

The Australian - Wong vows 'prudent' emission cuts

Greenhouse emissions cuts will be delivered at the lowest cost and "mindful" of the economic challenges facing Australia, the Rudd Government promised yesterday. Outlining the Government's blueprint for the implementation of a national emissions trading scheme yesterday, Climate Change Minister Penny Wong all but ruled out deep cuts of between 25 and 40 per cent sought by environmentalists. Senator Wong told business leaders at the Australian Industry Group in Melbourne the Government was aware of the threats posed by inflation and global uncertainty as it prepared to impose a new cost on businesses and households. "These are times which require careful and prudent economic management, a fact which is front of mind in all of the Government's decision-making," she said. Draft laws on a national emissions trading scheme will be completed by the end of this year for a 2010 start, under the timetable outlined yesterday. Business welcomed the first major policy speech by Senator Wong, describing it as "important" for detailing the Government's timeframe to deliver emission cuts of 60 per cent by 2050, including at least one interim target. However, they expressed concern at the pace of reform, which will see an exposure draft for emissions legislation and medium-term targets set by the end of this year so that trading can begin within two years. Senator Wong indicated a broader international strategy that included securing "widespread" agreement of all countries but led by the developed world. She also indicated the final design of a trading scheme would assist low-income households, as well as energy-intensive industries, to stop them being driven offshore. "There is no point in imposing a price on carbon domestically which results in emissions and production transferring internationally for no environmental gain," she said. Senator Wong said the scheme would be designed to allow it to link to other schemes while "ensuring it suits Australian economic conditions", which appears to address concerns that open integration would just drive up the price of permits. Business Council of Australia policy director Maria Tarrant said business would welcome the certainty provided, but she was concerned about the narrow window left for consultation. "Our concern now is how they are going to engage with business on that detail," Ms Tarrant told The Australian. Energy Supply Association of Australia chief executive Brad Page said the Government was taking a balanced approach to the complex policy challenges of climate change, but he was concerned about the urgency of the timetable. Environment groups also cautiously backed the speech, pointing out its commitment to the science, in apparent defiance of the proposal flagged last month by Ross Garnaut, who is reviewing the issue for the Government. WWF climate director Paul Toni said the Government should be aiming to start reducing emissions by 2010 by ending land clearing and with more aggressive energy efficiency programs.

Adelaidenow.com - Floods won't help Basin

Massive floods affecting 75 per cent of Queensland have done little to ease drought conditions in the parched Murray Darling Basin, a report warns. Despite the floods, and a return to more normal rain patterns across much of the catchment, conditions in the Basin are forecast to deteriorate. This all but guarantees the three years to the end of this year will be the worst on record. Federal Minister for Climate Change and Water, Penny Wong, yesterday released the advice from the Murray Darling Basin contingency planning process set up in 2006 as the drought worsened. She said senior officials had advised there was "a 75 per cent chance there would be less water available in the River Murray system in June, 2008 than there was in June, 2007". "The situation across the Basin remains very serious," she said. "Despite the recent flooding in Queensland, we are still a long way from being able to resume normal operations in the Murray Darling Basin." The contingency planning process was established by the former Government at a special Melbourne Cup Day meeting at the height of the drought. Senator Wong said at that time, it had been assumed drought conditions would have eased by 2008, allowing a return to normal Basin operations. However, the conditions were now such that 2008 could be worse than the record dries of 2006 and 2007. "Irrespective of the positive rainfall outlook for the next few months, higher rainfall at this time of year may not lead to substantial inflows, as the high inflow winter-spring period has passed and higher temperatures are expected to continue through summer, increasing evaporation," a joint statement from the State and Federal Governments says.

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FarmOnLine -Razor gang strikes rural funding

Drought funding and regional programs are among some of the victims of Government funding cuts announced yesterday by Minister for Finance, Lindsay Tanner. The new Growing Regions program, announced but the former Government just prior to the election, will be binned as part of a Government savings plan to reign in more than \$640 worth of federal spending over the next four years. The program had been designed to help rapidly growing towns, particularly in mining and coastal zones, with funding for improved infrastructure to cope with growing populations. Mr Tanner said told the National Press Club yesterday the Growing Regions program will be abolished and the estimated cost of re-establishment assistance for farmers affected by the drought will be revised down to reflect lower than expected rates of take-up. "If we are going to tackle inflation we have to start now," Mr Tanner said. "These savings are a modest but important first step in reining in the excessive spending we have inherited."

