

# **Submission to the Agricultural Competitiveness Green Paper**

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We congratulate the Government on taking the initiative to:

- a) place a microscope on the agricultural industry to see how it can be improved and supported to grow and thrive in a changing world with changing economic and climatic conditions;
- b) elicit ideas and comments in this regard from stakeholders and interested parties; and
- c) take on board the positive, constructive and possible suggestions obtained through this process - not just those that conform to an underlying ideological commitment.

In this context we make the following points and suggestions.

## **Point One**

There are several references throughout the Paper regarding the necessity for policy to be informed by “sound evidence and science” while at the same time there is complete silence on the sound evidence and science regarding climate change. This is a glaring defect in this paper. Although there are references to “climate variability” in this Paper, “climate variability” as a descriptor does not acknowledge what climate science tells us. We know not only from the science but from our lived experience that the earth is now subject to global warming. The science tells us that this is predominantly due to human activity resulting in excessive carbon being released into the atmosphere. We know that the climate will continue to warm, and that if the underlying issues causing this accelerated warming are not addressed then the higher temperatures will ultimately change the way it is possible to live on this earth.

The cost of the affects of the changing climate (more and more severe droughts, bushfires, floods, storm events etc) are and will continue to be significant. The eventual cost of those events is paid by the farmers/producers affected, but also by local and state governments. This cost burden should be considered in the federal government’s policy and such policy should explicate how the federal government will pay its own fair share of such cost.

We do not think it is good enough to simply recommend “insurance” as a risk management strategy for those engaged in agriculture. Climate change is after all a national, indeed a global, problem and it is the responsibility of the federal government to take a lead on appropriate policy formation to mitigate and pay for its affects.

Farmers and producers will of course consider what insurance is necessary to support their assets and business but exorbitant premiums are now being charged by insurance companies for extreme events such as floods and bushfires, and these premiums are beyond of means of many small farmers and producers.

A Green Paper or, indeed, a White Paper that does not apply itself to this issue and provide policy that encompasses positive and progressive action to address the situation is really only a Paper located squarely in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, not where it necessarily should be - in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Suggestion**

The silence, throughout the Paper, on climate change should be corrected and the evidence and science that describes climate change and its effects should be a reference point throughout, be it in regards to Education, skills and training, and labour (Chapter 7), Drought (Chapter 8), Water and natural resource management (Chapter 9) or Research, development and extension (Chapter 10). In particular, the Paper should address how the federal government will contribute to cost of the affects of severe weather events.

### **Point Two**

In terms of water resources management and “drought-proofing” the agricultural sector, there seems to be a strong preference for dam building and other infrastructure projects.

### **Suggestion**

While it is probable that *both dam and non-dam infrastructure (such as groundwater, desalination, and water recycling systems) are likely to be needed<sup>1</sup>* in a future which will bring higher temperatures and fiercer droughts, the Paper should place more emphasis on positive and creative actions farmers themselves (be they small family operations, larger family operations or large corporate operations), can use to be more prepared to withstand the affects of drought. After all, *Stopping or impeding the natural run of a river can create social, economic, and environmental impacts. That means that any touted benefits [of building a dam] must have a clear economic and water-management rationale.<sup>2</sup>*

The Paper should be using research and evidence already available and it should be directing significant resources to education and infrastructure support for farmers to better manage their soil asset resulting in (among other things) better water retention ability in the soil, better irrigation and rainfall use efficiency, more efficient use of the water resources already available, and other innovative uses of water efficiency knowledge that is already widely available. This point is made clearly and articulately at various places in the National Landcare Network submission to the Issues Paper.

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<sup>1</sup> Larsen, Gibbs, Quiggen, *Dam hard: water storage a historic headache for Australia*, The Conversation 27/10/14.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

An example of better and more progressive use of soil management techniques which in the first instance improves the soil and ultimately leads to better agricultural business outcomes is outlined in the Greg Chappell (Shannon Vale Station) paper *Regenerative Landscape Management Practises to achieve increased sustainable production*<sup>3</sup>.

### **Point Three**

On the question of dams, it is well known both anecdotally and scientifically, that the evaporation rate of dams and other open water storage facilities, is such that (depending on the situation of the dam and the local environment) up to half the body of water is lost to evaporation. As well, the issue of how rainfall, which supplies streams which flow into dams, will be impacted by climate change<sup>4</sup> is not considered in this Paper. Surely this is a necessary consideration.

