



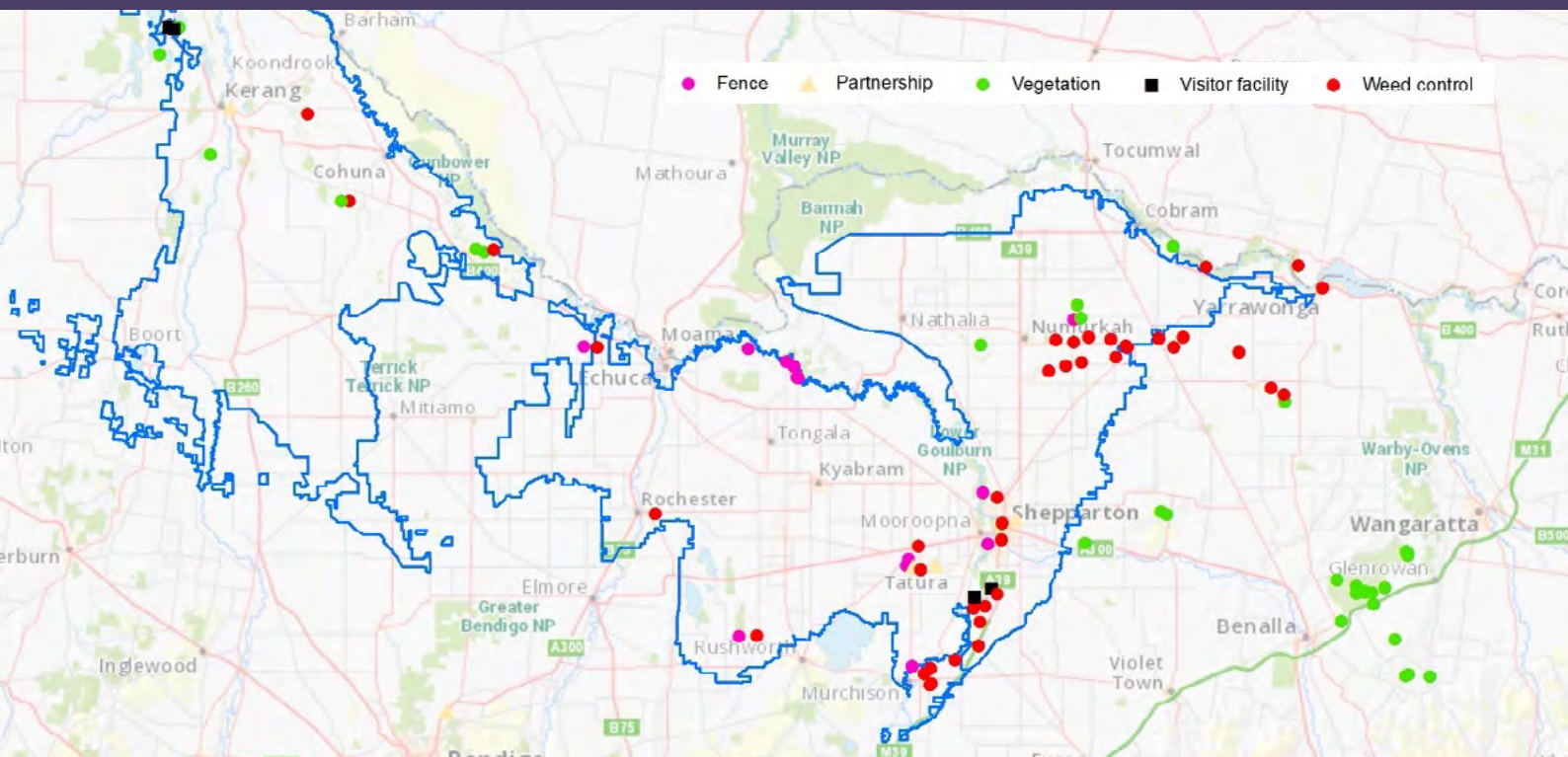
# Goulburn Murray Irrigation District Drought Employment Program 2020