Leader of The Nationals, Warren Truss, said the cuts were "Labor's payback" against those who didn't vote for it. Mr Truss said Kevin Rudd's election night claim that he would be "Prime Minister for all Australians" was already in tatters. "While much of the country remains mired in a big dry that has lasted up to seven years it is incredibly hard-hearted and short-sighted," Mr Truss said. He said the abolition of the Coalition's \$200 million innovative Growing Regions program puts a gigantic hole in Labor's claim that it is the party of planning and infrastructure. SOURCE: Rural Press National News Service, Parliament House Bureau, Canberra.

Bush poet strikes gold in Tamworth

The tale of Bill the fencing farmer's sporting glory has snared Ballarat's John Peel one of the nation's most prestigious bush poetry awards. Mr Peel, a Ballarat engineer, took home his first Golden Damper award as winner of the Tamworth Bush Poets' original work and performance division. The competition puts Australia's best bush poets up against each other as part of the Tamworth Country Music Festival. Mr Peel's poem "The Fence Off" tells the story of a farmer who discovers fencing is a sport and winds up locked in a duel with an Olympic fencer - who came equipped with a sword. The farmer draws on his expertise and parries back with a star post, knocking the Olympian over and stringing up wire to fence him in. Mr Peel said winning the Golden Damper with his own work was a huge thrill. "It was a big honour, having my name alongside great bush poets and competing against the NSW and Queensland champions," he said. "It's one of the most prestigious awards, probably more so than the nationals, because it's at Tamworth during the festival." Mr Peel started bush poetry at primary school in NSW and is a founding member of Ballarat's Eureka Bush Balladeers. He said his ultimate aim was for a compilation of his work to be published. SOURCE: *The Courier*, Ballarat, Vic.

The Australian - Demands to lift water restrictions

Sweeping rains across the eastern states have filled dams and reignited debate about when to ease water restrictions. Or the second consecutive week, Sydney's water supply has risen by 3 per cent, reaching 64 per cent yesterday and prompting the NSW Government to announce restrictions would be reviewed when dam levels reached 70 per cent. A spokesman for the NSW Minister for Water Utilities, Nathan Rees, said if restrictions were eased, permanent water-saving rules would come into place, including no watering between 10am and 4pm, using trigger nozzles on hoses and a ban on hosing hard surfaces. The news came as Queensland Premier Anna Bligh refused to bow to pressure to relax tough restrictions in the state's southeast, despite dam levels being at a two-year high. Southeast Queensland has been drenched by its best-sustained summer rain since July 2005. Enough water to supply Brisbane and its surrounds for 14 months has been added to the dams since the start of the year. The region's mayors - who face elections next month - have demanded level-six restrictions be eased, but Ms Bligh yesterday said it was important not to get carried away. "The last thing we want to see is people using water unwisely and find ourselves in a difficult position again in 14 months' time," she said. Wivenhoe Dam - which is Brisbane's main supply of drinking water - has received the lion's share of recent rains. Northbrook Creek runs into Wivenhoe Dam and borders Sue Clarke's Glen Ormiston pony stud. Ms Clarke said the creek was "bubbling along very well" for the first time in five years. "This time last year, it was a few smelly little waterholes and the area was a dustbowl," she said. "Now there's green grass everywhere and the landscape has transformed." Somerset, North Pine and Wivenhoe dams are at a combined total of 33.48 per cent and are expected to hit 35 per cent this weekend. The Queensland Water Commission yesterday gave in to Gold Coast Mayor Ron Clarke's demands to relax the city's water restrictions while the Hinze Dam is overflowing. The commission yesterday lifted all Gold Coast's restrictions, but Mr Clarke said level-two bans should be retained. Despite rising dam levels in NSW, the state Government remains committed to building a desalination plant. The contracts have been awarded, and the \$1.9 billion plant should be providing 15 per cent of Sydney's drinking water by 2009-10. The La Nina rains have filled many coastal dams, but dams inland and in the southern cities remain low. Melbourne's dams are at 36.9 per cent, just marginally higher than this time last year. They reached a low of 28.4 per cent last June. Adelaide's dams, which do not even hold one year's supply, are at 66 per cent capacity. Adelaide takes most of its water from the Murray, where total storage is at 20 per cent. Perth's dams are 37 per cent full. However, Perth takes only 27 per cent of its water from dams, with 17 per cent supplied by a desalination plant that came online last April. The remaining 56 per cent comes from groundwater. Perth is building a second desalination plant, Adelaide is planning to build one and the Victorian Government intends to build a \$3.1 billion desalination plant for Melbourne.

Accounts fail to value environment

Environmental assets account for more than 40 per cent of the total value of Australia but changes in their value are not included in measurements of national income, the latest yearbook reveals. Australia's national accounts fail to reflect the economic cost of depleting environmental resources or the damage caused by economic activity and wealth generation. The Australian Bureau of Statistics estimates land degradation has cost nearly \$800 million in lost profits from agricultural production and land value drops. But this is only a small fraction of the economic cost of environmental impacts. The cost of land degradation is small compared with the total value estimated for rural land (\$230 billion) and other land (\$2.4 trillion) while subsoil assets such as oil and mineral resources are valued at about \$256 billion.

