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The Secretary  
Agriculture, Fisheries & Forestry Committee  
House of Representatives  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Committee Members

I am writing on behalf of Conservation Farmers Inc (CFI), a farmer-based group in Northern NSW and Queensland representing 550 leading farmer members. Conservation Farmers Inc is an independent grower-based, non-profit organisation involved in the exchange of integrated information on profitable, sustainable farming systems. Much of the information presented is via field days, workshop training days, publications and a bi-monthly newsletter. The group funds itself through members' contributions, sponsors and field activities. CFI also competes for research and extension funding through the grain and cotton Industry Research & Development organisations.

This letter seeks to inform the committee of the inadequacies and poor understanding within research and training communities to extend information to their constituents.

#### RESEARCH

The farmer client (or investor) is not receiving an acceptable return because most of the investment dollars are being spent on research staff, and very little is being spent on extension. The result being that we are making significant advances in technology, but little of it is being applied. Quite simply research delivery is not catered for in a format that the client can apply. Many of the extension dollars are being spent publishing books and glossy brochures. This suits researchers but falls short of meeting the expectations of the farmer investor. Extension is formatted on a research project basis (a top to bottom approach) where the results often do not consider other farm practices and farmer needs. There is an urgent need for extension that looks at research using a **bottom up approach**:

"What are the needs of farmers, and how can relevant findings fit into farm management?"

Many research organisations have strategic plans that purport to engage the research issues with their stakeholders, but in reality offer few solutions at a farm level, due to the inadequate understanding of the research impacts at a micro level. For example, a farming system weed such as Fleabane threatens the very existence of No-till farming systems and another, named Lippia, is impacting seriously by eroding waterways and grazing lands. Current research undertaken by CRCs and other research institutions is directed at a macro level and few actions and solutions are being offered to manage the weeds at ground level. Lippia has been researched for 30 years yet there are no adequate on-ground solutions; a point of frustration for farmers in the Nth NSW and SE Qld regions. An annual critique of key research outcomes should be established matching the milestones and outputs. The success of the research outputs should be recorded by reviewing the adoption and usefulness to the industry and stakeholders.

A Cooperative Research Centre (CRC) is researching and perfecting technology utilising plastic film at sowing time for grain and cotton crops. The potential farm increase in profitability looks very promising, but the CRC has allocated no money to research the technologies application at field level or to the people they need to engage to use the product. Their expectation is an in-kind donation for time, land and resources from growers and agronomists. Budget allocations need to adequately cater for how the research outcomes will actually apply to an end user if research is to produce an economic dividend.

State agricultural departments continue to under-resource research and extension in Agriculture and have directed their staff to source 'external funds' from R&D organisations such as GRDC, RIRDC, CRDC etc. This creates a shift of research fiscal responsibility from the States to Federal government. There is so much competition for these 'external funds' that it has become unhealthy and is to the detriment of agriculture, with state agency bodies seeking to fund internal positions and people rather than research issues. It has also created a "turf protection" mentality, leading to poor communication and a lack of co-operation within the research community. To add further instability to the effective use of the R&D dollar allocations, state departments apply their own costs for doing business to the external funds which erodes the value of the research funds by as much as 30-38%. State agencies secure much of the R&D funds and many of the outputs become action learning modules (ALM'S) for training. Many departments have few mechanisms to engage farmers and allocate limited finances to complete the task. The departments then seek the aid and support of grower groups and consultants to deliver the training, but fail to adequately finance the training coordination. In some cases they expect to be paid to participate and deliver the training messages.

#### TRAINING

There is a considerable proportion of agricultural training that has poor content and fails to meet growers' needs. There continues to be a proliferation of training packages and programs and potential participants have become blasé about the training concepts. They are often unable to distinguish the value of the information presented or to recognise the capabilities of the presenters. State based Farm-Biz offers money for training but continued goal post shifting makes access for training funds difficult. Many of the Registered Training Organisation offices are city based and have little capability or capacity to understand the training needs of western rural businesses and so are unable to differentiate the value of the training or the quality of the program provider, or conversely, the inadequacy of a program and its provider. Many of these of these RTOs have excellent contacts in the city and are well versed in "accredited training" systems and their requirements. They are better able to access funding but do not always have the understanding of the rural clients. Effectively they can become overly focussed with "bums on seats" and less concerned about whether the client found the training has a productivity benefit. There is an assumption that accredited training must supply a productivity outcome. We would point out that this is indirect measurement and may not be true in all cases.

Northern NSW & Queensland agriculture is suffering from an explosion of mining activities and the resource boom in northern Australia. Skilled and unskilled labour is being attracted by the financial rewards the mining industry offers, coupled with consistent work hours and additional working allowances. Agriculture is being popularised based on the "dreams" of young people imprinted by folklore or country style media interpretation (eg., music, movies) to attract them to the industry but it is doubtful that their aspirations are being met in the form of training and encouragement to remain part of the industry.

Queensland no longer offers an agricultural training course through its network of agricultural colleges that sufficiently applies the theoretical and practical training required to effectively train young entrants for a management level entry into Agriculture. The college network has been transferred to the state TAFE based system offering less contact hours and does not offer sufficient training for

graduates to enter the workforce other than as a jackeroo/jillaroo or 1<sup>st</sup> year farmhand. There is an urgent need for resources to address this vocational imbalance to prepare young people for the opportunities agriculture has to offer.

In summary, there are a several small organisations, training groups and consultants that collate, add value and repackage research & training outputs from research institutions to farmers but they are not recognised or remunerated for the services. These groups need to be recognised for their contributions and given the opportunity to secure funds and contract researchers to direct and focus research dollars, in order to support the viability and sustainability of Australian Agriculture.

Michael Burgis  
Executive Officer