



Final report

Back to Business Bushfire Recovery – NSW coordinator

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Abstract

The MLA Back to Business Bushfire recovery project was undertaken to assist bushfire affected producers to prioritise actions to aid in decision making to assist in quick disaster recovery. The project involved engagement of bushfire affected producers and consultants with appropriate expertise to work together to identify problems and deliver solutions based on a prioritised plan of action.

The project saw consultants work with bushfire affected red meat producers to deliver action plans which producers have responded to with 91 percent already having implemented action and 67 percent of those already having noted a positive change in their business since implementation.

This project has delivered to those producers involved an improved sense of direction and well-being at a time when emotions were driving decision making. This has led to improved producer knowledge and skill, improved confidence in decision making, improved understanding of business priorities and improved productivity benefits. These lead to greater industry profitability.

Executive summary

Background

The extent of the bushfires that occurred across Australia during late 2019 and early 2020 was unprecedented. The impact of the bushfires on livestock producers across Australia was severe.

In response to the impact of the bushfires on livestock producers MLA agreed to fund between one and three support sessions between bushfire affected producers and local farm management or specialist technical consultants (hereby referred to as FMCs or STCs). Any livestock producer with a property identification code (PIC) who was affected by bushfires was eligible to apply to the program. The support sessions were aimed at providing tailored support to develop an individual plan to help get bushfire affected producers' businesses back on track.

Objectives

The key objectives of the state coordination role were to recruit and engage farm management consultants, to ensure that they met the minimum eligibility criteria, engage and verify eligibility of bushfire affected red meat producers, pair producers with consultants, collate reporting and summarise the outcomes of the program.

Methodology

Protocols and criteria for eligibility, enrolment, assessment and reporting were developed to provide clarity to farm management consultants and producers. A publicity and recruitment campaign using face to face meetings, social media, conventional media and word of mouth was conducted to encourage program involvement. Communications were maintained between the program and consultants and producers to ensure that expectations of all parties were being met.

Results/key findings

Sixty four bushfire affected producers engaged with consultants in one on one sessions to set plans in place and to establish opportunities for business recovery. Twenty two consultants met the

eligibility criteria and engaged and enrolled to participate. Of these seventeen delivered consultancies to producers. Advice provided varied depending on client needs. Producer evaluation of the program was extremely positive. On a scale of 1-10 (10 = high score) approximately 95 percent of responses were rated 8 to 10 for key questions regarding value of the program to the business and satisfaction of the program.

Benefits to industry

This project has provided business support to livestock producers at a time when they needed it most. Over 90 percent of producers have already implemented action plans to change with the majority of these changes relating to improving productivity in their businesses. Another key benefit was the ability of producers, who were emotionally exhausted, to step out of the immediate operational needs of the business and to focus on planning to deliver a clear picture of the priorities for action.

Future research and recommendations

This project delivered value to those participating. The number of producers participating relative to the number exposed to bushfires was, however, low. Investigation into improving uptake of such programs would be beneficial given the value to those participating. Some producer commentary has indicated that response times were slower than desirable while others suggested a longer time frame for delivery would be useful. A generic disaster action plan with protocols developed to deliver improved response times may assist.

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1. Background

The bushfires that occurred during late 2019 and early 2020 in NSW, ACT, WA, Vic, Tas and SA were unprecedented in their extent and intensity (www.aph.gov.au). The Australasian Fire and Emergency Service Authorities Council stated that over 17 million hectares had been burned across NSW, Victoria, Queensland, ACT, Western Australia and South Australia. The impact of the bushfires on livestock producers across Australia was severe. In the most extreme of cases all infrastructure and livestock was lost to the bushfires. The effect of bushfire to livestock producer extends beyond the productivity loss. Bushfires have a severe impact on the mental health and well-being of livestock producers.

In response to the bushfires MLA agreed to fund multiple one-on-one support sessions with bushfire affected producers and local farm management and specialist technical consultants. The support sessions provided tailored support to develop an individual plan to help get bushfire affected producers' businesses back on track.

The key target of this program was bushfire affected producers. The aim was to ensure that producers took the time to step back from the immediate operational needs of the business and develop an action plan to assist in recovery. External consultants were engaged to assist as they have experience in the development of plans which allow for the prioritisation of actions based on the needs of the producer. The articulation of these plans and priorities to bushfire affected producers by consultants has had the impact of moving them from a state of potential indecision and frustration, as a result of the operational recovery workload, to a state of order with a vision of how to progress.

