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# **Submission to the Caring for our Country Review**

## **The New Sustainable Agriculture Stream Evolution not Revolution**

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## Introduction

NSW Irrigators' Council (NSWIC) represents more than 12,000 irrigation farmers across NSW. These irrigators access regulated, unregulated and groundwater systems. Our members include valley water user associations, food and fibre groups, irrigation corporations and commodity groups from the rice, cotton, dairy and horticultural industries.

This document represents the views of the members of NSWIC. However each member reserves the right to independent policy on issues that directly relate to their areas of operation, or expertise, or any other issues that they may deem relevant.

## Background

*“Caring for our Country is an ongoing Australian Government initiative that seeks to achieve an environment that is healthier, better protected, well-managed, resilient, and provides essential ecosystem services in a changing climate.”<sup>1</sup>*

Originally announced by the Australian Government in 2008, the program was designed to assist in sustainably managing Australia's environment and productive lands into the future. A review of the program was conducted in 2011 with stakeholders putting forth some new ideas for the future of the program. As the program moves into the next phase of funding (2013-14 to 2017-18), discussion papers relating to the design and implementation of these programs is being sought.

Designed with two delivery streams;

- Sustainable Agriculture will receive approximately 30% of the \$2 billion funding to *“... increase the uptake of sustainable farm and fisheries practices and increase the capacity of land managers for improved natural resource management.”<sup>2</sup>*, and
- Sustainable Environment will receive approximately 70% of the \$2 billion funding to *“... continue to invest in the protection and conservation of nationally and internationally significant flora, fauna, ecological communities, ecosystems and land and sea scapes.”<sup>3</sup>*

NSWIC, being the peak body for irrigators in NSW, appreciates the opportunity to make a submission to this Inquiry. Our organisation and its Members support the development and growth of sustainable irrigated agriculture through a commitment to the ongoing management of our working rivers to ensure the indefinite provision of water for human use, ecosystems and biodiversity values.

As the funding from this program will support a diverse range of projects, it is important that NSWIC represent the innovative work that has been done as well as opportunity that continues to exist for irrigated agriculture to improve on management practices and the use of natural resources for sustainable agricultural and environmental outcomes.

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<sup>1</sup> Caring for our Country Consultation Discussion Paper – Sustainable Agriculture Stream introduction

<sup>2</sup> Caring for our Country Consultation Discussion Paper – Sustainable Agriculture Stream introduction

<sup>3</sup> Caring for our Country Consultation Discussion Paper – Protecting and conserving nationally significant species, ecosystems and biodiversity in the next phase of Caring for our Country introduction

## Introduction

There is no more resilient group than those individuals and organisations found in the farming and agriculture sector. Increasing competition for water resources, droughts, floods, pests, weeds and Government policy change have meant that the agriculture sector has had to find innovative ways to adapt to these challenges in order to continue producing food and fibre and at the same time remain viable.

Although there are two separate “streams” within the *Caring for our Country* program (Agriculture and Environment), the skills and experience of the agriculture sector in understanding Natural Resource Management (NRM) as well as contributing to and depending on a healthy environment to work within means the Agriculture sector benefits both streams.

Without the uptake of efficient, realistic and implementable NRM practices there is the possibility of reduced benefits for the environment. However, with the uptake of new NRM practices and the use of innovative tools to enhance efficiency, Agriculture programs can complement environmental programs and hence have the ability to increase the overall benefits that are delivered.

An example of such a program which benefited Agriculture and the Environment is the “Sharing the Knowledge” program run by NSWIC with funding from the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF) under FarmReady. This program identified leading irrigators who had implemented successful NRM practices and innovative efficiency techniques and held forums in regional locations around Australia to share these ideas and the benefits to individuals, communities and the environment.

