

Drought aid 'locked in'

Rudd Government looking at EC to make it work better

By Peter Lamb and AAP

SUNRAYSA growers have been reassured the new Rudd Government will not remove Exceptional Circumstances drought support granted by the Howard government late last year.

Sunraysia Rural Counselling Service chairwoman Lynne Heaysman said the service had already had "some discussions" about EC and there would be more talks.

She said that how the EC applied in different farm sectors was likely to be examined.

"Mostly, they seem to be looking at areas in drought for five years or more," Mrs Heaysman said.

"We understand there'll be additions to EC to incorporate the effects of climate change, particularly in pastoral and dry land farming.

"What assistance we've already got in horticulture remains the same.

"I think generally what they're saying is that farmers on their own might not be able to meet the challenges of climate change which has had a sudden and devastating impact on farming.

"We have to ensure our young farmers are here for the future."

Mrs Heaysman's comments follow a federal government promise to make improvements to EC.

Federal Agriculture Minister Tony Burke, who is talking to farmers in every state and territory, said the government would not tell farmers what they could and could not grow on their land.

He said the government supported existing EC arrangements but wanted to make sure the scheme was improved.

"So that whenever somebody

goes through a period of drought and goes through a period of needing government assistance, they've actually got themselves better prepared and better engaged to deal with climate change in the future," Mr Burke said.

There would be different ways to help drought-affected farmers adapt.

Some of the methods would include using genetically-modified crops appropriately, changing ploughing methods and specific water strategies.

"We want to make sure that we

don't just have a sustainable sector, that we've got a sector that's going to be able to thrive in what's going to be some challenging times ahead."

Mr Burke said he wanted drought assistance to extend beyond financial support.

"When people interact with (the EC system) I want them to always go away better prepared for climate change and better prepared for the future than when they arrived."

Mr Burke said the government wanted to ensure the system worked for small business owners and others dependent on rural economies.