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House Standing Committee on Primary Industries and Resources

Inquiry into the role of government in assisting Australian farmers to adapt to the impacts of climate change

Response provided by:

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Summary

The impacts of climate change will have significant impact on farming and farming communities in the low rainfall cropping areas of Australia. Small changes in climate can lead to large impacts on the environment and our industry and the need for rapid adaptation to change will be paramount to maintain social sustainability. Mallee Sustainable Farming (MSF) Inc strongly believes that the farmer based Research, Development and Extension service delivery model on which our operations are based is well placed to assist the farming and rural communities to be responsive and adapt to the impacts of climate change. It is critical that governments at all levels provide appropriate levels of support to farmer based organisations to enable them to carry out their core functions and respond to challenges as they arise. Maintaining the level of resourcing for partner agencies at the regional level will also be important to on ground implementation or adoption of new R and D strategies and techniques.

Introduction

Mallee Sustainable Farming Inc. (MSF). is a farmer driven organisation servicing the under 350-mm rainfall Mallee Broadacre Cropping and Livestock Regions of New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia. It covers approximately 7 million hectares of farming land between Hay, New South Wales to the east and Murray Bridge, South Australia to the west.

Dryland farming in the Mallee tri-state region includes the cropping of a wide variety of cereals and pulse crops. They include barley, wheat, triticale, vetch, lupins and canola. Livestock that form a part of many farms operations include sheep for their wool products and lambs for their quality meat. Beef cattle are also present on some farms and goats have become a burgeoning commodity in recent years.

MSF Inc. formed in 1997 in response to the recognition that conservation farming practices had not been widely adopted across the region. Research data had shown that grain productivity increases in the Mallee had lagged behind increases being made in higher rainfall cropping zones. Therefore, there was a need to identify the issues restricting the adoption of technology that would enhance the development of profitable and sustainable farming systems.

MSF utilises the research expertise of both state and federal government agencies to meet the goal of finding the best options for long term farm sustainability. Research partners include:-

- CSIRO
- NSW Department of Primary Industries
- Victorian Department of Primary Industries
- Rural Solutions South Australia
- Lower Murray Darling CMA
- Mallee CMA
- South Australian Murray Darling Basin NRM Board

MSF also utilises the skills of the private sector and universities.

During its first ten years of operation, MSF has achieved a great deal. MSF continues to strive to make it self relevant to farmers' needs whether they be in the sphere of cereal cropping or livestock management and have developed a number of successful extension activities to communicate new and timely information to landholders.

A number of challenges face farmers throughout the MSF Region into the future. These include:

- the impacts of climate change on farm profitability such as less rainfall during the seasons of winter and spring and the rise in the cost of farming inputs such as casual labour, fertiliser and fuel;
- the declining numbers of farmers in the Mallee area;
- the increasing competitiveness of gaining funds from the government and private sectors to invest in research and extension in the region; and
- reduced commodity prices.

The MSF Service Delivery Model

The philosophy of the MSF model of service delivery is to have the farming community driving the R, D & E agenda. Farming members take ownership of both the problems and solutions because they are part of the process through MSF.

MSF works in conjunction with staff from partner organisations to coordinate and add value to extension and communications across the three states. MSF, through its extensive range of forums at state and tri-state level, provides the opportunities and facilitation for regular interaction between extension officers, agribusiness providers and researchers to upgrade technical knowledge and skills to better support their local communities and respond to change.

The input of farmer groups and individual farmers is integral to the MSF farming system approach. The active and adequately resourced engagement of farmers and farming systems groups is seen as critical to develop tools, processes and packages that will have the strongest possible adoption. The involvement of these grower groups will ensure that key farmers will have input into the design of R, D & E activities.

MSF puts considerable effort into maintaining productive relationships with industry stakeholders and agency partners to ensure a focused support network to facilitate communication and information access and exchange across the Mallee region. Such partners include the state agricultural agencies, the catchment management authorities and landcare groups and the expanding partnerships with agribusiness partners (eg. private consultants, Elders and Landmark). This team based communication and information delivery framework enhances opportunities for networking (directly to landholders and industry), communication, product development and co-learning across state agency boundaries. User engagement occurs through partnerships with the existing farming and landcare groups and their advisors, and facilitated /supported through the delivery of traditional extension activities such as workshops and forums to transfer research outputs gathered as part of the program. There are also strong opportunities for elements to be supported via catchment management boards through their incentives programs, as MSF has successfully done in the past.

MSF's is also keen to introduce new approaches aimed at building the capacity for adoption of new and/or complex farming practice change. MSF is currently piloting a project aimed at surmounting one of the most common constraints to adoption by overcoming the on-farm implementation, learning and management hurdle. The use of a consultant agronomist has been shown to lead to more rapid adoption of more complex, management-intensive practices (e.g. no-till systems and IWM). In many Mallee districts (eg, NSW mallee and some districts in SA), the availability and use of specialist farming systems consultants is much lower than other farming districts. This new approach will extend a pilot scheme where a highly experienced and respected private agronomist works with a selected small cluster of neighbouring farmers (eg 4-6) who have developed an intention to adopt a change but have not had the expert support to facilitate the change. The participating agronomists will work with MSF to develop and communicate learnings/case studies from the process to other growers and industry. Importantly, this approach will capture, understand and address adoption constraints among sets of growers who are yet to extensively adopt advanced cropping practices or responses to climate change. It is expected that this will lead to the development of subsequent self-funded clusters, with MSF playing a facilitating role. It is also intended that this will facilitate the entry of new private agronomy service providers into districts currently with low usage.

As well as developing new and innovative ways of engaging the farming community in adapting to change, existing approaches are important and should be maintained. The information series "*Farmtalk* - Sharing, Learning, Doing" is a successful product that has been designed from a focal point of developing practical and clear messages on systems research outcomes. "*Farmtalk*" is a practical, technically sound, regional product catering for the low rainfall Mallee farming zone and works to deliver MSF outputs across the tri-state region.

MSF maintains two core trials sites, one at Paringi in New South Wales and the other at Waikerie in South Australia. These trial sites are overseen by a farmer, agribusiness and researcher-based advisory group and demonstrate a vast array of agronomic practices, variety trials and management options as determined by farmers. This makes the information gleaned from these trials both relevant and timely. A key feature of these core sites is a long term rotation trial that has now continued for ten years. This longitudinal study has been gathering data on the effects of tillage, different rotations and various fertiliser combinations aiming to find the best combinations for profitability and sustainability. There have also been trials on new varieties, weed management, rust control options, perennial species, lucerne and nutrition. The work on these core sites greatly increases the capacity for constructive farming systems research to be conducted in the area on an ongoing basis and provide the core to attract new RD&E activity into the region They will continue into the future and provide a valuable tool to demonstrate adaptive approaches to climate change.

Other modes of delivery that have proved successful and should be continued include:

- forums
- field days (e.g. the major Waikerie Field Day)
- newsletters
- surveys
- website
- workshops and training exercises
- MSF Annual Results Compendium

MSF strongly believes that the farmer based Research, Development and Extension service delivery model is well placed to assist the farming and rural communities to be responsive and adapt to the impacts of climate change. It is critical that governments at all levels provide appropriate levels of support to farmer based organisations to enable them to achieve their core functions and respond to challenges as they arise.

M. J. Maynard

Jim Maynard
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Mallee Sustainable Farming Inc.