



May 10, 2005

Louise Gell
Committee Secretary
Senate Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts
Committee
Department of the Senate
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Australia
ecita.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Ms Gell,

Subject: Inquiry into the extent and economic impact of salinity in the Australian environment

The Pastoralists and Graziers Association is a non-profit industry organisation established in 1907, which represents primary producers in the pastoral and agricultural regions of Western Australia. The PGA is the only Western Australian State Farmer Member of the National Farmers' Federation and participates in key industry and commodity groups. The PGA would like to present the following comments to the Senate Committee.

Salinity is a chronic and widespread issue in the agricultural region of Western Australia. Western Australia's salinity problem takes a different form to the more easily quantifiable and focused problems of the Murray Darling, it requires a different approach and equal if not greater importance. Farmers who are directly affected by salinity are extremely conscious of the affect that it has on reducing the production capacity of the land. There has been little effect from the NAP in WA due to the WA Government delaying signing the bilateral agreement. There has also been a delay in the on ground use of these funds due to setbacks in the development of regional strategies and their associated investment plans, with the agricultural regions of WA awaiting approval of their investment plans and the rangelands yet to have their strategy submitted for accreditation. Programs such as Landcare and NHT have increased the general awareness of salinity and prompted land mangers to think about salinity in the wider perspective beyond their own fence line. This has lead them to adapt their own management practises in an attempt to achieve wider benefits. This is an important step that will lead to the ultimate fulfilment of the goals of these national programs. Dryland salinity has developed over a long period of time and therefore the prevention or reversal of degradation caused by salinity will have a corresponding delay. This must be kept in mind when assessing the

efficiency of these programs. These national programs are of great benefit as they provide a gateway for the provision of advice on salinity management options for land managers through Landcare officers, as well as funding support through NHT and NAP, so that farmers are able to perform on ground conservation activities. The Envirofunds program has also allowed individual farmers to develop their own projects, mainly with the help of local Landcare officers. The regional NRM Strategies will allow for the on-ground activities to be coordinated in line with the whole of the catchment. This is very important as the land managers themselves generally do not have the time or capacity to keep abreast with the technological and scientific advances in salinity management.

The Regional catchment management groups have the potential to be very valuable or detrimental to the fight against salinity. The "Decade of Landcare" program has created a groundswell of grass roots support for salinity management. The development of the strategies and investment plans by these groups is a long and complex process and many landholders feel detached from the process and therefore often the catchment groups themselves. This leaves the potential for the catchment groups to be seen as bureaucracies by the land managers, which would work against the goodwill and support that the land managers have for salinity management. These groups must remain community based so that they reflect community perceptions and aspirations. The groups need to be clearly separated from the government agencies and their directives to avoid the perception of a bureaucracy. The role of these groups should be based on building on the grass roots support and coordinating activities on the catchment scale.

The science of Western Australia's dryland salinity and its management is the key to finding long term solutions. There is no silver bullet solution and the wide range of information on salinity can be confusing for land managers. The development of productive and effective management tools requires ongoing local research and development, coupled with good extension activities. The co-ordination of research would streamline the path from the plot to the paddock and increase the efficiency of delivery. There also needs to be a focus on productive solutions to salinity so that there is some short-term return on the investment for the landholder and the national program. The issue of declining extension activities needs to be addressed. The State Agriculture Department has made a clear move away from the provision of extension in general and there is no commercial market for these services in the salinity area. The Landcare program may be able to fill this gap in some way but would need a significant increase in capacity, funding and support.

Yours sincerely,



Belinda Thomson
Private Property Rights and Resources Director