The benefits were immense in that some practices or innovations had not yet been considered in some areas visited. There was no need in some areas to look for alternatives until it was shown that a change was not only viable and effective but also delivered multiple flow-on benefits. Not all solutions involved large scale and expensive changes, some involved just small alterations to management practices or customisation of existing tools to achieve the results. The program highlighted that there is no one-size-fits-all solution and only by understanding the variety of factors which determine best practice can you fully realise the potential and implement what works best for your situation.

A “Sharing of Knowledge” style program would ensure there is continued exposure for new ideas, investment in innovation, uptake of sustainable agriculture practices and a viable, competitive food and fibre industry into the future.

The funding of these “streams” has been identified as approximately 70% Environment and 30% Agriculture. With the benefits to both of these areas that can be achieved through the Agriculture stream, we question the rationale in weighting the funding this way. There needs to be a more even distribution of funding between these two sectors with a 50 / 50 split being completely warranted.

## Primary Industry Partnerships

*“... ‘primary industry partnerships’ is intended to facilitate the development of strong, complementary partnerships with and between industries, and other stakeholders. This concept will ensure a stronger contribution by primary industries to the delivery of improved natural resource management...”<sup>4</sup>*

NSWIC believes that this can be a very important aspect of a successful program. When there are multiple industries or stakeholders involved, the program exposure will be far greater and the outcomes should be more closely aligned with the Strategic Objectives of the Caring for our Country program.

It should be noted however, that the outcome should be the focus, not the partnership. If partnerships are entered into they need to have clearly defined guidelines of responsibility and ownership from the outset. In other words, who will be responsible for completing each task, when, where and which entity has ownership of the overall program.

*Caring for our Country* should promote the development of partnerships within the projects, but should be responsible for maintaining them. Projects which include partnerships could be looked at more favourably when assessing applications, however it should not be a requirement as some projects could achieve their outcomes without partnerships and therefore the additional level of administration required in managing them.

With Government involvement in many Agriculture and Environment areas there needs to be an assessment of the projects against the work these Government Departments are undertaking. Aligning outcomes to those that these departments are also working towards will mean a better result from the overall program.

## Questions

*Q: What sort of sustainable agriculture outcomes would be most successfully delivered through primary industry partnerships?*

There are many outcomes which could be achieved through partnerships, but it would depend upon each partnership. Due to the overlapping nature of most sustainable agriculture outcomes there are potentially many organisations which could be involved in a project. Landcare work, efficiency gains, water savings, productivity increases or soil health and river health could involve many partnerships depending on the outcome which is being sought.

For example, a program which deals with a reduction in fertiliser use, could be aligned with a specific Catchment Management Authority (CMA) whose area is affected by fertiliser runoff and who in turn works with other CMA's to identify other areas that could benefit from the project. Industry could also be involved, with equipment and fertiliser manufacturers, researchers and environmental groups assisting with technical data and support information to ensure the project is properly supported.

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<sup>4</sup> Caring for our Country Consultation Discussion Paper – Sustainable Agriculture Stream – page 3

*Q: How could primary industry partnerships be better supported and maintained?*

Alignment of strategies and plans that outlines the outcomes and targets in the first instance is essential to partnership success. It would be necessary to identify possible partnerships in the beginning so as to avoid duplication of similar projects. At the stage a project has been fully laid out, it may be too difficult to try and establish a partnership.

A section of the project application should ask the applicant to identify what other organizations or industries might have similar interests or benefit from their program being funded.

There has to be benefits for all organisation involved, so maintaining partnerships would involve ensuring that each entity is seeing the results which they set out to achieve.

*Q: Do you have examples of a similar partnership in practice? How successful was it, what was achieved and were there any particular learnings?*

The “Sharing the Knowledge” program which NSWIC operated, worked with the National Program for Sustainable Irrigation (NPSI) and Irrigation Australia Limited (IAL) for one of its forums (Griffith, NSW). Although similar organisations, NSWIC represents irrigators in NSW, IAL represents irrigation industry suppliers and NPSI deals with irrigation research and development, they all have a different business focus.