2. Objectives

The objectives of this project, with relation to the role of the state coordinator, follow:

- Engage appropriate FMCs to work in bushfire affected regions of New South Wales and provide contact details to MLA to contract
- Ensure FMCs meet the eligibility criteria
- Engage and verify eligibility of fire affected red meat producers, and ensure completion of the registration form which includes producer consent
- Pair bushfire affected producers with an appropriate FMC, which can include working with producers to determine preferred FMC and does not exclude current advisors provided they meet FMCs eligibility criteria
- Provide MLA with updates on the program at least monthly via email, reporting on the criteria detailed in Annexure B, along with verbal communication to further discuss detail
- Collate reporting from farm management consultants and detail in final report summarising the outcomes of the program.

All of these objectives of the program were achieved during the project timeline. The success in achieving the objectives was largely dependent on the processes and protocols that were instigated in the initial phase of the project.

The processes, protocols and procedures allowed for the setting of clear expectations of:

- MLA as the organisation funding the project.
- The state co-ordinator acting as the conduit between producers, consultants and MLA.
- Consultants who were applying to be engaged in the program.
- Bushfire affected producers who were looking for assistance from the project.

- Other parties who were looking to assist producers who were affected by the bushfires.

The processes which were developed allowed for improvements in the efficiency of delivery of information to aid all parties looking to assist bushfire affected producers. The processes also allowed for a highly efficient participation pathway for producers allowing them to apply to participate in the program by simply filling in an electronic form which could be completed on computer or by phone. Many producers stated that the ease of their involvement was an appealing part of the program.

3. Methodology

On the introduction of the program there were no processes or protocols developed for engagement, assessment of eligibility, enrolment, assessment and reporting for either consultants or bushfire affected producers. The state coordinators worked together with the MLA program team to develop criteria that ensured adequate program accountability whilst ensuring the process was not so bureaucratic that it would restrict involvement. MLA conducted an awareness campaign to promote the program and its benefits to producers.

The initial aim was to have bushfire affected producers engage with farm management consultants to deliver assistance in planning for business recovery. It became evident that some producers were comfortable with their business recovery strategy but were keen to have specialist technical services to assist in their recovery. This differentiation in requirement was accommodated by the program and guidelines changed to allow for either a combination of specialist technical services and farm management services or, where specified by the client, technical specialist services only.

Defining and demonstrating consulting expertise.

A definition of each role was provided to deliver clarity to consultants looking for involvement in the program.

A farm management consultant (FMC) was considered by the program to be an experienced consultant that specialises in farm business management with in-depth understanding of livestock farming systems from an integrated technical and financial perspective.

A specialist technical consultant (STC) was considered by the program to be an experienced consultant with technical expertise, but without farm business financial management expertise. Examples of specialist expertise included, but weren't restricted to nutrition, agronomy, livestock production, veterinary, genetics, and environment.

Farm management consultants were requested to demonstrate and provide evidence of the following criteria and be approved by the state coordinators and MLA prior to delivering any 'Back to Business' sessions:

- At least five years' experience sheep and/or beef consulting and farm business management with an in depth understanding of livestock farming systems from an integrated technical and financial perspective; and
- Provide three (3) referees, two (2) of which must be producers (clients)
- Evidence of daily billing rate (previous invoices)
- Have adequate levels of Professional Indemnity Insurance (\$2M) – certificate of currency required

Specialist Technical Consultants were requested to demonstrate and provide evidence of the following criteria and be approved by the state coordinators and MLA prior to delivering any 'Back to Business'

sessions:

- At least two years' experience sheep and/or beef consulting and farm business management with an in depth understanding of livestock farming systems from an integrated technical and financial perspective; and
- Provide three (3) referees, two (2) of which must be producers (clients)
- Evidence of daily billing rate (previous invoices)
- Have adequate levels of Professional Indemnity Insurance (\$2M) – certificate of currency required.

