

PERTH REGION NRM SUBMISSION FOR THE ISSUES PAPER, LEADING TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENTS AGRICULTURAL COMPETITIVENESS WHITE PAPER

In this submission we outline a regional approach to addressing the following issues, within the framework of the Agricultural Competitiveness White Paper;

- Ensuring food security in Australia,
- Farmer decisions for improving farm gate returns,
- Increasing the competitiveness of the agriculture sector and its value chains,
- Improving the competitiveness of inputs to the supply chain.

In respect to these matters, this submission focuses on identifying opportunities for stakeholder groups based around capital cities and major regional centres, where there is connectivity between fresh food producers and the majority of Australians. This focus draws the necessary distinction between broadacre production and fresh food production in terms of; the disparate supply chains, value adding potential of the supply chains and consumer expectations around food supply, safety and quality.

Perth Region Natural Resource Management, through the Australian governments Caring for our Country program, has responsibility for facilitating activities that lead to the adoption of improved agricultural practices throughout the Swan region and the Swan coastal plain.

A key finding that has emerged from the review of the Swan Region Strategy for NRM and consultation with key stakeholders across the region, is the need to develop an agriculture strategy for the region. Currently, the region lacks a coordinated approach to addressing the challenges of ongoing decline in business viability for farmers, natural resource (asset) management issues and growing concerns from the broader community around food security. This lack of coordinated action was evident in the recent Senate report (4.17) which stated: *“The committee received evidence that the voice of the agriculture and agribusiness sectors is currently fragmented. Evidence from Western Australia provides a taste of this fragmentation: It is an extremely fractured industry”*.

Though the senate report pointed to the need to establish an overarching organisation that can generate direction and cohesiveness in the industry, it also acknowledged the inherent challenges of establishing such an organisation. We are confident that a well-developed and implemented strategic plan can achieve a similar, though more timely and cost effective outcome, without adding another layer of bureaucracy.

A collaborative approach to developing a strategy, with on-going support and guidance, will lead to improved economic and social dividends for all stakeholders, as evidenced in the United States Department of Agriculture; Direct and Intermediated Marketing of Local Foods in the United States report (p12) and the Mornington peninsular food strategy (p14). For natural resource management organisations involved with the fresh food sector, the development of a regional strategy will help ensure agricultural land is managed as a key asset in the fresh food supply chain and not in isolation.

The production of fresh food is not confined to boundaries denoted by NRM groups, local governments or any other organisation, but by commonality in their linkage to high population centres. This linkage defines each region as a unique set of stakeholder groups with supply chain issues that need to be addressed at the regional level. For each region, the development of a strategy that stakeholders will utilise requires good facilitation to generate strong stakeholder engagement and collaborative input. This will provide stakeholders with the vehicle and the sense of ownership to utilise it. For the South West region of Western Australia, we believe that the development and implementation of one strategic plan would be sufficient for stakeholders involved in the fresh food supply chain.

In conclusion, we believe that the broader objectives of the White Paper can be complemented by targeted regional strategies. This will provide a timely and cost effective framework to help transform the agriculture sector into a more viable industry that can meet future food supply challenges whilst also improving the management of our natural resources.

For additional information please contact
Keith Pekin: Program Manager, Agriculture
Perth Region NRM
Keith.pekin@perthregionnrm.com

Explanatory notes;

Perth Region NRM is one of 56 NRM organisations located throughout Australia.

NRM organisations receive funding from the Australian government to develop strategic regional NRM plans. These plans are developed through an extensive consultation process with key stakeholders and the broader community. This process also means that NRM organisations are well placed to coordinate with stakeholder networks and groups to generate positive social, economic and environmental dividends.

Stakeholders include: relevant agencies from all levels of government, grower groups, landmanagers, tertiary institutions, wholesalers, retailers and consultants.

The strategy that PRNRM is developing (draft version available) with stakeholders integrates the management of non-traditional NRM issues with the traditional NRM agriculture programs. The traditional asset based activities NRMs normally conduct with landmanagers are themed around improving the capacity of our agricultural land to viably and sustainably produce food. Activities include; improved management of acid soils, minimising nutrient export, optimising water utilisation and improving soil health.

Non-traditional supply chain based activities include; facilitating improved intergenerational transitions, incorporating lean production throughout the supply chain, supporting consumer education and behaviour change, facilitating diversification in trading practices and rationalising supply chains.

Senate report title; 2012 senate report into higher education & skills training to support agriculture and agribusiness (section 4.17)

Greater connectivity between stakeholders in the supply chain will help meet consumer (as a key stakeholder) expectations around access to fresh, safe, locally produced food while taking into account animal welfare, fair trade and social equity issues.

A strategic plan needs to include a process that identifies complementary mechanisms that will support the plan's objectives such as the; Urban Regional Future Food Alliance (coordinated by Curtin University) and the National Soils RD&E strategy.