



# RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

## Understanding Drought in the Lachlan Region

### Understanding Drought in the Lachlan Region (2010-11)

**Funding:** ILWS

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#### Description:

This project outlines the effects of droughts occurring between 1895 and 1947 on the agricultural economy of the Lachlan Region in New South Wales. Despite substantial reductions in output from the main industry in the region, and despite little in the way of a formal drought policy, farming in the region did survive the stultifying drought conditions to go on to be a major food producing region from the 1920s onwards.

As well as examining the impact of these early droughts, the researchers attempted to answer the question of how farms survived. This led to a review of the way in which both water and other on-farm resources were being developed and social conditions were evolving. The Federation drought of 1900 to 1902 had a far greater impact on the Lachlan region than the droughts of 1914 and 1919. This difference is only partly explained by the severity of the drought. During the period between 1905 and the First World War farm technology, particularly in wheat production, was developing rapidly, and with it the structure of the industry was changing. These influences, together with a supportive social environment help explain how farming survived difficult times.

#### Outputs

Two journal articles are expected in 2011.

#### Outcomes

Though economic uncertainty and decline in the first half of the twentieth century was a common feature of life in inland New South Wales, as was the case with inland Australia generally, rural depopulation did not become a serious problem until the 1930s, when young men and women began leaving their towns and villages in search of work and livelihoods elsewhere. This was especially the case with towns and villages in the wheat-belt districts of New South Wales.

Wheat production in the Lachlan fell much greater than wheat production across the State as a whole during the Federation drought years of 1902-1903 and during the harsh dry seasons of 1918-1920. Faced with further suffering, emanating from the Great Depression and from the Second World War drought of 1937-1945, the people of the Lachlan wheat belt began to see themselves as the third generation experiencing hardship way in excess of the State wheat belt average. As a consequence, the young left the Lachlan catchment between 1933 and 1947 in rates far exceeding the average rate for rural New South Wales as a whole. The results point to the climatic and regional economic factors which underpinned the specific fragilities of agriculture and population in the Lachlan Catchment area.



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