Supporting farmers, farm workers and  
local agribusiness workers impacted by drought



# Goulburn Murray Irrigation District (GMID) Drought Employment Program (DEP) By the Numbers

<p><b>30</b> participants</p>	<p><b>21,100+</b> hours of NRM works</p>	<p><b>2,930 ha</b> of weed control</p>
<p><b>333 ha</b> revegetation</p>	<p><b>9 km</b> fencing</p>	<p><b>4</b> visitor centers maintained</p>
<p><b>130</b> nest boxes built</p>	<p><b>\$1.7M</b> investment to support GMID farmers</p>	<p><b>6</b> agency partnerships</p>
<p><b>100%</b> of those eligible who wanted a job, got one</p>		<p><b>82%</b> of participants are more positive about their future in farming</p>



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# The DEP Story



**Chris  
Cumming**  
CEO  
Goulburn Broken  
Catchment  
Management  
Authority

Drought is one of a number of ongoing challenges for farmers in the Goulburn Murray Irrigation District (GMID). Recovery from the Millennium Drought was difficult enough, exacerbated by the ever changing agricultural environment, other demands on their time and effort. The recent drought from 2017-2020 significantly impacted on the resilience of irrigation farmers, and their capacity to respond and adapt to the ever-changing conditions in the GMID.

The GBCMA harnessed its long-term relationships with regional partners to develop a Drought Employment Program (DEP) for the GMID. The employment program targeted farmers, farm workers and local agribusiness workers impacted by the drought.

The program was supported by the Victorian Government through Department of Environment, Land Water and Planning (DELWP), with an initial \$1.5M made available in 2019. The project was extended in mid-2020 with an additional \$200,000 as the program was achieving great outcomes for the farmers and the local communities.



Thirty farmers and agribusiness workers affected by drought across the GMID were employed under the program via labour hire company the Chandler McLeod Group. Teams of up to five workers were supervised by GBCMA and their partners: NCCMA, Parks Vic, Gannawarra Shire, Goulburn Murray Water and Murray Dairy who supported and hosted DEP crews. The program was also well supported by Greater Shepparton City Council, and Agriculture Victoria.

DEP participants contributed over 21,000 hours to natural resource management works, including almost 3000 ha of weed control and more than 330 ha of native seedlings planted. These works have greatly benefitted the environment and communities across the GMID.

More importantly the GMID DEP allowed participants time and space to try something new and build on their farming skills. Many participants received training to support a transition to different enterprises. The DEP provided a circuit breaker for some participants and alleviated short term financial worries whilst still doing practical and positive work.

We thank all our partners and the Drought Employment Program participants for their role in the program's success.

### **Coping with COVID**

The program has also successfully managed the challenge of COVID-19 by adjusting procedures to cater for health restrictions while also continuing to provide the support to participants.

Specific examples of the covid measures implemented are:

- Additional vehicles (as only two people per vehicle) and sitting diagonally to ensure physical distance rules are applied.
- Managing efficient meeting points for the teams to travel to sites across the GMID.
- Modifying processes to ensure regular cleaning of equipment and maintaining physical distancing.

COVID-19 also impacted on the ability of some of the partners to participate in the DEP and take on hosting roles. Despite the COVID-19 challenges and new processes, the DEP crews were generally able to keep working out in the field which was much appreciated by the participants.



# Why a Drought Employment Program was needed in the GMID

Agriculture across the riverine plains of northern Victoria is in a state of transition. Uncertainty in the regional community is high due to a range of factors such as: drought, MDB Plan, changing water policy and even market failure. The community's ability to adapt and build resilience quickly enough has been hindered by very dry conditions and rapid rate of change from many directions.

Many farmers across the region are struggling to continue to farm, to make changes and also make ends meet.

The GMID community has been telling the Goulburn Broken CMA that one of the main things that would help them would be to support irrigators and their employees through a transition employment program. A drought employment program was set up for Gippsland farmers during 2018 and the GMID DEP was modelled on this as well as previous DEPs during the millennium drought. One of the differences this time was an expanded training component, creating more pathways to new futures and retaining skills regionally. This was needed in recognition that the region was in transformation rather than the expectation that all participants would revert back to 'business as usual' after the drought.

