



Wimmera CMA

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Agricultural Competitiveness White Paper  
Submission - IP305  
Wimmera Catchment Management Authority  
Submitted 16 April 2014

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

Dear Sir/Madam

**AGRICULTURAL COMPETITIVENESS WHITE PAPER  
– RESPONSE TO THE ISSUES PAPER**

Wimmera CMA welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to inform the development of the Australian Government's Agricultural Competitiveness White Paper. Wimmera CMA recognises the importance of developing effective long term agricultural policies to ensure the agricultural sector remains a significant contributor to the economy and rural communities. Our submission addresses three key areas that we can offer practical advice and feedback.

The Wimmera catchment boundary is located in western Victoria and covers an area of 30,000km<sup>2</sup> or approximately 10 percent of Victoria's land mass. 84% of land in the Wimmera is privately-owned.

The landscape is highly modified and is dominated by broadacre agriculture. The gross value of agricultural production in the region is over \$900 million pa, which represents around 9 percent of the total Gross State Product. Approximately 25 percent of all local residents rely directly upon agriculture for their income. Agriculture is the Wimmera's largest employment source, employing over 5000 locals.

Wimmera CMA is responsible for strategic planning and coordinating actions to improve the management of the region's natural assets, guided by our vision for '*a healthy Wimmera catchment where a resilient landscape supports a sustainable and profitable community*'. This vision is driven by a triple bottom line approach, where the aim is to improve the environment while providing the greatest social and economic benefits for the community.

Wimmera CMA acknowledges the visionary leadership, community ownership and practical on-ground outcomes that have occurred in the Wimmera as a result of strong partnerships between community groups, individuals, government and non-government organisations. We see the development of the Australian Government's Agricultural Competitiveness White Paper as an important initiative for strengthening this existing commitment, further development of the agriculture sector, increase farm profitability and community resilience. .

Should you require any further information or assistance regarding this submission please don't hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely

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## **Issue 2: Farmer decisions for improving farm gate returns**

Potential use of environmental accounts.

As an emerging industry, environmental accounting measures all aspects of land use. The system for environmental economic accounting (SEEA) by the United Nations Statistical Division provides the framework to monitor the environmental and productive flow on effects to the economy.

The Wimmera CMA recently trialled this approach by producing the Wimmera Environmental Accounts developed with Department of Environment and Primary Industries (DEPI). This report shows the economic and environmental state of the Wimmera catchment. Land accounts show the current composition of the landscape in terms of land use, land cover and land value. Ecosystem accounts show the extent and condition of terrestrial, wetland and river ecosystem assets and changes over time.

Further extrapolation of accounts can produce information on land use risks, strategic priorities and opportunity. This information could then be used rationally to influence policy. Including reforms such as drought policy i.e. identify land that has limited agricultural productivity capacity. This land could then be transformed into environmental gains that benefit the entire community, particularly the agricultural sector, through reduced salinity, improved water quality or management of pest plants and animals.

## **Issue 5: Enhancing agriculture's contribution to regional communities**

Wimmera CMA recognises that agriculture must be profitable and sustainable. Continually striving for efficiencies is required for long term economic and social benefits. Equally protecting the social licence for farmers to operate is important. Everyone's objective is to ensure natural resources such as our soils are managed for future farming generations as the current farmers are only short term custodians.

In this context, we emphasise that locally available education for farmers to learn more about their industry in a professional environment is critically important to a strong agricultural sector and strong regional communities.

Wimmera CMA works closely and provides resources to many farmer-driven mentoring groups including the Victorian No-Till Farmers Association and the Wimmera Farming Network. These groups function as effective sources of information and provide advice for local farmers on best management techniques for soil conservation and productivity benefits based on a citizen science approach.

Many Wimmera farmers have also recently undertaken whole farm planning courses run by DEPI and Wimmera CMA and are proactive in collecting information on soils, soil fertility and carbon. Best practice techniques for Wimmera conditions are ever evolving and farmers want to keep pace with new technology and innovation.

We would like to highlight the importance of targeted training and education and institutions like Longerenong College that underpin sector competitiveness and promote career pathways and professional development for the agricultural sector.

Longerenong College itself has built strong partnerships and training opportunities with organisations including Bayer CropScience. Bayer's wheat and oilseed breeding centre at Longerenong College will give college students valuable access to current research and scientists, leverage private investment in the Wimmera, and encourage younger farm workers to gain broader industry experience and contribute to the development of the region.

Agricultural colleges play a large role in attracting to and retaining farmers. In the Wimmera essentially each farming enterprise can be viewed as a multi-million dollar small business.

Access to quality and tailored education facilities are important for Australian agriculture to remain competitive and innovative. It is important that these opportunities are provided locally so participants can continue to learn while contributing to their business and community.

Agriculture is one of the most technologically advanced industries in our region, with some of the lowest levels of phone and data reception, internet connectivity and availability to information like weather radar services. This contradiction presents another significant set of challenges for farmers and others looking to engage the agricultural sector and boost productivity. Improvements in communication technologies will also benefit remote educational opportunities.

## **Issue 7: Reducing ineffective regulations**

NRM bodies like the Wimmera CMA have demonstrated that improvements to the management of natural resources can be achieved through regional programs involving communities and government. To secure these outcomes we develop partnerships with landholders and groups but we also rely on effective regulation and compliance managed by governments.

Improvements can be made to assist local government to play a larger role in improving natural resource management. For example, local government could be given the tools and encouraged to develop local laws that ensure development does no impact on our high quality agricultural land and our ability to improve food security.

Wimmera CMA supports delegation of powers for Federal-based environmental legislation, for example the *Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*, to the State Government. This increases the ability to streamline administrative processes and ensure that landholders can efficiently and effectively meet legislative needs by dealing with a “one stop shop”. This should be supported by a strong monitoring and auditing program to ensure the Australian Government objectives are being met.

Many proponents do not understand the elements of law and how they impact on their day-to-day operations. This is very relevant to the agricultural sector where land managers have multiple interactions with their environment which is regulated on many levels. Wimmera CMA supports the development of “minimum standards”. Codes of Practice or industry standards have been developed in many jurisdictions to articulate minimum standards for certain industries to meet their duty of care or responsibilities under a range of legislation. Codes of Practice provide efficiencies in a number of ways including:

- Developing a clear understanding of what meets a minimum standard under the relevant legislation; and
- Supporting government to reduce red tape by allowing proponents to operate under a code without the need for specific approval where appropriate.

The latter is a very effective approach where it is supported with appropriate notification mechanisms and robust auditing and monitoring programs.

Codes can also be used in compliance cases to demonstrate whether a proponent has met the standard or not.