

Australian Women in Agriculture

Submission to the White Paper on Agricultural Competitiveness | Issues Paper

Background

Australian Women in Agriculture (AWiA) was established in 1992, in response to a demand by rural women to enable advocacy and to promote their advancement. It has a broad national membership, is managed by a Board of Directors, and is an incorporated body under the ASIC framework. AWiA has an international profile and in recognising the important role women play in global and subsistence/small-scale farming is connected to other national women's representatives in countries such as Papua New Guinea, New Zealand, USA, India and South Africa.

It is specifically charged to:

- Uniting and raising the profile of women in agriculture;
- Addressing rural and agricultural inequities;
- Working to ensure the survival of agriculture for future generations;
- Securing local, regional and international recognition;
- Achieving the status of a political and economic force.

AWiA core values are:

- Caring for people, the environment, rural families and communities;
- Ensuring the viability of future agricultural production;
- Respecting the culture, beliefs and philosophies of other people;
- Communicating to enable women to share their experience and develop effective networks;
- Providing leadership to facilitate change in the community.

The Challenge

AWiA acknowledges the importance of the consultation process associated with the White Paper, and is particularly pleased to read in the Minister's Press Release that he recognises the 'unique sets of assets' in Australia which maintain our competitive edge, and give the country its international standing. To this end

the White Paper must acknowledge that women are vital to an innovative and productive Australian agriculture in all its contexts.

Since a benchmarking report by RIRDC in 1998¹ which concluded that the contribution of women to rural and regional life remained largely undervalued, women have increasingly been recognised as taking their place alongside their husbands and partners in on-farm decision-making² and recognised for their contribution to innovation and productivity in the sector. An economic analysis undertaken in 2009 based on 2006 ABS data concluded that

¹ RIRDC (1998) *Missed Opportunities: Harnessing the Potential of Women in Australian Agriculture*. 98/10 Canberra.

² A subsequent reports brought this data up to date: *Revisiting Missed Opportunities – Growing Women's Contribution to Agriculture* (2009) 09/083 RIRDC:Canberra.

women contribute over 49 per cent of the total value of the output that might be attributed to farming communities³.

Unfortunately, and a little disappointingly, in its continued use of the term 'farmer' and in its lack of explanation as to who lives on the family farm, the Issues Paper emerges as completely silent on gender.

AWiA strongly recommends *the formal recognition of gender issues within and beyond the farm gate in the future development of the White Paper*. In particular, in access to decision-making and leadership positions in public and economic life, as recent OECD reports indicate a continued lag⁴. The recent NFF Blueprint put it this way: that 'increasing women's participation leads to improvements in financial performance and other benefits'⁵

To assist in this revision, AwiA has cast a 'gender lens' over the Issues Paper and our responses and recommendations appear below.

Preparation of this response

This response was prepared following a broad consultation undertaken from the date of the release of the Issues Paper, through social media, through focused discussions and through community forums. There has been a great deal of interest expressed, and AwiA is confident that its membership and indeed all Australian women, will continue this active interest through the Green Paper consultations through to the White Paper presentation and beyond.

This response takes up the topics as outlined in the Issues Paper and responds to the questions raised. In some cases it provides a context, or explanation, in others it simply makes the point as it is well recognised, but is not found in the Issues Paper. In some cases, as issues overlap we do not repeat our statements in subsequent sections.

Towards the Family Farm of the Future

Issue 1. Food Security

Our close proximity to Asian markets and their increasing wealthy middle class populations, is a unique opportunity for all forms of agriculture, but particularly more immediately, dairy. The White Paper needs to recognise that women will be formidable consumers within this group.

Country of origin labeling and issues with FTAs often work against innovation and entrepreneurship.

³ *Revisiting Missed Opportunities – Wiser Modeling Report Appendix 09/083*. RIRDC: Canberra.

⁴ OECD (2014) *Women, Government and Policy Making in OECD Countries. Fostering Diversity for Inclusive Growth*. OECD Publishing. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9879264210745-en>

⁵ NFF (2013) *A Blueprint for Australian Agriculture 2013-2020*. Theme 4.

It is critical to ensure that our soil health is improved to maintain and increase productivity and to stop land degradation. We would suggest that a triple bottom line approach to Landcare and sustainability should be included in the White Paper.