**Drought is impacting on the resilience of Irrigation Farmers and their capacity to respond/adapt to the changing conditions.**

*"It was just great knowing that I can get a job. It is very stressful thinking that you have got no income coming in. So, it was good for me and gave me hope straight away".*

**DEP participant**

*"Considering the impacts of the Basin Plan, the current drought and climate change, you put all of those three together, it is tough for the farmers, so this DEP as we've seen in the past, we know it does good things and I'm sure it will again this time".*

**Peter Harriott,  
CEO Greater Shepparton City Council**

# GMID DEP Goals

To assist farmers, respond and adapt to drought and the changing conditions in the GMID, the DEP program focused on delivering the following four outcomes.

## Outcomes

1. Participants remain connected to the farm and region.
2. Participants are happier and more confident towards the future and have meaningful work.
3. Agencies work together to support irrigators through the short-term transition (drought).
4. Participants develop new skills and knowledge.



## Goal 1

### Remaining connected to the farm and region

The DEP has been successful in enabling participants to remain connected to the farm and region.

A significant majority of participants (91% of those who responded to the survey) agreed that the flexibility of the eligibility requirements allowed them to remain connected to the farm. Most participants worked an average of four to five days per week on the DEP and were able to continue to work an average of approximately two days per week on the farm/agribusiness which they owned or were employed.

Post the DEP, 55% of participants have returned to the farm or agribusiness they were employed prior to the program, with the other 45% moving to other working arrangements within the region.

The eligibility requirements for the DEP were developed by the project steering committee to ensure that program was geared at supporting the targeted demographic of farmers, farm and agribusiness workers in the GMID who were affected by the drought.

The eligibility requirements addressed the GMID DEP goal to improve the resilience of irrigation farmers, farm and agribusiness worker to increase their capacity to respond and adapt to the changing conditions in the GMID.





## Goal 2

### Happier and more confident towards the future

Most participants indicated that they were more positive about a future in farming/agribusiness / the region because of participating in the DEP. They enjoyed the work they were doing and found it meaningful. Training provided was generally considered to be useful when returning to the farm/agribusiness and/or enable transition to future employment other than farming. In most cases the crews worked well together, and all those surveyed agreed that they developed a strong affinity with each other and were able to talk about the impact that drought was having on them and the general farming situation.

*“Fantastic program, I learned some new skills. I enjoyed getting away from the family farm for a while. Extremely positive program for our family life. My confidence within myself improved and my overall happiness. I left the DEP early due to the fact I found future employment. I thank the Catchment Management Authority and all the wonderful farm workers I met during the program.”*

**DEP participant**



## Goal 3

### Agencies working together

The DEP was overseen by a project steering committee made up of staff from the agencies involved in the program. Committee meetings were held monthly to discuss program design, progress, and resolve issues.

Most participants rated the DEP as being well run through the recruitment process and induction to the CMA's programs. The day-to-day work was generally regarded as well organised, and 64% agreed that communication throughout the program was of a high standard.

Only 45% of those that responded to the survey believed that the communication and coordination between the agencies involved in the program was effective.

Agencies were able to use their links with community groups and organisations to engage the DEP teams to help deliver on projects.

The Regent Honeyeater project at Winton Wetlands resulted in 153 hectares of revegetation to support the habitat for the endangered birds. The Trust for Nature program also resulted planting and watering of seedlings and fencing to support and protect areas of regional significance covered by land covenants.

The abrupt end to the employment for many of the participants was the only major negative for the program. Greater notice would have provided the participants with time to be prepared, plan and transition either back to the farm or to other opportunities.

The Agencies worked together to manage the impact of COVID-19 on the program. It was challenging at first to understand and apply appropriate health and hygiene practices that could be used out in the field and keep the program going and participants working. GBCMA and partners Project staff and the Steering Committee developed protocols and procedures which met the high standards being enforced across the state and the participants compliance was exemplarity to minimise the risk of transmission of the virus. No lost time was caused because of COVID-19.