The ABS estimates native forests, despite being the focus of environmental campaigns, only account for about \$2 billion of Australia's environmental assets, while plantation timbers are valued at \$8 billion. "This is premised on a relatively narrow economic view that does not account for damage to intrinsic non-monetary values such as ecosystem services, biodiversity and aesthetic/recreational values," the year book reports. The ABS is examining how to incorporate changes in the value of environmental assets in national accounts.

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Sunday Mail – “Coorong is dying while governments squabble”

Time is running out for the Murray, says David Paton

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FarmOnLine

Drought planning continues amid the flooding rains

It may be dumping down in Northern Australia, but the Murray Darling States are continuing their contingency planning in order to meet human water needs in the event the drought continues in 2008/09. The Murray Darling Basin contingency planning report is a joint agreement between Victoria, NSW, South Australia, the ACT and the Commonwealth governments. Victorian Water Minister Tim Holding said it was important governments worked together to prepare for the likelihood of another year of water shortages and low allocations. "Flows in the Murray River and its tributaries remain critically low after 11 years of drought," Mr Holding said. "Long-term forecasts indicate there is now a three in four chance that there may be less water available at June 2008 than there was in June 2007. "It is therefore essential that the Basin States have contingency plans in place to ensure that critical human needs can be met in towns and cities drawing water from the Murray system in 2008/09." Mr Holding said the special arrangements for 2007/08 have worked well, but a new approach was required to ensure that any additional water that becomes available continues to be shared equitably. "The new arrangements mean that South Australia will pay back its water debt to Victoria and New South Wales, which accrued under the special 2007/08 sharing arrangements," Mr Holding said. "It also means some additional water may become available to Victoria and NSW in the current year, which can be kept aside as a contingency to meet essential needs in 2008/09." Mr Holding said these contingency plans were separate from discussions about the establishment of a national approach to managing the Murray Darling Basin. Victorian Premier John Brumby and Mr Holding will meet with Federal Water Minister Penny Wong to discuss Victoria's position on the National Water Plan on Thursday. SOURCE: *Stock & Land*, Vic, weekly rural newspaper, posting updates daily on *FarmOnline*.

Old Govt extends flood relief; cash grants on offer for farmers

With more than 80pc of Queensland flood affected, the State Government has extended its flood relief with agencies now offering cash grants of up to \$25,000 for farmers. The State Government has extended its flood assistance for 10 local council areas in southern and far western Queensland following this week's fierce storms. Flood assistance already has been activated in five of those areas - the Gold Coast, Logan, Brisbane, Boonah and Diamantina. Other areas that will now get relief are Ipswich, Redland, Wambo, Tara and Boulia. Premier Anna Bligh said flood assistance had so far been activated across 71 local government areas - or more than 80pc of the State. "Many of these areas are also drought-declared," Ms Bligh said. "Activating flood assistance does mean the drought is over. "It recognises that flood damage has been reported in these areas and makes assistance available." Emergency Services Minister Neil Roberts said the storms which hit the region between Sunday and Thursday had caused more than \$2.4 million worth of damage to public assets, mainly roads. The storms, estimated to have inflicted the most severe rain damage in 50 years, eased across the region on Thursday. Meanwhile, Governor-General Michael Jeffery and his wife Marlena toured the flood-ravaged central Queensland town of Emerald on Friday. They met with volunteers and organisations involved in the relief effort, and visited a family whose home on the outskirts of the town was almost swamped. "There's a sense of bonding, the way people automatically down tools and get together," Major-General Jeffery said. "You can see it, I think too, in the mining companies and the businesses that have said 'Right, go out and help your mates'." Emerald Mayor Peter Maguire said the township was returning to normal, but people on outlying properties were just beginning to realise the extent of the task. Mr Maguire said he had met one couple with a \$1m damage bill, while farmers were facing a multitude of issues. "People are working on it - the government and (rural lobby group) AgForce - but I think they are going to be shocked when they get to the bottom of it," Mr Maguire said. Early government estimates put the cost of the floods on the Queensland economy at about \$150 million, but is expected to rise significantly as the damage is assessed. The government had earlier warned the damage bill could reach \$1 billion. Primary producers and small business owners who have suffered direct damage from the floods are now eligible to apply for Special Disaster Flood Assistance grants of up to \$10,000. A further grant of up to \$15,000 is available depending on the extent of the damage. The grant is part of the new Special Disaster Flood Assistance Scheme announced by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and Ms Bligh on January 24. The Scheme is administered by Qld Rural Assistance Authority and is designed to assist flood affected primary producers and small businesses following the January monsoonal rains.

