

# NCST NATIONAL COMMITTEE ON SOIL AND TERRAIN

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

14 April 2014

To whom it may concern,

## **Re. Submission to the issues paper on agricultural competitiveness**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a response to the issues paper on agricultural competitiveness – I am pleased to present a submission on behalf of the National Committee on Soil and Terrain (NCST).

The NCST congratulates the taskforce on the issues paper, and on its efforts to create a vision for a strong and competitive agricultural sector.

Specific comments on the issues paper are provided in the attachment (Attachment A).

In summary these comments emphasise that long-term agricultural competitiveness can only be achieved if due attention is given to maintaining and improving the condition of the soil resource underpinning agricultural production. Sustainable and efficient soil management, informed by appropriate data and information, is a fundamental requirement for building productive agricultural industries and ensuring ongoing food security.

I am happy to be contacted to provide further information on the issues raised in the attached submission.

Yours sincerely

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## ATTACHMENT A

### National Committee on Soil and Terrain submission to the Agricultural Competitiveness Taskforce, in response to the issues paper on agricultural competitiveness

April 2014

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The National Committee on Soil and Terrain (NCST) is a National Coordinating Committee which provides national leadership, coordination, direction and advocacy for matters relating to soil and terrain. Committee membership includes representatives from Australian, state and territory government agencies involved in soil and terrain. The NCST provides a national forum to discuss and exchange views and information, and plays a key role in developing an agreed framework and national standards for soil and terrain assessment, including monitoring soil health.

Most recently, the NCST has played a significant advisory role in the development of *The National Soil Research, Development and Extension Strategy – Securing Australia’s soil for profitable industries and healthy landscapes* (the soil RD&E strategy). The soil RD&E strategy was launched by the Minister for Agriculture the Hon. Barnaby Joyce MP in March of this year. The NCST have responsibility for implementation of several components of the strategy, focussed on the improved provision of soil information to support decision making by farmers and policy makers, and to track soil change.

In consideration of the Australian Government’s issues paper on agricultural competitiveness the NCST wishes to make the following comments.

The NCST applauds the Australian government’s intent to develop a strong, vibrant and competitive agricultural sector but we are concerned that the issues paper does not give adequate weight to this being achieved in the context of ensuring the **sustainable use and development of the nation’s valuable (and non-renewable) soil and land resources**. Underpinning our capacity to produce agricultural products are Australia’s fragile soil and land resources. Ensuring the security and future productive capacity of these resources is therefore fundamental to achieving agricultural competitiveness. The NCST are of the belief that this can be achieved by ensuring the aims and goals of the National Soil RD&E Strategy are implemented and supported.

- The issues paper has a strong focus on developing sustainable markets and productivity but neglects the importance of ensuring that this happens without damaging our natural environment.
- Australia’s agricultural landscapes are supported by a great variety of soils which are fundamental to Australia’s capacity to build food security. Many of these soils are fragile and need careful management. Input costs can rise sharply to maintain productivity as soils degrade. For example, subsoil acidification is an artefact of many of our agricultural production systems but, once developed, it can be costly and technically difficult to amend. There is a real need to develop management systems that can reduce the acidification process and to have monitoring systems in place for early identification of the problem thereby allowing early (and therefore less costly) intervention.
- Not only are soils a fundamental asset for agriculture but they also provide and support other ecosystem services. These ecosystem services include supporting the provision of clean air and water, assisting with carbon storage and contributing to the health of our biodiversity.

- Maintaining soil health is therefore integral to ensuring sustainability within the Australian agricultural sector.

The NCST believes that achieving competitiveness in the Australian agricultural sector will be facilitated by the goals and directions of the National Soil RD&E Strategy, which include improved access to quality soil data and information, improving soil management to increase productivity and profitability, improving understanding of soil's role in delivering ecosystem services and determining how to better manage soils to deliver outcomes for farmers and the broader community.

The issues paper identifies that increasing demand for agricultural products is likely to mean opening up new agricultural areas, including in northern Australia. The NCST is concerned that there is significant risk to our fragile agricultural resources if this expansion is not underpinned by appropriate and accurate land resource information to ensure that land is used within its capability and is managed sustainably. Ongoing monitoring of soil health should be identified as a prerequisite to any development in these more fragile lands to ensure that indicators of declining soil health are picked up early and management options implemented to minimise resource degradation.

The NCST believes that the white paper should:

- Include within its scope the need for appropriate resource information and data to support agricultural competitiveness and minimise resource degradation under an increasingly intensive agricultural system.
- Include an issue related to ensuring the environmentally sustainable achievement of a competitive agricultural sector e.g. *achieving agricultural competitiveness while maintaining or improving the natural resource base*. This should include items for soil/land condition monitoring, maintaining ecosystem services, improving land management systems and technologies and, developing holistic systems that achieve agricultural competitiveness as well as supporting land, water and biodiversity health.
- Recognise that improving agricultural competitiveness, increasing farm gate profitability and improving the prosperity of rural and regional communities **MUST** be underpinned by *sustainable* utilisation of our land resources based upon the provision of appropriate and sound soil knowledge and management.
- Recognise the National Soil RD&E Strategy and its role in answering some of the questions posed by the issues paper.
- More clearly acknowledge the role of soils in achieving a competitive agricultural sector; particularly through reducing or minimising input costs (e.g. fertilisers and soil ameliorants), improving production and improving quality of food produced (soils are after all the primary source of nutrients and minerals in the food we eat).

Some of the questions that might flow from this new issue include:

- What are the resource degradation risks that might result from developing a competitive agricultural sector?
- Do we have the necessary resource information needed to mitigate these risks?
- Do we understand enough about the interrelationships between the various elements of the environmental ecosystems to ensure that development can occur without degradation?

The NCST would like to thank the Australian Government for providing an opportunity to comment on the significant issue of agricultural competitiveness and we look forward to seeing the outcomes of the

white paper process. The NCST is also available, if required, to assist the Agricultural Competitiveness Taskforce with expert and impartial advice on issues relating to the long-term sustainable use of our soil and land resources.