

Do you want to help assist those struggling with the drought?

Eastern Australia is in the grip of a prolonged and intense drought. Small rural communities that don't have much in the way of business unrelated to farming are struggling to keep shops and services functioning. Once lost, these businesses and services may never return, even after the rains finally come.

How can you help?

One way schools and individuals can help is to plan an excursion or trip to small country town to see the impacts of the drought, and to inject a little extra life into the local economy. If your school group decides to help in this way here are some tips to make the experience more informative and also to make the biggest impact for good.

1. Plan to visit the smallest rural community able to assist you in planning your excursion. Small communities help contribute to the economic health of larger regional centres, but the opposite does not necessarily apply.
2. Try to stay at least one night. Your students won't get as much of a feel for a place on a short day trip and they won't get an opportunity to engage in meaningful conversation with locals if time is of the essence. And if you can, find a farmstay or B&B or local hotel for accommodation, rather than rooms in a motel chain in a nearby regional centre.
3. Don't just turn up. Contact the local Visitor Information Centre (VIC) or a commercial farm tour provider before you set off. VICs and tour providers can put you into contact with farmers, processors, chambers of commerce willing to meet with and talk frankly to students. There may be a charge but the cost per class member will be small.
4. Don't pack everything you need. Suggest your students be prepared to buy clothes, boots, hats, food, sunscreen or other things they might normally take from home. What they purchase on their visit will constitute a memento of the excursion as well as maximizing assistance to local businesses.
5. Most importantly, be respectful. Your students aren't visiting to dispense advice, but to observe and learn. Despite news of Farmageddon, most Australian farmers will manage their way through this drought as they have previous droughts. Your students might like to ask them what strategies they are adopting in order to cope but they should be advised against offering remedies. And remember it is the small businesses in small towns that are often the most heavily impacted by farmers tightening their belts – so don't

discount the benefit of advice from local chambers of commerce or progress associations.

6. Finally, the impacts of a natural disaster of the proportions of this drought will be felt long after the rains return, so consider establishing a longer term connection between your school and a small rural community that might extend over several years. Each succeeding group visit will find extra ways to support your classes desired learning outcomes.

If your school cannot physically visit a rural community or farm, schools can participate in the Facetime a Farmer/Fisher/Forester initiative on Ag Day (21 November). Schools across the country can be digitally connected directly with a primary producer who can answer questions related to any aspect of their job and the impact the current drought has had on their work. Facetime a Farmer is suitable for years K-12 and can be aligned to several subject areas.

What about for individuals?

While individuals can help rural communities by visiting and stimulating the local economy in much the same way as schools can, individuals can also use their spending power to buy local produce from small businesses. Products bought from farmgate markets and small businesses see a larger portion of the profit reach the farmer than in most chain supermarkets.

Individuals and businesses can also volunteer their time to help out farmers in need. From lending a hand on farms to working within your own community, there are volunteer opportunities available to suit everyone.

Fundraisers are also a good way to help raise money for drought relief organisations. Bake sales, gold coin donation casual clothes days and barbecues are just some of the ways to raise money to help purchase hay, water, diesel and feed for those struggling.

Regardless of whether you are a student, school, individual or organisation, any assistance provided will make a huge difference, no matter how small it may seem. Start today.