Australian Government
Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

Future Drought Fund

A tailored systems-based approach to monitoring, evaluation and learning in the Australian Government's Future Drought Fund

Benefits, opportunities and challenges

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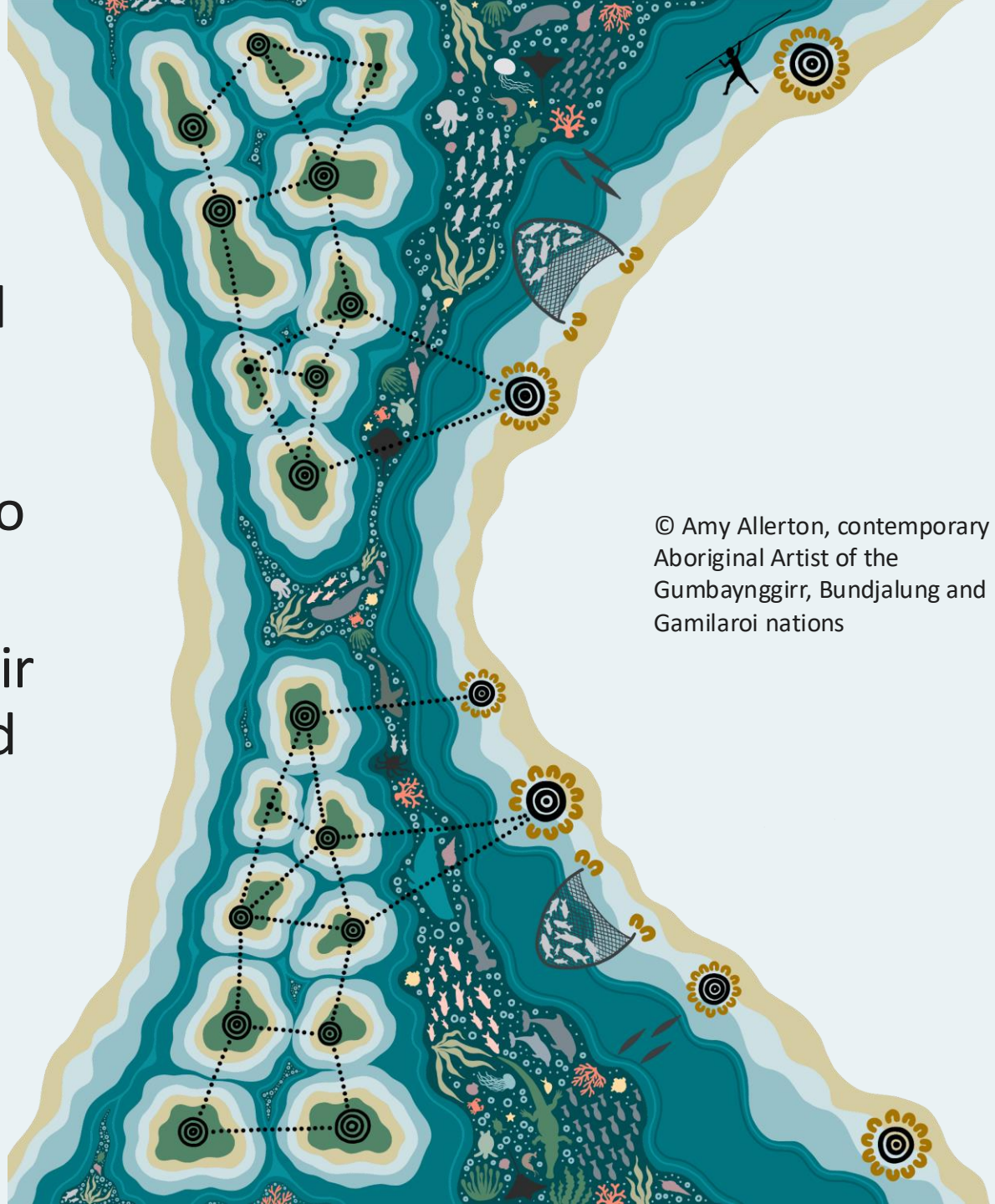
I would like to acknowledge the Ngunnawal people as the Traditional Custodians of the land we are meeting on and recognise any other people or families with connection to the lands of the ACT and region.

I would like to pay my respect to their Elders past and present, and I extend that respect to other Indigenous people who are present.



