



24th June 2010

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Ms Yvette Goss
Inquiry into Rural Research and Development Corporations
Productivity Commission
Locked Bag 2, Collins St. East
Melbourne, VIC 8003 Australia

Dear Yvette,

Re: Inquiry into Rural Research and Development Corporations

The South Australian Murray-Darling Basin Natural Resources Management Board (the Board) region covers an area of approximately 5.6 million hectares and is one of the state's most ecologically diverse and agriculturally productive regions. The Board recognises the importance of achieving a balance between our collective need for resources and the needs of the environment.

While the Board does not deliver large scale research and development services it seeks to invest in R&D activities and actively facilitate the extension and the adoption of relevant research outcomes across the region. In July 2009 the Board adopted its first Regional Natural Resource Management Plan (the Plan) which was developed on the basis of best available knowledge by drawing upon as much of the recent R&D conducted in the SA MDB Region as possible.

This submission does not seek to directly address all of the questions posed in the Productivity Commission's issues paper but instead is based on the experiences of the Board interacting with research and development at a regional level.

The submission is specifically focused on the irrigated agricultural sector that is a key economic contributor to the region but also a significant consumer of the region's natural resources. The submission has also been developed in the context of the CRC *for* Irrigation Futures and the National Program Sustainable Irrigation concluding on June 2010 and June 2011 respectively.

Considerable research and development efforts addressing key land and water issues impacting the SA MDB region including improved water use efficiency and rootzone salinity management have been funded through both State and National R&D programs. While efforts have been made to extend the outcomes of R&D to regional landholders it has often proven difficult to effectively engage with the research providers in order to facilitate extension and adoption.

There appears to be several reasons why extension and adoption of R&D is poor with a key contributor being the absence of a more clearly defined process to make this happen. It is acknowledged that it is not necessarily the role of the researcher to also provide extension and hence support adoption however it must be included as a vital component of the overall research plan. This issue has been exacerbated in recent times by the loss of independent (generally government funded) extension personnel to assist land managers to adopt relevant research outcomes.

Future monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement (MERI) must include R&D adoption as this is the ultimate measure of success and the return on investment. Publishing a final report, while a good public relations exercise for the researcher and organisation involved is simply an output and does not deliver any quantifiable on-ground outcomes. This is extremely important given the level of public funds that are invested in R&D through the current model and the need to justify the broader public good arising from the investment.

Much of the production system and NRM focused R&D activity in the SA MDB has been on the back of significant investment through joint Commonwealth and State funding programs such as the *National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality (NAP)* and the *Natural Heritage Trust (NHT)*. Following the conclusion of the NAP and NHT programs on the 30th June 2008 there has been a significant shift in Commonwealth funding priorities under the new NRM initiative *Caring for our Country*.

The Centre for Natural Resource Management (CNRM) was established by the South Australian and the Australian Government to administer \$11 million of research funding through the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality.

The CNRM facilitated the prioritisation of Natural Resource Management (NRM) research at the strategic, state and regional levels. It also served as a linker, facilitator and broker of knowledge, and sought to ensure productive partnerships between regional communities, research institutions, government agencies and private industry. The CNRM ceased when the NAP program concluded.

Significant funding (\$12.9 billion) has been allocated by the Commonwealth Government to the *Water for the Future* program however none of this investment is available to support R&D activities yet it is very likely investment in this area could contribute to achieving the high level goals of the program.

As a regional natural resource manager the Board would prefer an R&D model that encourages more projects that have cross industry benefits and that contribute to broader NRM outcomes. This is especially important into the future in the absence of a peak body to coordinate irrigation related R&D. The Board acknowledges the inclusion of the cross industry sector - *Water Use in Agriculture* in the developing National Primary Industries Research, Development and Extension (RD&E) Framework however does have reservations with this model also.

The Board while welcoming the framework's intent to deliver "greater collaboration and promote continuous improvement in the investment of RD&E resources nationally" is concerned with how the Extension (E) and Adoption (A) elements will be delivered. Given it is proposed to prioritise research in specific sectors and across jurisdictions then it will be even more critical to ensure that the E & A is adequately resourced and implemented.

The current model has certainly contributed to overlap and this has been clearly evident in recent times with similarly focused R&D activities occurring in isolation and without clearly defined linkages. This is not unexpected however as the current RDC model is aligned with commodities and therefore will invest in industry (as opposed to cross sector) specific priorities.

The above point is particularly relevant for the irrigation industry and hence future irrigation related R&D as many of the current RDC's are connected with irrigated commodities yet there appears to be very little collaboration between the RDC's R&D activities. An opportunity exists as part of this review to significantly improve cross commodity collaboration and communication and avoid duplication of R&D efforts.

There is no doubt that irrigators in the Murray-Darling Basin will need to continue to find further efficiencies in their production systems in order to deliver 'more with less' and therefore it is vitally important that R&D continue to be funded to achieve this outcome.

An opportunity exists to implement a more integrated and collaborative model to steer irrigation related R&D but most importantly this model must place far greater emphasis on, and invest in the extension and adoption of the research outcomes.

Yours faithfully

Michael Cutting

**Principal Project Officer – Sustainable Irrigation
South Australian Murray-Darling Basin Natural Resources Management Board**

References

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