



Agricultural Research Western Australia

Submission Received
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Presented by Dr Cox.

SUBMISSION NO. 95

Standing Committee for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (SCAFF) Inquiry into Rural Skills, Education, Training and Research Workshop.

The Commonwealth Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, the Hon Warren Truss, has asked the Standing Committee on Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (SCAFF) to inquire into Rural Skills Training and Research.

The Committee has invited interested persons and organisations to make submissions on the inquiry's Terms of Reference,

The following report is submitted by Agricultural Research Western Australia on behalf of a number of Western Australian industry, research and education organisations involved in the State's broader agricultural sectors.

The report's findings were developed by way of a workshop, focusing on the research aspects of the inquiry, and involving participants from across the spectra of relevant industry and government stakeholders. The ARWA workshop was held in conjunction with a similar workshop sponsored by the Department of Agriculture (DAWA) and focused on skills aspects of the inquiry.

The report outlines the pros and cons of current arrangements - and the key mid-term risks and opportunities - in regard to three of the inquiry's four Terms of Reference. This report does not consider Term of Reference (ToR) No. 2.

The report proposes a range of specific actions that the Commonwealth Government might consider in its efforts to maximise Australia's benefit from our agricultural, fisheries and forestry industries.

Dr Walter Cox
Chairman
Agricultural Research Western Australia
20 July 2005

ToR. 1: The availability and adequacy of education and research services in the agriculture sector, including access to vocational training and pathways from vocational education and training to tertiary education and work.

What's Good?

A **strong and diverse** research capability has provided strong and consistent productivity gains.

DAWA's network of offices - coupled with a **vigorous agricultural consultancy** sector - provides an effective means of identifying research needs and facilitating the adoption of research products.

Close cooperation between industry, DAWA, the universities and others has increased the effectiveness of the State's physical and intellectual resources.

The newly-created *Agricultural Research Western Australia (ARWA)* - a joint venture between DAWA and the Western Australian universities involved in agriculture - will both increase the **extent of cooperation** and ensure that cooperative **research is strategically based**. This is seen as essential to providing the depth and breadth of capability needed to address major, rather than ephemeral issues.

What's not so Good?

In regard to research, the principal constraint is an **inability to source researchers** in sufficient number and of appropriate quality. This stems from:

- The poor image of agriculture (both research and practice) as either a career or an essential, long-term component of Australia's economy and society;
- the lack of flexible pathways by which students and others can access the range of education and training that is available;
- the inherent high cost of many agriculturally-oriented courses; and
- agriculture's inability to offer competitive employment conditions.

As a result, the tertiary sector is **unable to provide enough graduates** to meet the needs of the broader agricultural sector.

In terms of research direction, an **overemphasis on production research** is at the expense of business management, environmental and social issues.

What could SCAFF Instigate?

Current student/course selection processes mean that quality students tend to select courses on the basis of their 'glamour' rather than their inherent worth.

It is recommended that SCAFF:

- Seek to amend the course selection and/or funding processes so as to **increase the uptake** of currently available courses; and to **broaden the teaching focus** to more meaningfully address non-production issues.
- Seek to facilitate a program within schools and the wider community to **promote agriculture** both as a career and an essential component of the nation.

ToR 3: The provision of extension and advisory services to agricultural industries, including links and coordination between education, research and extension.

The research workshop considered that:

What's Good?

- **Recognition** of the need for, and involvement in, extension processes by researchers across all relevant research organisations has led to a high uptake on research products.
- An emphasis within DAWA on its role as an information **wholesaler**, with private consultants as the **retailer** makes best use of available resources.
- The strong industry involvement in major **research reporting events** such as the annual 'Crop Update' series provides a highly effective means of driving uptake.
- The strategic approach to research planning within ARWA, and its strong **emphasis on outcome delivery**, will considerably enhance the current extension capabilities.

What's not so good?

- Researchers' **limited understanding of industry's preferences** in regard to extension processes and the accessing, selection and use of information.
- **Tensions** between the provision and sharing of information, both in regard to the relationship between public and commercial providers and its provision on a free versus fee-for service basis.
- Inadequate serious incorporation of farmers in the research process, with a consequent lack of ownership and understanding by those who should be the 'early adopters'.

What could SCAFF Instigate?

It is recommended that SCAFF:

- Seek to **showcase collaborative research and extension** processes that are best practice, demonstrating the benefits of strong extension planning and meaningful industry involvement.
- Seek to establish policy setting that raise the importance of industry involvement and product delivery as **assessment criteria for research funding**.

ToR 4: The role of the Australian government in supporting education, research and advisory programs to support the viability and sustainability of Australian agriculture.

The research workshop considered that the Australian Government's primary role is to provide **consistent and transparent policy settings** that foster research **focused on key, 'deep', long-term issues** that determine agriculture's ability to provide benefit to the nation.

What's Good?

- Major Commonwealth initiatives, such as the **Cooperative Research Centre** and **CSIRO Flagship Project** programs continue to provide significant benefit to the agricultural sector and the broader Australian society and environment.
- Policy settings within the Department of Education, Science & Training, such as the **National Research Priorities** and proposed **Research Quality Framework** are significantly increasing Australia's return on its research investment.
- Policy settings within the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries & Forestry, such as the evolving '**Team Australia**' concept (national research, regional development and local extension) are driving the performance of agricultural research.
- The **matching of industry contributions** towards agricultural research through the Rural Industry Research and Development Corporations, continues to provide the basis for supporting an Australian agricultural research capability.

What's not so good?

- **Frequent changes** to policy settings and administrative processes hinder the major, long-term research, development and extension efforts needed to address the 'really deep' issues that determine agriculture's viability and contribution.
- A **shift of focus away from agriculture** in favour largely of mining – which belies that reality that *'the farm will still be there long after the mine has closed'*. This shift, evident at all levels of government, feeds the image problems outlined earlier; and threatens agriculture's ability to survive the 'golden age of mining'.
- (Workshop participants noted that a similar loss of focus in regard to various other sectors was having an across-the-board impact on the level of scientific skills throughout Australia.)

What can SCAFF do to promote the Australian Government's role?

It is recommended that SCAFF:

- Seek to **strengthen interest in the sciences** at the school level; and encourage the creation of additional places in undergraduate and postgraduate science courses.
- Seek to establish and foster an emphasis on a bold vision to establish a '**new agriculture**' based on threshold advances in agricultural products and production technologies – and with a central premise of true sustainability.