



Agricultural Competitiveness Taskforce
Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet
PO Box 6500
CANBERRA ACT 2600

agricultural.competitiveness@pmc.gov.au

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Submission on the Issues Paper Agricultural Competitiveness

Landcare NSW is the peak Landcare body in NSW. There are over 3000 Landcare type groups in NSW, covering a wide spectrum of activities and interests. In our regional communities, it is farmer driven Landcare groups, addressing agricultural productivity issues, which are our predominant constituency.

The Issues Paper has focussed on many areas these rural based farmer groups tell us are important and we value that the Government is committed to reshaping the future of agriculture.

Landcare NSW believes that it is important that all of these groups, both farmer based, and community based, have the opportunity to directly input their views to the Issues Paper. Accordingly we have circulated information so as to allow any of these groups to respond in the way that reflects the opinions of their individual members.

Landcare NSW has prepared a short submission on key underpinning factors that we believe need to be considered in framing the development of the White Paper on Agricultural Competitiveness. For agriculture to be productive, profitable and sustainable a whole systems approach to analysing change is required; and if such change is to be adopted rapidly at the farm scale, the factors which impact farmer uptake must be understood and resourced.

Landcare NSW thanks you for the opportunity to provide input to the development of the Agricultural Competitiveness White Paper. We look forward to its release.

Yours Faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Rob Dulhunty".

Rob Dulhunty
Chair, Landcare NSW

Submission to the Issues paper on Agricultural Competitiveness

Prepared by Sonia Williams
General Manager Landcare NSW
swilliams@landcarensw.org.au



Landcare NSW thanks the Australian Government for calling for input on matters raised in the Issues Paper. Landcare NSW supports the intent and thrust of the proposed White Paper on Agricultural Competitiveness. A productive, profitable, and sustainable agricultural sector is the key factor that enables landholders to care for their land; and for the core of our rural based Landcare groups, concerns surrounding their profitability, productivity and sustainability are the very reason for the formation and continued operation of their group.

Landcare NSW would like to make some key observations on factors raised across the Issues paper. However we would like to preface our input with a short segment so that the Taskforce has greater clarity of what landcare is and means, so that our responses can be seen from this viewpoint.

Understanding Landcare

Landcare started 25 years ago, as a community government partnership, based on the premise that agricultural productivity and sustainable land use were not mutually exclusive – and in fact one relied upon the other. The Landcare model was based upon groups of farmers coming together to look at the issues that affected their livelihood, and through the group, a “peer to peer” learning approach enabled those farmers to identify the issues of importance to their operation, seek technical advice and undertake action.

Through resourcing from Government, Landcare provided the supporting enabling platform needed to place farmers needs front and centre of delivery. However over the past decade Landcare has been misunderstood by government, - with resourcing being moved from a process which enabled farmers (and community groups) to design and develop the solutions for their circumstance, to a program that merely delivered on-ground specified outcomes, based upon targets developed by those who were often remote from the day to day realities impacting those farmers and/or communities.

Despite this Landcare has still managed, over the past quarter of a century, to deliver upon many of the areas that have been raised in the issues paper. The recent report “Multiple Benefits of Landcare” commissioned by DAFF, and conducted by GHD consultants, highlights the outcomes that can be achieved - outcomes that lead to increased agricultural productivity, improved condition of the natural resource base, and stronger and more resilient rural communities.¹

¹ Multiple Benefits of Landcare, - Department of Agriculture – unpublished.

Underpinning Factors for consideration on items raised in the Issues paper

Systems Approach to Agricultural Production

Declining terms of trade is arguably the single biggest threat to a productive sustainable landscape. It is oft quoted that it is “hard to be green when in the red”; but it is equally true that “unless you are in the green, you will eventually be in the red”.

Productivity and profitability are an absolute necessity, but in achieving these it must be done in a way that takes into account the long term impacts of changes to management practice or any implementation of agricultural developments.