Producer eligibility, recruitment and the application process

The first point of contact for any producer was the Back to Business state coordinator. Upon receipt of enquiry a producer was engaged typically with a phone call to discuss their situation and understand their needs. Each producer was typically sent a follow up letter electronically which outlined the process for:

- involvement including eligibility criteria,
- application (a simple online form)
- engagement with the consultant
- reporting and evaluation

The online application process through Microsoft forms was extremely efficient and simple and allowed, not only for seamless engagement of producers but also for the collection of very useful survey data which provided an understanding of the extent of the damage to each producer. If producers were not comfortable using computers, it was still possible to assist them with the application process in an efficient manner. Data was collected in real time and both the state coordinators and MLA had access to all the data which was cloud based.

Protocols and criteria for eligibility, enrolment, assessment and reporting were developed to provide clarity to farm management consultants and producers. A publicity and recruitment campaign using face to face meetings, social media, conventional media and word of mouth was conducted to encourage program involvement. Communications were maintained between the program and consultants and producers to ensure that expectations of all parties were being met.

A reporting mechanism which allowed for the key issues of the consultancy to be reported without breaching client confidentiality were provided by consultants to the state coordinator. Action plans were also reported either as part of the consultancy report or in a separate form which was shared with the producer. Reports demonstrated the breadth of topic areas discussed depended on the circumstances of the client they also demonstrated that requirements of producers varied greatly.

4. Results

The following data is provided to provide some background regarding participating producers, the scale and type of business operations they are involved in and the extent of the bushfire damage to their asset base. While far more producers were engaged in activities promoted by the program only 65 producers participated in the engagement of consultants in the Back to business project. Several producers worked with more than one consultant as they valued the different expertise relevant to different components of their business.

Locality and property area

The majority of producers were located in the NSW Southern Tablelands and the Upper Murray while the minority was located in the South coast, Northern NSW. Seventy three percent of producers had properties of area between 100 and 1,000 hectares, 26 percent had an area of 1,000 to 5,000 hectares with a small percentage having area greater than 10,000 hectares.

Figure 1. Percentage of B2B participating producers by general locality

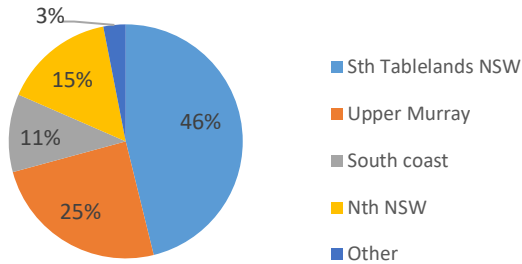
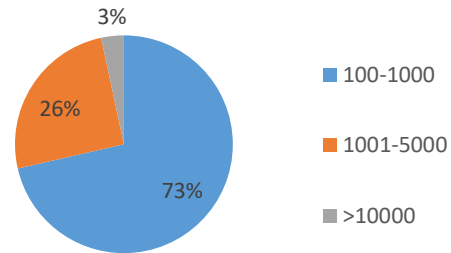


Figure 2. Percentage of B2B participating producers by property area (ha)



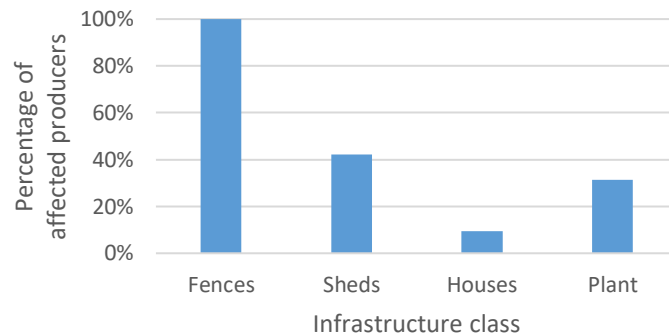
Enterprise scale

The number of cattle managed was fairly evenly distributed with 22 percent managing 1 to 100 head, 30 percent managing 100 to 500 head, 31 percent managing 500 to 1,000 head and the remainder managing over 1,000 head. Sixty three percent of bushfire affected producers did not manage sheep at all. Twenty percent managed between 1 to 1,000 head with the remainder managing over 1,000 head of sheep.

Impact of bushfire

The impact of bushfire on producers was assessed by surveying the extent of area affected, livestock losses and infrastructure losses. The severity of the losses varied greatly between producers from complete loss of infrastructure, pasture and livestock to relatively minor losses. All bushfire affected producers participating in the program lost fencing, forty percent lost sheds, ten percent lost houses and 30 percent lost plant and equipment.

