# Future Drought Fund Drought Resilience Innovation Challenges Pilot Program

Program overview transcript

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## Introduction

This is the transcript of a pre-recorded information session, presented by Katrina Baxendell, Andrew France, Iris Eagar and Sam Rademaker of the Future Drought Fund Strategy and Delivery Branch of the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry. The grant funding round of the Drought Resilience Innovation Challenges Pilot Program is now open for applications. This information session aims to assist potential applicants to understand the requirements and objectives of this program through this visual and audio method to complement the written Grant Opportunity Guidelines and Question and Answers documents.

## Transcript

[Recording begins]

Katrina Baxendell:

Hello, I'd like to welcome you to this information session on the Future Drought Fund’s Drought Resilience Innovation Challenges Pilot Program grant opportunity.

My name is Katrina Baxendell, and I’m the Director of the Communities and Innovation team within the Future Drought Fund, at the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry.

I would like to begin with an Acknowledgement of Country.

I acknowledge the Ngunnawal People, the traditional custodians of the land on which we're joining from today. I pay my respect to their elders—past and present. I also pay my respects to the traditional custodians of the lands on which you may be viewing this presentation, and to any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples that may be watching.

In this session we will be providing information on:

* the Future Drought Fund
* the Drought Resilience Innovation Challenges Pilot Program
* the type of projects we are looking for
* the application process and assessment criteria
* eligibility criteria, including the consortium requirements, and
* some other useful information to help you complete your application.

Thanks for joining us for this session. In keeping with the spirit of the consortium requirements of this Program, I’ll be joined by a few members of my team throughout the presentation.

Andrew France:

Thanks Katrina. My name is Andrew France, and I’m an Assistant Director within the Innovation and Communities Team. I’m here to tell you a little bit about the Future Drought Fund, and how the Innovation Challenges Pilot Program fits in.

We often say drought is not a case of if, but when. That’s why being prepared for when conditions start to dry is so important.

The Future Drought Fund is the Australian Government’s major investment in drought preparedness. It was established in 2019 with a $5 billion commitment. $100 million from the Fund is made available each year to support drought resilience activities and provide secure and continuous funding to help Australian farmers and rural, regional, and remote communities to build their drought and climate resilience.

We know that farmers who have a business mindset towards their farm are more prepared for drought. That’s why the FDF is about putting in place preparedness measures and foundations that farmers and communities can draw upon throughout the drought cycle.

We have a deliberate triple bottom line approach to deliver economic, social and environmental outcomes. These outcomes are interconnected and reinforce each other to make more resilient communities. Together with stakeholders, the FDF delivers higher impact programs with a focus on resilience capabilities.

Building resilience helps to drive:

* a more innovative and profitable agricultural sector,
* sustainable and well-functioning farming landscapes, and
* resourceful, adaptable, and connected farming communities.

As you can see, there are many FDF programs available that target these separate but related areas. Together, these programs help farmers and regional communities to prepare for drought and set up support for tough conditions.

We have categorised our FDF programs into 4 funding priorities:

* Partnering for Local Solutions, including First Nations initiatives
* Innovating for Transformation
* Building Knowledge, Skills, and Capability, and,
* Measuring Progress and Knowledge Sharing

As you can see, the Drought Resilience Innovation Challenges Pilot Program sits within the FDF theme of Innovating for Transformation. The program is all about funding projects that help drive existing and emerging drought resilience approaches. This could include innovative practices, tools and technologies.

The Innovation Challenges Pilot Program is a $20 million investment and will fund projects that help farmers take up innovative, transformational, and sustainable practices. These practices and technologies will, in turn, support drought resilience. It will help drive transformational change among farming communities to future-proof Australian agriculture against drought and climate impacts.

We received valuable feedback from researchers, farmers, innovators, and First Nations people to identify the complex drought challenges facing Australian agriculture.

This feedback was crucial in developing the Innovation Challenges Pilot Program and ensuring it addresses the most pressing challenges faced by Australian farmers and regional communities in the most innovative ways.

Based on this feedback, the Innovation Challenges Pilot Program will focus on 3 challenges:

1. Advancing Natural Capital and Biodiversity for Drought Preparedness and Resilience
2. Innovating Water Management for Enhanced Drought Resilience in Australian Agriculture
3. National Innovation for Enhancing Community Resilience to Drought in Australian Agricultural Regions

Your application must address at least one of these challenges, and we’re excited to see the innovative and tailored solutions you come up with.

Before starting an application, it’s important to read and understand the Grant Opportunity Guidelines – particularly the objective of the program and the assessment criteria. This is the most important document for completing your application and has details on everything we are about to discuss, and more.