Far too often in Australia’s history, farmers and the general Australian economy have been left to deal with legacy issues when agricultural developments were not done with a “whole of system” viewpoint. Some examples are the loss of trees from the farming landscape through clearing that did not take into account the need for retained understory (to prevent such issues as dieback) , or rising salinity caused through removal of deep rooted perennial species.

Landcare NSW would like to stress the importance of understanding that agricultural production is a complex systems based approach, and therefore any developments mooted in the White Paper will need be evaluated with a “whole of landscape approach” to any cost benefit analysis undertaken.

Enabling & Supporting “Grass Roots” Farmer Input to Improve Competitiveness

As stated on page 4 of the Issues Paper, the “foundation of a market based agricultural system is ***decision making by individual businesses***”. Also recognised on page 2 of the Issues Paper, is ***“the issues that affect the agricultural sector are varied and diverse, and the response to the issues need to reflect this reality”***.

Much research has also indicated that farming practices are often based upon socio-cultural practise, rather than solely upon technical activity².

If there is to be an increase of the proportion of producers who become earlier adopters of R&D (Issues Paper page 26,) then the extension approach required will need to ensure that peer to peer learning and support is part of the mix. Extension will need to be viewed as ***“building the capacity of the individual decision makers to make effective decisions and deal with changing circumstances”***. Thus rather than telling land mangers what to do, extension agents and processes need to ensure that land managers have the resources they need to make their own decisions in an informed way³.

Landcare, when supported in its role as a “change agent”, rather than merely seen as a deliverer of programs, has been shown to be a highly effective mechanism to increasing individual adoption, and producing the socio-cultural change required to enable a rapid

² Pannell D and Vanclay F (2011) Changing Land Management - Adoption of New Practices by Rural landholders.p52

³ SELN (State extension Leaders Network) (2006) “Enabling Change in rural and regional Australia: the role of extension in achieving sustainable and productive futures”. A discussion document produced by the State Extension Leaders Network . <http://www.seln.org.au>

and widespread uptake of technologies and practices that improve productivity within and across the farm gate.

Landcare has been a program supported by the Department of Agriculture for 25 years – the gains made by this approach have been internationally recognised, with more than 20 countries adopting the Landcare philosophy and program⁴. Whilst internationally recognised, the value of supporting the Landcare approach to adoption within Australia is not widely understood by; some sectors of government, by some R&D corporations, and by many industry groups and farming bodies.

Landcare NSW firmly believes that the White Paper needs to include Landcare as part of the platform for delivery.

The task of improving agriculture's competitiveness is too large for government's investment alone. Change at the farm scale will therefore need to be driven by partnerships, at the local and regional scale. Landcare provides the trusted local infrastructure for matching the unique needs of each farming community to the programs and opportunities provided by governments, industry bodies, R&D corporations and private providers.

Importantly Landcare utilises the peer to peer process to leverage existing farmer investment into actions that provide outcomes that are greater than just the sum of their parts. With Landcare facilitation and coordination, landholders can willingly contribute to achieving a greater good by turning their involvement from an individual investment into a strategic coordinated one. Supported groups are also able to provide input to R&D programs at the development stage, ensuring programs that are "fit for purpose", and that will be more readily adoptable.

Government's investment role is to catalyse this local adoption and leverage potential. It can do so by ensuring that there is secure ongoing funding for Landcare to build upon the previous 25 years of investment by government and communities, to support this local trusted interface that can both inform the development of, and increase the adoption of the technologies and practices, that improve agriculture's competitiveness.

The Government's White Paper on Agricultural Competitiveness provides an opportunity to examine: what is needed, what already exists, and what can be harnessed to drive the change and adoption at the local scale to bring agriculture to its full potential.

We thank you for this opportunity to contribute and we invite the Agriculture Competitiveness Taskforce to contact Landcare NSW to arrange a meeting or tour of our leading Landcare networks and groups, to further examine how Landcare can and does play a role in achieving the vision of an enhanced competitive agricultural sector, that enables profitable sustainable production, and revitalises our rural communities.

⁴ (Secretariat for International Landcare <http://www.silc.com.au/>)