Figure 3. Percentage of B2B participating producers by plant and infrastructure losses



A total of approximately 39,075 hectares of land was affected representing approximately 50% of the total area managed by all of the producers involved in the program. Half of the producers experiencing bushfire had no cattle losses, 33 percent lost between 1 and 50 head while the

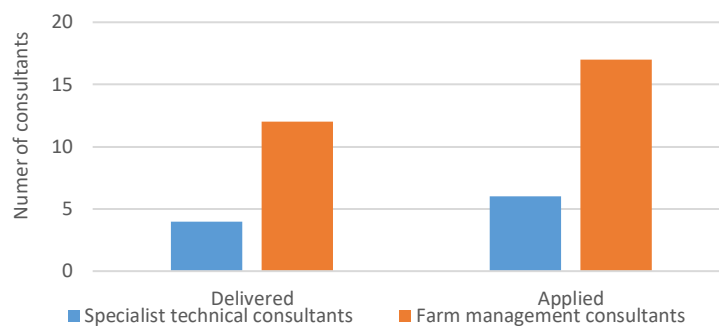
remainder lost more than 50 head. One producer lost more than 250 head of cattle. Six producers experienced sheep losses with five of those losing between 1 and 100 head and 1 losing more than 250 head of sheep.

Consultant engagement and delivery

In all, twenty three consultants applied to the program and sixteen delivered consultancies to bushfire affected producers. Of the total successful applications received, seventeen were farm management consultants and six were specialist technical consultants. Twenty five percent of consultants delivering were specialist technical consultants with the remaining 75 percent being farm management consultants.

Some consultants did more of the consultancies than others as they already had exposure to bushfire affected producers or they had client relationships with producers who were affected. In fact, seven consultants were responsible for the delivery of the majority of the consultancies. Many of these consultants actively recruited bushfire affected clients to the program because they could see the value to their clients of work to assist them in planning and making improved decisions in a time of desperate circumstances.

Figure 4. There were more consultants enrolled in the program than those who delivered



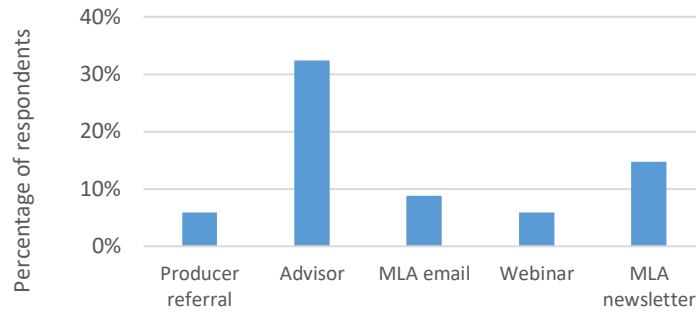
In addition to those producers who already had some relationship with a consultant there was at least 30 percent of producers who had never engaged, or had a business relationship with, a consultant in the past. As a measure of success of the program, 63 percent of those producers stated that they were very likely to continue using a consultant into the future while a further 31 percent stated that they were somewhat likely to continue using a consultant.

While producers were entitled, under the project criteria, to three face to face sessions with consultants not all producers opted for all three sessions. There were several cases where either the consultant, the producer or both considered that there was no further support required after one or two sessions, so the consultancy ceased at that point. Of 195 available consultancy sessions 154 sessions were held between consultants and producers.

Results as confirmed using evaluation data

The majority of participants in the program heard about the program from an advisor with MLA emails or newsletters having the next greatest impact. Other means such as local workshops which were held in each of the areas featured but the percentage of participants engaging in the project as a result of attendance appeared to be low.

