

Provision of extension and advisory services

- 5.1 Extension services have undergone radical change over the last two decades. There have been positive changes – increased use of information and communication technology; direct participation by industry; and increased private sector service provision. There have also been negative changes – a decline in State Government rural extension services, usually driven by the need to cut costs whatever the consequences; a loss of corporate memory as departmental extension officers move on; and a failure to coordinate disparate service providers. There has also been a loss of focus upon the central purpose of extension – providing knowledge and skills to farmers to make their operations more productive and sustainable in a manner accessible to them. As Mr Graham Truscott, General Manager of the Australian Beef Industry Foundation (ABIF), explained:

You can have all of the wonderful high-tech methods of extension out in rural Australia, but rural Australia operates with people. It is people to people. The best way to get a message to a farmer is for his neighbour to tell him. That is how directly communication works in the bush. If their neighbour tells them, they are much more likely to believe it than if anybody else told them. Therefore, you have to establish champions who are the neighbours. Therefore, you have to be able to educate the champions, and to do that you have to have people on the ground to do that education. It is a direct building of those skills to be able to achieve this vision.¹

1 Mr Graham Truscott, *Transcript of Evidence*, 10 March 2006, p. 32.

From Public to Private Extension Services

5.2 Agricultural extension services in Australia have historically been based within State agricultural departments, but this support has been progressively declining over the last two decades and private companies have been playing an increasingly significant role in the provision of extension and advisory services. The extent to which State Governments have disengaged from extension varies from State to State. The response to this disengagement, and the expanding role of the private sector, has also been quite varied.

5.3 In Western Australia, the Government has largely withdrawn from the provision of extension services. Nonetheless, as the Western Australian Government noted in its submission, 'this State has well developed extension networks based primarily in the private sector'.² In evidence before the committee, Mr Bruce Thorpe, of the Western Australian Department of Agriculture, explained:

At the farm management level, whilst the department withdrew from this area quite some time ago, the extension network here has been very well taken over by the private sector providers. There is a very extensive network in this state, probably more so than others, that works closely with the farming sector. The farmers are paying for that service.³

5.4 Dr Reuben Rose, General Manager, Livestock Production Innovation for Meat and Livestock Australia, was also unconcerned about the withdrawal of State Governments from extension. Industry needed extension services, but who provided them was not an issue:

To give you an idea, South Australia and Western Australia have almost no extension staff left. New South Wales has significant extension capacity, as has Victoria and Queensland. Everyone has a slightly different approach to this whole area. South Australia has not had any extension staff for a long time. The sky has not fallen in; people are still making money in South Australia, I believe.

I think it is a really difficult area, because a lot of this is driven by history and politics, but it is clear to me that a good extension capability, particularly a good private sector extension capability, is a key for the future prosperity of the industry. We have to have people with the skills to help producers make change. I am not

2 Government of Western Australia, Submission no. 19, p. 2.

3 Mr Bruce Thorpe, *Transcript of Evidence*, 20 July 2005, p. 33.

convinced that it is through funding or extension staff but encouraging the emergence of the private sector to help work with people...We work with the state departments, we work with some of the private sector providers and we work with the Landmarks and the Elders to try to make sure that that information is getting out, and people are going to use that in different ways.⁴

- 5.5 In his submission, Dr Peter Wylie, of the agricultural consulting firm Horizon Rural Management, argued that government extension services had become 'irrelevant and increasingly overshadowed by private sector advisors':

In most rural areas, private sector advisers outnumber government advisers by 4 or 5 to 1 and many private advisers visit as many farms in a day as the government extension officer might visit in a week.⁵

- 5.6 In its submission, CSIRO outlined for the committee how the traditional path from research to development to extension is increasingly being replaced by a more dynamic interaction chain which includes public research agencies, educational institutions, private agri-business, self-organised rural industry groups and a broad set of community organisations.⁶

- 5.7 On the other hand, Mr Peter Arkle, Rural Affairs Manager with the National Farmers' Federation, indicated that the withdrawal of State extension services was leaving a gap which the private sector had been unable to fill:

Probably where things are failing – it is not a political witch-hunt – is that we have certainly seen cutbacks in state extension services, public provision of those services. Maybe that is a reflection of a change in the times, but it is fair to say that the farming population has not shifted to the notion of commercial advisory services to any great extent. We will always have those progressive producers who are willing to pay. There is a large body of producers who probably, to be honest, with the phasing out of public extension services are missing out on this advice that they so critically need.⁷

4 Dr Reuben Rose, *Transcript of Evidence*, 20 October 2005, p. 5.

5 Dr Peter Wylie, Submission no. 16, p. 3.

6 CSIRO, Submission no. 86, p. 8.

7 Mr Peter Arkle, *Transcript of Evidence*, 10 August 2005, p. 18.

- 5.8 Significantly, given developments in that State, the Western Australian Farmers Federation was also concerned about the trend towards private provision of extension services:

The perception of agricultural information as a public good, and subject to market failure, has provided the prime argument in policy debates since the 1960s for the continued provision of government extension services. The increasing industrialisation of agriculture, with a consequent increased emphasis on the potential for commercial provision of these services, has resulted in a questioning of the public-good nature of much agricultural information.

