

## **Submission by Australian Women in Agriculture Limited:**

### **Future Operating environment**

#### **Lack of government commitment to the agricultural sector and a lack of recognition of the sector's contribution to the nation's longer term economic, social and environmental wellbeing.**

- \* Current government policies at all levels (based on same principles of efficiency and effectiveness) mean there are short term gains for agencies' bottom lines, but a loss of services to rural Australia. Where is the big picture thinking about the effect of this short-sighted policy making? Rural Australia IS in decline. What strategies are in place?
- \* The Australian Government and more importantly, Australian people from all walks of life, need to understand the importance of the agricultural sector, the effects on everybody's wellbeing and prosperity that is underpinned by the sector.
- \* Businesses need to develop higher level competencies to manage increasingly complex global business demands.
- \* The 'Get big or get out' mentality and corporatisation of farming results in the demise of rural communities. The current focus on efficiency and productivity only has a short shelf life. We are already the world's most efficient and effective producers yet do not share the business profit margins of our international counterparts.

#### **Reduced farm gate prices and cost squeeze**

- \* Corporations are using buying power to lock our local suppliers and squeeze down prices. The current competition policy is not in the best interest of micro and small businesses which happens to be most of rural Australia!

#### **The need to assist young farmers to get into the industry**

- \* Our ageing farmers are in need of reassurance that their industry has a future. We need to 'talk up' farming. There needs to be an advertising campaign showing farmers of all ages. The positives of farming business and life need to be emphasised and there are many positives. Farmers are dynamic, educated and highly skilled, innovative people who run many different sized farming operations.
- \* New models of farm ownership, financing and management need to be investigated to encourage new players and old to enter the industry or work smarter.

#### **International Markets**

- \* Greater input is required from all stakeholders into the impact of trade agreements. The mainstream farmer representative bodies are not necessarily representative of broader industry players.
- \* Continued funding of the Farmbis program is needed to facilitate the uptake of training in marketing skills, politics of world trade, FTA's, supply chain management and related areas.
- \* We suggest Australian branding of products to incorporate the clean and green image. More emphasis needs to be put on our Australian branding and pressure applied to see it implemented on a broad scale, both domestically and globally.
- \* We need to have enforced high standards of goods that enter the country. There should be strict quality specifications that import products must pass in order to be imported. It is important that other primary producers in other countries are growing and supplying goods that have the same QA requirements as those that we grow and use domestically or export.

#### **Domestic Market**

- \* There must be genuine community engagement as opposed to token community consultation. Ridiculous time frames that don't recognize the multiple roles of rural

people restrict the important and highly valuable input needed for informed decision making.

- \* The contribution of rural volunteers needs to be calculated and added to the nation's GDP.
- \* Consumers should be educated to understand the changing trends and requirements of farmers within their businesses, such as QA programs etc and the associated costs of these regulatory requirements.
- \* We call for improved labelling to ensure consumers know exactly what they are buying. This should identify exactly where the product has come from. We need to encourage Australians to buy Australian.

#### **Education Skills and Labour supply**

- \* We recommend increased participation of women in industry decision making by addressing the barriers to their representation and participation on industry programs, boards and committees.
- \* "Holistic Strategic Planning" that encompasses business planning at every level needs to be encouraged. This should include early succession planning and the uptake of new technology, to fully equip all members of the farming business to move the business forward successfully.
- \* Strong and vibrant rural communities are needed to attract labour to rural areas. If we continue to see the decline in our country towns and loss of services to rural communities, there is no incentive for people to come and be part of that community or indeed stay in that community. A vicious cycle has been created that needs to be stopped and communities need reinvigorating.
- \* Many of our primary industries are dependant on seasonal workers that may or may not be itinerant. We need to assist this very important employment sector to be up-skilled when necessary. This may include specific training programs so that there then becomes a base of skilled workers available. Again we need to encourage people to enter primary production and for them to see it as a career path.
- \* Continued improvement in childcare resourcing (including training of child carers) and facilities to allow for the return to the workforce of women in rural areas should be a major priority.
- \* We recommend continual raising of the profile of all environmental based programs to include early education in schools. Understanding of the effort and financial commitment that rural, remote and regional Australians contribute to the greater good of sustainability should be promoted, not in relation to farming land but the whole environment.
- \* We strongly urge continued funding of the Farmbis program and models of service delivery that are not based on urban models and 'magic numbers'.

