Submission to the Australian Government

Agricultural Innovation Inquiry

"Rural Australia is more than agriculture. Whilst it is our economic underpinning, each region has a range of comparative advantages that need to be talked up and opportunities created. We need innovation, incubation, inspiration and networks".

Response Submitted by

National Rural Women's Coalition

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Who is the National Rural Women's Coalition?

What We Do - The National Rural Women's Coalition works to support and grow vibrant rural, remote and regional Communities throughout Australia. The National Rural Women's Coalition (NRWC) provides a collaborative national voice for women living in rural, regional and remote Australia and does this by:

- Representing the diverse views of women in rural, regional and remote Australia.
- Providing advice to the Australian Government on policy issues relevant to the views and circumstances of rural women.
- Contributing to building a positive profile of rural women, their achievements and issues.

The core activities of the NRWC revolve around:

- Advocacy for women
- Influencing policy and decision-making
- Building capacity within women's organisations and for rural, remote and regional women
- Reflecting the diversity and inclusivity of the women's sector

Membership - Current members of the NRWC are the Australian Local Government Women's Association; Australian Women in Agriculture; Country Women's Association of Australia; National Rural Health Alliance; Women's Industry Network Seafood Community; a rural Aboriginal Woman and one Independent Director. The content of this paper represents the collective views of rural, remote and regional women with whom we have consulted and does not necessarily represent the thoughts of Directors or member organisations. However, each member organisation reserves the right to independent policy on issues that directly relate to their areas of operation, or expertise, or any other issues that they might deem relevant.

The National Rural Women's Coalition has over 5300 social media supporters and has a reach of over 200,000 through its newsletter, social media and member organisations supporters. The NRWC is funded by the Australian Government - Office for Women.

About this Response to Agricultural Innovation Inquiry

Introduction

The National Rural Women's Coalition believes it is important that the views of rural women who reside in the numerous rural, remote and regional communities throughout Australia have input into a consultation about their communities, industries, needs and issues. Women in rural communities as farmers, business women, community leaders and volunteers pay a crucial role in agriculture and are often at the forefront of exploring digital disruption and implementing improvements in the efficiency of agricultural practices and innovation.

This submission has been formulated from information gained from rural, remote and regional women during formal input including face-to-face, teleconference, webinars, social media and surveys opportunities throughout recent years.

Rural women believe there are three key concepts which need to be considered if agriculture is to adopt and use new technology to improve productivity based on education and innovation.

1. **A fast telecommunications network from the beach to the bush today, not tomorrow.**
2. **Access to training to enhance women's digital communication knowledge and business skills.**
3. **Increased investment in research, development and training in the rural sector.**

National Rural Women's Coalition

1. A fast telecommunications network from the beach to the bush today, not tomorrow.

A fast network is essential and vital to the future of the agricultural economy if rural and remote Australia is to grow and prosper. We need all Australian communities from the beach to the outback to be better connected. This means rural people need to have access to the same standard and type of telecommunications that are enjoyed by urban businesses and communities if we are to overcome the tyranny of distance and be more competitive globally. Australians who live in rural and remote areas should not have to compromise downward when it comes to telecommunications.

Technology is vital in food and fibre production plans of the future. Farm innovation increases productivity. Despite these well-known facts, many rural Australians do not have access to high quality, reliable and fast broadband services. Farming in the 21st century is typically high tech, with an ever increasing need for mobile networks, high bandwidth telecommunications links, access to real time data, precision monitoring, computers, data banks and a range of sensors and other tools that aid farmers to manage their land, water and other assets to enable rural, remote and regional communities to prosper socially and economically.

We need rural and remote Australia to become hubs of innovative production and distribution if as a nation, we are to realise the potential of the digital economy and if agricultural innovation is to be the driver of improving efficiency, innovation and marketing of land and sea primary production.

2. Access to training to enhance women's digital communication knowledge and business skills.

To create a better informed Australia, "Education is the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world". (Nelson Mandela)

Rural women figure prominently in the management of a primary production business, both sea and land based. They believe it is vital to have the skills to be able to use digital communication devices which are the legacy of fast, affordable and reliable telecommunications. Rural women need to be provided with access to training to enhance their ability to use digital devices in order to ensure that their primary production business and wider community operates at best practice level. To be cost effective, this training needs to be offered in a way that is respectful and considerate of their (often) remote and rural location, their business and family commitments as well as affordable.

Rural women would like to expand their knowledge and skills in using emerging digital technologies as and when they become available if they are to become digital disruptors that will lead to strong business innovation in agriculture. This training should be delivered in a web conferencing formats. By using webinars, rural women are able to learn in manner that is flexible and that does not have any downtime in relation to travel, babysitting and caring responsibilities and does not disrupt their businesses to any great degree.

Since 2011, the NRWC has used online collaborative learning webinars extensively for delivering learning known as *E-Leaders Programs* to women living in rural and remote Australia and the NRWC is keen to continue, and indeed expand this project, should adequate resourcing be received. More information, including evaluative reports, on our recent programs can be found at http://www.nrwc.com.au/Projects/ELeadersProgram.aspx.

If farm gate returns are to improve, good decisions needs to be made. As rural women are key partners in a primary production business, we need to ensure that women have the knowledge to grow their business in an innovative and profitable manner.

Australia is a nation of pioneers and rural women have always been part of this 'pushing boundaries' movement. However rural women need knowledge and skills in using digital telecommunications and associated devices if they are to assist in leading agricultural innovation in the future.

3. Increased investment in agricultural research and development in the rural sector.

Rural women are proud of the fact that the food produced in Australia is plentiful, healthy and nutritious. However, if primary production is to be viable and competitive, innovation on land and in the sea needs to be supported by research and development funding to agriculture and the wider rural sector.

Investment in training, skill development and extension activities by government, private enterprise and industry groups needs to be more supportive of the rural sector (which is wider than just the agricultural sector) in order to increase productivity and improve global competitiveness. Rural women consider that it is not enough to invest in research and development. Innovation needs to be supported at both primary producer and whole of rural community level with training, skill development and extension activities.

Innovation and research is closely connected to economic and social benefits at local, national and international levels, and this connection needs to be understood, communicated and strengthened. Investment is required if primary producers are to be more sustainable and productive.

Rural women would like to request more support for initiatives which increase productivity, in the form of investment in agricultural research and development and extension activities.

Conclusion

The National Rural Women's Coalition believes women play a key role in innovation in agriculture on land and in the sea and therefore are often at the forefront of exploring digital disruption and implementing improvements in the efficiency of agricultural practices and innovation. If agricultural innovation is to become the norm for all sectors, rural women want:

A fast telecommunications network from the beach to the bush today, not tomorrow.

Access to training to enhance women's digital communication knowledge and business skills.

Increased investment in research, development and training in the rural sector.

Contact National Rural Women's Coalition

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