Drought and the Adequacy and Appropriateness of Policies and Measures to Support Farmers, Regional Communities and the Australian Economy

14 February 2019

**"I cared for you in the wilderness, in the land of drought"
Hosea 13:5**

Introduction

Catholic Women's League Australia Inc. (CWLA) is the national peak body representing the League's six member organisations located throughout Australia. We are a Non-Government Organisation and have consultative (roster) status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations. We are also a member of the World Union of Catholic Women's Organisations, which represents one million women in 60 countries.

A high percentage of our members are from rural areas and many live on farms. They have experienced drought, understand the need for preparation and being resilient in difficult circumstances.

We are pleased to see that loans and financial support have already been recognized as vital areas needing prompt action.

Response to the Drought Co-ordinator's Report

- **Regular assessments of Australia's natural resources to inform long term, regional natural resource management priorities**

We would like to see a review of the Murray Darling Basin Plan. It is obviously unworkable in its present form. Water diverted towards environmental flows (e-flows), with the aim of flushing out estuarine areas, increases the likelihood of flooding of farms and is reportedly harming the River Red Gum forests of the Barmah Forest.¹

¹ <https://www.campaspenews.com.au/corowa-news/2019/10/04/840233/environmental-flows-continue-as-drought-worsens>



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The current 2750 gigalitres (GL) in environmental flows² is seriously affecting farm production levels, farmers' livelihoods and consequentially rural communities. By putting that level of water volume into perspective, 500GL is the capacity of one Sydney Harbour. Large environment flow allocations have reduced the availability of water in times of drought by approximately 30%.³

With the current temporary ceding of State powers to the Federal government with regards to the Murray-Darling Basin, the drought affecting farmers in this region could be immediately alleviated by the Federal Minister in the stroke of a pen. The Federal Minister could allocate the 1000GL (that's two Sydney Harbours worth of water) currently viewed as seepage and evaporation, to be counted as "environmental flow".

- **Assessment of every surface and groundwater basin across the country**

Most of our current dams were built after World War II. The population of Australia was 7.5 million then. New dams are needed for our current population of 25 million. The stored water used to be sufficient for 5 – 7 years of use. Now with the increased population and environmental flows only sufficient water for 2 – 3 years of drought is stored.⁴

- **Programs to boost local community leadership and come up with local "adverse event" plans.**

Please could you consider among 'adverse events' the high rate of suicide among farmers. Local services in mental health are desperately needed for all the community, but in times of drought or fires, farmers are particularly vulnerable⁵. Seeing water flow past your property but being unable to use it because of environmental flows, or zero water allocations are examples.

State boundaries can and do prove an impediment to accessing services, particularly along the NSW/Victorian border. Different health services, legal systems, road and transport systems and access to government services all put pressure on already stressed farmers, their families and ultimately on the local community.

- **Indicators designed to inform the government on regional and local conditions and assist drought preparation and response; and better inform farmers and communities to manage and prepare for drought.**

We would like to see farmers consulted in their own areas. Local expertise is important. Added to this, farmers need to be allowed to manage their own farms with as little outside interference as possible e.g., to remove trees close to farm buildings, to reduce fuel loads, to make decisions themselves.

² Weatherill demand places Murray-Darling Basin in jeopardy, Chris McCormack, News Weekly, 24 February 2018
<http://newsweekly.com.au/issue.php?id=493> (accessed 14.2.20)

³ Murray Darling Basin plan based on debunked science, Patrick Byrne, News Weekly, 2 November 2019
<http://newsweekly.com.au/article.php?id=58753> (accessed 14.2.20)

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Depression in rural Australia: what are the causes? Australian Counselling, <https://www.australiacounselling.com.au/depression-rural-australia-what-are-causes/> (accessed 14.2.20)



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Without responses to regional and local conditions, more farmers will walk off their farms. Although not usually due to drought we know that the number of dairy farms has decreased by about 2700 in the past 10 years⁶. Our ability to feed the nation is compromised in good times when farmers and communities are unable to access support in critical periods of extreme dry weather.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak on behalf of our members living with drought.

Kate Mathai

National President
Catholic Women's League Australia

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/dec/01/australian-dairy-drought-foreign-ownership-farmers>