It is argued that much agricultural information still has public good characteristics and that market failure can occur even with services clearly deemed to be private goods.

This is supported by overseas experience, which indicates that areas of market failure are a reality as extension services are privatised. It raises the concern that some state governments may go too far down the road of privatisation of extension, neglecting important issues which would not be picked up by the private sector.

There is also concern about the weakening of research/extension links. Loss of feedback from farmers to researchers could become a problem as state public-sector agencies cut back on production-oriented extension.⁸

- 5.9 The submission concluded that:

If agricultural extension is to become dependent on commercial priorities then the directions pursued may not be economically efficient from the point of view of society as a whole, or may be contrary to other goals related to social welfare or the environment.⁹

- 5.10 One major concern was the cost of and access to extension services on a cost-recovery basis, whether public or private. In its submission, the Australasia-Pacific Extension Network (APEN), representing some 500 extension practitioners in Australia, Asia and New Zealand, noted that:

Extension agencies in Australia have trended toward cost-recovery, fee-for-service, and privatisation of extension services.

8 Western Australian Farmers Federation, Submission no. 92, p. 5.

9 Western Australian Farmers Federation, Submission no. 92, p. 5.

Gradual policy change in the 1990's saw state departments subject to processes of review and re-structuring that affected the nature of service provision. The trend towards privatisation seems to have also been influenced by:

- a. the declining relative importance of agriculture in the economy;
- b. budget pressures on governments, as well as;
- c. the increasing influence of economists' theories and prescriptions.

State agencies have frantically investigated ways of enhancing income or shifting functions to the private sector. While there has been little resistance to full-recovery pricing for training sessions or learning aides, there are few examples of successful fee-for-service options. It seems that landholders facing the decision of paying comparable rates for public agency advice or private consultants, typically favour the private sector. As agencies privatise services mixed results are occurring.¹⁰

- 5.11 The Queensland Government, in its submission, also expressed concern about cost and access to extension services, this time those provided by RDCs, arguing that producers were in effect paying for them twice:

There is need for greater transparency in the way extension services are funded as they move to fee-for-service. It is appropriate that research and development corporations have a greater role in supporting the uptake of innovative practices resulting from research and development without further cost impost on industry. There is a perception that the research and development corporations, which receive significant funding via industry levies, have resulted in industry paying twice – firstly for the cost of the research and development component, via levies, and secondly, for their utilisation of extension services.¹¹

- 5.12 On the other hand, Conservation Farmers Inc. noted in its submission that State Governments were not above using funds sourced from RDCs to undertake research and extension, then selling the products to raise revenue:

State agricultural departments continue to under-resource research and extension in Agriculture and have directed their staff to source 'external funds' from R&D organisations such as GRDC,

10 Australasia-Pacific Extension Network, Submission no. 52, p. 4.

11 Queensland Government, Submission no. 51, p. 10.

RIRDC, CRDC etc. This creates a shift of research fiscal responsibility from the States to Federal government. There is so much competition for these 'external funds' that it has become unhealthy and is to the detriment of agriculture, with state agency bodies seeking to fund internal positions and people rather than research issues. It has also created a "turf protection" mentality, leading to poor communication and a lack of co-operation within the research community. To add further instability to the effective use of the R&D dollar allocations, state departments apply their own costs for doing business to the external funds which erodes the value of the research funds by as much as 30–38%. State agencies secure much of the R&D funds and many of the outputs become action learning modules (ALM'S) for training. Many departments have few mechanisms to engage farmers and allocate limited finances to complete the task. The departments then seek the aid and support of grower groups and consultants to deliver the training, but fail to adequately finance the training coordination. In some cases they expect to be paid to participate and deliver the training messages.¹²

