

# 'We're still here': RFCs



*Central West Rural Financial Counselling Service relief counsellor Rob McGorman and CEO Jeff Caldbeck are reminding Gilgandra residents that the local office will still be open on a part-time basis.*

Central West Rural Financial Counselling Service (RFCs) CEO Jeff Caldbeck has reminded local farmers the Gilgandra office of the service is still in operation.

Although the office will no longer be manned by a counsellor five days per week, a counsellor has been appointed to run the local service on a needs basis, which is expected to see the office open for business for two or three days per week. After initially earmarking the local office for closure due to reduced funding RFCs board took following protests from local citizens.

Dubbo-based relief counsellor and former farmer Robert McGorman has been appointed to the Gilgandra office and will be the key contact person for local farmers seeking financial advice and assistance.

"We'd just like people to have confidence that the office is open, it mightn't be open five

days a week but we're doing the best that we can to maintain the service level here in Gilgandra," said Mr Caldbeck.

"We may not have the original staff here anymore but we do have counsellors and Rob's certainly got the credentials to handle the work here," he said. "He's done a lot of work here during the natural disasters this year and last year in Gilgandra and Warren.

"We like to provide continuity of service as much as we can and that's what today's about really, to inform the Gilgandra community and surrounds that the office isn't shut and the service is available.

"It's preferably by appointment but at this stage our relief counsellor Rob Gorman will be here two or three days a week to service clients on a needs basis. If the need is for more than that then we'll work out what we can do then. If you see the car there and you need to talk to Rob, pull

in. He'll tell you if he can see you or not and if not, he'll make an appointment with you.

"You can still ring the number here and it will go through to Rob's phone. If that fails, you can always ring the Dubbo office and we can pass a message on to Rob."

Mr McGorman, who has been a financial counsellor with the RFCs since 2006, said he was accustomed to quickly developing relationships with past clients of other counsellors, after serving as a travelling relief counsellor.

"I think that happens because, well I'd like to say it's because I'm such a nice guy," he joked. "I am easy to get along with, and the other thing is, I have been a farmer myself.

"So having had that experience and 'been through the mill', I understand where they're at. He said developing a rapport with the clients of the previous Gilgandra-based financial counsellor would not be a problem for him.

"I guess it will probably be more difficult for the clients than it is for me. I've been in this relief role now, for as long as I have been a rural financial counsellor, and I don't find it hard to build up a relationship with clients."

Only four months ago, the Gilgandra, Parkes and Walgett offices of the RFCs were all facing imminent closure, due to reduced federal funding for the service and uncertainty over whether or not the new State Government would continue their support for the program.

The NSW Government confirmed they would continue to provide support for the service in their budget, released in September.

The roll back of drought declarations and current lack of other natural disaster work has forced a shift in government policy, which has in turn had a direct impact on the RFCs's income stream.

The RFCs is funding its operations this year with approximately 20 per cent less funding than last year, when flooding sparked an increase in demand for the service.

Gilgandra's RFCs office kept open between from July to September thanks to rescue funding from Gilgandra Shire Council.

Mr Caldbeck said it was this support and the passionate community response to the closure that prompted the board to make the decision not to permanently close the office.

"Given the community's concerns and also the shire's support, we thought it was important to provide that service," he said. "It's not the same service that was there before but it is a service."

"It's all about trying to provide the service with the funds we've got.

"We've dropped from 15 full and part-time counsellors to 12. We have lost our admin though and that's hit hard for a lot of counsellors because they relied on those people, but we took the decision that it was better to keep offices open, even just with a counsellor.

"I could have shut five offices and fully staffed the remainder, but then I would have had five communities jumping up and down."