

**Inquiry into the coordination of the science to combat the
nation's salinity problem**

SUBMISSION

To

**House of Representatives
Standing Committee on Science and Innovation**

Prepared by:-

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Background

The Western Australian Farmers Federation (Inc) (WAFarmers) is WA's largest and most influential rural lobby and service organisation.

WAFarmers represents West Australian farmers from a range of primary industries including grain growers, meat and wool producers, horticulturalists, dairy farmers and beekeepers. WAFarmers has recently expanded its membership base to incorporate rural small business owners.

It is estimated that collectively our members are major contributors to the \$5.5 billion gross value of production (ABS March 2003) that agriculture in its various forms contributes to Western Australia's economy.

Additionally, through differing forms of land tenure, our members own, control and capably manage many millions of hectares of the State's land mass and as such are responsible for maintaining the productive capacity and environmental well being of that land.

Introduction

WAFarmers is please to provide comment to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Science and Innovation.

WAFarmers is heavily involved in salinity management in Western Australia from an organisational policy perspective through to individual member on farm involvement.

The key issues in this inquiry as perceived by WAFarmers follow.

WAFarmers and salinity management

- WAFF policy accepts there are three ways to approach salinity, contain, adapt or recover. At the farm level considerable investment is being made to address these three approaches but not well underpinned by the science already available. Due to the emotional stress brought on by potential loss of productive land, water resources and infrastructure assets; the psychological perception of failure in managing the land including its environmental values much of this investment is poorly targeted to achieve its goal because of a lack of understanding of the science of salinity and the mythical investment in "magic bullets".
- WAFF recommends the Commonwealth and States need to develop a "one stop shop" for the delivery of science to the landowner on behalf of all the scientific organisations. The current array of organisations involved in doing research and extension of science is wide and only serves to confuse or dilute a clear, science based response to addressing salinity on a broad front. For example the National Dryland Salinity Program (NDSP) has a good record in communication through its publications although not

in the field to deliver, State Government agencies, although closest to the landowner are not currently resourced to deliver and National bodies doing much of the science are too remote to the individual landowner and often unaware of the realities of implementation challenges.

- A program that delivers science by engaging with **all** landholders is the only direction to achieve success. Currently in WA there are many approaches to address the containment, recovery or adaptation goals of the stakeholders. However due to no strong coordinated vision and presentation of the science there remains
 - a high degree of disengagement,
 - a section that are skeptical of science due to conflicting science results
 - some overwhelmed by the scale of dealing with salinity
 - and others don't believe it is a problem for them.
- Also of significance in delivering and coordinating good science is the need to "manage" the purveyors of silver bullets and a minority of politicians that have unreasonable influence and pander to the irrational or pursue a narrow agenda.
- There is a need for the "basic science" to be coordinated into the real world of "applicable" systems e.g. economic cost/benefit analysis of options and outcomes plus an analysis of on site and off site impacts both socially and environmentally.
- While State agencies within Western Australia have tried to coordinate actions within the state with limited success under its Salinity Action Plan, Coordination of National Programs is showing a similar degree of problems with a Murray Darling Basin (MDB) centric model that misses the differences between States. Hence WA, with the nations largest dryland salinity problem, is only now participating in the National Action Plan for Salinity & Water Quality and then only at a token level.
- The degree of funding that has gone into high order activities like the L&W audit, M & E programs etc., while probably appropriate to the scale of the issue being dealt with, are way out of proportion to the limited resourcing and commitment to the application of "on ground works" and managing salinity at a landscape scale.
- WA Farmers recognises there is still a need for more research in the management of salinity, however the coordinated extension of what is already known would appear to be a wise investment.
- WA Farmers recommends for efficiency and enhancement of uptake of salinity solutions projects and programs that include both researchers and the landholders as having the greatest chance of success.
- WA Farmers believes that the adequacy of technical support to land managers is currently extremely under resourced in comparison to the task in hand.

Conclusion

WAFarmers commends the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Science and Innovation in undertaking this inquiry.

WAFarmers has previously contributed to House of Representatives Committee inquiries, the most recent being a Select Committee on the recent Australian Bushfires.

Whilst submissions will provide sound background information for the Committee's consideration, it has been WAFarmers experience that far greater benefit is gained through conducting public hearings.

WAFarmers encourages the Committee to undertake this process and looks forward to meeting with the Committee in Western Australia in due course.

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