I also recommend reading the Questions and Answers document and reviewing the sample Commonwealth Standard Grant Agreement so you know what you’re applying for. All these key documents are available on the Grant Connect website once you register.

A limited number of grants will be available with maximum funding of up to $2 million for eligible consortia. These consortia will work with farmers and the agricultural community to deliver projects between May 2026 and June 2028. We will be speaking more on the consortium requirements shortly.

The grants will be awarded following this open competitive grant process.

The application forms and grant opportunity guidelines as well as other information and documents can be accessed through the Grant Connect website.

Please note, the Innovation Challenges Pilot Program will focus on funding technologies or practices that have already reached the proof of concept stage, and would benefit from accelerated projects to strengthen the evidence base and speed up their development.

Applications close on **22 October 2025 at 9pm Australian Eastern Daylight-Saving Time.**

As part of your application, you should demonstrate how the project will:

* Increase public investment in transformational, innovative and tailor-made solutions to one or more of the innovation challenges
* Enable innovators to investigate high-impact, potentially transformative technology, tools and practices through a challenge-based lens
* Fast-track the development of high-potential, high-impact, innovative tools, technologies or practices to support farmers and agriculture-dependent communities
* Demonstrate the effectiveness and cost sustainability of innovative tools, technologies and practices
* Build an evidence base demonstrating that innovative solutions to drought and climate change are available for adoption by farmers, regional and farming communities
* Encourage projects to be self-sustaining long-term beyond grant funding by establishing collaborative consortia

This is an exciting grant opportunity for different kinds of organisations to work together collaboratively on a long-term project, and to build and support those relationships. We are hoping that these collaborations will continue after the grant is finished.

It’s also a great opportunity for organisations to include farmers and farmer-led research groups in the grant process, which will ensure that the practices and tools being used are practical and fit for purpose.

Iris Eagar:

My name is Iris Eagar, and I’m an Assistant Director in the Innovation and Communities Team. Now that Andrew has talked us through the Program and its objectives, I’ll give a bit more detail on how to apply.

When completing the application, an applicant will need to show how their project will:

* Address at least one of the challenges
* Collaborate with consortia partners and stakeholders to develop innovative solutions
* Implement innovative practices, technologies or approaches that have already been proven in concept and address a clear need in the agriculture sector
* Accelerate access to, and adoption of said innovative tools or products to increase drought resilience
* Provide clear public good benefits. Funded projects can involve private benefits, but these need to be more than offset by public benefits and/or co-contributions from non-government sources

You will also be required to identify and propose an appropriate Independent Innovation Mentor in your application. This should be an organisation or someone who can provide advice on the project but is not involved in its implementation. This could be an AgTech innovation specialist entity, or another appropriately experienced professional. They should be independent and impartial.

Your mentor will be expected to provide a robust and independent analysis to the department on the progress of successful grant projects against the objectives of the program. You must identify and propose an appropriate Independent Innovation Mentor in the grant application. More information on the mentor can be found in section 4.2 of the Grant Opportunity Guidelines.

So, I’ll unpack that a little to help applicants understand and guide their applications. Firstly, I’d like to explain what we mean by the term **drought resilience**.

Drought resilience is the ability to adapt, reorganise or transform in response to

* changing temperature,
* increasing variability, seasonality, and scarcity of rainfall, and
* for improved economic, environmental and social wellbeing.

The practices, technologies or approaches that applicants are proposing to use, must primarily focus on improving drought resilience. In particular, they should focus on continued agricultural productivity and profitability during drought, and faster recovery afterwards.

Applicants must clearly demonstrate how their project aims to deliver future drought and climate resilience, not just mention it. This is a crucial requirement if your project is to be successful.

While we are open to existing project proposals seeking funding, please keep in mind that we will only be funding projects with drought and climate resilience as their central focus, and which clearly deliver to the program objectives.

If you have already read some of the other information we’ve put out about the program, you will be aware that your project must not duplicate FDF or other government funded programs. More information on how funding can and cannot be used is available in the Grant Opportunity Guidelines.

We are specifically looking for projects that will accelerate existing innovation, rather than projects that still need proof-of-concept. The overarching aim is to focus on innovation that directly responds to at least one of the challenges and will increase access to, and the adoption of, innovative solutions to increase drought resilience.

Additionally, a significant focus of the FDF is on public good benefits, which are a key funding requirement of the Future Drought Fund Act.

Public benefits include delivering on the 3 strategic objectives of the FDF, which are to:

* Build on economic resilience for a more innovative and profitable agricultural sector,
* Increase environmental resilience for sustainable and improved functioning of farming landscapes, and to
* Enhance social resilience for resourceful and adaptable farming communities.