Barriers to productivity are often located in infrastructure failure, and not all rural areas have access to Broadband or mobile and Internet facilities.

Recommendations for Issue 1:

- 1.1 Consider country branding similar to NZ model which tracks the product back to its source, on-line, in time;
- 1.2 Ensure that all technology transfer is well planned, collaborative, culturally and gender sensitive;
- 1.3 Increase the education, R & D and extension essential to underpin increased productivity in Australia, and ensure that such knowledge continues to be available for overseas technology transfer;
- 1.4 A recognition within the White Paper that the pathways of young men and young women into agriculture are different;
- 1.5 Life long learning should be the principle that underpins any capacity building of human capital and such learning should be promoted as exciting and directly related to productivity.
- 1.6 A recognition that the female consumer (both in Australia and overseas) is increasingly making choices which impact directly at the farm gate.

Issue 2. Improving farm gate returns

As Australia's agricultural system has developed as a 'bolted-on' approach, we suggest that the White Paper offers a unique opportunity to take a systems approach, which includes the natural system and would enable the building of a 'whole of system' future understanding.

Such a systems approach should also consider the avoidance of waste in all its forms, including food waste especially considering 30-40% of food produced is wasted. The increasing demand for 'perfect products' is driven by a market which factors in such waste as 'normal', an aspect not sustainable in the long term.

The public/private benefits of R & D investment need to be better articulated. Any R & D government funding should include a stipulation as how the extension of that R & D will be undertaken.

We question to what extent has the ethical investment sector, specifically the super funds, considered investing in the future of Australian agriculture. What are the barriers to such investment that government could resolve?

The whole education/extension/training system within Australia has become unnecessarily complex and competitive. To build the skills in current drought management, eg, water, soil, feed etc. uptake of new technologies will rely on a national, state-agreed model of education and extension.

The impacts of the withdrawal from formal extension by some state governments, and the increasing private for profit extension market has yet to be fully understood. We may in fact be reversing our international reputation for innovation, without fully recognising this.

In any review of extension, we also need to better understand how information is accessed, by whom, and when. Informal learning is underway within the sector, but nationally we are ignorant of this process, and how (or even if) change is implemented successfully this way.

It needs stating that all too often scientists delivering quality R & D outcomes are not necessarily the best communicators. The need to evaluate and monitor (even disappointing outcomes) is vital, as is the time needed to ensure that the research is of high quality. The current three-year cycle for research grants is often not enough time for growing seasons to be incorporated in field trials.

The recent changes to the PIERD Act to include marketing levies offers an opportunity provide the necessary investment in training to understand niche marketing; multiple markets opportunities; and compliance and regulation to access markets.

The Issues Paper is relatively silent on climate variability and shifts in climate change. We would argue that a bipartisan philosophy on drought policy is long overdue and should be a standard budget line item! We would also suggest that drought management should not be separated from management for flood, fire, heat waves and other climate adaptation strategies. In some cases responses are similar, where differences are evident, it is in the sudden nature of some crises, versus the longer, insidious nature of drought. We question whether this lies within the strict purview of 'agriculture' but is more likely to be a cross government issue.

Recommendations for Issue 2:

- 2.1 The complex spatial and socio-economic relationship between human capital development and climate variability needs to be urgently addressed in the White Paper. A national lack of understanding remains a barrier to our farm gate improvements.
- 2.2 The market driven 'waste' component in food production, consumer education and supermarket imperatives on supply standards needs urgent attention.
- 2.3 The debate about production scale vs. premium, niche and diverse production for high-end consumers needs urgent consideration.
- 2.4 Future R & D investment *must* consider the impacts of E.

Issue 3. Access to finance

Just why agriculture is not seen as a ‘must have’ investment remains a mystery. Do we actually understand how investment into primary production – at a national as well as local scale – occurs? How is it executed on the family farm? What decisions are made based on what information?

We touched on the issue of ethical investment by super funds earlier (Issue 2). Our members are also concerned to see full transparency of all foreign investment activities, which includes: disclosure to shareholders and the interested public.

We recognise that this is a national issue, one which is well beyond the agriculture portfolio, but it will continue to be a ‘hot topic’ while the general public does not have the transparency it demands. We are particularly concerned that it appears that foreign finance models for labour investment are undertaken without full disclosure and without training.

