

April 23, 2009

Mr. Russell Chafer  
Committee Secretary  
House of Representatives Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Innovation  
PO Box 6021  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Mr. Chafer,

**RE: Inquiry into Meteorological Forecasting**

Thank you for your letter of 24<sup>th</sup> March inviting a submission on the aforementioned inquiry.

The Western Australian Farmers Federation (Inc) (WAFarmers) is the State's largest and most influential rural lobby and service organisation. WAFarmers represents approximately 4,000 Western Australian farmers from a range of primary industries including grain growers, meat and wool producers, horticulturalists, dairy farmers, commercial egg producers and beekeepers. Collectively our members are major contributors to the \$5.5 billion gross value of production that agriculture in its various forms contributes annually 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.

Broadly speaking, climate change modelling has estimated that a significant area of the Western Australian agricultural region will increasingly be affected by a trend of decreasing rainfall and increasing temperature patterns. Recently, the Senate Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport, in their Climate change and the Australian agricultural sector inquiry (December 2008) expanded on this, when it found that within climate change, a range of common biophysical impacts were expected. These included; competition for water resources and reduced water availability, increases in temperature, increasing frequency of extreme climatic events and elevated levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. Further, they found that there was likely to be extensive interplay between these impacts.

WAFarmers believes that these future climatic predictions significantly heighten the need for the introduction and ongoing delivery of an effective and timely support and information package which facilitates farmers' capacity to manage their land in a profitable and sustainable manner. The Productivity Commission's Draft Inquiry Report; Inquiry into Government Drought Support (October 2008) noted that a suitable package should include a range of *'research, development, extension, professional advice and training to improve business management skills'* to build their *'self reliance, preparedness and management of climate change'*. Unfortunately WAFarmers is aware that despite the development and funding of a number of climate change related programs, there has been a reduction in area of funding for long term climate collection data.

One example of the erosion of information and services can be found in the allocation of resources to the annual agricultural census (Ag-Census), which for over 100 years has played a vital role in measuring the variability and increase in annual crop yields. The Department of Agriculture and Food utilises this information in their Climate Risks and Opportunities Project, which conducts research and development into climate change and forecasting, into crop yield forecasting and in decision support systems to improve the adoption of profitable and sustainable farming systems which manage climate risks.

Financial constraints in the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) led to the Ag-Census being reduced to 1 in 5 years in 1997. The promised 'sample survey' data which was to be provided between census years was subsequently discontinued at a shire level in 2002, resulting in a gap of direct regional measurement of the impact of the 2002, 2006 and 2007 national droughts (as 2005 was last census). Currently, WAFarmers understands that the ABS is proposing that divisional (sub-state) data will be discontinued and only State level data will be released four years out of five.

This has a significant impact on the State's capacity to make predictive statements on seasonal climate information. In real terms this means that calculation of 2009 yields at a 'shire level' is reliant on the 2005 Annual census yield value to determine the technological increase in yields since 2000, i.e. 1 yield figure in eight years. The next shire level wheat yield will be collected in 2010/2011, which will not be available until 2013.

The withdrawal of funding to the Ag-Census continues to result in information gaps will have a large impact on how industry and government agencies are able to prepare for, and manage climate variability, and works against the concept of improving the self-reliance of farming communities. In combination, extending the period between the collection of the data, and reducing the resolution of the released information will have a negative impact on the accuracy of the modelling, and its subsequent predictions. As such WAFarmers believes that this inquiry should review the current and future expenditure in this program.

I thank you for consideration of this submission. Should you wish to discuss this matter please do not hesitate to contact me on 0427 183 439 or WAFarmers Director of Policy, Alan Hill on 9486 2100.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mike Norton', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Mike Norton  
President