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**TITLE: Drought relief payments: a waste of money**

**AUTHOR: Clive Hamilton**

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Cows are sacred in Australia. The Prime Minister has said he is willing to keep spending on drought relief because farming is essential to the national psyche. Always attuned to deeper urgings of the community, Howard knows there are votes in giving money to struggling farmers even among the city dwellers who are coughing up.

Our national myth is that of the stoical farmer battling the elements and never succumbing. But the \$1 billion plus in drought relief granted over the last few years is an expensive means of sustaining an anachronism.

Among progressive primary producers there is a deepening awareness that good farm management means managing for drought. That means managing the land to preserve its fertility and moisture and destocking before the drought takes hold.

Properly managed farms take steps to minimise soil erosion, including wind breaks, preventing animals from disturbing soils during droughts and using no-tillage methods, especially when droughts are predicted.

Erosion from a poorly managed farm is ten to a hundred times higher than from a well-managed farm. If the soil blows away then the land has not been properly managed.

Yet the farmers who do not have the expertise or the capital to manage for drought know that if their crops fail or cattle start dying then the Government in Canberra will always be there to bail them out. Economists call this “moral hazard”.

Drought relief is officially known as “exceptional circumstances” payments. But, particularly under the effects of climate change, drought should no longer be regarded as exceptional. The current drought has lasted for five years and is now intensifying. Australians need to accept that drought is now normal.

Sometimes we have to be cruel to be kind, and that means refusing to pretend that if we can get marginal farms over this hump everything will return to normal. Instead of another round of drought relief, both the taxpayer and the marginal farmer – not to mention the land itself – would be better served by a one-off scheme to close down farms that are not viable in a drought-prone continent.