



Salinity Inquiry Submission No. 66.....
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RICEGROWERS' ASSOCIATION OF AUSTRALIA INC.

31st October 2003

Mr G Nairn MP
Chair
House of Representatives Standing
Committee on Science and Innovation
R1 Suite 116
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Mr Nairn,

Inquiry into the Coordination of the Science to Combat the Nation's Salinity Problem

The Ricegrowers Association of Australia (RGA) would like to Standing Committee on Science and Innovation for the opportunity to make comment on the above inquiry.

The RGA notes that the Inquiry is especially interested in how the best scientific knowledge and expertise is and continues to be used to address the nation's salinity challenge¹.

At the current point in time, much has been done from a scientific perspective to investigate ways of combating salinity and in particular, dryland salinity. It is the latter that is seen as the "sleeping giant" in respect of future environmental issues such as soil and river health.

Irrigation salinity has largely been seen as under control via the use of land and water management plans in the major irrigation areas and farm management plans for irrigation farms outside the major irrigation areas. Other initiatives have also been undertaken to ensure the future productive viability of irrigation land and the externalities that can be derived from irrigation.

The CSIRO have developed SWAGMAN, a software tool which manages water use (surface and ground water) on farm and within the surrounding region in order to better manage water across a region. This has been a long standing project which is strongly supported locally for its practical application on farms.

¹ House of Representatives Standing Committee on Science and Innovation 2003, Inquiry into coordination of the science to combat the nation's salinity problem – Inquiry Information, page 7.

The major issue continues to be the development of practical on the ground solutions to assist farmers, communities and organisations to combat dryland salinity.

Quite rightly, the Inquiry Information paper² refers to work such as airborne geophysics which has assist in monitoring and mapping of salinity hazards and ground water systems. In addition, much work has evolved on developing appropriate farming systems to assist combat salinity, eg the planting of perennial instead of annual grasses and the move from widespread planting of trees to targeted planting in identified salinity hot spots.

In NSW, Catchment Management Boards have developed Catchment Blueprints which were originally designed to assist in meeting targets, eg salinity, acidity and vegetation. Work had also commenced on other targets relating to catchment health.

These blueprints were budgeted in order that these targets would be attained within the planned time frame. However, the budgeted items cannot be fully funded from existing Government budgets and programs, such as the National Action Plan and National Heritage Funding.

In NSW changes to natural resource management were recently announced which will again delay the implementation of catchment based plans.

One of the major issues is the time delay from commencement of applicable scientific research and its conversion into appropriate and practical extension tools for use by farmers and other stakeholders in as short a time frame as possible.

In the meantime, it is "carry on as normal" for the majority of farmers.

From RGA's perspective, another major issue is reducing the salt loads imported with water from dryland catchments. Irrigation areas are ultimately acting as salt sinks until such time as the science catches up to ensure appropriate actions are taken in the upper catchments to reduce the export of salt.

Once in the irrigation areas, salt is stored in groundwater. Therefore it is essential that the control of the groundwater tables is continued to prevent productive irrigation land becoming salinised. The Land and Water Management Plan's (LWMP's) have been extremely effective in addressing this issue and it is important that this work is continued into the future.

It is also important that local works are supported by work undertaken by agencies such as CSIRO. The CSIRO and UNESCO have nominated the Murrumbidgee Valley as the Hydrology for Environment, Life & Policy (HELP) Pilot project. This is the first reference site under this project which is a case study to look at surface and groundwater connectivity and groundwater movements.

² Ibid

I trust that these comments assist your deliberations in this inquiry and if you have any further questions, please don't hesitate to contact me