## Goal 4

### New skills and knowledge

Participants completed formal training in First Aid, Agriculture Chemical Users Permit (ACUP), Construction induction (Work safe White Card) and Asbestos identification. They were also inducted into the GBCMA and other host organisation OHS Management systems, as well as developing on the job natural resource management experiences with using tools, fence construction, tree planting and weed identification and control.

Each crew was provided with an iPad and trained in undertaking daily safety inspections, incident reporting and mapping of the works they were doing.

Using technology was expressed by many of the participants as an aspect of the program they wanted to learn about. Not least of which was so participants could record and show what they were achieving during the DEP.

A majority of participants (82%) believed that they had access to the appropriate formal training required to do the job. However, only just over half agreed that they were provided with the appropriate on the job skills training and the equipment needed.

Unfortunately, the program was unable to progress some specific training and use of equipment (such as chainsaws) which participants expressed would have made the job easier and more efficient.

Participants believed that coming from a farming background, they had experience and skills in these areas. The inability to navigate various OHS requirements and systems between contractors and agencies, restricted the program to deliver more extensively on some projects.



# Participant Case Studies



## Brett Fleming

Benalla orchardist Brett Fleming said the program came along at exactly the right time.

“I needed to find work to supplement my income from the orchard and this was ideal,” Mr Fleming said.

“I have learnt new skills and I’ve also been able to put my industry knowledge to good use.”

Mr Fleming has been working at Winton Wetlands, near Lake Mokoan, eradicating weeds and building corridors for native fauna.

“It’s very worthwhile work and I’m enjoying it. My supervisor sets me a task in the morning and I get the job done without coming across too many people.”

He said he enjoyed working in the bush and working at his own pace.

“The nature of most of my work to this point has been push, push, push. I’m really enjoying being set a task and getting it done.”



## Katrina Glover

Sustained dry conditions meant dairy farmer Katrina Glover was keen to earn some off-farm income.

“It was a relief to get some work and I really enjoyed my time in the Drought Employment Program because it gave me an opportunity to learn a lot more about the catchment area,” Ms Glover said.

Having moved from Melbourne five and a half years ago, she said saw the program as a chance to meet new people.

“I’ve met some really fantastic people and a wide-range of people of different ages and from varying backgrounds.

“We’ve also met a lot of people in the communities where we’ve been working. They are often interested in and grateful for the work we’re doing.”

During her time in the program she was kept busy picking up rubbish and removing weeds from the banks of creeks and the river system.

“It’s been worthwhile for the environment, the communities but most of all for us as individuals.”



## Alastair Whittington

Sustained dry conditions and falling milk prices forced Alastair Whittington off his Nathalia dairy farm a couple of years ago. Unemployed

and worried about money, Mr Whittington applied for the Victorian Government-funded Drought Employment Program (DEP).

He said he needed a job to help keep food on the table while he figured out his next move.

“The drought really affected the availability of work and so the program was brilliant because it acted like a circuit breaker. It gave me the opportunity to have a good look around and I was really lucky to find a new opportunity,”

Mr Whittington bought a bakery in Shepparton and now employed more than 10 people, including a woman he met in the program. With the pressure off he began to see opportunities he hadn't in the past.

“We would sit around at lunch-time and discuss the future. It gave me breathing space to really consider what I was going to do next and I realised there was more out there than I was seeing.”

He said baking and dairy farming had more in common than he first thought.

“The hours are much the same. I'm getting up at about 4.30 and finishing a little bit earlier than when I was dairy farming.”

But there was one big difference he was appreciating.

“For the first time in my life I'm a price-setter. Previously I'd always been a price-taker. As a farmer you have no choice. People told me how much this was going to cost and they told me how much they'd pay me.”

Now Mr Whittington said it was a nice change to set the price for his produce but laughed that it was his waistline which was now paying the highest price.

“It is very tempting because the slices and pies are top-notch.”



## Doug Brown

Doug Brown was at a crossroads when he applied for the Drought Employment Program.

“For me it came along at the perfect time. We'd finished being full-time farmers and I was just unsure about what was my next move,” Mr Brown said.

