

# AGRICULTURE AND FOOD POLICY REFERENCE GROUP

## **Landcare**

**Supporting Ecologically Sustainable Agriculture**

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A submission from the:

**Australian Landcare Council**

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### SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The uniquely Australian landcare movement has been a significant innovation in promoting the sustainable use and management of the nation's natural resources. It effectively combines production (agriculture) with environmental issues and has been the catalyst to increased understanding, changing attitudes, and immeasurable contributions from individuals, farm businesses and communities.

The facilitatory role of the National Landcare Program (NLP) has helped galvanise communities and adds value to complementary programs like the Natural Heritage Trust (NHT) and National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality (NAP). Collectively, they are doing much to establish a sustainable base to the agriculture and food production sectors of Australia's economy.

The Australian Landcare Council (ALC) urges the Agriculture and Food Policy Reference Group to recognise the role landcare has played in the sustainable agriculture and food sectors, and to consider how to optimise the future contribution from landcare.

The ALC specifically recommends:

- The various submissions received by the Reference Group be used as input to a National Sustainable Agriculture Summit.
- Research be promoted into innovative, resilient farming systems and their interaction with catchment health; along with measures to engage and share knowledge with local communities.
- Australian Government programs to build farm business management skills be maintained – and strengthened to be more consistent in their availability, delivery and uptake.
- Future regional natural resource management (NRM) programs continue to include measures to promote local landcare initiatives.
- Ongoing effort be made to simplify and enhance the process of applying for funding assistance (e.g. NHT, NAP and Envirofund); map out and explain the fit between various complementary programs; and ensure ready insurance cover is provided to landcare groups. The landcare theme should be bolstered as the philosophic driver of the various programs.
- The Australian Government continue to explore means to promote private investment in landcare-related activities; including taxation incentives.
- Increased effort be made by government to establish principles for resource access, development and management, and to integrate relevant administrative decision making processes, particularly at the State and regional levels.
- Regional communities and industries be involved in the implementation of the National Water Initiative and in designing exceptional circumstances policies to support sustainable agriculture and food sectors in a variable climate.
- Indigenous communities be recognised as having specific interests relevant to Australia's agriculture and food sectors and be accommodated in the future work of the Reference Group.
- Investigations and monitoring be conducted into aspects that have been integral to past successes in NRM in Australia (e.g. volunteerism and landcare) to ensure appropriate measures are available to maintain those strengths into the future.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Australian Landcare Council (ALC) is the Australian Government's peak advisory body on landcare and matters concerning natural resource management. It has a major role in advising the Government on priorities and strategies for natural resource management to achieve efficient, sustainable and equitable management of natural resources in Australia that are consistent with the principles of ecologically sustainable development (see enclosed *Annual Report 2003-04* for more information).

Since the inception of the landcare movement in late 1980s, there has been a significant increase in awareness of environmental matters and their importance in maintaining sustainable agricultural industries, and of the catalysing role that rural and regional communities can play in fostering that ethic.

Landcare has been fundamental to improvements in the sustainability of Australian agriculture. It continues to be relevant and relishes the challenge of continuing to evolve and help the Australian Government ecologically sustainable development in the future.

## 2. COMPETITIVENESS

### 2.1 Sustainable Supply Chains

The ALC has taken an active interest in helping to promote sustainable and profitable agriculture and food sectors. The Agriculture and Food Policy Reference Group provides an ideal opportunity to understand and map out the role of the various key players who all contribute to that overall goal, optimising their collective and individual effectiveness.

It is recommended that:

**The various submissions received by the Reference Group be used as input to a National Sustainable Agriculture Summit.**

The Summit should seek to:

- Understand the production and price interactions for the major agricultural commodities; in the context of the volume and value of national production, Australian processing, Australian consumption and exports and imports (both processed and un-processed).
- Understand the regional and industry implications in terms of production, under different national production scenarios (i.e. if increased exports of a specific commodity are anticipated along with a growing food processing sector, where in Australia is that production likely to come from?)
- Understand the likely regional resource implications of alternative production scenarios (i.e. how much water and land would be required and what would the catchment impacts be?)
- Highlight the nature of farming systems required to balance production, profit and environmental health through the operation of resilient farm businesses.
- Investigate the community resources required to support production (eg business, health and education services; transport, power, communications and water infrastructure; labour; and industry, state and catchment support programs).

The Summit would not generate a precise blue-print for the future, but it would highlight the strategic priorities that required more specific attention – and ensure there was a widespread understanding of what those priorities were, and why.

### 2.2 Research and Development

The farming systems of the future must be based on sound science. That science needs to understand the links between production, profit and environmental sustainability. Farm-scale research needs to link with catchment-scale investigations to understand the interactions and to ensure catchment management and agricultural programs are equally robust.

The potentially challenging nature of such research makes it important to engage local communities, to learn from them and to ensure they understand and accept new findings. A knowledge broking role will be as important as the research itself.

It is recommended that:

**Research be promoted into innovative, resilient farming systems and their interaction with catchment health; along with measures to engage and share knowledge with local communities.**

### 2.3 NRM Education and Technology Adoption

It is understood that resilience in agricultural businesses is influenced more by management than by underlying resource values (e.g. soils or climate). Education, diversification and preparedness to learn and work as part of a community (e.g. landcare membership) are important drivers.

Programs like FarmBis and Property Management Planning (whole farm planning and risk management) have been effective in building resilient farming enterprises for those involved. Attracting more producers to them and improving the consistency of approach, content and delivery are the next challenges to optimise their quality and value.