The outcome was very successful in that the number and variety of participants was much greater. Individuals who did not specifically have an interest in farming methods but were interested in the R&D which is being done, ended up getting much more out of the program when they saw the correlation between what is taking place on ground and the research which supports it.

NSWIC, NPSI and IAL took advantage of an opportunity which presented itself and delivered a informative and productive forum. It’s programs like this that can deliver a better outcome if aligned at the project planning stage.

*Q: Are there other frameworks or approaches in your region that support farmers to adopt sustainable agriculture and broader land management practices that could be adapted by other areas of Australia?*

There is a great deal of variability in soils, topography, rain patterns and crops grown in farming operations around Australia, so a framework that highlights the options available and the benefits that can be achieved for the environment, the farmer and the community is one that can be adapted to all areas of Australia. The “Sharing the Knowledge” program is a perfect example.

## Innovation

*“Investment in innovation is necessary for ongoing growth and improvement in the productivity, effectiveness, competitiveness and sustainability of Australia’s agriculture and fisheries industries.”<sup>5</sup>*

NSWIC and its Members could not agree more. In order to remain competitive our Members are under constant pressure to improve. This pressure comes not only from the use of inputs (water, fertilizer, electricity, fuel) but also from production methods, quality and quantity produced, delivery and Government policy change.

Innovation and productivity growth has been the cornerstone for the success of the agriculture industry and with mounting pressure on resources, a growing demand for the goods and services produced and increasing foreign competition, innovation needs to continue if the industry is to remain viable and competitive.

*“The Australian Government encourages innovation in the rural sector primarily through investment in R&D.”* but has recognised that *“The market failure in the provision of socially optimal levels of R&D and extension is likely to be more severe in the rural sector than in many other sectors of the economy, as individual small businesses have a very low capacity to conduct the required activities.”<sup>6</sup>*

This acknowledgement that the cost of large scale innovation makes it prohibitive for many farm businesses will be a big challenge in meeting targets for this program. However, it doesn’t always have to involve large scale change. Ideas inspire new ideas and the benefit of being exposed to innovation is that it makes you think about what else is possible. But it is only by sharing these ideas in the first instance that this development can take place.

Monitoring the uptake and success of innovation projects is difficult to quantify. Due to each farm being unique, packaging a solution will not be an option. Individuals will mix and match the practices or innovation ideas to suit their business, making it difficult to quantify the results. On the upside however, there is more ability to access co-funding or partnerships in this area, especially from organisations which are undertaking research or are developing in innovation ideas.

Depending on the type of innovation, conducting trials or doing comparisons to existing systems could possibly be the best way of ground truthing the idea or process. Very few people are willing to take the leap of faith involved in implementing an unproven innovation, but prove it works and that benefits will be delivered and you will have many looking to get involved.

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<sup>5</sup> Caring for our Country Consultation Discussion Paper – Sustainable Agriculture Stream – page 3

<sup>6</sup> National Food Plan – Green Paper page 146

## Questions

*Q: How could innovation in agriculture be better supported?*

NSWIC believes that providing an avenue for exposure of ideas would increase the support for innovation. The difficulty many people face is the ability to get the idea / innovation out in front of an audience. As mentioned above, ideas inspire new ideas. If you have a great product or idea but nobody knows about it, it's only useful to you.

*Q: Do you think a competitive EOI process will identify the best projects or do you have other suggestions?*

Unless it is a large scale business or manufacturer, new ideas can be hard to identify. It might be a customised piece of equipment that increases fertilizer application accuracy but is only used by one person, if others knew about it, it could be widely used and save tons of fertilizer. How can we access those ideas?

“Sharing the Knowledge” is the perfect example of a low cost program which highlighted such innovation and gave a platform for it to be introduced and adopted by others.