"QRAA's administration of the Special Disaster Flood Assistance Scheme will provide those who have been affected by this disaster with the means to assist in recovery efforts by covering costs associated with repairs, removal of debris and the clean up of properties and premises," acting QRAA chief executive officer, Tony O'Dea, said. In addition to the grant assistance, QRAA's Natural Disaster Relief Assistance Scheme offers affected producers and small businesses with low interest loans of up to \$150,000 for repair, replacement of infrastructure, carry-on and restocking requirements following the flooding. These loans have a low-interest rate of 4pc, no fees or charges and repayment terms of seven years, with the option of up to two years interest only.

Rain brings further water price decrease

Good rainfall has bolstered storages and increased irrigation allocations, leading to a weaker water market in the Murray Darling Basin during January. Waterfind's January water market report for the Murray System has revealed that temporary water experienced a further decrease in both the price and value of trades. It reports that during January, temporary water traded between \$220 and \$400/megalitre. Over the past month, the total volume of water traded in the Murray System decreased by 7pc, and the total number of trades fell by 28pc. In comparison to January 2007, the total volume of water traded in the Murray was down by 17pc, with the number of trades that occurred also dropping by 39pc, Waterfind says. Although total storage of just 23pc of capacity was recorded at the end of January for dams that affect the supply of water to the River Murray - a slight decrease of 0.7pc compared to December 2007 - there have been irrigation entitlement increases in some valleys. Increased allocations were announced by Goulburn-Murray Water on January 15, and then again on February 1. Allocations for high-reliability shares now stand at 36pc in the Murray, 51pc in the Goulburn, 65pc in the Broken and 14pc in the Campaspe system. On January 15, NSW Water Utilities Minister Nathan Rees announced that recent inflows have been sufficient to allow a further 10pc of water suspended in 2006 to be repaid to accounts, bringing the total repaid water to NSW Murray irrigators to 65pc. An allocation increase of 6pc was also announced for Murrumbidgee Valley general security licence holders, who can now access 9pc of their water entitlement. But other storages continue to lag, with levels in Dartmouth Dam at the end of January indicate that there has been minimal change since December, with the current level at 17pc. Hume Dam experienced a slight decrease over January, dropping from 24pc in December to 20pc.

SA irrigators guaranteed carry-over water for 2008-09

The South Australian government has confirmed that irrigators will be able to carry-over all of their allocations not used in 2007-08 into the 2008-09 water year. State Minister for the River Murray, Karlene Maywald, says licensed water users will be able to carry forward all of their unused restricted water allocation as at 30 June 2008, for use next water year. Ms Maywald says this will assist irrigators to better manage the limited water available. "While the provision of carry-over depends on climate conditions and the ability to deliver it from interstate storages to South Australia, the government is confident carry-over can be supplied, although an absolute guarantee cannot be given," she said. "Water carried over into 2008-09 will be tradable in South Australia and interstate." Previously, carry-over water could only be traded in South Australia. Carry-over water application forms must be lodged with the Department of Water, Land and Biodiversity Conservation between March 1 and 31 inclusive. Applications must nominate the expected volume of water that will be unused at 30 June 2008. This will determine the total volume of water to be held in upstream storages for delivery in 2008-09.

Global wheat prices soar to record highs

A growing global shortage of high-protein wheat has sent prices to record highs in Chicago. According to today's Commonwealth Bank's daily commodities report, prompt wheat prices are "dramatically higher" than yesterday. "Prompt wheat continues to make new records as the fierce bidding for high-protein wheat continues," it says. "Prices are now extraordinarily high and they probably won't persist there for all that long." But the CBA warns the risk is that the wheat market is not trading as though price matters. "The buyers just have to buy (for a number of potential reasons). Sellers are, naturally, extremely reluctant to sell so any bid has to be very aggressive in order to tempt them. "Ridiculous prices come about because there's no obvious reason for that process to stop — and therein lies the danger." Wheat futures yesterday hit \$US10.63/bushel in Chicago, while earlier in the week AWB was quoting ASW at \$434/t and APH at \$454/t. Adding to the complexity of the market outlook has been the global weather pattern, with wet weather in parts of Australia's wheatbelt adding to hopes of a good winter crop. But the CBA says dry winter crops in India are unlikely to get enough rain on a ten-day horizon, while forecasters expect dry patches in Argentina to get some useful rain over the next week. SOURCE: Grains market news from *FarmOnline*.