He said the training component of the program was a bonus.

“Some of that training can be used to take a new step with the farm or learning new skills to get a job away the farm.”

Mr Brown said he was grateful the program continued throughout lockdowns caused by COVID-19.

“I've been really pleased with the support from the GB CMA and the Victorian Government to keep things going during these difficult times.”

The semi-retired farmer was appointed to the role of team-leader for his work crew.

“I thoroughly enjoyed being team-leader. We had a good bunch of men and one woman.

“We all came to the program with different skill and backgrounds so it's just interesting to meet new people and hear their stories.”



## Frank Verduci

For 22-year-old orchardist Frank Verduci, the Drought Employment Program was an opportunity to broaden his horizons.

“The drought has made things tough on the orchard and I just thought this was a good chance to explore other careers,” Mr Verduci said

“It’s been a great way to expand my knowledge and I’m learning something new every day.”

Mr Verduci has been busy clearing woody weeds from reserves around Katamatite and Tungamah.

“I’ve really enjoyed learning more about my local region and what’s native to the area and what’s not.”

Brought up on an orchard in Cobram, Mr Verduci knows a thing or two about plants and weed control.

“I knew a fair bit about irrigation and how to get the most productivity out of the land and I understood what soils suit particular plants.”

But he said the program showed him there was a world away from the orchard as well.

“I’ve been able to obtain some new qualifications through the program so I’m not sure what the future holds but I have more options now.”



## Sophie Sfetcopoulos

Sophie Sfetcopoulos said there was one very simple reason she applied for the Drought Employment Program (DEP).

“Because we needed money to live. I have a large family and I needed to earn an income quickly,” Ms Sfetcopoulos said.

The mother of five and her husband recently made the difficult decision to cease farming their Shepparton orchard.

“We just didn’t have enough water to keep going. So we decided to rent out the farm but that didn’t generate enough money to make a living,” she said.

In fact, until recently, the farm had supported three families but sustained dry conditions meant they were all forced to leave the property and seek off-farm work.

Ms Sfetcopoulos said one of the most valuable elements of the program was the training.

“It has been great for me because it gave me some training that I desperately needed. You find when you’re coming off a farm you often don’t have the necessary training to walk into a job.

“It gave me the opportunity to do a First Aid course and an Agricultural Chemical Users Permit. I never had the opportunity to do that type of training on the farm.”

She said she’d encourage other people, especially women, to apply for programs such as the DEP.

“It’s just great knowing I could get a job. It’s very stressful thinking that you’ve got no money coming in but you’ve still got bills to pay.

“It gave me hope straight away.”

# Importance of Partnerships and Hosts



**Brett McFarlane**  
DEP-Project Coordinator

Project Coordinator Brett McFarlane said at its core the Drought Employment

Project (DEP) was about dignity.

“We want to help people maintain their dignity so they be back farming next year while they can’t make a living from the farm this year,” he said.

He said the DEP was designed to provide two to four days a week work for farmers and farm workers who were impacted by the drought.

“Because of the dry conditions we find many people are still having to look after a property even though they can’t make a living from it,” Mr McFarlane said.

“Their incomes have dropped but they can’t go off-farm and get a full-time job because they’re still a farmer.”

He said circumstances had conspired against

farmers in the Goulburn Murray Irrigation District.

“It’s been a difficult time. They’ve had to deal with prolonged dry conditions, high water prices and uncertainty in the dairy industry.

“This way they can keep the wolf from the door by earning some off-farm income and still be able to maintain their farms.”

He said participants were doing important work for the environment that might otherwise not be done.

“They’re involved with woody weed management, collecting rubbish, fencing and revegetating the landscape.”

He said the project helped support local communities which were doing it tough.

“The money that goes into a farming household is generally spent locally. This is local people working on local projects for the local good.”



## Lachlan Barnes

### Murray Dairy

“Having the flexibility to advertise a complex project addressing an ongoing industry need around employment difficulties which required extensive practical dairy knowledge allowed us to attract two very experienced and capable people. The initiative and drive of these ex-farm owners took the project in a direction we wouldn't have otherwise pursued, responding to immediate needs of Covid-19 changes for the dairy industry which provided great value for us, the DEP staff and gave a positive direct impact for dairy farmers and the wider community.”

