

Local photographer on crusade to draw attention to "mother of all droughts"

Stories of heartache on display

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DESCRIBED by some as "the toughest time of my life", living on the coast it is hard for many of us to begin to imagine the impact that drought is having on regional Queensland.

Farmers hoping, praying and begging for rain — it seems incomprehensible.

Now, a local photographer is using her talents to help highlight the issue with a series of heart-wrenching images, in the hopes that the rest of Queensland will begin to understand what their regional brothers and sisters are going through — and do what they can to lend a hand.

Images taken by Bowen's Anne Smith, of Anne Suse Smith Fine Art Photography, are currently on exhibition in Longreach titled *Drought ... What next?*

They highlight families and communities from across western Queensland experiencing devastating change and challenges due to the prolonged and widespread drought.

A calendar has also been produced using Anne's images to support the exhibition, along with a number of stories collected as narrative for the exhibition and a report supported by Regional Development Australia.

The exhibition will be on display at the Longreach library until January, before moving on to Central Highlands Regional Council Art Gallery from February 2 until March 19, then Barcaldine Regional Council Art Space at a date to be announced.

Its next stop will be Parliament House in Brisbane, and there is a push for it to move to Canberra after that.

The images were taken by Anne earlier this year on a trip out west, through her role as a CentacareCQ drought relief facilitator.

Travelling with Anne was CentacareCQ Diocesan Director Dr Ricki Jeffery, who described the situation as "a drought their ancestors would say is the mother of all droughts".

"The images were taken to draw attention to the impact that this drought is having on regional Queensland and they were taken on cattle and sheep stations in the region," Anne said.

"As CentacareCQ has worked towards supporting communities and families to build resilience and maintain relationships in the Barcaldine, Blackall/Tambo, Barcoo, Longreach, Isaac and Central Highlands local government areas, we had the great privilege of being invited to take images on drought impacted properties and hear the stories of individuals, families and their communities as they deal with the drought.

"Many have said it has been 'the toughest time of my life'. Another said this drought 'is drought where it creeps up slowly zapping the energy from you like the surrounds you live in'.

"Families and communities who are facing unwanted change and potential loss of lifestyle, livelihood and identity, while experiencing individual



Images by Bowen photographer Anne Smith taken to illustrate plight of farmers in regional Queensland battling the drought, which are now part of the *Drought ... What Next* exhibition. RIGHT: CentacareCQ Diocesan Director Dr Ricki Jeffery chats with Longreach Regional Council Mayor Joe Owens at the opening of the exhibition.

Pictures on this page: Supplied by Anne Smith



and relationship pressures due to financial stress caused by the drought — they spend their days 'consumed by the weather and our animals and everything else seems to be on hold'."

Anne said while often heart breaking and gut wrenching, it had been an honour to be invited to take the images, which were "a tribute to life in drought and CentacareCQ's attempt to

increase awareness and understanding of the impact of the 'mother of all droughts' on western communities".

Anne said what was abundantly clear from the start was that regional Queensland needed help.

The Federal Government Drought Assistance Funding in Regional Queensland is currently being delivered by Centa-

care Central Queensland and this funding has been discontinued as of December 31.

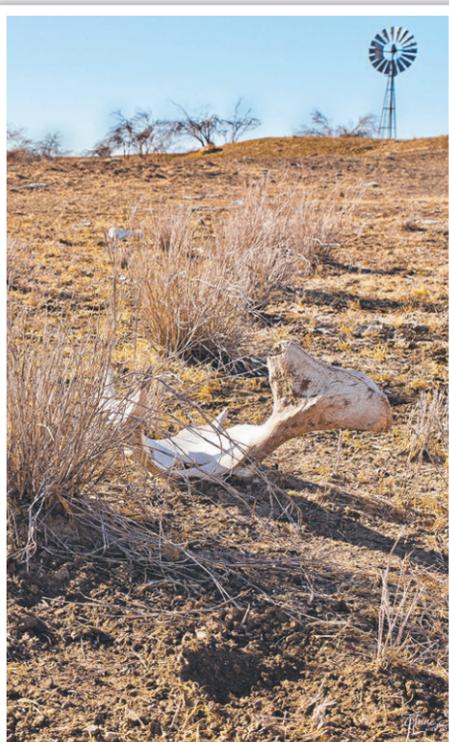
Meanwhile the drought is far from over and could be with us for many more months and possibly longer.

Now is not the time to desert our rural communities.

They need our assistance and those of our Federal leaders in particular.

Through her work, and the work of others in this area, Anne is hopeful of drawing attention to what is happening in regional Queensland so that these regions get more support.

To find out more about what regional Queensland is experiencing, the link to the exhibition images is <http://annesusesmith.com/drought.html>



Drought appeal – They need us to help out

Courier Mail

QUEENSLAND farmers are being driven off the land in droves, while those left behind cling on with no income as they battle the worst drought in a century.

Three-quarters of the state is drought-declared, with mayors warning of growing despair in the worst-hit areas. They say farmers are being forced to rely on increasing levels of debt, while suicides are increasing as some fail to cope with the lack of hope.

This week, fellow News Corp publication The Courier-Mail, in partnership with the Commonwealth Bank and Channel 7, launched the Pitch in for the Bush Drought Appeal to raise money to help drought-stricken farmers in Queensland and NSW.

The Commonwealth Bank is contributing \$100,000, and News Corp is chipping in \$20,000.

Donated funds will be distributed by the Salvation Army.

Commonwealth Bank chief executive Ian Narev said it was important to recognise the

dire situation our regional heartlands were facing as many were food bowls for the nation.

"We need to reach out to our men and women on the land who are dealing every day with one of the worst droughts on record in both NSW and Queensland," Mr Narev said.

The worst-affected regions are in the northwest — including areas around Mt Isa, Winton and Hughenden — and a swathe from central Queensland down to the NSW border, taking in Charleville, Roma and St George.

During the past five months, conditions have worsened considerably in the Channel Country and Cape York.

Recent rain has done little to relieve the effects of the past two years, which have left vast areas parched.

During that period, almost half the state (44.4 per cent) has received rainfall levels in the lowest 10 per cent on record.

"This current drought is the worst for Queensland since the Federation Drought between 1895 and 1902," said Dr Jeff Sabburg,

senior climate officer at the Bureau of Meteorology.

The state has not experienced rainfall deficiencies like this since the Millennium Drought of 2002-03.

This latest Big Dry is also unique in that it is occurring in what weather experts call "neutral years" — a period not dominated by either an El Niño or La Niña pattern.

The future continues to be uncertain and the weather bureau will release its updated summer outlook later this week, but the current forecast is a 70 per cent chance of lower-than-average rainfall.

How you can donate at a CBA branch:

- Simply visit a Commonwealth Bank branch and make a donation today
- Donations can also be taken through www.commbank.com.au/droughtappeal
- You can also donate via internet banking direct to the Salvos: Account name — The Salvation Army — We're For The Bush Drought Appeal, BSB 062 000 Account number 1529 5020 Branch 48 Martin Place, Sydney