### **Suggestion**

1. That at least one member of the industry advisory council is from a background of successful understanding and use of sustainable farming by building soil health leading to better business and environment outcomes, as well as of efficient use and storage of available water;
2. That some of the resources allocated to dam building be redirected to up-to-date research of more efficient ways of water storage (for instance underground water storage, as in the Peter Andrews model<sup>5</sup> or indeed large scale underground built water storage facilities such as that in Abu Dhabi<sup>6</sup>), and that significant resources be allocated to educate farmers, agronomists and other key people at the coal face on how to make better use of the sound evidence and science that is available on how to farm sustainably by (a) improving the health of the soil; (b) increasing the water and rainfall use efficiency; (c) making better use of the water that is available; and other well-known and proven sustainable farming methods.

### **Point Four**

There seems to be a clear commitment, throughout the Paper, to coal seam gas and other mining activities, albeit with appropriate consultation with farmers. These mining activities affect (often negatively) the landholder/farmer and agricultural capability. This has been a longstanding contentious issue between farmers, mining companies and governments and instead of directing energy and resources to supporting clean energy alternatives, this Paper makes it clear that the government is committed to expanding gas and fossil fuel mining, and to privileging mining company rights over farmer/landholder rights. This would have to be of concern to

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<sup>3</sup> Greg Chappell (Shannon Vale Station 21 Nov 2012 *Regenerative Landscape Management Practises to achieve increased sustainable production*

<sup>4</sup> Larsen, Gibbs, Quiggen, op.cit.

<sup>5</sup> Andrews, P. *Back from the Brink*, ABC 2006 - "We now come to what is really the key to the survival of vegetation in Australia: the storage of water in the ground." p65

<sup>6</sup> Fehlinger, W., *Underground water reservoir for Abu Dhabi*, giz International Services (Internet)

any farmer who is unfortunately situated in areas that are identified for mining of one sort or another, and for anyone who wants to see Australia, like its allies China and the USA, move more and more to renewable energy sources.

### **Suggestion**

That the White Paper advocate strongly for a shift away from gas and fossil fuel production to renewable energy. This is not only the way of the future of energy provision in a warming world, but it is the way to generate hundreds of thousands of new jobs in Australia and to strengthen and expand a local thriving renewable energy economy.

### **Point Five**

We acknowledge that the Green Paper recognises that in some rural areas there is a deficiency in access to reliable, up-to-date (high speed) internet and mobile phone services. In our area we feel this deficiency keenly. To provide a snapshot of our experience of telecommunications and internet services, we give the following examples:

- Mobile service (texting) is only available in a few spots in our house/office. No mobile phone service is available anywhere in the house/office;
- downloading information from the internet using our mobile phones is virtually impossible;
- We regularly pay between \$150.00 - \$400.00 per month for our (satellite) internet service which entitles us to up to only 10GB download ability. Though we have access and use of this inordinately expensive service, it is very slow and often unreliable. For this price, we are only able to use email and look up websites. We are unable to download any Application updates; we are also unable to look at YouTube clips, or any other online videos. We are unable to engage in online educational services. Because of this very poor service we are at a huge disadvantage in our business and in our personal lives. We invite the Minister or any of his advisers to spend one week with us, or even just one day, and experience life with this low level of telecommunications and internet services.
- Our landline service suffers regular outages, sometimes for as long as 10 days and as often as five times per year.

### **Suggestion**

We contend that the achievement of the Australian Government's agriculture policy principles (outlined on page viii of the Green Paper) cannot meaningfully be attained with such poor quality telecommunications services in much of rural and outback Australia, where a large amount of agricultural activity occurs. Therefore, we would like to see the fast-tracking of the update and extension of high quality telecommunications and internet services to rural and outback Australia.

### **Conclusion**

Although we are pleased that the government is taking the initiative to investigate the state of agriculture in Australia, we are generally disappointed that the proposed solutions to many of the issues raised are not progressive and instead seem to be stuck in the mindset of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s style agriculture, albeit using modern technology. This type of agriculture is no longer appropriate or sustainable.

We know that there are powerful vested interests who wish to see this outdated style of agriculture continue but we also know that it must change sometime, and the longer the delay in making the change the more detrimentally farmers, their communities and the nation as a whole will be affected.

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