

13 August 1999

The Secretary
House of Representatives Standing Committee
on Environment and Heritage
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Fax : 02 6277 4424

Dear Madam or Sir,

Inquiry into Catchment Management

The NSW Dairy Farmers' Association (DFA) welcomes the opportunity to provide comment to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage Inquiry into Catchment Management.

The DFA is the sole industry representative body for dairy farmers in New South Wales.

Dairying is the fifth largest rural industry in New South Wales with production at the farm gate estimated at \$472 million in 1997/98. Although traditionally associated with the coastal strip, a flourishing and extremely efficient industry also exists further inland with farms operating in areas such as Orange, Cowra, Tamworth, the Riverina and the Murray.

Australian dairying is in a period of great change. While our farmers face the likelihood of a deregulated industry within the next twelve months, they have already been dealing for several years with the impact of increased environmental accountability.

In such a climate initiatives such as catchment management may be viewed as a source of assistance, encouragement and support to dairy farmers, or a source of concern and confusion. We make the following general points in the hope of encouraging both the first point of view and effective, community based natural resource management.

- The NSW Healthy Rivers' Commission has adopted the following definition of a "healthy river."

"The concept of a healthy river is one which encompasses a broad range of social characteristics which, in total, describe the river's environmental status and its ability to support patterns of commercial activity and the social amenity to which the community aspires."

The DFA approves of the approach of the Healthy Rivers Commission, which looks forward to improving all existing aspects of the river rather than looking back to a dubious, and unachievable, goal of returning a river to its “pristine” state. The Commission acknowledges the economic role of a river as well as its environmental importance. Another important aspect of the Commission’s approach is that the community must have opportunities to understand and consider the costs involved in alternative standards or objections for river health and to participate in decision making, relating to those standards.

There is much of value in the approach of the New South Wales Healthy Rivers Commission and many New South Wales catchment management authorities already work closely with the Commission. While acknowledging that the aims of total catchment management may differ from those of the Commission, the DFA believes other states may gain from an examination of the approach.

- Catchment management has, by its very nature, a local focus. Each catchment is unique and each valley and stream within the catchment is unique. While it is necessary to have some overarching regulatory framework, catchment management efforts whether orchestrated by government, committees, trusts or voluntary groups are best served by a “valley by valley” approach to water management. The value of “ownership” to the system cannot be underestimated.
- The Water Reform process in New South Wales has led, in certain catchments, to many layers of activity, decision making, and review. It is possible for catchments to be served by a Catchment Management Committee, a Catchment Management Trust, a state government appointed Water Management Committee and also be subject to a Healthy Rivers Commission Inquiry. It is imperative that these layers work together to dispel confusion and ensure common purpose without duplication or triplication of efforts.
- The scope for coordination and cooperation provided by total catchment management is generally welcomed by dairy farmers. Most farmers understand the importance of sustainable farming practices and believe they have an important role to play as custodian of their land. However, farmers often feel they are unfairly shouldering the financial burden of community expectations. The financial and technical assistance accessible through the catchment management process is important, not only practically, but also because it reinforces the notion of community support. Future funding of the total catchment management system, and the programs it supports must be assured.
- The NSW dairy industry has worked on specific programs within catchment management system, mainly in the area of dairy effluent resource management. The success of these programs has been due in no small part to the pragmatic and encouraging approach taken towards industry efforts to address environmental problems. Other New South Wales government agencies such as the Dairy Corporation, the Environment Protection Agency and the Department of Land and Water Conservation have also met with success through using a more consultative and “hands-on” approach with farmers. We acknowledge that we still have some way to go, but the approach of encouraging farmers towards best practice rather than wielding a regulatory “stick” has worked.

- The common sense and practicality of the catchment management system must be preserved. Taking the example of riparian zone management, the options pursued must be flexible, appropriate, necessary and practically achievable. Each farm is unique and the value of local “know-how” in managing such issues is a recognition that one size does not fit all.
- The DFA commends the composition of Catchment Management Committees and Trusts, which favours a majority of land-holders or land users within the catchment area. While not a criticism of the current system, the commitment required from community and farming representatives should be noted. Sitting fees and recompense for out of pocket expenses is appreciated, but the fact remains that committee involvement is a serious and time-consuming undertaking.

For land-holder and community representatives a day away at a meeting is a day away from the farm and/or one’s livelihood, not just another day at work. And organisations and communities find the same members acting in representative capacities time and time again.

The growing trend towards consultative issues management between government and community stakeholders is very much welcomed. It does however present a worthy challenge for stakeholder groups to identify and encourage the best people for committees and other representative roles.

Overall the DFA believes there is much to commend the total catchment management approach to resource management. In doing so we note the importance of local autonomy, flexibility and adequate funding to the ongoing success of the system.

Yours sincerely,

Joan Waterford
Policy Officer