

**House of Representatives Standing Committee on Agriculture, Fisheries  
and Forestry**

*Inquiry into rural skills training and research*

*Submission from Barrie Brennan*

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In relation to Term of Reference 2.

In seeking to define 'skill needs' or in this instance 'specifying skill sets required for training', the approach generally applied is some form of 'audit'. The investigation seeks to determine the skills available and those missing in the community or region. The investigation looks at the programs on offer and what employers define as their needs.

However owners and managers of businesses in agriculture for example have their own plans and needs that do not always (or perhaps very often) 'fit' industry-wide categories. The pressure of just managing their business may mean that decisions about their labour force are dealt with in a single solution, use an external labour supplier or hire good general staff and train them themselves on the job.

In addition, Government initiated programs relating to determining labour needs or specifying skill sets requiring training are not often taken up by small business managers and owners, as these programs are often perceived as being more relevant for the larger businesses. Also these same persons may lack an awareness of the programs or question their effectiveness for the amount of time and work that will be required to apply and participate.

What may have more credibility are programs and strategies in the areas of skills shortages and needs that report on activities that have actually been carried out by businesses and organizations from the local or comparable regions. In this way options that are demonstrated to have worked in other businesses can be offered and current practices such as the 'one shot solution' may be modified.

The proposal then is to check out with agricultural businesses in rural northern NSW, for example, about their experiences of skills shortages. Businesses to be contacted may range from the large and long term in the region to the more recent and small to medium sized. The data will be collected in site visits and interviews (no survey forms in the post or on the internet to be filled in).

Data will be collected - together with still pictures and video to illustrate the locations (provided the firm of course gives permission) - on activities that have worked (and perhaps those that have failed).

The product of the research would be a publication with pictures - hard copy and on the internet - of a range of options, organised to bring together a range of strategies that would be available for local agricultural businesses.

But also in the production of the report indications of shortages noted will become evident and means by which businesses have sought to overcome the problems.

The report will therefore be of value to businesses but also to providers of training and the appropriate government instrumentalities concerned with agriculture, regional development and training.

Further, if the program in northern NSW for example is successful, other regions may be encouraged to carry out their own survey. In addition, if the Northern NSW survey is successful, then businesses themselves (or their representative organisations) may decide to continue the survey on a regular basis .. and that may be a useful indicator of the success of the initial project.