



House of Representatives Standing Committee on Agriculture and Water Resources - Inquiry into Water Use Efficiency

Background

Growcom is the peak representative body for Queensland horticulture and strives for the long term growth and profitability of horticultural farms and the industry. Our core membership consists of Queensland's fruit, vegetable and nut producers and individuals, groups and industries who have a stake or interest in the future of Queensland horticulture.

Growcom is an independent, commercially focused not-for-profit organisation that provides a range of relevant services to help members, clients and partners achieve greater success in the Queensland horticulture industry. Growcom is widely considered the "voice" of horticulture on issues common to all commodities and works to engender support for the horticulture industry in the community.

Growcom embraces and promotes innovative, responsible farming and business practices. We are a progressive organisation with a strong track record and 90 year history.

Response

Growcom, funded through the Rural Water Use Efficiency Initiative (RWUEI) has provided a service to assist growers to implement improved water use efficiency and improved natural resource management since 1999.

Whilst saving water is beneficial to growers and the environment, Growcom also recognises the importance of converting this resource into a food product as efficiently as possible.

The program has been very successful both in delivering measurable water savings but has also greatly improved the output of many the growers involved in the program. The program has been held up as one of the most successful government and industry partnerships with clear benefits to industry and the broader community.

Specifically the Growcom RWUEI program has

- generated more than \$230 million of gains in water savings and productivity
- achieved a high level of recognition in the horticultural industry, with over 95% of growers aware of the program
- consistently engaged 60% of horticultural growers participating in changed irrigation management practice and improvements (BMP)
- engaged with more than 10,000 attendances at activities and workshops, aimed at assisting growers improve irrigation efficiency & natural resource management
- assisted over 1,600 growers through the RWUEI, Financial Incentive Scheme, and several other incentive schemes funded by QDNRM and various regional NRM groups resulting in an average return on investment of 3.5:1. An incentive program in north Queensland resulted in a 7:1 ROI
- produced over 90 information sheets to assist growers improve irrigation efficiency
- fostered a solid understanding of growers' operational opportunities and risks through the delivery of Hort360 BMP program enabling Growcom to better target their needs.

Adequacy and efficacy of current programs in achieving irrigation water use efficiencies

Growcom has seen a steady decline in funding of programs overall and disparity in funding across the state primarily due to government water planning and risk identification. As we move across the state we increasingly notice the variability in management practices due to programs being / not being delivered in the region. Our long experience with the RWUEI program enables us to differentiate between the different phases of the program in terms of actual deliverables.

The Queensland Government funded RWUEI is a long running program and in its initial phases was very successful. Delivery of R, D & E and incentives via industry, government and universities enabled the program to engage irrigators in on-farm trials, system evaluations, education, training and incentives. Importantly it also contained an evaluation process enabling industry to document change in water use and productivity thus demonstrating a ROI for irrigators and government. The strong links between the research activities and the actual on-ground delivery overcame the common problem of research findings not being taken up in practice. It is our contention that the original design of the RWUEI program should continue to be a model for best practice extension.

Conversely the experience within Reef Trust highlights how lack of funding and insufficient program connectivity leads to less benefit from the overall investment. Although not seen as a high priority management practice within Reef Trust, irrigation management can influence the movement of nutrients, pesticides and sediment. Initial phases of Reef Trust assisted many growers to improve management practices / purchase equipment, but was not underpinned by significant development and extension processes to assist growers implement and achieve potential benefits. This has flowed through to State and Commonwealth government being unable to adequately demonstrate practice change outcomes, outside of modelling.

How existing expenditure provides value for money for the Commonwealth

Growcom has had minimal involvement in Commonwealth funded buy back and Healthy Headwaters programs. It appears to be market driven and so the assumption is the Commonwealth sees the programs as being value for money. Given the outcomes observed, the preference would be to continue the Healthy Headwaters program as it provides multiple social, environmental and economic benefits however there appears to be a gap in knowledge as to how the investment has provided a ROI for both the irrigator and Commonwealth.

This appears to be a typical occurrence whereby growers are encouraged to change but not necessarily supported at a practical level. We see significant government and irrigator investment in new systems which then do not provide the expected efficiency gains as there is no on-ground support on how to best operate them. If corrected this would provide sound ROI outcomes which would encourage others to participate.

Possible improvements to programs, their administration and delivery

Through experience Growcom sees that to ensure a program is successful it needs to deliver holistic change that assist irrigators to

- understand risks, opportunities and actions to their farm enterprise through delivery of education programs and industry BMP's
- implement practices which have economic, social and environmental outcomes through fit for purpose training and incentive programs
- optimise practice change to ensure change management is realised through on farm technical support and extension
- produce products with greater efficiency and of a high quality, being able to demonstrate this and being able to self invest for further change

Trust can be the biggest influencer and hence we strongly suggest the involvement of industry throughout the development, delivery and M&E processes.

Other matters, including, but not limited to, maintaining or increasing agriculture production, consideration of environmental flows, and adoption of world's best practice.

For a number of years Growcom has delivered its Hort360 BMP to irrigators across Queensland. Engaging irrigators through this process enables Growcom to greatly improve the specificity of the extension effort directed to growers enabling them to quickly see which aspects of their operation need improvement. Collation of captured data enables Growcom to benchmark the industry and deliver programs to address identified risks at multiple scales. Growers are able to track their own performance and review peer to peer progression.

Water itself is not a large cost input for most irrigators even though without it most farms cease to operate. For intensive horticulture production systems energy to pump water is currently the main driver for the uptake of water use efficiency and alternative energy sources. As the cost of energy steadily continues to increase over the next few years as per the QCA determination, irrigators will find it more difficult to objectively irrigate. As market price takers this will place increasing pressure on farm gate returns and further reduce the ability of the horticulture industry to self invest.