



## Our Australian Rice Industry

Growing Rice to Feed the World



14 August 2008

The Secretary  
Senate Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport  
P O Box 6100  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Ms Radcliffe,

### **Submission to the Inquiry into Natural Resource Management**

The Ricegrowers' Association of Australia Inc (RGA) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Senate Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Inquiry into Natural Resource Management.

### **The Ricegrowers' Association of Australia Inc**

The Ricegrowers' Association of Australia Inc (RGA) is the collective voice of rice growers in Australia. RGA represents over 1600 voluntary members in NSW and Victoria on a wide range of issues. As much of the Riverina region has been built upon rice, and rice is still the mainstay of many towns today, it is important that RGA members have strong and effective representation. RGA fulfils this role by representing and leading growers on issues affecting the viability of their businesses and communities.

The RGA is a member of the New the National Farmers' Federation and fully supports the separate submission made to this Inquiry by the NFF. This submission deals specifically with issues from the experience of the RGA.

The RGA's Environmental Champions Program (ECP) is a voluntary innovative improvement program designed by farmers for farmers and focuses on engagement of farmers. The five level achievement program aims to recognise growers for their environmental stewardship, while combining all existing regional environmental programs, best management practices and requirements of relevant government agencies and irrigation bodies into a streamlined process. RGA has received support through several NHT programs to trial and deliver the ECP. Twenty-five percent of Australian rice growers have voluntarily been involved in this program since it was rolled out industry wide in 2005

We have briefly addressed some of the issues being considered in the inquiry on the following pages. Please contact me on (02) 6953 0433 to discuss any aspects relating to this paper.

RUTH WADE  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

### **Lessons learnt**

The RGA has been involved in several projects funded through national programs such as the National Heritage Trust. The key lessons learnt from our experiences have included

- There has been significant value in local communities driving local solutions to NRM issues. This needs to be supported through local support networks and access to expert knowledge gained through research. When these partnerships work effectively on-ground outcomes are achieved.
- Removing ownership from local groups to more centralised structures within large organisations weakens the focus on the people which make the change unless strong local support networks are maintained.
- It is important to have flexibility in the way outcomes are achieved. Various methods can provide similar outcomes and the best method for the specific situation and location is best identified by those on the ground
- Recent NRM programs have driven short term NRM investment reducing job security for NRM practitioners and increasing staff turnover. More funding security is needed for key staff and NRM programs to enable profiles to be built with land managers and outcomes achieved.
- Longer funding periods are preferred as greater outcomes can be achieved and activities can be worked around seasonal demands in farming industries
- Engaging landholders in genuine outcomes can take significant time and longer term support is often warranted to achieve desired outcomes. Short term projects may continue to attract “early adopters” and not be delivered over a long enough period for later adopters to become involved and make changes on the ground. Eg the 15 year funding agreements for Land and Water Management Plans in the NSW Riverina irrigation areas has enabled long term support and investment in improving on-farm practices.
- Need to provide on-ground support to networks of land managers as well as the ability to tap into expertise. Both are important in achieving on-ground change. Support networks aid in building confidence and shaping attitudes of land managers, relationships need to be built to achieve this. Expert skills are needed to feed into such networks to provide the knowledge for good on ground outcomes.
- Project reporting needs to be streamlined and relevant. Excessive reporting can hinder the progress of projects and take significant time.

### **Building on knowledge and experiences gained**

In NRM it can be easier to find funding to try new things and run new programs rather than continue to implement programs and activities which have been shown to work well. Short funding cycles encourage new programs to be developed when more value may be gained from refunding a successful project for additional years. It is important to continue supporting successful programs and enable them to evolve as needed on the ground. There needs to be an opportunity to trial new approaches and ideas, but follow up investment is needed to implementing those which are successful on a broader scale.

One size does not fit all. Past successes and experiences could be built on by supporting a range of different approaches. Local practitioners are well placed to identify the needs of their local area.

### **Costs and benefits of regional approach**

The regional approach has allowed solutions to regional issues to be tailored. It has however created an additional level of bureaucracy which in some areas is not yet well understood by landholders.

There is potential to link and partner with local community and industry groups to work on on-ground outcomes however this is not always being done well. Increase focus on working collaboratively and constructively with the people on the ground and genuine ongoing community consultation. In some cases valuable networks such as Landcare have not been effectively tapped into and opportunities for outcomes and significant in-kind investment are being lost.

in some areas there has been a further reduction in face to face on-ground interaction with land managers. There is a need to focus on relationship building and support land managers at a local level. This requires a level of continuity and staff working with the community need job security beyond 3 year funding periods so they can continue their partnership with land managers on a range of projects. Relationships take time to build and change over of support start due to short term funding slows progress on the ground due to new relationships having to be built

### **Need for long term strategic approach**

It is useful to have a long term strategic approach to NRM. It would be valuable for this long term approach to be reflected in long term funding of key projects and community support. As mentioned previously 3 year (or shorter) funding cycles are not effective for all projects and increased value would be achieved through longer term investment.

### **Capacity of regional NRM groups etc to engage land managers**

A range of organizations can be effective in engaging land managers, the most effective will vary from area to area, depending on existing relationships in the community. Regional groups are in many cases still developing a profile with land managers and existing networks should be embraced. Landholder engagement can be achieved through genuine partnerships with and support of grass roots level organizations which are working with landholders. These groups are well placed to facilitate outcomes and may be Landcare, catchment or industry groups.

Centralisation of services can reduce linkages between landholders and expertise, reduce ownership in local communities and lead to reduced outcomes.

### **Caring for our Country**

The broad objectives of the program appear to provide a comprehensive approach to NRM covering specific environmental issues as well as sustainable management of private land. As 60% of land is under private management and also used for productive purposes the Sustainable Farm Practices priority is a valuable inclusion.

Currently there is not enough detail available on how the program will be delivered to make comprehensive comments. The first business plan will provide a better indication of how well the program will meet Australia's future NRM needs.

Clarity on funding cycles and priorities well in advance would be valuable to groups seeking funding. Consistent, pre set dates for funding applications would assist with project planning and a five year investment plan would enable better planning and preparation of funding proposals.