VICTORIAN CMA FORUM SUBMISSION TO:

AGRICULTURE AND FOOD POLICY REFERENCE GROUP

Catchment Management Authorities

1. This submission has been prepared by the Victorian Catchment Management Authority (CMA) Forum which comprises the Chairs of all ten Victorian CMAs and the Victorian Catchment Management Council. One of the most important tasks of CMAs is to encourage and integrate catchment condition improvements in association with others – particularly the agriculture and food production sectors.

2. The Victorian Government established CMAs in 1997 to further its commitment to integrated catchment management as an important way of achieving sustainability. As illustrated in *Growing Victoria Together,* the Victorian Government gives high priority to the concept of integrated catchment management as a basis for sustainable use of land and water resources, and to biodiversity.

3. Halting degradation, restoring natural resources, promoting sustainable development, building cohesive communities and protecting the environment for future generations requires the integration of ecological, economic and social objectives. CMAs are the only bodies set up to achieve such integration in Victoria.

4. Victoria is divided into ten catchment regions, each with a CMA. The Minister for Environment and Water appoints the Chair and Directors of these statutory authorities, and the CMAs work closely with his Department of Sustainability and Environment. The Victorian CMA model has been emulated throughout Australia.

5. Our submission is primarily directed at issues identified in Part D of your document *Ensuring a profitable and sustainable agriculture and food sector in Australia - Issues for consideration.*

Part D Using and managing natural resources

Catchment management and agriculture

6. Victorian CMAs share a vision for the sustainable and profitable use of natural resources in a way that protects and improves the condition of catchments.

7. Since most land in catchments is privately owned and used for agriculture, the management of that land has a large bearing on catchment condition. The Victorian Catchment Management Council produces, every five years, a report on Victoria's catchments' conditions. Measurement of condition is a fledgling science, and more effort is needed in this area.

8. Catchment condition is affected by two broad factors: the proportion of deep-rooted perennial vegetation; and the proportion of water resources extracted for consumptive uses. (These broad factors include pest plants and animals, and biodiversity).

9. Although both factors are associated with agricultural land development, it is also true that developed agricultural land can be – and is being - managed to give good catchment condition.

10. When agricultural land is managed to minimise degradation of its natural assets (soil, water, vegetation, and biodiversity) then good catchment condition will follow.

11. Simple measures to maintain and improve catchment condition are in many places well understood and applied, but it must be acknowledged that more science is needed to understand how to remedy badly degraded assets, particularly rivers and wetlands, not to mention soils.

Sharing the burden

12. Financial profitability of good agricultural land management is a prerequisite for reducing degradation and improving sustainability. Declining terms of trade in agriculture make profitability a continual challenge.

13. Also, in the long term, agricultural profitability depends on minimising degradation of natural assets used in agriculture. Many land managers have found it financially difficult to undertake these longer-term investments on their own.

14. The impact of this in Victoria is seen through changing land tenure, with farmers moving out of broad-acre grazing. In areas where land does not have a high amenity value for lifestyle owners, the Government may need to consider alternatives for managing that land.

15. Because good catchment condition provides public as well as private benefits, Governments (Victorian and Australian) have funded land and water improvement projects on agricultural land. Landholders have co-funded such projects in cash and in kind, in magnitudes often exceeding Government contributions. The results of this co-investment are readily demonstrated in regions that started early on this path.

16. Catchments provide ecosystem services (eg clean water, clean air, biodiversity, pleasant landscapes) to all Australians, and CMAs believe there are benefits in exploring alternative ways of sharing the costs of providing these services. Market-based incentives are a promising area of exploration here.

17. Healthy catchments will also assist food marketing based on a “clean and green” image, and the development of accredited Environmental Management Systems will provide strong market based incentives for improving private land management.

Catchment Management and Landcare

18. The Landcare model demonstrates that government funding of land management projects is an effective combination in improving land and water condition.

19. The CMA model in Victoria is conceptually consistent with the Landcare model, necessitated by the increased magnitude of government funding and requirements for public accountability.

20. The so-called ‘regional model’ for delivering government funds to private land and water projects has been successful because it is based on public-private partnerships, and because projects are initiated and executed by land managers.

21. It is also successful because it allows integration of all aspects of catchment health: soil, vegetation, waterways and wetlands, pest plant and animals and coastal impacts.

22. A significant factor in catchment health is the management of native vegetation. While Victoria, like most States, has clearance controls in place, there may be opportunities to explore refinements, such as accredited longer-term whole-farm plans which include commitments to manage native vegetation.

Conclusion

23. The concluding message is that agriculture and food policy should include support for appropriate government funding of land and water management projects that will minimise degradation and enhance rehabilitation of land and water and biodiversity resources. These together will help to make agriculture and food production more profitable and sustainable in the long term.

24. In the prioritisation of such funding, on-ground works must rate highly, as should community capacity-building. But effort is also required in new knowledge acquisition and dissemination, and in measuring catchment condition.