

EDITORIALS

Droughts and flooding rains

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Hand-feeding livestock on a listening tour of drought-stricken outback NSW and Queensland must seem like a tonic for Malcolm Turnbull, who has spent much of his time in Canberra knee-deep in political muck. But as the Prime Minister took three valuable days this week to reconnect with a rural base seeking a top-up of the \$1 billion in federal drought assistance spent since 2013, he could not resist indulging the pet topic of city elites: “There’s no doubt that our climate is getting warmer,” he said. “I don’t know many people in rural NSW that I talk to that don’t think the climate is getting drier and rainfall is becoming more volatile.”

Farmers whose families had worked the land for more than a century took a longer view. Dubbo grazier Wayne Brabrook said present conditions were “nothing really when you speak to the old guys”.

Former deputy prime minister John Anderson said his family farm records revealed droughts of equal severity between 1902 and 1904 and in 1940: “I’m not a climate change denier but I would be very wary about using this as a political device.”

The CSIRO’s latest biannual state of the climate report (2016) shows rainfall, averaged across Australia, increased slightly since 1900, with a large increase in the northwest since 1970. Autumn and early winter rainfall had been below average in the southeast since 1990, a period that included the millennium drought, resulting in low rainfall from 1997 to 2010.

Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics records show agriculture has enjoyed a string of bumper years. In 2016-17 farm cash income averaged \$212,600, the highest in the past 20 years, following record winter grain production and high beef cattle prices. Farm cash incomes were expected to decline for about half of Australia’s broadacre farms in 2017-18 as a result of reduced grain production in most regions and lower beef prices. But broadacre farms still were expected to post the second highest farm cash income recorded nationally, at 32 per cent above the average for the previous 10 years. ABARE’s 2018 outlook conference in March was told total winter grain production was estimated to have decreased by 36 per cent in 2017-18 but looked likely to remain 6 per cent above the 10-year average.

Not all areas have shared the bounty, and if rains do not come soon large areas of NSW and Queensland face distressing times. Some farms have been on drought relief payments, equivalent to unemployment benefits, for three years. There are calls for new freight subsidies for stock feed and to extend the cash buffer. The federal government has a role to play and is justified in seeking co-ordination with the states in providing extra help. Mr Turnbull is correct that being able to adapt to tough conditions is imperative for survival on the land. This has always been the lot of farmers on a continent that experiences big swings in extremes from drought to flooding rains.

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