

Agricultural Competiveness Green paper

Submission by :

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inaugural 100 Women in Australian Agribusiness - Rural Press 2014.

inaugural 100 Women of Influence in Australia - Australian Financial Review 2012.

RIRDC Rural Women's Award Victorian winner & Australian runner up 2010

I have contributed to the Australian Women in Agriculture submission but as a former board member of the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation, I have some specific comments on RD&E.

The green paper notes that transformational research and extension have been identified as gaps in Australia's RD&E system.

It also states that stakeholders want to ensure that RD&E is effectively delivered to farmers to get the maximum value from levy expenditure but that given the large private benefits from extension, any Government intervention should enable the development of private markets for extension services.

This is an inherent contradiction, for if farmers want maximum value from levies then surely including extension should be part of the RD&E system that is funded by levies.

The further separation of R&D programs and Extension is at the crux of one of the biggest problems in the agriculture sector, namely the low uptake and adoption of R&D. Increasing the uptake and adoption of R&D should be a priority for future prosperity in the sector and not relegated to the private market.

Privatizing extension services will further confine R&D uptake to those farming enterprises that are already progressive and also cloud the integrity of R&D when it is offered by Consultants from private agribusiness companies that have their own vested interests and financial investment. (We need only to consider the problems in the Financial Advice services to be wary of the inherent conflict of interest).

What has been a perennial issue for the relative ineffectual performance of agricultural extension in Australia has been the failure of agricultural scientists and bureaucrats to understand that the purpose of Extension is fundamentally to create human behaviour change and not about the provision of new information that hopefully farmers will use. Agricultural Extension is a social science which historically has been designed and delivered by physical scientists and bureaucrats with very poor results.

Social scientists, informed by change theory and who know how to create change in individual human behaviour are required to design Extension that is meaningful and effective. Extension should be built in at the front end of any research project, for what is the point of new information if it is not utilized. Past practices of creating educational opportunities for farmers around R&D reach 20% of farmers at best. This is because providing information is rated a poor tool in change theory for creating change in human behaviour.

As a social scientist, my term on the board of the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation has confirmed my view that effective Extension that increases the uptake of R&D by a greater number of primary producers will not happen by privatizing extension or by continuing the 'old' and ineffective extension services model. It will require involving skilled social scientists in the RD&E project design. Farmer driven R&D, farmer 'buy in' and farmer incentive need to be fundamental to the design of any R&D project and be a 'natural' extension of the project work. Current criticism by farmers about the value gain from R&D levies and accusations of lack of transparency will then diminish.

Research, development and extension:

What stakeholders proposed the Government should consider

Policy idea 20—Strengthening the RD&E system

Collaboration, cross-sector and transformational research and extension have been identified as current gaps in Australia's RD&E system. The Government is interested in ways to promote better rural RD&E coordination and reduce duplication. This includes encouraging closer working relationships between the RDCs, CRCs, CSIRO, universities and other research entities, establishing common RD&E priorities, and assisting farm businesses to innovate by facilitating greater access to R&D tax incentives and the development of private markets in extension services. Views are sought on the options below:

d) Promoting the development of extension services—Many stakeholders said they wanted to ensure that RD&E was effectively delivered to farmers to get the maximum value from levy expenditure. Given the large private benefits from extension, any Government intervention should enable the development of private markets for extension services. This is most likely to occur through co-operative activities that involve private extension providers, the RDCs, universities and State and Territory governments. The Government is seeking stakeholder feedback on ways to promote the development of the market for extension services—such as expanding RDC efforts or specific funds being made available to facilitate the development of extension markets.