#### **Research Development Innovation and Technology**

- \* The importance of research into rural sociology needs to be stressed. This research gives us insights into the coping (or not coping) mechanisms that rural families and communities adopt when faced with natural disasters, loss of markets, loss of services, mental health problems and youth suicide. Using case studies that show positive outcomes that may influence other families or communities and instigate change is recommended.
- \* There should also be research into the use of telecommunications for businesses in rural areas that by their very nature, keep others in rural areas. This is especially important for women who run a home-based business that impacts less on families and allows them to remain within the rural areas.
- \* There should be research into value-adding potential for agricultural commodities.
- \* Likewise we recommend continued research into sustainable systems for each of our industry groups.
- \* We stress that research should be done 'with', not 'to' regional businesses and communities, recognizing the amazing assets and innovation of rural, regional and remote people.

- \* The contribution to innovation and value-adding that women have brought to agriculture needs to be recognised, quantified and assessed.
- \* There also needs to be better forecasting and planning on the part of governments in regards to the impact of rural decline on our nation's wellbeing.

### **Technology adoption**

- \* This is most important in the new and emerging industries and in value-adding of products. Support needs to be given for the uptake of this technology and the development of the technology through other industry areas.
- \* There also is a requirement for an associated infrastructure that supports the new and innovative technology, without this the uptake is limited and of little value.

### **Infrastructure in the Agriculture and Food Sector**

- \* Governments need to support and facilitate the supply of labour to rural, regional and remote areas.
- \* Road infrastructure is in need of upgrading to provide competitive access to markets for rural and in particular remote communities. There are still large sections of highways subject to flooding and dust holes, repairs only carried out as a result of natural causes, not as a matter of course.
- \* The electrical power supply for much of rural Australia is still the SWER system of supply, if farmers are to remain competitive, adopt new technologies; this system is in desperate need of upgrading to at least a Three Phase System. The SWER system was a temporary system installed, never intended as the main source of rural supply, we are subject to constant fluctuations and supply interruptions. Modern technology is simply not compatible with this antiquated system.
- \* Telecommunications - Rural Australia is still subject to a telecommunications system that is subservient to our city neighbours. The result being that there are still parts of Australia with paper coated lead cables leading to a constant interruption of supply when wet. The systems in place in rural communities do not lend themselves to the uptake of technologies to enable farmers to be competitive in the market place with the supply and purchase of associated goods and commodities.

### **Water**

- \* Primary producers will continue to be more and more accountable for the conservation of water resources for the greater good of all Australians. It is imperative that the entire Australian population plays a role in water conservation and is educated to be water-wise.
- \* Water rights – tradeable water within the same stream, not as a commercial investment, there is the potential for good arable land to be left dry and worthless.

### **Biosecurity and Quarantine**

- \* We strongly recommend the processes of risk assessment by Biosecurity Australia be improved and streamlined.

### **Rural Businesses and Communities**

- \* Women are significantly under-represented in rural and regional decision making bodies. Rural Women's Units provide support to reverse this inequity. They continue to be under resourced to provide this and other vital network roles. Funding for these vitally important services needs to be increased.
- \* Statistics and research still seriously underestimate the value to real farm work that women contribute. We need to ensure that statistics and research are improved to recognise women's true value to the industry.
- \* The effects of off-farm income on Exceptional Circumstances assistance needs to be reassessed recognising that this income often allows for mere subsistence of those families.
- \* Access to services for many is inadequate. Public transport is inadequate in rural and regional areas and in many cases in remote areas is non-existent. This

breakdown in rural communities puts an enormous burden on community volunteers. The burn-out of these volunteers is becoming more and more evident. Unfortunately the government has become dependant on these volunteers to do much of the work that should be catered for by governments at all levels.

- \* There must be adequate and appropriate provision of the following health services for rural, regional and remote communities – mental health, obstetrics, gynaecology, dental, oncology, child health etc. There should be safety provisions for victims of domestic violence in rural and regional communities.
- \* Rural and regional communities should be offered appropriate support so that they can identify opportunities for development.
- \* We recommend increased funding support for all rural, regional and remote women and girls and that their inclusion in primary production be encouraged at all levels. Our industry and our government are missing out on 50% of the available workforce if they do not commit to the advancement of women in this industry.

We encourage a whole of government - Federal, State and Local - commitment to rural Australia. We need all areas working together for the greater good of our industry instead of point scoring against one another or vote counting as elections draw near.

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*These views are collated as a representative view of members of the Australian Women in Agriculture Limited and do not pertain to be the personal views of each and every member of the organisation.*