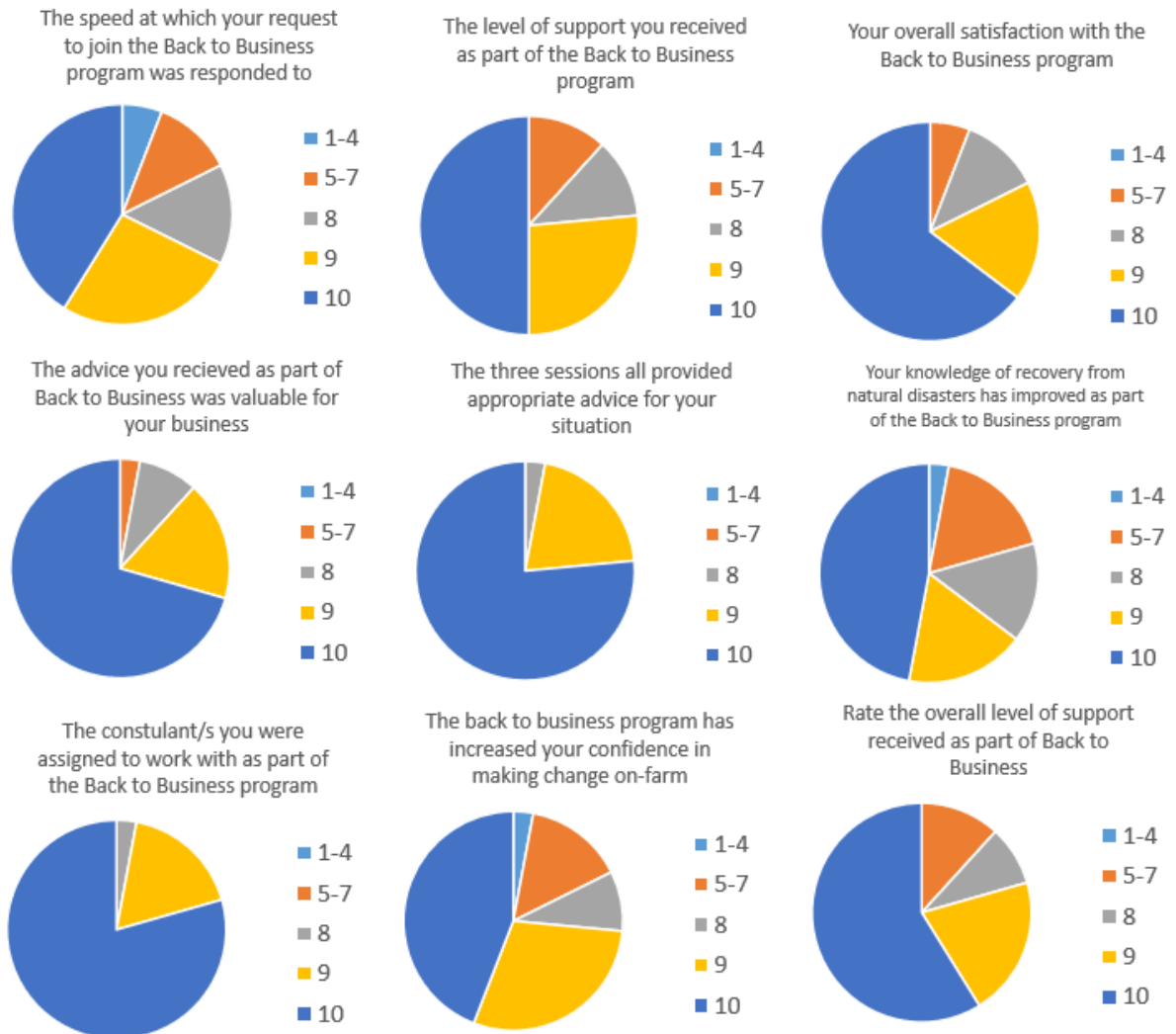
Figure 5. How producers heard about the program



Responses to evaluation questions

A number of questions were asked of participating producers in an attempt to evaluate the impact of the project and to understand their level of satisfaction with the project. The graphical responses of participating producers, showing the proportion of responses to the questions asked follow. Respondents were asked to rate their response to a number of statements on a sliding scale from 1-10 with 10 being the most positive response.

Figure 6. Satisfactory ratings of project participants



The key findings from this data follow:

- The overall satisfaction of the program was extremely high.
- The consultants that were paired with the producers were highly regarded.
- The advice provided by the consultants was highly regarded.
- The suitability of the advice to the circumstances and situation was highly regarded.
- Most producers significantly improved their knowledge of recovery from natural disasters.
- Most producers significantly increased their confidence in making change on farm.
- Some producers were not responded to quickly enough.

What sort of consulting assistance was provided?

Consultancy advice included Financial planning, property planning, whole farm planning, farm expansion, herd rebuilding, Veterinary advice, Nutrition, Soil testing and fertiliser planning, Agronomy, Pasture recovery, Revegetation, Fencing plans and feed budgeting. In most cases this was the assistance that was requested however in some cases this deviated as a result of the consultant having insights in the greater needs of the producer.