© Amy Allerton, contemporary Aboriginal Artist of the Gumbaynggirr, Bundjalung and Gamilaroi nations

The Future Drought Fund (FDF)

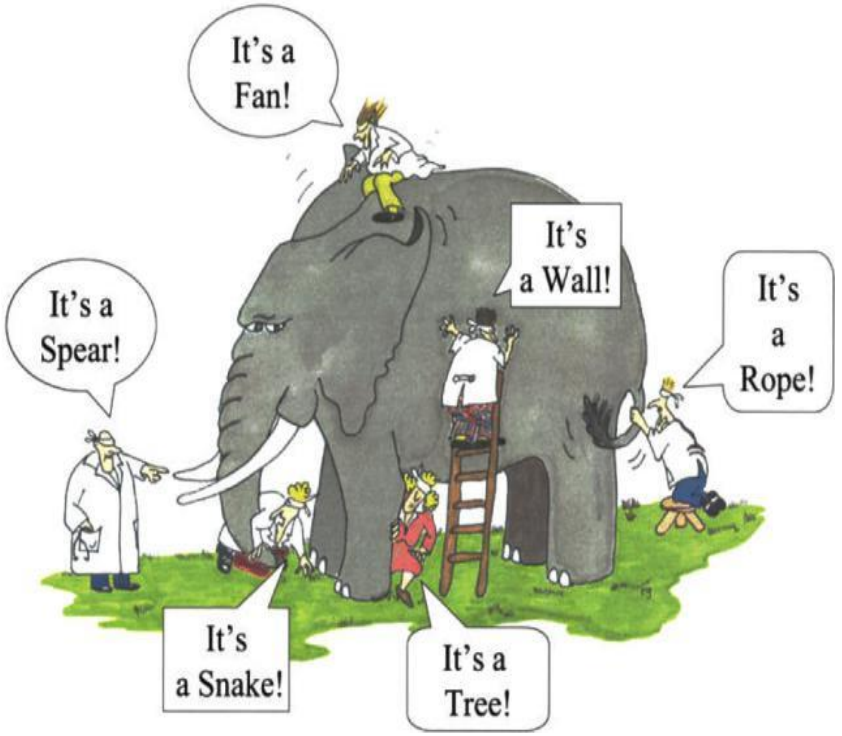
- A $5 billion investment, established in 2019 under the *FDF ACT 2019*, and aimed at achieving public good through building resilience to drought and broader climate impacts
- A secure funding of $100 million available each year to fund programs aimed at supporting farmers and regional communities to build social, economic and environmental resilience, through learning about, being prepared for, and having the capacity and options to respond to drought and other climatic shocks
- Delivery of FDF programs is governed by 4-yearly Drought Resilience Funding Plans (FP) that set FDF objectives and aims
- Productivity Commission review of the FDF in 2023 recommended that the FDF MEL system should be strengthened
- Latest budget provided $519 million over 8 years to fund 11 programs, including $11.4 million for measuring progress and knowledge management
- FDF constitutes a unique and distinct pathway to sustainability, through a focus on building whole-of-system social-ecological resilience founded on robust scientific principles.

The FDF's dedicated MEL team
Program Evaluation and Support Section

- Leading the response to the Productivity Commission MEL recommendations
- Designing and implementing a streamlined, multipronged MEL strategy, including a new MEL Framework (more on that shortly)
- Supporting FDF program leads and teams in implementing, managing and continuously adapting MEL
- A "critical friend" facilitating cultural change towards evaluative thinking, that helps us be self-reflective, always aim for better ways to do things, creatively innovate and value our work, and share learning from programs and the way we deliver
- Building and maintaining MEL collaboration networks with multiple stakeholders at multiple scales, including through a dedicated MEL Community of Practice, to ensure synergies are leveraged
- Providing a conduit to broader MEL work in DAFF, Government, industry, research and academia, and MEL communities
- Leveraging networks to promote FDF's significant and unique contribution to sustainability via its implementation of robust resilience theory principles.

Underpinning theory: Social-ecological resilience

- FDF is underpinned by **social-ecological resilience theory**, where resilience is *the ability of a system to absorb disturbances and reorganise so as to retain essentially the same structure, function and feedbacks*[1]
- FDF is an enduring commitment to support the ability of social-ecological systems – farmers, communities and landscapes – to adapt, reorganise or transform in response to droughts and broader climatic impacts, for improved resilience
- A system: an interconnected set of elements that are coherently organized in a way that achieves something[2] Social-Ecological Systems: linked systems of humans and nature that are complex, adaptive and dynamic by nature[3] *
- Building resilience includes, among other things, ongoing learning and adapting, including through safe-fail experimentation with transformative practices, approaches or systems
- As enablers of change and resilience building, our role is to support these processes, and to continuously learn and adaptively manage FDF, which is only possible through monitoring and evaluation.



[1]Walker, B and Salt, D 2012, *Resilience practice*, Island Press, Washington DC.
[2]Meadows, D 2008, *Thinking in systems: a primer*, Earthscan, London.
[3]Folke, C 2016, 'Resilience (republished)', *Ecology and Society*, vol. 21, no. 4, pp.44, https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-09088-210444.

