



## **Drought perception needs a shake-up**

Drought should not be perceived as a natural disaster, a conference of rural industry leaders was told in Canberra today.

Mr Ken Moore, Manager of the Social and Institutional Research Program for Land & Water Australia, told delegates at the *Farming in the Dry* session of the Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics Outlook conference that drought is realistically a long-term component of Australia's climate.

"In managing drought and climate variability we have had an expert consensus for nearly two decades that drought is not a natural disaster, but a risk that needs to be managed by business," he said.

"But the public still understands drought as a natural disaster and that is why there is so much pressure to make natural disaster responses when drought gets a high profile in the media.

"The way forward is through building a new social consensus on the need for change in how farmers, communities and governments respond to climate variability. The power of consensus to drive change has recently been seen in the wider discussion and action taken on climate change."

Other speakers on the *Farming in the Dry* panel were Mr Ian McClelland, chairman of the Birchip Cropping Group, and Dr Peter Hayman, Principal Scientist in Climate Applications and South Australian Research and Development Institute.

Mr McClelland agreed with Mr Moore: "Farmers are adapting to climate variability, but we need more continual education and encouragement of farmers to adopt and adapt new technologies, and greater investment in scientific research," he said.

Dr Hayman, whose PhD in agro-climatic risk management was jointly funded by Land & Water Australia and the Grains Research Development Corporation, told delegates it would always be hard to distinguish between extreme events and trends.

"We do not have a stationary climate, so we should not have a stationary coping range. If we want to stop being vulnerable to climate change we need to make room for adaptation and innovation," he said.

These comments follow Minister Tony Burke's acknowledgement, in his opening address to the ABARE conference, of the powerful social issues behind drought policy and the need for a risk management approach. The "Farming in the Dry" session at the ABARE conference was funded by Land & Water Australia and chaired by Dr Michael Robinson, Executive Director of Land & Water Australia.

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