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

Submission to developing an Agricultural Competitiveness White Paper.

Submitting Organisation:

Ag Excellence Alliance Incorporated (referred to as Ag Ex in this document).

Ag Ex was established in 2005 the help increase the viability of South Australian farm businesses through providing leadership and effective linkages between the state's fifteen key grower groups and key stakeholders including natural resources management organisations, agribusiness, research and development organisations, Government and education institutions. The formation of Ag Ex was a direct response by regional communities to the withdrawal of regional research, development and extension (RD&E) services by state agencies.

R, D & E contributes significant returns to agriculture, regional communities & the wider economy. An estimate on a simple RD&E program in South Australia implemented by farming groups on early sowing of crops has conservatively returned \$315M per year over the last five years (0.5 t/ha increase in yield x grain price of \$210/t x 3,000 farms x 1,000 ha's /farm/year). The cereal yields achieved given the seasonal conditions over the last few years have been incredible.

This submission is focusing on the critical functions that research, development and extension (RD&E) play in the agricultural sector of South Australia. Ag Ex believes these are key areas of concern and opportunity for the sector and one that the Government has an opportunity to be more active in to achieve an environmentally and profitable sustainable future for the nation's agricultural industries. Partnering with existing community structures and leveraging industry and Australian Government funding opportunities can provide a win-win scenario for the government of the day, the industry and the rural communities that rely on a profitable and sustainable farming sector.

With the withdrawal of state government in the regional RD&E delivery, the government has the opportunity to partner with the new force in delivery of agricultural RD&E to direct limited resources in partnership with grower groups and advisers to address the sustainability and profitability of agriculture. Linking grower group and government resources provides an effective pathway for achieving a resilient and profitable agriculture sector whilst meeting NRM targets that aim to protect the industry's natural resource base.



Areas that the Ag Ex have identified where the government can effectively partner include:

- Farming groups working with government to identify issues and opportunities of the agricultural industries to influence policy decisions
- Leveraging state and industry resources;
 - to champion 'clean and green' food production and security, and environmentally sustainable management of the nations farming practices;
 - to support grower group operational structures to assist them to continue to provide their critical functions in the regions;
 - to be leaders in the regions around issues of responsiveness to climate variability; and
 - to attract, train and provide ongoing support to the next generation of people so that the industry has the skill base and capacity to ensure the resilience of grower groups, advisers and the agricultural industries they support across the nation.

To assist in understanding the current status of agricultural RD&E in South Australia, there are now 15 main grower groups servicing 3,000 farmer members. Research by the Grains Research and Development Corporation shows that farmers involved with grower groups have a greater level of knowledge on new and innovative farm practices. Currently, 60% of farmers employ private sector advisors and over 80% of farmers are now members of one or more groups. Those involved in grower group projects increase their profitability by an average of 10%. 50% of growers attend two or more regional group activities per year and groups attract membership of leading growers most likely to adopt new ideas and technologies. Annually 2,000 new research and extension personnel are required across Australia but currently there are only 800 graduates.

Key drivers of strategic change in the farming sector are now grower groups and advisers. Key trusted advisers are a link to these groups. The groups have the trust of government and industry funding bodies to be the key recipients of funds to drive regional research, development and extension at the local, regional and state level. These groups are now the regional research centers that were once the domain of the state agencies. Some NRM regions have recognised this and are now forming strong partnerships with farming groups to develop and support initiatives that drive sustainable land use and profitable farming systems in the regions.

These advisers and grower groups now play a key role left by the withdrawal of RD&E support from state agencies. Funding is predominately from the national RD&E corporations and Australian Government programs such as the National Landcare Program, primary industry training programs and the Carbon Farming Initiative. Ag Ex is creating efficiencies in the delivery of national and state wide programs by engaging grower groups and advisers to deliver locally. Role & Value of Region Landcare Facilitators working partnership with Grower Groups, Ag Excellence, SARDI, Adelaide Uni, SA Uni & Regional NRM Bodies.

In South Australia, Regional Landcare Facilitators, funded by the Australian Government through NRM regional bodies, have helped to fill the development and extension gap left by the state. Their role has been crucial in supporting project development, grower group Management, underpinning project delivery, farmer engagement and extension of project outcomes. These positions have been essential in building grower group linkages, funding opportunities and integrated projects with NRM, state and Australian Governments.

Farming groups, facilitators and advisers provide significant value to the Government by;

- providing credible access to land holders/managers and are a communication pathway for all levels of government to industry and land holders;
- providing a vehicle for grower groups to collectively levy Commonwealth funding through Research and Development Corporations and Australian Government investment in the state;
- having a proven track record of delivering research outcomes for sustainable agriculture and are rated highly at a national level with GRDC, AWI, MLA and DAFF. The groups have developed strong relationships with DAFF and the RDC's, have a good understanding of investment cycles, and they provide valued input into the development and delivery of RD&E programs;
- providing a good understanding of the technology adoption process and having the capacity through the support of advisers to adapt practices and innovations to suit local conditions and ensure faster adoption by farmers and;
- providing a vehicle for identifying emerging issues quickly, which Government can use for strategic and tactical investment decisions. They provide input to local policy makers and managers on RD&E priorities.

Grower groups and their support structures, especially the adviser network, face many challenges in the future. There is a critical need for greater capacity across the state to support these structures. There is an emerging new generation of industry personnel who require mentoring and training to fill the needs of the industry. Some of the specific challenges include;

- leadership and capacity challenges for the future viability of groups;
- accessing skilled personnel to provide effective leadership, management and technical skills for the operations of the groups;
- managing erratic funding cycles and incomes to keep the momentum of the groups going;
- ability to work across regions and collaborate with other groups in a co-ordinated fashion to build cost efficient initiatives that address similar issues and to share resources; and
- availability of adequately trained and experienced people in research and extension practice to service the groups.

Ag Ex provides the mechanism for grower groups to interact and operate at a more professional level across the state. Initiatives lead by Ag Ex include;

- providing a network linking grower groups, advisers and support staff;
- working with in collaboration with NRM organisations and production focused grower groups to provide solutions to sustainable agriculture;
- coordinating and supporting project development, delivery and management;
- providing capacity building and training opportunities; and
- providing means of communicating and sharing achievements of grower groups across the nation.

In conclusion the Ag Ex committee would like to thank the Australia Government for the opportunity to make this submission. Ag Ex is willing to make further presentations in person or written submissions to the parliamentary select committee if deemed of value.

Yours sincerely

Trent Potter

