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## Preparing with hindsight unlocks drought resilience in Coleambally

Farmers are learning from past experience and planning to emerge from future droughts in good shape, according to a project supported by the Southern New South Wales Drought Resilience Adoption and Innovation Hub.

'Preparing with Hindsight' is a collection of case studies for farmers, that share successful attitudes, mitigation strategies and management practices for drought.

In his profile, Coleambally district farmer Peter Sheppard explains how important diversification is to the resilience of his irrigated cropping enterprise.

"Drought resilience is multi-faceted, and farmers need to be versatile and prepared to adapt," he says.

"You also need to be financially prepared and ready to make hard decisions like trading your water instead of growing a crop.

"It's hard, as we love growing things to feed and clothe people."

Since the Millennium drought, Peter has improved his farm layout and irrigation systems, and installed an irrigation bore so he can access water more reliably. He also feels better informed and mentally prepared to make hard choices.

In the 2018/2019 drought, the Sheppards changed crops, reduced their cropping area, share farmed a couple of holdings and sold what little water allocation they had.

"The business emerged from it in pretty good nick, and we were prepared to start a full program again."

Other case studies feature farmers Lachlan Bull at Deniliquin, Ruth Klingner at Forbes, Daniel Mathie at Holbrook, Fiona and Craig Marshall and Mulwala, Geoff and Tim Roberts at Pulletop, and Allan and Tanya Clarke at Tocumwal.

All have seen how strategies for protecting ground cover, storing fodder, managing stock and supporting critical decision-making can help reduce the impact of drought on their business and improve their ability to bounce back from a dry.

For example, Ruth Klingner says the 2018/2019 drought was the hardest she has experienced, but it taught her the value of having plenty of fodder on hand so breeding stock can be retained. She was also glad to have a management plan in place before the drought, as it helped minimise the emotion involved in making hard decisions for the farm.

Fiona and Craig Marshall found several lessons from the Millennium drought helped their sheep and broadacre cropping operation during 2018/2019, including the need to make tough decisions around de-stocking and cutting crops for hay early, and the importance of retaining stubble and ground cover on paddocks. However, Fiona still noticed the economic impact on nearby towns like Mulwala and Corowa.

“When people, particularly young people, leave the district they do not come back,” Fiona says.

“So when farm workers were laid off during the 2018/2019 drought, that impacted the pool of farm labour in the district when things did improve.”

‘Preparing with Hindsight’ was implemented as a community engagement project conducted by the Southern NSW Drought Resilience Adoption and Innovation Hub with partner the Farming Systems Group Alliance. The project collected landholder experiences of the 2018/19 drought event through the pre-drought, in-drought and drought recovery stages.

Hub Director Cindy Cassidy says sharing knowledge and experience is a key function of the hub and the case studies can help farmers to manage and recover from dry years.

“We learn from one another,” she says.

“We all know that drought is a feature of our environment. Sharing these experiences enables farmers and community to learn from each other and identify ways to improve our drought resilience.

“Given how important agriculture is to the region, having drought resilient farms is essential for the strength and health of our economy, landscape and people.”

All seven ‘Preparing with Hindsight’ farm case studies can be downloaded from the Southern NSW Drought Resilience Adoption and Innovation Hub web page. (Search ‘SNSW Drought Hub’.)

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