AWA

1. The Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority is introducing long awaited changes to labeling of ATRAZINE which has been linked to reproductive cancers in overseas studies following discovery of residues in the drinking water of three Victorian towns in 2006. The move signals a tougher approach to registration of pesticides and similar chemicals in the future.
2. Access to the new Minister for Climate Change and Water, Penny Wong, to discuss the progress of the National Plan for Water Security or their rights under the intergovernmental agreement between the States

appears to be difficult. Irrigators suspect climate change has hijacked the water agenda amidst good progress on the plan and farmer rights last year because they have not been consulted.

3. Both Victorian Premier and the Minister for Climate Change and Water believe they have made constructive progress in resolving difficulties in implementing the \$10bn Water Plan for the Murray Darling Basin. The Victorian Government has welcomed new water sharing arrangements for the Murray Darling Basin to meet critical human needs in 2008/09 if the drought continues.
4. Water meters in Hobart is a new concept though mainland city dwellers are very familiar and there installation has contributed to reduced water use by citizens. At the moment only business and industry are fitted with water meters to capture usage data.
5. The proposed 120km Pipeline from the Lower Fitzroy to the northern end of Gladstone Area Water Board's raw water distribution system at Yarwun has been granted pre-construction approval from the Queensland government.
6. SA Minister for the River Murray Karlene Maywald says South Australian irrigators will be able to carry-over all of their allocations not used in 2007-08 into the 2008-09 water year.
7. While forest fires can often result in an initial increase in water runoff from catchments, it's the forests and bush growing back that could cause future problems for water supplies by Reducing Stream Flows.
8. Gary J. Zimmerman is the new Executive Director of our affiliate American Waterworks Association. He replaces Jack W. Hoffbuhr, who is retiring after leading AWWA for 12 years.
9. Investment of more than \$200bn is needed to control Wastewater Pollution in the US for up to 20 years, experts have claimed. A new report from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) estimates that \$134.4bn will need to be spent on wastewater treatment and collection systems, \$54.8bn for combined sewer overflow corrections, and \$90bn for storm water management.
10. Norway has joined Australia as the second contributor to the multi-donor trust funds administered by the Asian Development Bank (ADB). The Water Financing Partnership Facility was established in 2006 to provide ADB's water financing programme with resources to support demonstration projects and its quality.
11. Anglican Water has set a challenge to its top 50 suppliers to baseline their carbon footprint and develop a strategy to adapt by 31 March 2009. Suppliers were told they would have to show 'adaptation' to climate change and that they were mitigating its effects by reducing carbon emissions, and would be scored on their achievements.
12. A Greek academic has said that at least 5000 Water Wells, many of them illegal, are turning Greece's Attika Prefecture into Swiss cheese, allowing seawater to percolate into the groundwater and endangering future water supplies. The water table has sunk by as much as 30 m over the past 10years in some places and more than 20 m in others.
13. The 102-year-old Acquedottio Pugliese, Europe's largest water conduit at 16,000 km long, is vital to irrigation in Italy's Puglia Region but a report by the Mediobanca investment bank revealed that a staggering 50.3% of the water is now being lost through leaks.
14. A new analysis led by researchers at Scripps Institution of Oceanography at the University of California San Diego warns that Climate Change from human activity is already disrupting water supplies in the western US. Declines in snowpack, warming air temperatures and earlier spring river runoff already seen in the region are impacts expected from greenhouse gas and aerosol emissions from human activities.
15. Turkey's breadbasket, the Konya Basin, was once known for its beautiful lakes, but now Lake Aksehir - formerly the size of three cities - has turned to dust and others are threatened, warned geologist Dr. Guler Gocmez of Selcuk University in Konya. Across the Mediterranean, Groundwater is being pumped at a far greater rate than nature can replenish it.
16. Congratulations to Dr Matthew Brannock (University of New South Wales) and Catherine Port (Sydney Water) for each winning best paper prizes at last week's 2nd Australian Young Water Professionals Conference in Brisbane. Both will represent Australia at the 4th International YWP Conference in Berkeley, California this July.
17. Listed for Australian Honours were Dennis Brockenshire (ex Barwon Water MD) and Barbara Richardson (Public Service Medal for NRM policy). Barbara is at DECC. Adam Lovell, currently Science and Technology Manager for Water Quality at Sydney Water, will be joining WSAA as the Manager, Science and Sustainability and will be based in Sydney. Adam will continue on as the Deputy Chair CRC Water Quality and Treatment.
18. Demands by consumers for water restrictions to be lifted are being ignored in Queensland and NSW despite floods and drenching rains in both states.
19. Construction workers for John Holland, builder of Sydney's desalination plant have successfully gained a 5% increase in wages.
20. Torrential rain across eastern Australia as well as the west has lifted large areas of the country from drought as some farmers experience their best season in decades.