*Q: Should a mechanism for testing the viability/adoptability of an innovative practice be developed? and how could it be built into projects?*

A mechanism for testing innovation would definitely make sense, utilising existing or establishing new industry baselines could provide a means by which to measure results against. Thorough development testing or generating on-ground results takes time and therefore this might be difficult to achieve in a short time frame.

The length of funding for programs which involved a high amount of innovation would need to be looked at due to the time involved in testing and quantifying the outcomes.

## **Weed and Pest Management**

*“... aims to ensure we have better information about the location of established weeds and pest animals, sleeper weeds and emerging problem species.”<sup>7</sup>*

The strategic objectives talk about national strategies, mapping, community involvement, technical support, promotion and monitoring. These are all very involved, time consuming and costly activities. Coordination of all these will take additional time and resources and would ideally fall to one or two organisations or areas that could take ownership of it and responsibility for implementing a task this large.

Weeds and pest animals do not follow town, catchment or state boundaries, so the coordination of activities to address them is vital to the success of the program. Finding ways to involve the community and landholders will mean the difference between success and failure of the program.

Access to information, education and processes for controlling the spread of these invasive species will be very important.

### **Question**

*Q: What do Landcare and other community groups need to enable them to contribute to the surveillance of weeds and pest animals?*

An easy to follow framework for reporting on and getting advice for controlling weeds or pest animals is essential. This is the direction of the strategic objectives listed, ensuring there is coordinated on-ground support and monitoring will ensure its success.

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<sup>7</sup> Caring for our Country Consultation Discussion Paper – Sustainable Agriculture Stream – page 4

## Landcare and Community engagement

NSWIC believes it is very important to “... include support for leadership activities, community capacity development, innovation, communication skills development, governance training, as well as small on-ground projects.”<sup>8</sup>

There are many small organisations and community groups that could benefit from this type of support. These projects could be at a community or catchment level where they have identified a specific need or outcome which can be achieved through the funding of a small project. Utilising passionate and dedicated organisations will generally deliver a measurable and cost effective result.

## Questions

*Q: How can we better support community groups across regional Australia?*

Knowledge of and ability to access the program is the first step. Community groups or organisations might require assistance in developing or delivering a project, so the support of the department might be required. The project outcomes should still be judged against the strategic objectives and priorities for the *Caring for our Country* program.

*Q: What activities do you think we should support in order to build community engagement, capacity and leadership?*

Community groups will be in the best position to answer this question as the activities which promote participation and support will vary depending on the people and areas involved. They must be consulted to know what desired outcomes will generate the most success. This could involve information forums, specific training classes, demonstration field days, and even recognition of individuals or groups whose work has gone to achieving the desired outcome.

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<sup>8</sup> Caring for our Country Consultation Discussion Paper – Sustainable Agriculture Stream – page 4

***“How do we ensure that we invest wisely?”<sup>9</sup>***

NSWIC is glad to learn that the review of the program indicated it has:

*“... exceeded the five-year outcomes in nearly all national priority areas.”<sup>10</sup>*

We would also like to acknowledge the recognition that:

*“Steady improvement is being made by farmers in many of the practices that will contribute to better production outcomes, build resilience to climate change and provide community benefits by improving the quality of ecosystem services from agricultural lands.”<sup>11</sup>*

The discussion paper indicated some potential outcomes from the five years of funding. NSWIC finds that these points are not necessarily unattainable, but could be extremely difficult to achieve and potentially hard to measure.

For example

*“30% farm businesses/enterprises/industry bodies that have adopted innovative practices through trials, demonstration and extension.”<sup>12</sup>*

With approximately 134,000 farm businesses in Australia, the *Caring for our Country* goal would be to have 40,200 farm businesses adopt innovative practices. Without dedicated staff and a large scale implementation strategy, is this realistic?

