



31 May 2005

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Committee Secretary
House of Representatives
Standing Committee on Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600
AUSTRALIA

RE: Inquiry into Rural Skills Training and Research

Dear Secretary,

As the peak body representing the interests of the state's horticultural producers, Growcom welcomes the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry Inquiry into Rural Skills Training and Research.

At a national level, horticulture is the largest agricultural employer with over 80 000 people directly employed in horticulture (25 000 in Queensland on 3 500 enterprises) and a further 11 200 employed in horticultural processing. Nationally there are 18 000 farms engaged in horticulture.

Labour and management issues are becoming increasingly important to the horticulture industry and Growcom has responded to the issue with an increased investment in the area. Training in both horticulture and business is becoming ever-more important as growers' markets become more global and competitive, and as new business opportunities and ways of improving productivity become available.

Farm owners, managers and employees need access to learning, whether it be for planning work routines, sustainable horticultural production, irrigation, marketing or IT skills etc, that meets their requirements and enables them with the skills to operate effectively in the horticulture sector.

At present, we are working to address the gaps in information available to decision makers associated with the sector, along with promoting programs that may benefit farm owners and managers. While the results of some of our research will not be available within the period of the Committee's consideration of rural skills training and research, along with other research, confirms the continued need for training to improve:

- Strategic planning.
- Capacity for change and adoption of innovative practices.
- Market competitiveness (leadership and mentoring training)
- Natural resource management (eg Farm Management Systems, irrigation technology).
- Risk management (WH&S, QA, food safety etc).
- Human resources management.

Labour costs are a significant component of the cost of production, however, the diversity of the industry through its crop variety, seasonal nature and employment and high reliance on seasonal, itinerant workers has made the development of an accurate picture on labour matters difficult. In general, growers are increasingly concerned about the supply of labour (both skilled and unskilled) to the industry. The low number of available workers and regional nature of farming enterprises,

along with management issues, appear to be casual factors for shortages in the industry. It appears to be the case that better management practices, learnt through relevant training, will assist in resolving the labour shortage being experienced by the industry.

As with other Australian industries, producers have reported that the call for skilled staff to carry out specific functions on farms and in packing shed eg QA supervisors etc is growing, however there is a lack of skilled people expressing interest in these positions. The relatively poor perception amongst the community of agriculture as a preferred career choice, along with the regional nature of the industry, makes promoting the industry a higher priority than altering existing vocational training.

We support the continued assessment of the relevance of skills training for the industry, but would submit that promoting careers in agriculture (including the provision of career paths), along with the need for training across an increasingly broad range of disciplines, is a necessary function of both Government and industry in improving the sustainability of Australian agriculture.

Sincerely

Brendan Nolan
Policy Development Coordinator