In line with this call for transparency, we also suggest better disclosure in company annual reports, in their investment strategies, in product sourcing, and in employee sourcing and employment practices.

It should be recognised that different agricultural commodities experience different peaks and troughs, and such low interest loans/FMDs that are available should be assessed on farm income alone, excluding off-farm income (most likely women’s off farm income).

Recommendations for Issue 3:

- 3.1 That the White Paper seeks a bipartisan policy platform for drought management;
- 3.2 That Farm\$mart be extended to include farmers, working in collegiate groups, to enable advice on positive and/or negative approaches in business management;
- 3.3 That Industry super funds, and the Federal Future Fund be reviewed to ensure there are no barriers to ethical investments in agriculture.

Issue 4. Value chain competitiveness

We would suggest that one of the critical barriers to our future competitiveness internationally, is our unnecessary competitiveness domestically.

We should learn from countries such as NZ and Denmark where cooperative and collaborative supply chains and processing have boosted their (essentially from very small population) capabilities.

Government needs to reconsider not only where it creates unnecessary red tape, but also where it creates unnecessary competition. We can tackle this by ensuring that all future government investment actually boosts domestic collaboration and cooperation.

Australian agriculture remains fixated on ‘consultation’ remaining at the level of large industries and with some farm advocacy groups which purport to represent ‘all farmers’. To

increase our value chain competitiveness, government needs to reconsider how it 'consults' and with whom it 'consults'.

To this end, there needs to be some better 'listening' to grass roots producers, who are targeting niche and diverse markets, and who may, for various reasons (including lack of representation) not be part of the 'old boys' network.

For the consumers, most of whom are women, the labeling of our food has become unnecessarily complex. We need to be much clearer what is meant by 'contents' and consider a more 'easy to understand' labeling system.

NZ has made much of its 'clean and green' image. While Australia is recognised as similarly blessed, it is a very fragile system, which requires continued investment. We would suggest that a focus on quality would enable such a system its robustness and superiority.

Increasingly farm labour is from overseas. While this is unlikely to change, our experience shows that not only are 457 Visas unnecessarily convoluted and complex, but also that on occasion, a possible local labour force is ignored. There are also disparities in labour costs between retail and on-farm labour costs, and overseas labour costs which continue to hold back our competitiveness internationally.

AWiA members recognise the complex relationship between supermarkets and the farmers that provide their products only too well. We suggest that as the White Paper considers this complexity into the future, that the consumer and producer are encouraged to contribute to any such future discussions, and that the power of the supermarkets does not overwhelm their voices.

Recommendations for Issue 4:

- 4.1 That consideration of possible future vertical integration of some products be undertaken as a matter of urgency;
- 4.2 That an analysis of the costs associated with a continued extended supply chain with an oversupply of 'middle-men' be undertaken *before* the release of the White Paper;
- 4.3 That the regulation of the retail sector (which is outside of Dept of Ag purview) be reviewed urgently, with the involvement of the producers at the discussion table.

Issue 5. Regional communities

Unfortunately, the Issue Paper remains silent on the important contribution by all those who live in regional Australia to its continued future success. The role of women as key contributors to regional community groups and to the social infrastructure of such communities needs to be identified as critical to their future.

In addition, family farms remain the backbone of such communities, despite the increase of larger so-called 'corporate' farms. The future of regional Australia and the future of the family farm are intimately entwined. We cannot have one without the other⁶.

The community organisations in regional and remote Australia have taken major 'hits' over the past generation. Those that remain have proven their resilience and commitment. Government should ensure that any future policies do not undermine this commitment.

Infrastructure in regional Australia remains the critical opportunity for government investment. In particular, IT remains less than optimal. In some reasonably close to major centres communities, there is little or no access to mobile phone coverage. Waiting for the 'roll out' may take a generation or more.

In the discussion on infrastructure, public transport and banking should not be forgotten.

The changing demographics in regional Australia have placed pressure on education services at a regional scale. For some of the TAFE and Universities it has been a challenge to maintain their programs and again, the competition, which our system establishes, works against future opportunity take up.