21. Plans to ship water from New Zealand and set up mobile desalination plants in southeast Queensland may no longer be needed after recent heavy rain.

12th

FarmOnLine - Half of NSW eases out of drought

The "big dry" is easing in NSW, says Premier Morris Iemma, as latest figures show more than half of the State is no longer drought declared. NSW Department of Primary Industries analysis for January shows 46.1pc of the State is classified as in drought. The figure is down from 52.6pc in December, coming after a welcome bout of drenching rain. "The big dry that has gripped NSW is coming to an end," Mr Iemma said. "For the first time in seven years, many parts of Western NSW (are) out of drought with the drenching rain in recent times. "We're not there yet, but there is real hope that 2008 will see an end to the worst drought in more than 100 years." A drought map also provided by the department shows 32.9pc of the State is rated as "satisfactory" and most of this green zone stretches down NSW's coast, and inland in the State's north. The region around Bourke and Walgett, in the State's northwest, is also in a green area while a further 21pc is rated as "marginal". The vast area from Wilcannia to Condobolin and Gundagai (46.1pc) remains in drought. NSW Primary Industries Minister, Ian Macdonald, said rural rivers that were dry over the past seven years were running again. Farmers were planting extra crops in a move that should put downward pressure on vegetable prices. The State's sunflower crop alone would double in size this year to 21,000 hectares, Mr Macdonald said. "NSW usually produces in the order of \$10 billion in farmgate value, it has been down to as low as \$3 and \$4 billion in recent years," Mr Macdonald said. "This is a massive turnaround that has gone on over the last three months (when) 90pc of the State has had above average rainfall." The Nationals called on the government to not prematurely wind back drought support for farmers. "The 'climate' drought may be easing, but across many areas of NSW the cash drought is just as severe," NSW party leader Andrew Stoner said. The NSW Farmers' Association has welcomed the announcement by the Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and Mr Iemma that grants of up to \$5000 will be provided to flood-affected primary producers in the State's Central West and North Coast regions. NSW Farmers' Association president, Jock Laurie, says the recovery grants will enable farmers to pay for clean up and restoration activities urgently needed after the floods. "Many farmers are already under significant financial and emotional pressure due to several years of drought conditions and they just don't have the cash flow to undertake clean up and restoration activities," Mr Laurie said. SOURCE: AAP and *FarmOnline*.

No reprieve from drought for Vic

Recent rainfall patterns are showing that, more than ever, Australia's eastern states are divided between the haves and the have-nots. As Sydney and Brisbane drown under a deluge of rain, Victoria is crying out for a decent drop. Heavy falls over eastern NSW last week threatened fruit harvests, filled up dams and left Sydneysiders wondering what happened to summer. Melbourne's measly rainfall of 12mm this month has strengthened predictions the State will remain in the grip of drought. In NSW, for the first time in two years a majority of the State's land is not drought-declared. Last week's heavy rain raised Sydney's dam levels to nearly two-thirds of capacity, with some catchments receiving falls of 200mm. Sydney's water restrictions could be relaxed if dam levels hit 70pc, leading the State Opposition to question the worth of a desalination plant. Weather forecasters said the city was set for more above-average rainfall well into autumn, thanks to the La Nina weather pattern. "Historically, La Nina favours higher-than-average rainfall over eastern Australia and that's what's we've seen through a lot of NSW this season," said Jane Golding, a Bureau of Meteorology forecaster in Sydney. But Victoria is still waiting for a persistent deluge to make an impression on water storages. The Victorian Department of Primary Industries' latest report of seasonal conditions said southeastern Australia had missed out on the equivalent of an average year's rainfall during the decade-long drought. The Bureau of Meteorology's drought statement warns that several above-average years of rainfall are required to make up Victoria's water shortfall. But the Bureau's outlook for the next two months points to no great chance of above-average rain. Stephen King, a forecaster at the Bureau in Melbourne, said Victoria could not rely on La Nina to help out. "La Nina has less of an effect down our way. It has its greatest effect in northern NSW and southern Queensland," Mr King said. "It's really an effect of equatorial temperatures, and with Queensland and Sydney being closer to the equator, they have a lot more of their weather come from that way." On top of missing out on the rain, Victoria may lose out on the flow-on effects of the downpour up north. Graeme Hannan, Goulburn-Murray Water's executive manager of planning and environment, said that despite falls in Queensland, added flows to the Darling River would not hit trigger levels that gave Victorian irrigators access to the water. SOURCE: *The Age*, Melbourne.

