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Dear Sir /Madam,

Thankyou for the opportunity to comment on the Productivity Commission's draft report on Rural Industries Research and Development Corporations. As an industry funded researcher for over 20 years, covering 3 RDC's and one CRC as funding sources, I hope my comments have some validity.

Firstly is a concern regarding the allocation of funding. I believe the adage "the noisiest wheel gets the most attention" is often very true in RDC funding, where the capacity to lobby relevant people within the organisations can be very beneficial in securing funding. For some years I was supported by the Grains RDC to investigate the relative sustainability of organic and biodynamic arable farming systems. While I was very fortunate to receive this support, the allocation of funding in the direction of alternative farming systems was no match for the proportion of levies paid by organic growers. As a result, they felt very discriminated against by the system, and while RIRDC was supposed to be supporting research in this area, its funding allocation was pathetically small. This was unfortunate as in many cases deliverable outcomes in improving the productivity and sustainability of the alternative systems could have been of direct benefit to conventional growers as well, but this was not recognized at the time.

Another moot point which does not get mentioned within the document is the people who do the research. The present funding model of the RDC's I believe is very wasteful in terms of monetary and personnel time. Frequently field based research requires greater than three years to obtain meaningful results, but that is the maximum time allocation to most research projects. Without the recognition that people (researchers may also be considered as a component of working families) work best when they don't have to worry about their employment future, money is wasted on many short term funding programs. Researchers are often more focussed on their future employment than the work they are meant to be doing, and will often move to another source of more secure funding part way through a project, taking with them considerable amounts of social and intellectual capital.

The present funding model I believe should therefore be changed to provide better outcomes for the government, levy payers and research personnel. A significant proportion of the funding should be provided to the major research organisations as a block funding grant for a minimum of 7 years, in a similar way to many of the CRC's. Industry needs to be widely consulted in developing research proposals, but it must also be recognized that industry often does not know what it needs to know (for example in long term environmental sustainability). Researchers of proven capability then need to be provided with continuing status for that period, so they can concentrate on their work. Within that time, they need to be given credit not just for the scientific publications they write, but for the meetings, seminars, field days, industry magazines and workshops which they also contribute to. In talking to many growers throughout my working career, I feel very confident that they would much prefer this model for the researchers to work under, and it would certainly be preferred by the research community. It is quite distressing to see the massive amounts of money that are allocated to rural research in Australia and to see researchers such as myself remaining on short term contracts (25 contracts in 21 years) with no job security being so commonplace.

I am happy to talk about these issues further should that be the committee's wish.

Yours sincerely,

Chris Penfold

Research Fellow