Recommendations for Issue 5:

- 5.1 That the White Paper clearly states *who* is on the family farm, who contributes what to its success, and how the labour of both women and men are essential to its future competitiveness;
- 5.2 That consideration as to the critical and valuable contribution of off farm activities that enable people to remain in place, such as community organisations, sporting and other activities, be accorded their value in the White Paper;
- 5.3 That rural health, and rural mental health policies specifically be continued to be supported, and that further diminution of these be advocated *against* in the White Paper;
- 5.4 That an immediate (prior to release of the White Paper) analysis of the breadth and capacity of the regional education sector (primary, secondary and tertiary) be undertaken which enables a recognition of the barriers to young people remaining in place, or returning to place to continue their education;
- 5.5 That work experience programs for young people in agriculture (such as those funded through RIRDC (Horizon) or through Nuffield or through state governments be recognised as valuable 'seeding' experiences for future leaders;
- 5.6 That the White Paper recognises the value of building on traditional Indigenous knowledges of landscapes, on fire management, pest control, floods, drought and on culture and heritage.

⁶ For the modeling which underpins this statement see: Land & Water Australia & Vic DPI (2005) *Australia's farmers: past, present and future*. p.29. June. And an updated RIRDC project 14/003 (2014) *New entrants to Australian agriculture. Where are the young farmers?*

Issue 6. Inputs to the supply chain

AWiA acknowledges the importance of future education, extension and training in building the workforce of the future family farm.

AWiA agrees with Berry Marttin of Rabobank at ABARES in March 2014 who said that: 'treating farming as a generational concern is the most profitable investment'⁷.

It needs to be stated that the recent 'spike' in increased enrolments in agricultural programs in regional universities has more to do with the lack of employment opportunities, and the lowering of the entrance scores, than it does to any renewed enthusiasm for the topic.

Future agricultural practice in Australia will be highly technical, increasingly technological and based on both science and experience. It therefore offers opportunities for tertiary and secondary education for enthusiastic young people. However it suffers from a perception of being dirty, dangerous and brutal at times. This needs to change. Governments need to lead this change. AWiA stands ready to assist in the change process.

Our members are passionate about the place of agriculture in producing high quality food and fibre. We understand only too well, the increasing role of technology in that production. We believe the White Paper offers a unique, once in a lifetime opportunity to lead this change.

We recognise the increasing overseas component of the farm workforce, and are therefore keen to see a 'multi-workplace employment' process for farm workers, both local and foreign, and to ensure that the insurance and superannuation aspects of these are included.

The increasing withdrawal of state governments from extension (see above Issue 2) is of great concern to our members. Extension needs to be 're-energised' for the new 21st century. Historically, it has been instrumental in enabling our innovation and productivity growth, but its models are tired and lack investment. The cross-generational aspects of such education remains less than well understood.

Our challenge will be to ensure that the next generation of farmers keeps up with the changes in technology, bio-security and R & D more broadly. How will this happen as the one-on-one model is clearly no longer viable. The White Paper must take up this challenge and offer leadership, in collaboration with state governments, private providers and industry, but also drawing on local knowledge to do so.

Our continued investment in rural R & D is vital to future success. Where barriers exist, and savings can be made, such investment needs to be based on collaboration and cooperation, not on competition. Many of the issues for the future family farm, and human capital investment are cross-program issues within the R & D framework, and require government leadership to ensure that they do not get 'bogged down' in territorial disputations.

⁷ ABARES 2014. Berry Marttin International Rural and Retail Division, Rabobank International. Keynote Speech. March.

Recommendations for Issue 6

- 6.1 Recognise the value of the 'competency' system for qualifications, but consider how best to administer these across various providers. It is long overdue to introduce a Bologna-style agreement for Australian agriculture study;⁸
- 6.2 Support novel and exciting ways of introducing people not connected to agriculture and land management to those who are the nation's stewards and producers;
- 6.3 Training providers be encouraged to link with producers to enable 'gap year' opportunities;
- 6.4 Practical HR and recruiting help should be made available to those who are employers, perhaps through job matching opportunities;
- 6.5 Enable secondary students to connect with TAFE programs;
- 6.6 Recognise that there is likely to be increased movement 'on and off' agriculture, and these transitions at life stages need to be planned for, and accommodated.

