

Victorian Landcare Council Policy Briefing Note 14



The new Minister for Agriculture, Barnaby Joyce, has taken \$10m from landcare's budget, and moved it to drought relief. In this Briefing, we give you the story and the strong response from the landcare community. Over the page, we make points for you to speak to with your own Federal Member. If you do that right now, you will keep pressure on Cabinet.

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Barnaby's heist

Federal Minister for Agriculture Barnaby Joyce has taken \$10m from unallocated funds originally destined for sustainable agriculture projects under the Caring for Our Country Landcare program, and will use this money to fund drought relief for cattle farmers in Queensland and northern NSW. Minister Joyce denies that the redirection of funds constitutes a cut.

"I think a reasonable person looking at this would say it definitely assists sustainable agriculture programs," he said. "... if I had all my cattle at one watering point in a corner of a paddock, that is not assisting the land. That is actually causing a problem in the care of the land. The more I can get those cattle to evenly pasture across my property, the better I can look after the property. That is certainly a Landcare attribute."

Compare this with statements before the election, when the then shadow environment Minister, Greg Hunt, said:

"The Coalition will give Landcare significantly greater access to the Caring for Country pool of funds, as well as the current Landcare funding. We have listened to local communities and we will put Landcare at the heart of our land conservation programs." (27th August Farm Weekly).

Response to Joyce's unilateral action has been strong.

6th November, the Victorian Landcare Council sent a letter to Minister Joyce pointing out that taking money from landcare actually makes communities *less* able to deal with emergencies like droughts. We said:

".... you will be jeopardising not only the support of the 100,000 strong landcare army around the country, but more importantly the capacity of this landcare community to proactively manage an Australian landscape which is resilient to the same extreme events to which you are reacting!

"You are in fact overlooking the crucial role that landcare plays in overseeing the integration of sustainable land management practices across the land to enhance the resilience and capacity of Australian farmers to produce food and fibre.

"We strongly urge you and your government to reconsider such a decision. Your investment in landcare will arm the landscape to prevent wind and water erosion, increase the storage of carbon, maintain a healthy water supply and increase agricultural productivity. All whilst supporting the expansion of a knowledgeable and capable community ready to take up any challenge."

7th November, ABC Rural: Chief executive officer of the Little River Landcare Group, Pip Job, says the Coalition made an election promise to continue to fund Landcare projects, and that the funds for drought relief should come from traditional sources, rather than 'robbing Peter to pay Paul'. "We're not against the government providing drought support, but they need to fund it from Treasury and not at the expense of other valuable land management projects."

Chairman of Landcare NSW Robert Dulhunty says that the Minister Barnaby Joyce denying that the re-allocation of money into drought programs was a cut to Landcare "is nonsense". "I don't think taking money away from Landcare is the way to help out those in drought, it should come from Treasury as it is a natural disaster, like bushfires and floods. Taking money away from Landcare is like stopping spending money on backburning when putting money into fighting bushfires."

8th November, ABC Rural: David Walker, the chair of the National Landcare Network, says he's been asking to meet Barnaby Joyce since rumours started about the cuts, but has had no luck. "My understanding is the Minister has refused to rule out further raids if he so desires, which is very disturbing."

What can you do?

Don't let this be the thin end of the wedge.

Phone the office of your local Federal Member today and tell them what you think.

Some points to make:

- The Coalition gave an undertaking before the election to revitalise landcare's role and to maintain the total funding level.
- Over the last decade, landcare programs have been an easy target for governments wanting to trim their budgets. Enough is enough.
- Landcare gets an enormous amount done on a shoestring. We want a Coalition Government commitment to landcare.
- As for drought relief, if the government wants to be serious about this, it needs major funding from Treasury, not money poached from another program at one Minister's convenience.