- 5.13 In its submission, Land & Water Australia also identified several concerns relating to the decline in State extension services, especially in regard to natural resource management (NRM). Land & Water Australia observed that there had been 'a marked shift in expenditure on extension (broadly defined) from the States to the Commonwealth over the last fifteen years'. It noted that, 'Commonwealth funding of facilitators and coordinators through Landcare, the Natural Heritage Trust and the National Action Plan has played important roles in facilitating community involvement and on-ground activities funded through these large national programs'.¹³
- 5.14 Land & Water Australia also noted that there 'has been a gradual disinvestment in the underlying extensions profession', including training, career paths and institutional support. The result was that:

The remaining advisors and the new facilitators are often relatively young and even if well qualified in the sciences, they lack significant experience. Most are on short term tenure, suffer from inadequate professional support (there are very few experienced extension staff remaining within departments/agencies above them), have poor training opportunities (nowhere to go and little support for further

12 Conservation Farmers Inc., Submission no. 20, p. 2.

13 Land & Water Australia, Submission no. 89, p. 2.

education) and consequently, limited career paths. The predominance of short-term contract work, high levels of staff turnover and loss of good people from the sector results in institutional amnesia and lack of support for people in the field. It also means that it is not easy to find out what is being done/has been done elsewhere, and what lessons have been learned. Regional NRM staff feel as if wheels are being reinvented all over Australia.¹⁴

- 5.15 The lack of overall coordination in the organisation and delivery of extension services was also of concern to APEN. In evidence before the committee, Mr John James, past president of APEN, emphasised the fragmentation in the provision of extension services, noting that 'We are reinventing the wheel many times over':

I believe it is a more fragmented system now, especially where you have national, state and now regional bodies. If you look at the regional bodies, there does not seem to be a lot of coordination, networking or sharing of information going on between each of those within each state, let alone across the country. So we are not learning from our mistakes and what we can do better.¹⁵

- 5.16 His colleague, Mr Greg Leach, identified a significant loss of capacity and continuity of service in the transition away from State Government extension:

I think, from a state agency standpoint, we have not identified well enough the role of extension in the market failure and public good domain. There has been a gross shift in the role of extension from the state agency to the regional bodies without, I believe, a great deal of coordination and thought about the coherency and continuity of that effort. With the shift from state agency to regional bodies, there has been a concurrent loss by the agency of institutional capital in terms of the capacities of rural people to work with natural resource management issues. There is an issue of lost capacity.

One of the real big issues in terms of the ability of the regional body to deal with the public good area is their inability, because they have very limited funding, to attract the professionals who have longer term relationships in these areas and credibility and standing. They are more able to attract the short-term employees.

14 Land & Water Australia, Submission no. 89, p. 2.

15 Mr John James, *Transcript of Evidence*, 11 April 2006, p. 31.

There seems to be a fair deal of institutional churn and roll-over and that has a fair impact on meeting the public good issues. From my agency's standpoint we have a few challenges ahead of us in meeting that public good area in terms of extension and non-coercive change support. We are pretty sharp and we are getting sharper in terms of regulation, legislation and compliance but we still have quite a gulf to address in terms of the non-coercive support.¹⁶

- 5.17 In response to these issues, APEN advocated the creation of a National Extension Framework. The proposed framework would define the roles and responsibilities of extension providers, identify the needs of clients and providers, and create a system of national coordination of extension services.¹⁷ A similar proposition, focussing upon natural resource management, was put by Land & Water Australia in its submission, which stated:

Land & Water Australia remains of the view that the job of achieving landscape-scale adoption of more sustainable land management practices requires highly skilled intermediaries between science and practice. There is a need to consider how some of the key issues can be addressed in a coordinated and integrated manner, perhaps through a framework for rural extension that examines and establishes:

- differences and similarities in drivers between extension for commercial agriculture and for natural resource management;
- the role of governments in extension and responsibilities between levels of government;
- supporting development of appropriate skills and training and competency standards for NRM extension;
- clarity and consistency in the role of universities and other training institutions and providers;
- career structures or other impediments to building and maintaining NRM extension capacity; and
- mechanisms to promote NRM delivery as part of commercial extension activities.¹⁸

16 Mr Greg Leach, *Transcript of Evidence*, 11 April 2006, pp. 29–30.

17 Australasia-Pacific Extension Network, Submission no. 52, pp. 3, 9–11.

18 Land & Water Australia, Submission no. 89, p. 3.

Research and Extension

- 5.18 The vital link between research and extension was emphasised in the evidence presented to the committee. Research was important to improve production and environmental management – it's purpose to make Australian agriculture more competitive and sustainable. There was little point to research, however, unless primary producers had effective access to information in a form they could readily utilise. Hence extension. As Dr Rose explained to the committee, referring to the activities of Meat and Livestock Australia:

The core activities of MLA focus on improving market access, building demand for Australian meat and conducting R&D to provide a competitive advantage for the Australian red meat industry. It is in that context of providing competitive advantage that MLA undertakes its rural skills training and research initiatives. We firmly believe that the R&D outcomes are ineffective until they are communicated and delivered to producers. Our producers keep on saying to us there is no sense in leaving this research on the shelf. We commit around 20 per cent of our total budget of around \$36 million this year to communication and research adoption initiatives.¹⁹

- 5.19 The evidence presented to the committee indicated that the link between research and extension was not operating as effectively as it could or should. In its submission, Rural Industries Skill Training stated:

In reality there is limited knowledge sharing of research findings within the general rural community and ultimately to the end producer. There are cupboards of finished research projects sitting on shelves across Australia where the findings have never been conveyed to the end user (farmers).²⁰

- 5.20 In its submission, CFI observed:

There is a low level uptake of research outcome by farmers as a whole. The most obvious reason for this failure is the missing step between the completion of research by the scientific community and the farmer's ability to visualise the uptake process and the associated productivity benefits.²¹

19 Dr Reuben Rose, *Transcript of Evidence*, 20 October 2005, p. 1.

20 Rural Industries Skill Training, Submission no. 29, p. 7.

21 Conservation Farmers Inc., Submission no. 110, p. 4.

5.21 This communications gap between researchers and farmers is principally the consequence of underinvestment in extension and a failure to match research findings to the practical needs of farmers:

- Communications staffs recruited from education and extension areas quickly learn that 'marketing' is not an acceptable term in government service sectors as no one wants to be seen as 'commercial'. They usually produce brochures, CD, websites, education manuals and write articles. Most farmers work long physical days and have little enough time for reading long technical articles or assimilate comprehensive CDs and manuals. Essentially it means much of the extension information being produced is not being read or implemented on the ground.
- Older male farmers spend little time on computers and hardly ever browse a website unless they absolutely have to. Recommending them to large complex websites rarely meets their needs. They rely a great deal on their spouse to source electronic material.
- Farmers mostly avoid classroom formats, preferring to learn by doing or seeing in a field context. Yet 'power point' seminars are still the preferred way for researchers to communicate with farmers.
- What farmers say they want is someone they can talk to, help them interpret the information overload; someone who understands the holistic nature of their operation. Yet they are told time and again that 'one on one' extension is no longer an option.²²

5.22 CFI believes that change will only come from real engagement, and providing relevant material illustrating the steps for change:

Farmers must see the need for themselves and not have it pushed on them. There must be a person contact that understands the area and can demonstrate the economic benefits of any research with farm validated examples. All the practical steps and costs must be in place.²³

5.23 CFI also identified a gap in funding, with most of the extension dollars being spent on research staff and little spent on extension, the result being that 'we are making significant advances in technology, but little of it is being applied'.²⁴ CFI believed that there needed to be far greater

22 Conservation Farmers Inc., Submission no. 110, p. 5.

23 Conservation Farmers Inc., Submission no. 110, p. 5.

24 Conservation Farmers Inc., Submission no. 20, p. 1.

accountability in the funding of research in terms of uptake of research and innovation:

Many research organisations have strategic plans that purport to engage the research issues with their stakeholders, but in reality offer few solutions at a farm level, due to the inadequate understanding of the research impacts at a micro level. For example, a farming system weed such as Fleabane threatens the very existence of No-till farming systems and another, named Lippia, is impacting seriously by eroding waterways and grazing lands. Current research undertaken by CRCs and other research institutions is directed at a macro level and few actions and solutions are being offered to manage the weeds at ground level. Lippia has been researched for 30 years yet there are no adequate on-ground solutions; a point of frustration for farmers in the Nth NSW and SE Qld regions. An annual critique of key research outcomes should be established matching the milestones and outputs. The success of the research outputs should be recorded by reviewing the adoption and usefulness to the industry and stakeholders.²⁵

- 5.24 According to Rural Industries Skill Training, the way forward was to incorporate extension into research, and tie funding for extension to research funding:

Improved skill development within an industry needs effective and relevant research, however this research needs to include an extension and training component within the research project to allow for the dissemination of this information to the wider rural community. Sufficient funding needs to be dedicated to research projects which require extension to ensure that appropriate training programs can be developed from the research findings.²⁶

- 5.25 Focussing on the work of RDCs, Mrs Margo Duncan, Chair of the Advisory Council for Tocal Agricultural College, made the same point to the committee, highlighting the excellent work undertaken by some RDCs to turn research into practice:

Research and development corporations were established many years ago to support research and development in particular industries. They have been focused very much on research. The development side, which should include training, has received

25 Conservation Farmers Inc., Submission no. 20, p. 1.

26 Rural Industries Skill Training, Submission no. 29, pp. 7-8.

little emphasis. It is therefore necessary that these corporations put more funds into training and supporting training. The recent move in Victoria, where Dairy Australia has stepped in and assisted with dairy training in Victoria, should be a way ahead for training in other industries.