Well thought out applications will address the assessment criteria and primarily focus on drought resilience.

Make sure you provide all the information requested, address the eligibility and assessment criteria, include attachments, and submit by 22nd of October 2025 before 9pm (Australian Eastern Daylight Saving Time). No applications will be accepted after this date.

As we mentioned earlier, it’s important for all applicants to read the Grant Opportunity Guidelines before completing an application. The assessment criteria are listed in section 6 of the Grant Opportunity Guidelines, along with some dot points on what strong applicants will include in their answers. Let that guide you when you are answering the criteria questions.

You must address all of the assessment criteria in the application, which you can see on the screen now. As you can see, Criteria 1 and 2 together account for 70% of what we want to know about your project – what it is, how it is going to be delivered, why it would help, and how it aligns to the FDF objectives of resilience. Please note that you will have a limit of 6000 characters, or about 900 words, for each criterion.

When reading the Grant Opportunity Guidelines, you should also make sure you are aware of reporting responsibilities for grantees, which are outlined in section 12 of the grant opportunity guidelines. All projects within the Future Drought Fund include a strong emphasis on Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning, or M-E-L. We want to make sure that projects are on track and outcomes are achieved, but we also want to make sure the whole sector can benefit from the Innovation Challenges Pilot Program projects.

As you can see, there are a number of additional documents you will need to complete and attach to your application. All documents must be included for your application to be considered compliant and be assessed.

These documents include:

* The project budget and theory of change. Templates are available on the GrantConnect website and must be used for your application to be considered complete. Please don’t change the template or remove sections, as your application will be considered invalid.
* Signed letters of support from all consortium members, which provide details of how the member fits into the consortium’s governance structure, how they will work with the lead applicant, their relevant experience and how they will contribute to the project activities. You can find more details on the requirements in section 7.2 of the Grant Opportunity Guidelines.
* if you are applying as a Trustee on behalf of a Trust, you must also provide a ‘Trust Deed’ document. The Trust Deed needs to verify that the Trust exists and that the individual applying on behalf of the Trust has authority to do so.

These documents have a 2MB limit for each attachment and should be in a PDF format.

You can find more information on the mandatory attachments under section 7.1 of the Grant Opportunity Guidelines.

Sam Rademaker:

My name is Sam Rademaker, and I’m an Assistant Director in the Innovation and Communities Team. Now that we’ve covered the Program and how to apply, I’ll be discussing eligibility and expenditure.

Like this presentation, this Program is a group project. All grant applications must involve a consortium of partners, including at least one farmer or farmer-led research/extension organisation.

The consortium must nominate a lead organisation which is capable of entering into a legally binding and enforceable agreement with the Commonwealth. A full list of eligible organisations is available in section 4.1 of the Grant Opportunity Guidelines, but I’ll take this opportunity to note that an Aboriginal Land Council, Aboriginal Land Trust or Torres Strait Islander Land Trust (or equivalent entities) established under Commonwealth, state or territory legislation will generally be eligible. I’ll also flag that if a Trustee is applying on behalf of a trust, the trustee must be an eligible entity.

Lead organisations must have an ABN, an account with an Australian financial institution, and be registered for GST. We also encourage you to check the list of ineligible applicant types in section 4.3 of the Grant Opportunity Guidelines.

The lead organisation will submit the application form, and if successful will be solely accountable to the Department for the delivery of project and its activities. All consortium members must be listed in the application and have their cash and in-kind contributions captured in the budget template.

If you are applying as the lead of a consortium, you must provide a mandatory signed letter of support from each of the consortium members. Details required in each letter is outlined in section 7.2 of the Grant Opportunity Guidelines.

Finally, please keep in mind that where the Grant Opportunity Guidelines reference an “eligible applicant”, they are referring to the organisation that will lead the consortium and apply on behalf of the group.

Now that we’ve talked about the consortium, we’ll discuss the requirements for each applicant.

Part of the reason we ask applicants to form a consortium is to allow individuals, sole traders, and certain other ineligible organisation types to participate in the Program. If you have a suitable project, we encourage you to partner with an eligible entity. The Community Grants Hub are available to help if you have questions about your eligibility.

Organisations can also apply as part of more than one consortium, but please keep in mind that every application will be assessed separately.

While we hope that otherwise ineligible applicants are able to participate by joining a consortium, some applicants will not be eligible for this Program, including:

* Organisations that appear on the National Redress Scheme’s list of “Institutions that have not joined or signified their intent to join the scheme”
* Organisations on the non-compliant list of the Workplace Gender Equality Agency

If your consortium includes one of the above applicants, your application will be deemed ineligible.