Issue 7. Reducing ineffective regulations

There are a number of day-to-day issues which fall within this area. One immediate example is that livestock semen export to USA requires a permit for each shipment, which adds to cost, whereas other countries have yearly permits and are therefore more competitive.

AWiA members are also aware that there are different state regulations which lead to doubling up of 'red tape' - for example, transport 'B Double' laws; border anomalies, Johne's disease in sheep, fruit fly regulations etc. We would argue that some regulations (ie; Queensland fruit fly) are, we would argue, actually disproportionate to the risk involved.

Such varied state government systems need to be integrated better (see our comment in Issue 2 above re: 'bolted on' system) and coordinated better.

We would argue that biosecurity laws need some overhaul, as we currently do not test for 'banned' chemicals only those currently in use in Australia. For example, AWiA members are aware of DDT use in China and the subsequent risk of heavy metal contamination, and we are also aware that such inadequate testing of imported products gives our own local products a bad name - which is a huge risk for all producers!

We would support immediate clear labeling of Australian produce, and promotion of an Australian standard to grow our overseas markets in milk, beef and fruit.

Some of our members remain concerned that information about production, animal welfare, animal husbandry and technological advances are not well distributed throughout the education supply chain. We encourage government to consider the distribution of such information very carefully, and ensure that when farm education kits are distributed to

⁸ see: www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/aus-nz/

schools, these are also made available to key stakeholders, such as WWF, PETA and other groups.

Recommendations for Issue 7:

- 7.1 Regulation is often required in order to ensure that best practice methods are maintained. We recognise that and are not arguing for complete deregulation of the system;
- 7.2 The environmental impacts on water and soils in country of origin from imported products into Australia should not be ignored in any labeling;
- 7.3 Effective transport of small quantities from family farms into niche markets needs to be considered in the whole of chain system;
- 7.4 COAG be asked to consider coordination by all governments to ensure future regulations are 'borderless'.

Issue 8. Enhancing agricultural exports

AWiA members recognise the complex inter-relationship between infrastructure in rural Australia and our ability to maintain our global competitiveness. To this end farming businesses must have access to fast, unlimited broadband, mobile phone coverage and video conferencing.

We strongly recommend that the government does not forget that 'fair trade is not free trade'.

As a nation, we are not yet clear as to the value of our premium products to the global consumer. While we can offer GM free, clean and green, F & M free etc. these advantages remain fragile and we can lose them at any time. We would caution that robust science which underpins such advantages, should not be compromised when considering how to maintain our competitive edge.

Not all producers understand well how to value-add to their products, or to work with their industry partners to value-add for more competitiveness.

The AWiA membership is well aware of the 'social' in the marketplace. As consumers as well as producers, we are concerned that any devaluation of our product has an immediate and long-term impact. For example, milk products in China.

While we are very close to potential Asian markets in Northern Australia, and we must be seen as a serious contender for the Asian market in the promotion of our clean and green products - including smaller niche products such as crocodile skins - we are also aware of the challenges raised by the Northern Australian Task Force and will be making a submission to it in due course.

Recommendations for Issue 8:

- 8.1 That any major changes to regulations regarding bio-security, exports etc. include consultation with the broader community of interest (see Issue 4 comments);
- 8.2 That to be fully competitive globally, we must prioritise local infrastructure support.

Issue 9. Investments and Job Creation

Opportunities for on-farm value-add including eco-services provisions, need to be continually explored and their possibilities communicated to farm operators and land managers.

AWiA members have personal experience in finding creative ways to fund on-farm investment and succession plans. One example is that of lease lending to buy programs.

AWiA supports the concept of incentives for retraining for ALL ages and skill levels.

Job creation in regional and rural communities is supported by access to high speed broadband (see Issue 8 above).

Our experience is that visa extensions are highly successful incentives for lower paid agricultural workers. Any barriers to such extensions need to be reduced where possible.

Recommendations for Issue 9:

- 9.1 TAFE courses could be funded directly for re-skilling regardless of previous educational attainment;
- 9.2 Agriculture, food and land management could be introduced at primary school level as part of a revised curriculum;
- 9.3 Eco-system services could be seriously considered as a component of any direct action environmental plan, and to offer opportunities for income generation on farm;
- 9.4 Succession planning that does not create life-long debt for the younger generation needs to be developed.