

MINISTER FOR AGRICULTURE AND FORESTRY;
THE MIDWEST AND WHEATBELT
LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN THE LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL



Ref: 8-00491

Mr A Schultz
Committee Chair
House of Representatives
Standing Committee on Agriculture,
Fisheries and Forestry
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Mr Schultz

The Premier, the Hon Geoff Gallop, in his letter of response dated 18 April, advised that he had referred the consideration of any State submission to your Inquiry into Rural Skills Training and Research for my attention.

I would like to ensure that Western Australian Government's response has considered in detail the issues, and note in this regard that the Committee was seeking submissions by 19 May 2005. I am advised that given the level of liaison needed by the Department of Agriculture with other State agencies involved in the rural skills and research sector that, to ensure a comprehensive response, an extension of time is required for our submission. The Department has been in contact with the Committee Secretariat and indicated that a full response would be available by the end of June. I have, however, attached an interim submission as prepared by my Department of Agriculture for consideration by your Committee.

I have also been informed that it is likely the Committee will be able to visit Western Australia in July. I would welcome the opportunity to provide assistance to the Committee with any activity planned within the State. The contact officer for Western Australia for any assistance to your Committee is Ms Kay Bodman at the Department of Agriculture (08 9368 3149).

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kim Chance', written over a large, stylized circular flourish.

Kim Chance MLC
MINISTER FOR AGRICULTURE AND FORESTRY

11 MAY 2005

**INTERIM SUBMISSION FROM THE GOVERNMENT OF WESTERN
AUSTRALIA TO THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STANDING
COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FORESTRY - INQUIRY
INTO RURAL SKILLS TRAINING AND RESEARCH**

Comments on the Outline of Key Issues paper

1. The paper indicates that the Committee will be specifically seeking to 'establish the knowledge, skills and technological demands required of agriculturalists currently, and in the future, in areas such as soil science, information technology, GPS¹ and marketing'. While the need to ensure a high level of competence in these technical/production issues is acknowledged, Western Australia would like to suggest that the Committee also seek information in relation to such issues as succession on the farm, attracting and retaining labour, utilisation of information technology, occupation safety and health, risk management strategies off farm, general business management. From State research data sourced from the FarmBis program, it is evident that building competence in these areas is at least as important to farmers as having a high level of competence in production as they strive to ensure the sustainability of their farms.
2. The paper also indicated the Committee will seek input to such basic questions as "what are the current and future industry training needs" and "what is actually being taught". Western Australia would presume the Committee would be able to take advantage of earlier research on these questions. Of particular relevance would be the research conducted by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research Ltd in its 1998 Industry Training Monograph into agriculture, forestry and fisheries. Additionally the report of the Rural Industry Task Force conducted under the Australian Government's National Industry Skills Initiative (2001-2003) which identified in its findings a range of skills development strategies.
3. Western Australia notes the emphasis towards capturing better knowledge about the 'formal' education sector as represented by TAFE and the universities. It is the experience in this State that primary producers, while perhaps not represented in large numbers in the 'formal' training scene, are very large users of on the job/informal training. This is evidenced by the success of the various FarmBis programs over the past seven years. The FarmBis program offers primary producers a financial incentive to undertake 'informal' training so that continuous learning becomes common practice. It has been a key tool, particularly in Western Australia, in building the capacity of the industry. Western Australia would therefore suggest that particular attention be given by the Committee to improving knowledge about the impact of the 'informal' training sector.
4. Some preliminary research to identify 'official' indicators of skills shortages within the sector of primary industries in Western Australia has revealed that there is limited reliable data available, both at a State and National level. The

¹ GPS = Global Positioning System

explanation seems in part to be that the Commonwealth Departments of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR) and Education Science and Technology (DEST) do not pick up on skills shortage in primary industries. The reasoning given is that as employment in these industries is seasonal and because not enough workers hold post compulsory qualifications monitoring cannot be justified. As understood in Western Australia, numbers and the needs for type of skills are apparently used by DEWR and DEST to advise the Australian Government on such key issues as planning for post compulsory education schemes associated with Vocational Education and Training (VET) and university levels, employment campaigns and even skilled migration quotas, the lack of any useful information on primary industries is an obvious impediment to developing a clear understanding of training needs in the sector. It is suggested the Committee consider confirming this situation and identify a resolution.

Comments on the Terms of Reference (TOR)

1. The TOR appropriately emphasise the linkage between research and how new knowledge arising from research gets to the farmer on the ground. Western Australia would like to bring to the attention of the Committee that this State has well developed extension networks based primarily in the private sector. Farmers utilise the knowledge and skills of these networks extensively, however there is some concern that this consultancy market could be regarded in an international context as immature given that service provision is largely fragmented. The evidence of this is that the industry is dominated by one and two person practices who are primarily 'technical' missionaries. It would be useful for the inquiry to explore the validity of this evidence comparing the smaller practices with those that have already developed into multi disciplinary practices such as exist in the United Kingdom.
2. Another key challenge to agriculture's future is to improve its image within the broader community as an industry offering interesting and rewarding careers. This issue was identified as Key Area 1 in the final report of the Rural Industry Task Force (2001-2003). Recognising that labour shortages are now seen as a National issue, the situation for agriculture is even more extreme. Limited research within Western Australia alone has indicated the industry has little appeal to potential new entrants as wages and conditions are not competitive. While it will be interesting for the Committee to investigate the number and range of agricultural educational campuses across Australia, this has little relevance unless there is a demand for these facilities by students. Western Australia would therefore be very interested in the Committee exploring options to improve the image of the industry.

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