You will also need to outline whether members of your consortium will make any cash and/or in-kind co-contributions. This should be included as part of the application package.

Eligibility requirements for grant activities are outlined in section 5.1 of the Grant Opportunity Guidelines, and we’ve also included some examples. For now, I’ll emphasise that your grant activities must:

* address one or more of the specified challenges
* focus on innovative drought resilient farming practices, technologies and/or approaches
* consider the economic, environmental and social benefits to farmers
* include farmers or farmer-led research organisations in the consortium
* not exceed $2 million in requested funding, excluding co-contributions
* be delivered from May 2026 to no later than June 2028

Examples of eligible projects include, but aren’t limited to:

* Innovative moisture retention technologies for different soil types across diverse climates
* Integration of Indigenous knowledge, collaborative research, and the development of technologies that support First Nations ecological practices, or
* Smart irrigation systems for precise water delivery based on crop needs and climate data.

Your Grant project can include activities in multiple locations within Australia and will be evaluated for the scope and scale of impact.

Most importantly, we want to see innovative projects that build drought resilience for farmers across a range of agricultural industries and sectors, so there is room for many ideas to be developed into successful projects.

There are a range of items and services grant money can be spent on, and these can be found in section 5.3 of the Grant Opportunity Guidelines. Likewise, there are also some activities that grant money cannot be used for and these are outlined in section 5.4.

You must outline your proposed expenditure in the application form, including specifying what will be covered by grant funding vs any potential co-contributions from consortium members.

Applicants are not required to co-contribute funding to the delivery of their projects. However, the extent of any co-contributions will be taken into account when assessing your applications.

It is important to note that you can only spend the grant money on eligible expenditures that you have incurred on an agreed project, as defined in your grant agreement.

To be eligible, expenditure must:

* be a direct cost of the project,
* be incurred by you for required grant activities, and
* be spent between the activity start and end dates in the grant agreement.

Ineligible expenditure includes but is not limited to:

* Activities with outputs limited to a single region
* Activities that are funded through another grant
* Salaries not directly essential to the project
* General business admin expenses
* Costs for preparing grant applications or feasibility studies
* Commercial ventures or revenue-generating activities
* Assets exceeding 20% of the grant value

Make sure you read the Question and Answers doc, the Grant Opportunity Guidelines and any the other documents made available through Grant Connect. If you still have a question, you can send it to support@communitygrants.gov.au and the answers will be provided in the updated Question and Answers Document on Grant Connect. We’d encourage you to subscribe to receive alerts when new information is available, as it’s your responsibility to stay up-to-date with new information throughout the application period.

Katrina Baxendell:

To recap on some of the key points:

* The closing date and time for applications is **the 22nd of October 2025 at 9pm (Australian Eastern Daylight Saving Time)**
* **The grant** maximum funding is up to $2 million per project
* Your consortium must include farmers or a farmer-led research organisation
* Applications can only be submitted through the GrantConnect website
* Commonly asked questions can be found in the Grant Opportunity Documents on GrantConnect. If you can’t find the answer you are looking for you can send it to support@communitygrants.gov.au.
* Please note, the Community Grants Hub will close their question period on the **15th of October**, so make sure you get any additional questions in before this date. Questions submitted after the **15th of October** will not be able to be answered.
* The Q&A webpage will be regularly updated to include answers to any new questions so check back in regularly. If you subscribe to the Innovation Challenges Pilot Program Grant Opportunity on GrantConnect, you will be notified by the Community Grants Hub when updates to the Q&A document have been made.
* Successful grantees are expected to be notified from April 2026, with activities starting after this.

Just a final summary before we sign off:

* Make sure your application clearly addresses drought resilience and all the selection criteria
* Make sure you complete the entire application form, including all mandatory documentation which includes the budget template, theory of change and signed letters of support from all consortium members.
* Applications close on the **22nd October 2025 at 9pm (Australian Eastern Daylight Saving Time).**
* Unfortunately, we will not be accepting any late applications, other than through exceptional circumstances, so I encourage you to allow time to submit your application prior to the closing time.

This recording will be available on the Department’s website, so you’ll be able to revisit and share all the information we've covered off today. Please pass this information session recording on to any other parties you feel may be interested.

Thank you for listening, and all the best to those looking to apply.

[Webinar ends]

**Acknowledgement of Country**

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of Australia and their continuing connection to land and sea, waters, environment and community. We pay our respects to the Traditional Custodians of the lands we live and work on, their culture, and their Elders past and present.

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