

Drought battle a long way from won

By GARY SHIPWAY

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Funding ways to retain water will be a big step towards a

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Former chief minister Shane Stone and Steve Cadzow at Mt Riddock Station near Alice Springs. Picture: Supplied

GARY SHIPWAY

IF YOU are living in the Top End and you are watching the Katherine flood alerts you may not believe this, but the Northern Territory is still in drought.

And the Morrison government's co-ordinating-General Drought and North Queensland Floods, former NT Chief Minister Shane Stone, says there is still along way to go before the situation changes.

Mr Stone and his agency have been working hand-in-hand with communities, all levels of government and agricultural organisations to support farmers and other rural and regional Australians living through the effects of drought and flood.

His work covers the national footprint and he has a direct line to the Prime Minister Scott Morrison who has pledged his government's support and given Mr Stone a \$10bn budget to get the job done.

There are now 34 national regional recovery officers — one in the Top End and one in Central Australia — who are the eyes and ears of the agency in terms of what it needs to do to support drought.

"I know people look out their window and when they see lots of rain and they last thing they think about is drought," Mr Stone said.

"There is no doubt the Territory is having a good wet season, but you cannot go through an extended period of drought and think it is all going to change overnight.

"There are a lot of things that need to happen.

"It needs to be sustained, consistent and more than one season.

"Just because we have had rain doesn't mean the drought is over. It's not that simple.

"At the moment farmers in this nation are dealing with a ferocious locust plague in Central Queensland.

"They did get a bit of rain, the grass did start to grow and then the locusts

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more secure future for primary producers in the Territory



Drought has been hell for farmers and when it does rain there is no infrastructure to retain it.

ate it all. And now in NSW we have a mouse plague smashing farmers.

"Just when people are getting one foot in front of the other along comes something else.

"There is a national target on what we want out of agriculture over the next 10 to 20 years and we will not meet those national targets unless we can continue to go in the right direction."

Mr Stone said the funding help Territory farmers are receiving is not a hand out, but rather it is a hand up.

"It is not just about money, it is about giving them new sets of skills, it is about encouraging them to diversify. Some people just want to grow cattle or sheep.

"But for others it is about having something else on their property and there are Territory farmers and station owners wanting to now do this.

"As to how much of the 1.7 million square kilometres of the Territory is in drought, I think the producers would say most of it is in drought," Mr Stone

said. "We know there are people doing it real tough in areas of Central Australia.

"We show up and we act quickly."

Mr Stone doesn't have a plush Canberra office.

Much of his work, like his agency staff, is done out of a LandCruiser.

In the past two years they've covered around 330,000km.

"It's a vast country. It can be 60 kilometres from the front gate of a property to the homestead."

Having travelled so much of the nation's drought stricken country has reinforced Mr Stone's belief that government's need to put more focus on water retention facilities and this includes dams.

"When the Territory has had a good wet season yet so much of that water has not been retained," Mr Stone said.

"This is a matter for state and territory governments who need to embrace the value of new dams for the good of the nation."



Cattle are dying in places due to the drought conditions.