

**Inquiry into the extent and economic impact of salinity in the  
Australian Environment**

**SUBMISSION**

**To**

**Australian Senate  
Environment, Communications, Information Technology and  
the Arts**

**Prepared by:-**

**Organisation:** The Western Australian Farmers  
Federation (Inc)

**President:** Mr Trevor De Landgraft

**Address:** 28 Thorogood Street  
BURSWOOD WA 6100

**Postal Address:** PO Box 6291  
EAST PERTH WA 6892

**Phone:** 9486 2100

**Facsimile:** 9361 3544

**Email:** [andymcmillan@waff.org.au](mailto:andymcmillan@waff.org.au)

**Contact Name:** Andy McMillan

**Title:** Director of Policy

November 2005

## **Background**

The Western Australian Farmers Federation (Inc) (WAFarmers) is WA's largest and most influential rural lobby and service organisation.

WAFarmers represents West Australian farmers from a range of primary industries including grain growers, meat and wool producers, horticulturalists, dairy farmers and beekeepers. WAFarmers membership base also incorporates rural small business owners.

It is estimated that collectively our members are major contributors to the \$5.5 billion gross value of production (ABS March 2003) that agriculture in its various forms contributes 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.

## **Introduction**

WAFarmers welcomes the opportunity to provide comment on the Australian Senate Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts Reference Committee's Inquiry into the extent and economic impact of salinity in the Australian Environment.

Farmers in Western Australia have been tackling the problem of salinity for many years. Up until the establishment of regional catchment management authorities in WA, the State Salinity Strategy and Action Plan had proven to be an integral component in the State's battle to manage salinity.

Federal and State Government political posturing over funding arrangements for the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality (NAP) and National Heritage Trust (NHT) has resulted in the State falling behind other States in the uptake of NAP and NHT funding, however, with these issues now in the past, WAFarmers is keen to see funding from federal programs "hit the ground".

## **Terms of reference**

*Whether goals of national programs to address salinity have been attained, including those stated in the NAP, NHT and National Landcare programs.*

The late start to the most recent round of funding under federal government programs in WA makes it difficult to comment on the success or failure as catchment management authority investment plans are either in the final stages of approval and/or early stages of implementation.

In the past, however, WAFarmers has been critical of State Government Agencies manipulating federal government programs to the extent that on ground impacts have been minimal. A "vegemite approach" of spreading funding across numerous projects as opposed to a focus on a smaller number of major projects has also produced inconclusive results.

To this end WAFarmers strongly supports the current regional focus and decision making abilities of catchment management authorities.

However, WAFarmers perceives a lack of transparency in the current arrangements and is concerned at the potential for funding to be re-directed and lost in duplication of services and excessive administration costs.

The Federation also considers that there needs to be an increased emphasis on research and development in the future determination of funding priorities, as we clearly do not have all the answers. There is also a need for lateral thinking in the development of future strategies e.g. the use of salinised land as a resource rather than a threat, for the development of aquaculture industries, salt-land pastures, salt harvesting and desalination industries.

All proposed methods for managing salinity should be investigated. The Federation is aware of demonstrated successes in management by tree planting, pastures, drainage etc. and believes that no one remedy in isolation can be applied across the State.

Rather, salinity affected areas of the State should be individually assessed in the light of all available management practices and the appropriate course of action taken in accordance with proven outcomes in similar climatic/topographical circumstances.

With rigorous monitoring and evaluation successful solutions can be developed for extension to other areas without the need to “reinvent the wheel”

The current level of extension services available to provide information/advice/assistance on control measures to suit individual circumstances is inadequate and requires further consideration. There is also a perception amongst some landowners that those involved in co-ordination and extension services lack credibility due to a lack of experience and insufficient time spent in the field.

The State Government has recently conducted a review into the effectiveness of the catchment management authorities and the review outcomes should be available in the near future.

In addition, the Federal Ministers for the Environment and Heritage and Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry's reference group charged with consulting on aspects of the regional delivery of the Government's NRM programs is meeting with stakeholders across WA in mid November.

The completion of these reviews will provide a clearer picture of the attainment of program goals.

*The role that regional catchment management authorities are required to play in management of salinity-affected areas and the legislative and financial support available to assist them in achieving national goals.*

As previously stated, WAFarmers supports the roles of regional catchment management authorities.

The major criticism that WAFarmers has of the regional catchment management authorities is the lack of community awareness of what their role is and what activities they are undertaking. Whilst one group's communication is very good, others range from basic to non existent.

Given this uncertainty, community concern is being expressed over a perceived focus on biodiversity outcomes as opposed to sustainable farming and salinity control outcomes.

A perception also exists of excessive Government agency influence in group decision making processes, particularly when these agencies may be competing for project funding.

These perceptions highlight a major shortfall in this process. There is an urgent need to engage more landholders in the process. The provision of incentives for landholders to become involved at all levels of salinity management may well address this issue.

There is also a need for Government to communicate a clear vision that it is prepared to support saving the long-term economic benefits of agricultural production and its multiplier effect on employment and wealth creation. This objective tends to be lost in debates of "public good v private good". It also tends to be secondary to saving biodiversity and rural infrastructure when the interdependence and well being of them all should be obvious.

To gain the best outcome for limited investment dollars, both public and private, a clearer and more prescriptive solution to salinity needs to be provided by agencies with well resourced technical personnel and extension staff. This would overcome much of the "silver bullet" or last ditch emotional expenditure on solutions of dubious value being implemented at present.

*What action has been taken as a result of recommendations made by the House of Representatives' Science and Innovation Committee's inquiry "Science overcoming salinity: Coordinating and extending the science to address the nation's salinity problem" and how those recommendations may be furthered to assist land-holders, regional managers and affected communities to address and reduce the problems presented by salinity.*

WAFarmers participated in the inquiry and a copy of our submission is attached for information. WAFarmers representatives also gave evidence at a public hearing in Perth in November 2003.

The most recent communication from the Committee was the final Hansard transcript of evidence. WAFarmers is not aware of the recommendations emanating from the inquiry.

**Conclusion**

WAFarmers regrets the delay in the preparation of this submission and notes advice that the Reference Committee's schedule for public hearings in Perth is fully allocated.

In the event that WAFarmers representatives are unable to meet with the Committee during their Perth visit, should questions arise from this submission, discussion by teleconference may be an alternative.

.....END.....