



Ref: NCCMA-63-34214

17 April 2014

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

The North Central Catchment Management Authority (CMA) would like to thank the Australian Government for the opportunity to provide feedback on the Agricultural Competitiveness Issues Paper 2014. The North Central CMA is very supportive of the intent of the Issues Paper to bring together all of the elements that will make Australian agriculture realise its full potential and remain competitive and sustainable into the future.

Recently the North Central CMA has been working to bring clarity to what sustainable agriculture means for the region and how best the organisation, as a regional Natural Resource Management body, can support farmers and industries to work in concert with federal, state and local governments.

The North Central CMA defines sustainable agriculture as being:

- productive over the long-term to generate wealth and be economically viable;
- environmentally sound by enhancing the natural resource base and minimising off-site impacts;
- socially acceptable in terms of having a 'social licence to operate' for rural and non-rural communities; and
- resilient to variable climatic conditions whilst maintaining productive capacity.

The North Central CMA organisational purpose is 'to enhance the integrity of our catchments through community partnerships'. This links strongly with enhancing the natural resource base to ensure the long term sustainability of Australian agriculture and therefore its competitiveness.

In response to the Agriculture Competitiveness Issues Paper, the North Central CMA puts forward the following responses to a number of the identified 'questions for consideration' listed within the paper.

- **Do farmers have access to timely, relevant and accurate information to fully inform production decisions to meet domestic and global food demands?**

This varies through time and sector. For many farmers, programs that provide timely, relevant, accurate and importantly, independent information is limited. The North Central CMA, along with other regional NRM bodies, offers innovative and highly efficient forms of agricultural knowledge exchange (not one-on-one extension advice) for farmers, land managers and community NRM groups. Activities range from knowledge sharing, trialling new practices and access to the latest information from industry experts. Farmers in our region have a huge thirst for knowledge and demand for these types of activities, with programs often oversubscribed. It is vital that these programs continue and expand to ensure Australia's farmers are competitive by being able to test new ideas and practices in a low risk environment, share knowledge and experiences relevant to their local conditions and access independent research.

- **What are the drivers and constraints to farmers adopting alternative business structures, innovations or practices that will assist them in improving farm-gate returns?**

Information collected through North Central CMA farmer surveys strongly indicate that constraints are a lack of knowledge (and therefore confidence), the rapid rate of change within the agriculture sector, lack of resources (people and capital) and ageing infrastructure, financial risk and family traditions. Drivers include access to independent research and decision support tools; knowledge about alternative, productive and locally proven land use options so that farmers can make their own informed decisions. However, farmers are often limited in their ability to access electronic information and advice due to inadequate internet and mobile phone coverage.

- **What tools, skills and advice do farmers need to effectively adapt and respond to the risks they face?**

Based on our first hand experience through farmer interviews and surveys, we see the following as high priorities to deliver to farmers so that they can effectively adapt and respond to risks they face:

- a. Provision of information and tools that help landholders make informed decisions in a more-timely manner based on whole of enterprise thinking;
- b. Prove innovative crops, technologies and sustainable farming practices through local demonstration trials to lift farming productivity and competitiveness;
- c. Provide options to reduce the barriers to entry such as low interest rate loans to purchase property and equipment;
- d. Provide innovative models, contemporary information and guidance for new entrants;
- e. Opportunities for knowledge exchange with researchers, extension staff, industry experts, community groups, leading farmers and peers; and
- f. Strategic and coordinated policy intervention to support the agricultural sector.

- **What approaches could be used to encourage improved drought preparedness?**

A robust business plan that focuses on farming resilience is essential. The business plan needs to include scenario planning for varying climatic conditions, alternative crop types, water needs and sources, livestock management are vital.

Adopting the principle of “the right plant, in the right place, at the right time under the right management” will position the agriculture sector for resilience and viability. Specifically for broad acre farming, a significant focus on incorporating native forage species and farming systems that closely mimic the natural local ecosystem, which have evolved with the Australian continent, will drastically improve farmer’s drought preparedness. Research, Development and Extension into species, systems and overall management is vital to uptake of these practices. Further investment and understanding of soil health and sub-soil moisture will maximise the utilisation land and water resources and minimise the risk from drought.

- **How can land, water and other farm inputs be more effectively deployed to better drive agriculture sector productivity, while maintaining or enhancing the natural resource base?**

Initiatives that maximise Australia’s advantage of ‘clean and green’ agriculture need to be further enhanced. Alternative farming systems that closely mimic the natural environment, such as utilising native forage species, incorporating more perennials on the farm, connecting remnant vegetation with native shelter belts, and increasing soil carbon levels will decrease the reliance on farm inputs and enhance ‘clean and green’ farming to increase global markets access and agricultural competitiveness.

The precision application of inputs by matching land use to capability through a combination of remote sensing, plant nutrient requirements, and variable rate technology will maximise productivity and reduce threats and risks to the soil. This will drive innovation and efficiency, maximising scarce resources and protecting the natural resource base.

- **What skills including specialised skills and training, will be required in the future and how can these be delivered and uptake encouraged?**

Based on our extensive consultation with farmers, specialised skills and training programs to incorporate the following topics will meet farmer demand and ensure Australian agriculture is productive, sustainable and competitive:

- Climate science and risk management;
- Skills to maximise soil health;
- Land use matched to land capability;
- Improved water use efficiency;
- Integrated pest and weed management;
- Provision of information and tools that help landholders make their own informed decisions about their whole enterprise in a more timely manner; and
- Reconnecting consumers with farming through education, marketing and direct experience.

Locally adoptable practice change advice in a clear, concise and practical manner has resulted in strong uptake of knowledge and information by north central Victorian farmers. We have utilised a broad range of tools and options including training, demonstration trials, field trips, field days, short courses and so on.

- **How can rural industries and governments better identify, prioritise and fund research, development and extension?**

Involving farmers in the development of research, development and extension programs is essential to maximise adoption and uptake to utilise scarce research funding. This includes the identification, prioritisation and funding decisions for agricultural research, development and extension. Programs must be delivered at both the national and local level so that information and training is relevant to farmers and local agricultural systems. Farmers also want evidence that the “trial site” has been analysed and proven to be economically commercial.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'DW', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Damian Wells
Chief Executive Officer