

**Inquiry into future water supplies for Australia's rural industries
and communities**

Secretary: *A. P. ...*

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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON
AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES
AND FORESTRY

SUBMISSION

To

**House of Representatives Standing Committee on Agriculture
Fisheries and Forestry**

Prepared by:-

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The Western Australian Farmers Federation (Inc)

The Western Australian Farmers Federation (Inc) (WAFarmers) is WA's largest and most influential rural lobby and service organisation.

WAFarmers represents West Australian farmers from a range of primary industries including grain growers, meat and wool producers, horticulturalists, dairy farmers and beekeepers. WAFarmers has recently expanded its membership base to incorporate rural small business owners.

It is estimated that collectively our members are major contributors to the \$4.5 billion gross value of production that agriculture in its various forms contributes to Western Australia's economy.

Additionally, through differing forms of land tenure, our members own, control and capably manage many millions of hectares of the State's land mass and as such are responsible for maintaining the productive capacity and environmental well being of that land.

TERMS OF REFERENCE

1. The role of the Commonwealth in ensuring adequate and sustainable supply of water in rural and regional Australia

WAFarmers believes that the Commonwealth Government should provide leadership and enter into agreements with the States and Territories to ensure that farmers across all agricultural commodities have access and entitlement to water resources sufficient to meet their needs in operating a viable farming enterprise.

Western Australia has the largest landmass of any Australian State or Territory. As a result, the State also has a diverse range of climatic conditions, seasonal variability and agricultural regions. A "one size fits all" approach to water policy and programs is not appropriate for WA.

Accordingly, WAFarmers believes that the Commonwealth should take a more co-operative and consultative approach with the WA State Government to ensure that Commonwealth policies and programs adequately address that State's needs.

2. Commonwealth policies and programs, in rural and regional Australia that could underpin stability of storage and supply of water for domestic consumption and other purposes

WAFarmers supports the Commonwealth programs, the National Action Plan for Salinity (NAP) and Natural Heritage Trust (NHT) that provide funding to States and Territories for water related issues.

Of great concern, however, is the politicising of the programs once negotiation of the bilateral agreements commence and the subsequent loss of substantial program funds within bureaucracies in the form of administrative costs.

Australian farmers are not interested in political mileage being made out of environmental issues. Farmers acknowledge that some past farming practices have had detrimental impacts on the environment and are taking steps to address these issues. Bureaucratic bickering and red tape over funding issues is an extreme source of frustration and adversely affects both farmer and community enthusiasm for ongoing environmental projects.

Farmers simply want to see targeted assistance funding 'hit the ground.'

WAFarmers is a critic of both Commonwealth and State Governments over these issues, however, in relation to the NAP, supports the WA State Government in its call for prior State Government expenditure on salinity control to be recognised in assessing the State's financial contribution towards the NAP.

Western Australia, particularly the South West of the State, is readily highlighted and criticised for its status as an "environmental hotspot". However, successive Governments of both political persuasions have and continue to receive little acknowledgement for their efforts in expending State resources, far in excess of Eastern States expenditure, on salinity control. This situation must change.

The WA State Government has recently released a Draft State Water Conservation Strategy and sought comment from WAFarmers. The criticisms highlighted herein will also be incorporated into our submission to the State Government.

3. *The effect of Commonwealth policies and programs on current and future water use in rural Australia*

WAFarmers, in recognising the importance of the Murray-Darling scheme to the Eastern States, believes that water issues in other States and Territories, particularly WA, are not given adequate priority and that Commonwealth policies and programs are developed with minimal consideration of circumstances outside of the Murray-Darling catchment.

Earlier comments regarding the politicising of NAP and NHT funding can be reiterated in relation to this term of reference.

4. *Commonwealth policies and programs that could address and balance the competing demands on water resources*

Agriculture needs to have an assured supply of water to maintain both production and viability. Farmers should not have to be concerned with rural water supplies being restricted or withdrawn to supplement metropolitan supplies.

WAFarmers believes that the Commonwealth Government should assist States and Territories to identify and explore new and alternative water supplies i.e. groundwater, dams and desalination.

With the majority of Australia in the grip of one of the worst droughts on record, it would be timely for the Commonwealth to initiate a program of assistance measures and incentives for farmers and rural communities alike to undertake "drought proofing" programs e.g. water harvesting and storage and the recycling of grey water.

Incentives should also be provided to encourage more efficient use of water supplies in agriculture, particularly in relation to irrigation methods. WAFarmers is aware that the Commonwealth has expended considerable resources in capping artesian bores in New South Wales & Queensland.

Western Australia should also be afforded the opportunity of accessing Commonwealth funds to develop State specific water conservation strategies.

WAFarmers would also encourage the Commonwealth Government to work with States and Territories in addressing issues of equity in the allocation of water supplies, whereby large "corporate" farm allocations are not granted to the exclusion or detriment of smaller family owned and operated farms.

5. *The adequacy of scientific research on the approaches required for adaptation to climate variability and better weather prediction, including the reliability of forecasting systems and capacity to provide specialist forecasts*

WAFarmers is aware that considerable resources are being expended on Greenhouses strategies and that there are both supporters and detractors to the scientific approach being adopted, particularly in relation to the public education program.

WAFarmers has identified a glaring omission to the process i.e. the communication of research into diversification and alternative farming options if existing farming systems and practices are to change as a result of Greenhouse.

Education and communication on all aspects of water use is an issue that needs to be addressed by both Commonwealth and State Governments, not solely in rural Australia, but across the Continent.

Whilst a State Government issue, the loss of extension services across many Government agencies is a major impediment to the promotion of education and industry change processes.

WA has a somewhat unique situation in relation to the adequacy and accuracy of climatic forecasting. The Department of Agriculture has an extremely competent meteorologist in its employ, who has had considerable success in recent long-range seasonal forecasts. However, Bureau of Meteorology forecasters, whilst adequately identifying frontal systems, have extreme difficulty in accurately forecasting rainfall events beyond the Perth metropolitan area.

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