

Inquiry into Government Drought Support

In answering the challenging question of “How to optimise farmer acceptance of practice change in a variable climate”, Mallee Sustainable Farming proposes to the productivity commission the following two scenarios in delivering research and extension activities to landholders.

Scenario 1: Traditional forms of research and extension methodologies have a proven track record in assisting farmers to practice change. Applying adaptive research to on-farm demonstrations and subsequently communicating this to landholders through field days, crop walks, workshops, publications, CDs and DVDs are all accepted and proven tools. Topics to employ these tactics could include agronomy, mixed farming integrations, animal and plant nutrition, business and farm economics management which all provide capacity building skills to cope with seasonal conditions. This model can use current factual or anecdotal evidence and is delivered by state agency staff, farming systems organisations and/or agri-industry advisers. This method generally concentrates on the industry issues that are dominant in the farm environment at a particular point of time and is responsive to environmental barriers. Examples of farm management strategies include (for the cereal production industries) seed versus hay production or for the livestock industries (sheep) wool versus meat production.

Scenario 2: In addition to the traditional on-farm research and extension delivery sites and field days, the creation of small groups of like-minded farmers (group sized limited to 6 participants) work together to co-trial, co-develop and share resources, experiences and results. The farmer group is managed by a suitably qualified facilitator from a farming systems group who has access to private consultants/advisors. This combination can therefore provide a range of services in agronomy, livestock, marketing and finance etc in order to support farmers’ endeavours in adapting to practice change. After a few years of such service, landholders would be expected to co-contribute to continue to receive farm specific management advice. It is expected that one facilitator could service approximately ten (10) groups. Over time, the service provided by the consultant/adviser would be available on-line in a team chat-room over the internet. This scenario works best when farmers identify and take ownership of the activities.

Such scenarios can be applied to any agricultural industry.

In an ideal world of government funding, it is necessary to fund support programs for a minimum of five years to a maximum of ten (10) years. This ensures that farmers are fully engaged and fully prepared to be self-reliant. They can then capitalise on a myriad of management strategies when seasonal or marketing changes either positively or negatively impact their business. By providing a longer term framework, reliance on government support services will be reduced as landholders would learn strategies against both short-term and long-term changes.

In addition, long term programs offer support to the agribusiness and government sector as it provides certainty and stability for careers in the agricultural employment market. This in turn allows for capacity building of personnel familiar with the conditions and requirements of the region and these experienced staff can match the farming systems management needs to that of the community. By building on regional staff capabilities, there is a complimentary benefit to the landholder where trust and confidence is gained as

the region has ownership of the expertise. Research programs are best contracted out to government agencies such as CSIRO, state authorities, universities and farming systems groups. Evaluation of such services needs to be on-going with formal reviews conducted every three years.

Mallee Sustainable Farming Inc currently uses both scenarios presented in this submission. The second scenario is being piloted with pleasing success in the first phase and this has led to farm specific services in a local environment resulting in greater adoption.