It is recommended that:

**Australian Government programs to build farm business management skills be maintained – and strengthened to be more consistent in their availability, delivery and uptake.**

## 3. USING AND MANAGING NATURAL RESOURCES

### 3.1 Achieving Natural Resource Management Benefits

The 'regional delivery model' developed by the Australian Government for programs such as the NHT and NAP is endorsed as a positive direction likely to promote sound outcomes. However, the model is still new and requires close monitoring and management to ensure its potential is achieved.

Critical aspects will be the links between other stakeholders and the regional natural resource management (NRM) bodies; complementing Australian Government investments with other funds, and keeping it 'simple' for administrators, communities and land managers.

Landcare groups often form at a district scale and are powerful mechanisms to energise local resources in planning and implementing works and learning activities. It is imperative that catchment and regional NRM bodies foster such groups and their relationship with them. The voluntary contributions (in terms of funds and time) generated by landcare should not be taken for granted.

It is recommended that:

**Future regional NRM programs continue to include measures to promote local landcare initiatives.**

A regional focus for the delivery of various Australian Government programs provides an opportunity to further simplify means for land managers and local communities to become engaged in landcare-type activities. The apparent plethora of programs may be required to achieve different, complementary goals, but the sophistication of their structure can be bewildering for those unaccustomed to the 'system'. Ongoing effort is required to make it easy for interested parties to be involved in the programs; e.g. with standardised application processes and offering public liability insurance.

Landcare is widely recognised and supported. That strength should be put to use by building on the 'brand image' and using landcare as an 'umbrella' for programs – each with its own purpose, but clearly linked as part of the nation's landcare portfolio.

It is recommended that:

**Ongoing effort be made to simplify and enhance the process of applying for funding assistance (e.g. NHT, NAP and Envirofund); map out and explain the fit between various complementary programs; and ensure ready insurance cover is provided to landcare groups. The landcare theme should be bolstered as the philosophic driver of the various programs.**

The support of the Australian Government through programs like NHT, NAP, NLP and Landcare Coordinators and Facilitators has been critical to stimulating the investment of many times more funding by communities and landholders. Greater recognition of the public good arising from those personal expenditures could further increase such contributions.

While those programs must persist, there also need to be more avenues available to introduce alternative funds and other resources. Programs should be promoted to attract private investors; along with the provision of taxation rebates and investment incentives for companies and individuals.

It is recommended that:

**The Australian Government continue to explore means to promote private investment in landcare-related activities, including taxation incentives.**

### 3.2 Resource Access

Access to resources required for production, a 'duty of care' to protect natural resources, rights to use and develop resources, and concepts such as 'public good', 'beneficiary pays' and 'polluter pays' have become entangled in current debates. There are practical ramifications from that confusion, such as inconsistencies and an apparent lack of connection between decisions affecting land-use change and the development of new industries, water allocation and use, peri-urban development, native vegetation clearance, and regional community aspirations.

Reduced investor confidence and unsatisfactory outcomes (e.g. inappropriately located or managed developments) result. Once a change in land-use or a development has occurred (often approved by local government) then the environmental consequences must be managed via environmental legislation (often administered via State governments or their regional authorities) or community-based NRM programs (funded largely by the Australian Government).

It is recommended that:

**Increased effort be made by government to establish principles for resource access, development and management, and to integrate relevant administrative decision making processes, particularly at the State and regional levels.**

### 3.3 Climate Variability and Change

Predictions of climate change and increased variability pose significant challenges to Australian agriculture and food sectors. Water is likely to continue to increase in value as a means to stabilise fluctuating production and produce quality.

For governments, even more attention will be required to exceptional circumstances policies – dealing with floods and droughts (including in irrigation districts). This may impact on regional adjustment policies. The importance of risk management training for producers has already been mentioned.

The National Water Initiative will address many issues presented by a more variable climate, but it will need to interact closely with industries and especially with regional NRM bodies. Measures to ensure the required regional connection are not yet evident.

It is recommended that:

**Regional communities and industries be involved in the implementation of the National Water Initiative and in designing exceptional circumstances policies to support sustainable agriculture and food sectors in a variable climate.**

This could be one of the benefits to flow from improved, joint understanding generated by the National Sustainable Agriculture Summit proposed earlier in this paper.

## 4. RURAL AND REGIONAL COMMUNITIES

### 4.1 Indigenous Communities

The ALC recognises that significant tracts of land are managed by Indigenous communities across Australia. Some properties are managed for commercial food production (e.g. cattle), some with Indigenous foods or tourism in mind, and others for strong social objectives. Members of these communities often hold knowledge of natural resources that is yet to be learnt by Western science; and Indigenous culture requires tailored approaches to consultation and decision making – whether that be in remote or near-urban locations.

It is recommended that:

**Indigenous communities be recognised as having specific interests relevant to Australia's agriculture and food sectors and be accommodated in future work of the Reference Group.**

### 4.2 Implications of Change

The farming and regional community structures of just a few decades ago are now distinctly different in many parts of Australia. New industries (often irrigated) have appeared; new business structures are evident (often linked to processors or retailers); fewer, larger enterprises dominate production; yet smaller, more diverse producers are also evident (often closely aligned to specific markets).

Communities and social 'norms' are also changing and will continue to do so into the future. There may be changes to the wealth distribution in (and between) regions as different commodities change in relative prosperity, the role of women and the influence of their attitudes may be further increased, and new forms of social isolation and dislocation may occur via uneven access to communication and transport systems.

Australia's advances in resource management through programs like landcare have relied heavily on 'volunteerism'. It brings with it both additional resources, and also wonderful opportunities for two-way learning, perspective sharing and community building. 'Volunteerism' should not be undervalued or calmly assumed to persist forever without recognition and support.

It is recommended that:

**Investigations and monitoring be conducted into aspects that have been integral to past successes in NRM in Australia (e.g. volunteerism and landcare) to ensure appropriate measures are available to maintain those past strengths into the future.**