An action plan was developed by consultants for the producers and already 91 percent of producers responding to the survey suggested that they had implemented actions within the plan. Of those who had implemented plans, seventy percent have already noticed positive changes in their business. In the majority of cases, those who responded that they haven't noticed positive changes had had insufficient time for the changes to have an impact.

Impact of COVID 19 on the program

Not long after the project had started, lockdowns preventing travel due to COVID 19 were experienced. This changed the consulting environment and required an adaptation of the conventional one on one in person approach. MLA were extremely responsive in their approach and allowed changes to the delivery mechanisms provided they were reasonable and the results could still be delivered. The adaptive approach of MLA and the consultants is to be applauded as it allowed the project to progress despite the inability to meet in person. Some took measures to impose social distancing while others chose to deliver remotely via phone or using online platforms.

Approximately thirty percent of surveyed producers suggested that COVID 19 had impacted on the delivery of consultations between consultants and producers. Fifty percent of the consultations were conducted in person with the remainder being held as a combination of phone and in person or online meeting and in person or only online. In response to the question "Did you feel as though the program delivery was successful via this method?", every respondent answered "Yes".

This demonstrates that the consultants working with producers had the ability to change their delivery method without impacting negatively on the client experience. In fact, some clients spoke to the improved efficiency as a result of adapting to and learning how to use the new technologies. One of the key criteria of the consultants was no less than five years consulting experience. It is likely that this depth of experience helped to explain this extremely positive outcome.

5. Conclusion

The Back to Business Bushfire recovery project was a reactive and highly positive approach from MLA to assist red meat producers who had experienced a severe disaster with large financial implications. The provision of funding to deliver advice specific to the circumstances of the producer, relevant to their needs and goals with adequate time to allow for an understanding of the business is unique. The red meat industry will benefit from this program through improved productivity and profitability. The evaluation data already shows that positive productive changes have occurred because of producers being involved in the project.

This project has delivered increased grower resilience and quicker recovery times as a result of producers being better able to prioritise their time and by developing a logical order by which actions should occur.

This project has also demonstrated that conventional means of delivery are useful but can be integrated with other means such as on line meeting places to drive efficiencies in delivery and potentially lower delivery cost.

5.1 Key findings

Investment into one on one consultancy between consultants and producers who have experienced extreme or disastrous circumstances delivers positive industry outcomes through improved planning and decision making. This assists in providing clarity and objectivity at a time when it is needed most.

Positive changes have already been implemented from action plans developed for clients resulting in significant lift in productivity and potential increase in profitability.

Over ninety percent of producers were happy with the consultants they worked with, were highly satisfied with the program and considered the advice they received highly valuable and suited to their circumstances. Over eighty percent of producers have increased confidence in their ability to make change on farm.

The ability of consultants to deliver value appears not to be diminished by engaging with clients using on-line or other means of engagement other than in person.

5.2 Benefits to industry

This project has provided business support to livestock producers at a time when they needed it most. Over 90 percent of producers have already implemented action plans to change with the majority of these changes relating to improving productivity in their businesses.

It is possible that the biggest benefit of this project, though not specifically stated, was the ability to alleviate an emotional and mental toll on producers induced by exhaustion and facing impending disaster by funding the delivery of an independent and objective opinion.

The outputs of the survey demonstrate that there was an improved ability of producers, who were emotionally exhausted, to step out of the immediate operational needs of the business and to focus on planning to deliver a clear picture of the priorities for action. This has led to positive changes in a number of businesses.

6. Future research and recommendations

This project delivered value to those participating. The number of producers participating relative to the number exposed to bushfires was, however, low. There was far more scope for producer engagement and involvement however it is difficult to understand how this could have been improved without individually canvassing each producer. Further, the ability to engage with many was low due to them already having started on the operational clean up.

Investigation into improving uptake of such programs would be beneficial given the value to those participating. Some producer commentary has indicated that response times were slower than desirable while others suggested a longer time frame for delivery would be useful. A generic disaster action plan with protocols developed to deliver improved response times may assist and should be considered to improve speed of rollout.

It is recommended that a number of case studies be developed so that the value can be demonstrated now in time for publication and promotion of the next disaster management support project.