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Australia pledges $7.94 M to boost drought resilience for NSW winegrape, apple and cherry sector

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The Australia's Future Drought Fund is supporting the NSW Government, in partnership with program lead Charles Sturt University, to launch a major new research initiative aimed at helping winegrape, apple, and cherry producers strengthen their resilience to drought. This initiative is part of a plan to leverage the best researchers to bolster the winegrape, apple, and cherry sectors in the face of changing climate conditions.

Strong industry engagement and knowledge-sharing will be critical to the projectâ??s success. The goal is to ensure research findings translate into tangible benefits for growers, enabling them to apply these insights in day-to-day orchard and vineyard practices.

This five-year project will develop and test new agronomic management practices to improve orchard and vineyard drought resilience through the following activities:

- **Long-term trial sites**Â at a Batlow commercial apple orchard and a Gulgong cherry orchard.
- **Additional demonstration sites**Â across the Central West, southern NSW, and Tasmania to include diverse horticultural production systems in winegrape, apple, and cherry sectors.

- Sites will test a combination of researcher-designed and grower-suggested treatments to evaluate how different practices influence drought tolerance and productivity over time.
- Growers from each region will contribute to the trialâ??s design, treatment selection, refinement, and on-ground implementation this autumn and winter.
- Six NSW Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development research staff will collaborate with Charles Sturt University and University of Tasmania researchers.
- Long-term trials will capture the seasonal cycle of perennial crops, providing growers with detailed insights into how different management approaches perform under real-world conditions.
- The NSW Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development will work with host growers to identify a toolkit of management strategies, including soil amendments, deficit irrigation, and modern technologies like soil moisture probes, to improve orchard resilience to extreme weather events.

Research findings will be made accessible to farmers through workshops, factsheets, orchard walks, and theÂ**â??Best Practice Drought Managementâ??**Â training manual.

The project has receivedÂ **$7.94 million in funding**Â from the Australian Governmentâ??s Future Drought Fund under the Long-term Trials of Drought Resilient Farming Practices Program, round 2.

Federal Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry Julie Collins said:Â â??Drought is always a case of when, not if. This is why weâ??re working with the NSW Government, Charles Sturt University, and other partners to understand the risks, priorities, and actions needed to boost resilience to future drought. We heard loud and clear from the farming industry at last yearâ??s National Drought Forum about the importance of building long-term resilience to drought, which is what this project will deliver. The Long-term Trials Program is a great example of how collaboration between government, industry, and research leaders, through co-design with farmers, can deliver real solutions and tangible benefits to regional communities. I encourage farmers to get involved where possible in this project and see if they can take advantage of this valuable opportunity.â?•

NSW Minister for Agriculture Tara Moriarty explained â??The Minns Government is working to develop and sustain our horticultural sector and to assist farmers facing increased climate variability. This project is designed to deliver practical and evidence-based solutions. We are currently addressing the impacts of drought, and this project demonstrates we are working for the future. This will give growers future access to a toolkit of proven management options that can help safeguard their productivity and profitability during tough seasons. This investment, made through the Future Drought Fund, will support the development of drought-resilient practices that can be applied directly on farm, ensuring growers are better prepared for the challenges ahead.â?•

Charles Sturt University Vice-Chancellor Professor RenÃ©e Leon said,Â â??We are seeing increased frequencies of drought, and we need to develop solutions which enable farmers and industry to do more with less water. This project is about improving the ability of horticulturalists to make better use of limited rainfall, developing smarter agricultural technologies, and building cross-industry collaborations. It is important work which is a national priority to secure the future of our food supply. Charles Sturt Universityâ??s research is born in the regions, but its impact reaches across the nation. With support from valued partners like the NSW Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, Charles Sturt University will continue converting regional challenges into world-class breakthroughs that strengthen our economy, our communities, and our environment.â?•

NSW Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, Director for Horticulture Dr Alison Anderson said, â??By drawing on the research and industry expertise at both the Orange and Wagga Wagga Agricultural Institutes and partnering with researchers at Charles Sturt University and University of Tasmania, weâ??re able to test farming management strategies that strengthen drought resilience across temperate horticultural and viticultural systems. This combined research effort ensures growers receive practical, scientifically validated options that work in real orchard and vineyard conditions. Integrating that knowledge into long-term commercial trials will allow us to identify the most reliable, cost-effective drought-management tools so growers can make confident decisions in increasingly variable seasons. This comprehensive initiative underscores the commitment of government, research institutions, and industry to equip growers with the tools and knowledge needed to navigate future climate challenges effectively."