We support both specified and general resilience

- Specified resilience to drought and broader climatic impacts through monitoring of critical thresholds, tipping points and feedbacks

- General resilience to all shocks and disturbances through:
  - Understanding of Social-Ecological Systems as Complex Adaptive Systems
  - Maintaining diversity and redundancy
  - Managing connectivity and modularity
  - Managing slow variables and feedbacks
  - Encouraging learning and safe-fail experimentation
  - Broadening participation
  - Reserves/reservoirs (human, economic and natural)

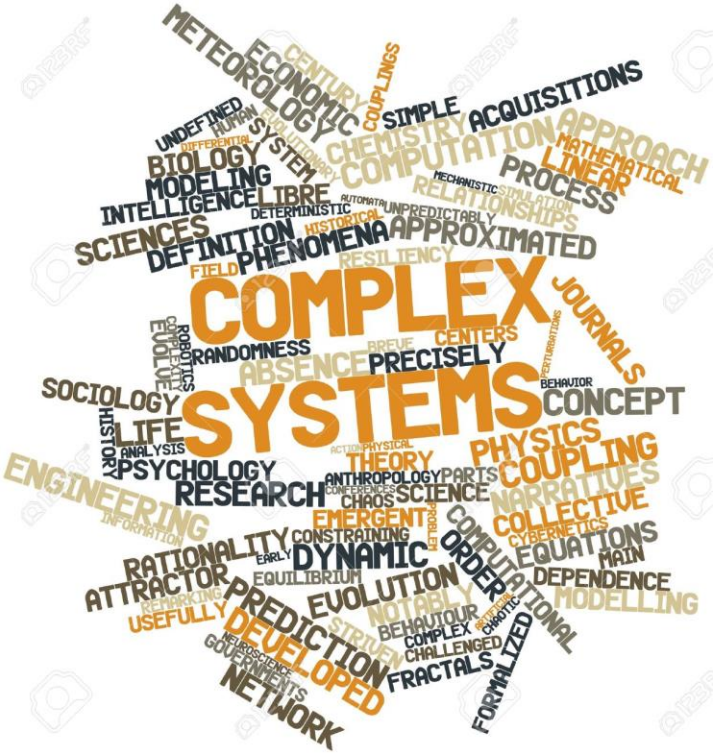
The FDF MEL Framework 2024-28: a systems-based approach

- Framework developed for DAFF by Clear Horizon
- FDF deals with complex drought and climate related issues, with many uncertainties and systemic issues, requiring systemic responses
- FDF itself is a complex system, whose own complexity arises from interactions among actors, programs and the broader context of resilience and sustainability initiatives
- MEL should therefore be proportionate to this complexity and FDF needs a systems-based Theory of Change and MEL Framework
- A systems MEL identifies and analyses interdependencies of FDF programs, and the resulting emergent outcomes and impacts
- In addition to indicators relevant to program activities and outputs, will carefully design whole-of-FDF systemic resilience indicators that are guided by both specific and general resilience principles.

The FDF MEL Framework 2024 -28: Key elements

A MEL approach reflecting the principles and foundational blocks of resilience theory by:

- Using a nested Theories of Change approach to link scales (project, program, FDF, broader system)
- Targeting the monitoring and evaluation of the impacts of networks and connectedness on building resilience
- Using a capitals framework to monitor and evaluate the improvement of capitals as reserves that help building resilience
- Enabling iterative assessment of systemic thresholds, tipping points, feedbacks and surprises
- Introducing the concept of 'levers for change' for achievement of desired outcomes and change
- Enable incremental, transitional or transformational change through impactful leverage points in social-ecological systems, including paradigm and behavioural change.



The FDF MEL Framework 2024 -28: Key elements

- Explicitly recognizing that FDF is one contributor to a broader context – the ecosystem of resilience and sustainability initiatives, and accordingly distinguishing between spheres of control, influence, and interest
- Introducing MEL principles that are purpose-driven and learning-oriented, including iterative adaptive learning and reflection processes to match the characteristic dynamic nature of complex systems
- Recognising that efficiency is gained through systems-informed coordination of different programs to use resources well, minimise duplication and increase synergy to achieve outcomes, and effectiveness is producing collective outcomes that matter
- Implies ongoing monitoring for emergence of outcomes from the interconnection and interactions between various programs, and evaluating these outcomes
- Commensurate with safe-fail experimentation, embrace failure as an opportunity to learn and adapt.

Lessons learned so far

- Dealing with complex systems is itself a complex task. **Learning, adaptation and capacity are central and essential**

- **Behaviours, beliefs, world views, values and knowledge** that influence actions and attitudes of people need to be taken into account to build trust and openness and achieve change

- Giving our delivery partners ownership of program design and outcomes is proving to be **empowering and motivating**. This is helping FDF to facilitate **changing behaviours** and promoting adoption of resilience practices, approaches and systems at scale

- There is a current momentum to build resilience to drought and broader climate risks. FDF is a key player in that, given the nature of its activities, robust theoretical foundations, and the perpetuity of its funding.

Lessons learned so far

- Implementing its various approaches puts the FDF in a unique position to contribute to policy, on one hand, and academic deliberations of social-ecological resilience theory on the other. The more the FDF evolves and learns, the better it will get at that. This is a remarkable opportunity that is being leveraged and supported

- FDF is effectively an enabler of systemic and transformational change, through continued experimentation, learning and sharing knowledge with its networks of stakeholders and partners

- All of this only possible through a systems-based MEL that matches the dynamic nature of FDF and the issues it addresses.

Thank You!

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