Almost half of farmers can't finance coming winter crop

A survey of 1800-grain growers in Victoria, NSW and Queensland has found nearly half the respondents have not yet secured sufficient finance to establish this year's winter crop. The funding shortfall follows year's drought and failed crops, which is limiting farmers' ability to finance the expense of planting this season. The Grain Growers Association conducted the survey of its members in October 2007 and found 68pc believe their financial situation is worse than five years ago. But GGA chairman, Dan Mangelsdorf, says it is surprising just how committed eastern Australia's grain growers have remained in the face of extreme financial hardship.

"Our members are rolling up their sleeves to make the best of what the coming season brings with hopes of a profitable crop so as to start rebuilding after the last five years of drought," he said. "This can occur provided banks and governments continue to take an equally long-term view in relation to the grains industry's profitability." The GGA says wheat growers will be investing around \$300 per hectare in input costs to establish the 2008/09-winter crop. The average area of wheat planted in Australia over the past three years was 12 million hectares. If seasonal conditions allow, farmers will be investing \$3.6 billion into their wheat crops alone. "This investment is so significant that one in three farmers surveyed believe they will need to downgrade their level of input this coming year in order to plant a crop," Mr Mangelsdorf said.

Adelaide Advertiser - Row over water security office

A new government agency has been formed to focus on water security in SA, sparking a political brawl over who first proposed the initiative. Premier Mike Rann yesterday outlined a further development of the water security portfolio, announcing the establishment of an Office for Water Security, to be headed by a Commissioner for Water Security. As part of the changes, a new Water Security Council also will be formed by merging the Water Security Advisory Group and Task Force and will be chaired by Water Security Minister Karlene Maywald. But the Opposition immediately claimed credit, applauding the Government for "finally agreeing to set up a Water Security Council – a plan first raised by the state Liberals in August last year" in their Vision 2010 Waterproofing South Australia plan. Opposition Leader Martin Hamilton-Smith yesterday said it had taken six months for the Government to "finally agree that our plan was right". "Mike Rann and his Government have run out of ideas and are turning to the Liberals to lead the state," he said. But Mr Rann told Parliament he had appointed Ms Maywald as the state's first Water Security Minister a year ago and since then had embarked on "the most significant water infrastructure program ever launched in this state". The \$2.5 billion of works includes a planned desalination plant for Adelaide and the doubling of storage capacity in the Mt Lofty Ranges. Mr Rann said the Office for Water Security will co-ordinate water policy development across government and support Mrs Maywald in negotiations on the national plan for water security; SA's commitments under the national plan and developing a statewide water security plan. The Government will advertise for applications for the commissioner's position within weeks. The new water council will identify and assess "important challenges", Mr Rann said. Chief executives from a range of government agencies, including Treasury and Finance and Premier and Cabinet, will sit on the council. Mr Rann said he had met with new federal Water Minister Penny Wong last week to outline SA's position on water security, including that critical human requirements be provided as highest priority.

The Australian - Rains wash away much of drought

Torrential rain across eastern Australia as well as in the west has delivered large parts of the country from the drought. While the rewards are yet to flow into farmers' pockets, some are experiencing their best season in decades. NSW Premier Morris Iemma said yesterday that January's drenching rains would have the two-pronged benefit of easing pressure on farmers and stabilising grocery prices. Mr Iemma said "only" 46.1 per cent of NSW was now officially drought declared. The figure is down from 52.6 per cent in December. NSW Nationals leader Andrew Stoner accused the Government of being Sydney-centric and said that while the latest drought figures might offer farmers hope, Mr Iemma must not use them as an excuse to cut support for country communities. "The climate drought may be easing, but across many areas of NSW the cash drought is just as severe," he said. In Queensland, 62.4 per cent of the state is still officially drought-declared, but the figure has not been updated since last month and does not reflect the situation. Almost all of Victoria and the western two-thirds of South Australia are still classified as suffering "exceptional circumstances" by the federal Department of Agriculture. Don White of the consultancy firm Weather watch said there were always two types of drought in Australia, meteorological and political. "Some of my clients are telling me they are heading to their best season ever, yet they are still drought-declared," he said. "Some farmers in the northwest of NSW are saying they haven't seen a better season in more than 50 years." Most of Victoria had experienced good summer rains, parts of Queensland were completely waterlogged, and drought was a diminishing issue for most parts of Australia, he said. The main problem was that many farmers were yet to benefit in terms of cash flow from the markedly improved conditions, although the future looked good. "The long-range outlook is for average or above-average rainfall for the next few months," he said. Only days after experiencing record rainfall, Perth is again set for a week of soaring temperatures, with the mercury predicted to nudge the high 30s. Last Thursday's deluge in the city exceeded the January and February combined average rainfalls of 23mm, with a total of 30.4mm.

