

**M E D I A R E L E A S E**

Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

Bega Valley region moves back into drought

The Bega Valley region will be drought declared for the third time in six years after the Federal Government accepted independent advice on local conditions.

Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry Tony Burke today said he had accepted the advice of the National Rural Advisory Council (NRAC) that the region should be Exceptional Circumstances-declared.

The NRAC was asked to investigate after a formal request from the NSW Government and interim drought assistance was made available from 28 April 2009.

Eligible producers can now apply for full Exceptional Circumstances assistance, including income support and interest rate subsidies for families and businesses.

The region will be EC-declared until 30 April 2011, to align with the southern farm production cycle.

There are around 300 producers in the EC region, mainly in the dairy and beef industries.

The region includes the towns of Cobargo, Bermagui, Bemboka, Bega, Tathra, Candelo, Merimbula and Eden.

Mr Burke said the NRAC found rainfall had been ‘severely deficient’ and producers had been affected by reduced irrigation allocations.

It also found producers had seen a prolonged downturn in farm income due to the need to purchase more fodder and reduced returns on livestock and other sales.

“Many farmers in the Bega Valley region have clearly been under pressure and this assistance will help to provide some extra support for eligible producers,” Mr Burke said.

“At the same time, we recognise this system is not working as well as it could for farmers, which is why we are finalising the reforms to drought support.

“The current system of drawing lines on a map means that one farmer may be eligible for support while the neighbour over the fence is not.”

Mike Kelly, the Member for Eden Monaro, welcomed the news that Exceptional Circumstances funding for the Bega Valley had been approved.

“I’ve been working hard with my state counterparts to initially have the assessment boundaries redefined and more recently my federal colleagues to ensure the process was handled in the quickest manner possible,” he said.

“We have seen an unprecedented drought over the past few years and I welcome this announcement today as an important step to assist farmers who are coping with very difficult conditions.”