Agricultural Competitiveness White Paper Submission - IP262
Dr Chris Johansen
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Submission to Agricultural Competitiveness Issues Paper

By Dr Chris Johansen

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An issue overarching, and indeed overriding, the nine issues proposed in the Issues Paper is "rationalization of land use". This Paper implies that the historically evolved pattern of agricultural land use in Australia will continue into the indefinite future, but forces are afoot that will necessitate considerable and rapid changes to traditional land use patterns. These changes will inevitably affect the competiveness of Australian agricultural output. It is desirable that the Federal Government be proactive in heralding and favourably facilitating these changes rather waiting to provide emergency relief to those who will inevitably be adversely affected.

There are three main aspects of land use that are increasingly affecting Australian agricultural productivity, efficiency and hence competitiveness.

Firstly, the predicted effects of climate change, which are now not only predicted but are being recorded as in the south-west of Western Australia. This will inevitably change crop area suitability classifications, particularly for rainfed crops. For wheat at least, "Goyder's line" will need considerable re-drawing, particularly considering the sensitivity of this crop to moisture deficit and high temperature during the reproductive period. Plant breeding efforts are not likely to be able to keep pace with the rate of climate change. For irrigated areas, increasingly erratic, but probably declining, rainfall in catchment areas will increase uncertainty as to future water availability, threatening the viability of existing irrigation areas let alone planned ones.

Secondly, deteriorating soil quality threatens to decrease productivity and limit crop options. Factors include increasing soil salinity and acidity and decreasing soil organic carbon, available plant nutrients and useful soil biota. These continue to progress on a national scale, perhaps slowly and insidiously, but measurably. Although means of alleviating these constraints are known their implementation has been piecemeal, making little impact on the overall soil quality situation – concerted alleviation endeavors are required to at least maintain current levels of agricultural production let alone increase it.

Thirdly, a more rational allocation between land for agricultural use and that for other purposes is required. Currently topical is the demands of land use for mining and urban sprawl over prime agricultural land. Rationalization of agriculture with forestry and regeneration of natural vegetation, particularly that degraded by extensive grazing, is also required.

Unless there are appropriate policies in place to protect, and preferably enhance, the natural resource base issues such as increasing agricultural production, farm gate profitability, market chain development, export markets, investment, employment, etc. become secondary. It is thus suggested that the issue of appropriate future land use be realistically, comprehensively and proactively addressed in this review of Australian agriculture.