## Tony Corbett

### Goulburn-Murray Water

“The Drought Employment Program was a great opportunity to have support in our weed control activities around channels, drains and waterways. The weed control work is crucial, especially in our access tracks, because they support our entire channel structure. It was rewarding to be able to provide training and experience to people whose income had been impacted by dry conditions. GMW elected to extend the employment after the funded part of the program ended and participants have been encouraged to apply for on-going roles which are currently being advertised.”

## Brenton Hall

### Gannawarra Shire

“The Gannawarra Shire Council wishes to thank Goulburn Broken CMA for the opportunity to host participants through the Drought Employment Program. The participants whilst working at the Shire gained new skills, experiences and contributed to the Shire's open spaces being clean and green for residents and visitors. I would welcome being a host partner again should further funding become available.”

## Anthony Sloan

### North Central CMA

“The DEP was a fantastic program that allowed the NCCMA to provide on-ground labour to help bread and butter organisations like Landcare and friends of groups through the pandemic. The program helped the NCCMA to deliver quality environmental on-ground outcomes through current internal projects which allowed budgets to stretch further. The program also facilitated the development of important relationships with partner organisations such as Parks Victoria and Trust for Nature by delivering mutually beneficial projects with the labour the DEP supplied. The participants did a fantastic job with most continuing on to be employed through the NCCMA working for Victoria project which is still currently running.”



# Conclusion

## Lessons

Communication and coordination between the agencies are very important for the delivery of employment programs. Roles and responsibilities need to be clear and concise to give participants confidence in understanding what they are being asked to do.

Agencies and contractors need to be able to negotiate ways to enable the safe use of equipment required by the programs to effectively deliver on, not just the physical outputs, but also on the expected skills and training opportunities this type of program should be able to provide to participants. Chainsaw use being the specific example with the DEP.

Clearer and more timely communication on program timelines (by the labour hire service provider) to allow participants to be prepared, plan and transition at the end of the program.

The DEP has been successful in supporting 30 farmers, farm workers and local agribusiness workers across the GMID during 2020 who have been impacted by drought.

Participants have remained connected to the farm and the region by being able to obtain relevant gainful employment locally and work both on and off the farm.

By having the DEP opportunity, participants were able to take a breath from the farming reality and gain confidence in their options for the future. The DEP provided a safe space where they were able to connect with people and talk about the issues they are facing with others in similar situations.

DEP participants were able to develop new skills which, in many situations, helped in gaining new employment opportunities.

Multiple agencies and community groups have worked together to develop and deliver a program of works benefitting the participants, but also delivering on critical NRM works across the region that enhance the natural environment in which we live and interact.

The GMID DEP was one of a few programs in the region that kept going with on-ground works during the Covid-19 restrictions.







The GBCMA on behalf of the GMID community thanks the Victorian Government for their support of the DEP, it is a truly worthwhile program making a difference to people's lives.

# Funding

\$1.7 million was provided by the Victorian State Government to implement the GMID Drought Employment Program from late 2019 to early 2021.

The majority of funds were spent on employing participants through labour hire providers and host partners (\$ 1.15 M or 67%). Funds were also spent on project management, OHS, training and crew supervision (\$0.47 or 27%) as well as operations and materials (\$ 0.09 M or 5%).

# Media

-  **Alistair Video**  
<https://youtu.be/21N2gz8pWWo>
-  **Winton Wetlands**  
<https://youtu.be/NjzfsDGakPA>
-  **Muckatah Replanting**  
[https://youtu.be/\\_RY4qToBxRU](https://youtu.be/_RY4qToBxRU)
-  **Tungamah Weeds**  
<https://youtu.be/PAu5uW61fIM>
-  **DEP Program**  
<https://youtu.be/pyRpCARYgJE>
-  **Council support DEP**  
<https://youtu.be/bKZHe0QolBI>





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