Or,

*“All regional NRM bodies with a clear framework and implementing a plan of action for working with industry, Landcare, farmers and farmer groups, scientists, planners and community to establish benchmarks for improved land management practices and identified activities to improve the uptake of practices...”*

Although it is necessary to set out goals for a program such as this, the goals and how to achieve them must be attainable. The potential outcomes which are listed would require a great many people to coordinate, implement and monitor them. With the way this program is set up, with lots of different sized projects from many different stakeholders, coordinating them all to achieve these results is very optimistic.

NSWIC would like to highlight a statement from a Murray-Darling Basin Authority report:

*“In addition to CMAs and other NRM bodies, local, state and the Australian governments work together to ensure water resource management, including environmental water management, is considered in the broader context of natural resource management, including through weed and pest management, planting native trees and many other projects funded under programs, such as Caring for our Country and State government-funded projects. The MDBA strongly encourages governments to continue investing in this important area.”<sup>13</sup>*

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<sup>9</sup> Caring for our Country Consultation Discussion Paper – Sustainable Agriculture Stream – page 5

<sup>10</sup> Caring for our Country Consultation Discussion Paper – Sustainable Agriculture Stream – page 5

<sup>11</sup> Caring for our Country Consultation Discussion Paper – Sustainable Agriculture Stream – page 5

<sup>12</sup> Caring for our Country Consultation Discussion Paper – Sustainable Agriculture Stream – page 5

<sup>13</sup> Proposed Basin Plan Consultation Report – May 2012 – page 171

This is important to recognise when you are asking the question of whether this program invested wisely. There must be collaboration with Government departments and the projects which are funded to ensure the goals are aligned and that the outcomes are achieved and accounted for (this is particularly important where Government departments have targets they are working towards or are utilising resources to achieve set results).

## Questions

*Q: Do these outcomes address the appropriate issues?*

At the end of the day the outcomes need to be aligned with the issues. What is the objective, how is it going to be achieved and who is best suited to implement it.

*Q: How could we help Landcare, farm system and other community groups monitor their performance and contribute to better natural resources management at the national scale?*

The setting up of standards in the first instance, best practice for each area depending on the outcome which is to be achieved.

*Q: Is there a greater role for regional bodies to improve community engagement in the uptake of sustainable agriculture practices, environmental management and/or broader integrated land management?*

As alluded to earlier, regional bodies will know best what is beneficial for business, community and the environment in their area, so we would agree that yes there is a role for regional bodies to improve community engagement.

Developing programs which are not aligned with the areas they are to be implemented in does not make sense.

## Summary

Agriculture in general and the environment as a whole are far too important to the future of all Australians to not have investment in projects that guarantee their survival and ability to continue providing for the country.

Regardless of the “stream” each project is aligned with, they must have achievable outcomes which are clearly outlined and can be delivered on. Any ability to include the community, partnerships or funding support should be looked at as a more effective way of delivering successful outcomes for sustainable agriculture and healthy, productive landscapes. With the level of commitment from stakeholders and the high level of outcomes to be achieved, projects should have a greater than one year lifespan.

The funding for *Caring for our Country* needs to be evenly distributed between the two “streams”. This is clearly justified by the benefits which can be delivered through the Agriculture stream and is supported by this statement from the discussion paper:

*“National leadership, partnerships and a strong, informed natural resource management sector are crucial to achieve a healthy, sustainable future for Australian agricultural production and the environment that supports it.”<sup>14</sup>*

Ensuring projects whose goals and outcomes align with those of Government departments must be incorporated into this program. This collaboration will guarantee the funding will be better utilised and that the results achieved will consequently be recognised and accounted for in the targets being sought by Government (i.e. Murray-Darling Basin Plan).

The challenges facing the Australian landscape, communities and business are increasing and without the continued support of Government, Landcare, industry and communities, these challenges will be far more difficult to overcome. The Agriculture sector is ready to assist in delivering high quality programs which support their land, the environment and the broader community.

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<sup>14</sup> Caring for our Country Consultation Discussion Paper – Sustainable Agriculture Stream – page 2