King penguins in peril as planet warms

The magnificent king penguins of the Sub-antarctic Islands are at risk of extinction from starvation if the planet heats up as climate scientists predict. The warning comes from international experts led by Yvon Le Maho, from the National Centre for Scientific Research in Strasbourg, France. Based on nine years of observational data, Dr Le Maho and his colleagues estimated 9 per cent of adult king penguins would die for every 0.26C of warming. When sea surface temperatures rose, the volume of small fish and squid the penguins eat declined, and fewer birds survived to breed.

Since the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change last year predicted an average increase of 0.2C per decade over the next two decades, Dr Le Maho's team calculated that king penguin populations were at "heavy extinction risk". According to seabird ecologist Eric Woehler, of the University of Tasmania, the findings fitted with predictions presented in Hobart last September at the sixth International Penguin Conference. As revealed in *The Australian*, ecologists including Dr Woehler reported that the world's 17 species of penguins "face serious population decreases throughout their range", predominately because of climate change. "Penguins are the bellwether of climate change," Dr Woehler said. He welcomed the report by Dr Le Maho's group in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences. "As birds, they're pretty much at the top of the food chain and act as two-footed bio-indicators of the health of the environment, marine and terrestrial," Dr Woehler said. Dr Le Maho's group studied the breeding and survival of penguins on Possession Island in the Crozet Archipelago of the southern Indian Ocean, where about two-thirds of the world's two million pairs of king penguins breed. The group warned other Antarctic seabirds were at risk from Southern Ocean warming.

Thousands could die in English heat

There is a 25 per cent chance that a severe heat wave will strike England and kill more than 6,000 people before 2017 if no action is taken to deal with the health effects of climate change, a report said today. The report for Britain's Department of Health estimated more than 3,000 people could die in an intense summer hot spell in southeast England, with just as many more dying from heat-related deaths over the summer. Until 2012, when London stages the summer Olympic Games, the odds of thousands dying in summer heat each year will be one in 40, the report said, and thousands more could die each year as a result of other effects of global warming and air pollution. "In terms of conventional thinking about risks to health, a risk of one in 40 is high," the report said.

Tens of thousands died across Europe in a heat wave during the summer of 2003, including more than 14,000 people in France, but so far people living in Britain have coped with rising temperatures. Although more summer deaths are expected, fewer people will die in Britain as a result of cold winter weather, as the world warms up because of rising carbon emissions from human activity. The report, an update of a 2002 study, was reissued on the same day London's mayor said owners of the most polluting cars will have to pay £25 (\$53) a day to drive them in the city centre in a measure to cut down on carbon emissions. *Reuters*

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The Australian - Aid to fight future droughts

Labor has vowed it will ensure farmers receiving drought relief become better equipped to withstand future droughts. It also plans a major attack on social and economic alienation, promising that many of the policies it took to November's federal election will allow more Australians to participate more fully in economic and social life. The promises came yesterday in a speech given by Governor-General Michael Jeffery to open the 42nd Australian parliament. While the opening address is delivered by the Governor-General, by convention it is an outline of the new Government's legislative program. Watched by former Labor prime minister Bob Hawke and senior bureaucrats and diplomats, Major General Jeffery said the Rudd Government would commit to building a modern Australia and a fresh approach to governing. "It is committed to being a government that listens to the Australian people, that consults with the Australian people and that is upfront with the Australian people on the problems it can solve and the problems that lie beyond the powers of any government to solve," he said. The Governor-General said the nation's long-running drought had had serious impacts on the livelihoods of people across rural and regional Australia. "While the recent weeks have seen rain in many parts of Australia, long-term water shortages remain an acute concern," he said. "The Government will implement ... programs to help support farmers in adapting farming practices as they face the changing climate. "The Government's drought policy will ensure that farmers receiving government assistance are better prepared to deal with the increasing frequency of dry conditions predicted for the future." Agriculture Minister Tony Burke last month hinted at moves to tie drought relief payments to changes in farming practices to better deal with climate change. At the time, the Nationals attacked the Rudd Government as anti-farmer, while the National Farmers Federation said it was open to working with the Government. Major General Jeffery's address covered all of Labor's main election policies, including the promised education revolution, elimination of infrastructure bottlenecks and skills shortages, action on climate change and working on better state relations to improve public hospital services. He outlined Labor's plans to rewrite industrial relations laws and improve housing affordability by creating first-home saver accounts and releasing government land for development. He said many of the government policies, taken together, were an agenda for greater social inclusion. Policies that would deliver on the agenda included the Government's plan to halve the number of homeless people turned away from shelters each night over the next five years, universal access to pre-school for all four-year-olds, a national plan on literacy and numeracy, and halving the gap in mortality rates between indigenous and non-indigenous children within a decade. The Government would also deliver a national employment strategy for the disabled and people suffering mental illness and a dental health program for low-income earners.