The council does not want to appear too critical of research and development corporations, as they have done an excellent job within the way their charter has been interpreted in the past. The skills crisis that is now enveloping rural industries would suggest that their charter needs to be broadened and their funding extended further to add value to the existing funding from government for agricultural training. However, there has been some excellent support for training from research and development corporations. For example, the Grains Research and Development Corporation supports full-time vocational education and training scholarships for students in agricultural colleges. The Cotton Research and Development Corporation is taking an active role in planning for future training in the cotton industry.

It is therefore suggested that research and development corporations use funds to add to what DEST provides for traineeships and other training. This would not be a large amount of funding but, if targeted well, it could really assist the promotion and delivery of training for rural skills across Australia. If some discretionary funds are not introduced into the system, nothing will change and in fact less and less rural training will occur. This is an excellent opportunity for the research and development corporations.²⁷

- 5.26 In its submission, the Australian Cotton Cooperative Research Centre highlighted the work it was doing to promote extension in the cotton industry. It noted that under Australian Cotton CRC leadership the National Cotton Extension Network has provided a close link between research, industry initiatives, consultants and growers. The uptake of research is a high priority for the industry with the Cotton Research and Development Corporation investing approximately ten per cent of its R&D expenditure in extension programs to supplement state department extension services. This includes:

Cotton Industry Development Officers (regional extension positions focussed on cotton production), national extension coordination, a technology resource centre, decision support and

27 Mrs Margo Duncan, *Transcript of Evidence*, 21 October 2005, p. 24.

education. These positions partner with State DPIs, Cotton Seed Distributors' Extension Agronomists and specialists in the areas of Water Use Efficiency, Irrigation and Integrated Pest Management (IPM) to form the National Cotton Extension Network.²⁸

- 5.27 In its submission, Land & Water Australia acknowledged a change in emphasis in its own work, giving much greater prominence to extension now than hitherto:

In recognition of the need for research funders to invest further along the innovation spectrum than they used to, Land & Water Australia now invests almost 20% of its funds in knowledge and adoption activities, compared with less than 5% in 2000 – with a consequent reduction in corporation funds available to fund new research projects. Land & Water Australia has found, and this submission will outline, that success hinges on improving the relative “adoptability” of new knowledge, the need to be relevant to users and to use collaboration and teams to address the broader issues that tend to characterise NRM problems.²⁹

- 5.28 There was a downside to this, according to Mr Andrew Campbell, the Executive Director of Land & Water Australia – investment in extension by research bodies was taking funding from research. He indicated that ‘ideally it would be great if R&D corporations were not having to fund the extension as well as the research because that means that our research dollars cannot go as far’.³⁰

- 5.29 It was also suggested in evidence put before the committee that extension should be tied in more closely with the VET system, providing a formal framework for transferring skills. In its submission, the Rural Training Council of Australia NSW argued that there was much to be gained from this approach:

While extension is not seen as part of the traditional vocational and education framework the potential in terms of training and technology transfer is very significant. Traditionally, extension services were provided by state based agriculture departments. With the downturn of state provided services, private consultants, agronomists and professional staff working for rural merchandisers are increasingly being called on to fill this role. There is also an informal aspect of extension whereby “training”

28 Australian Cotton Cooperative Research Centre, Submission no. 56, pp. 11–12.

29 Land & Water Australia, Submission no. 89, p. 3.

30 Mr Andrew Campbell, *Transcript of Evidence*, 17 August 2005, p. 4.

sessions are conducted by manufacturers and suppliers of agricultural equipment. However, the links between these activities and formal training structures remain tenuous.

Efforts are being made by a number of research organisations to create stronger links between research and training including the Weeds CRC and AWI. If the purpose of research is to identify new work methods and practices that ultimately improve productivity, sustainability and profitability then the most effective means of getting the message to farmers is through education and training programs.³¹

- 5.30 Mr Darren Bayley, Chair of the National Conservation and Land Management Training Providers Network, made a similar point in his evidence before the committee:

Our network believe that there is considerable scope to improve links with agriculture advisory services and research organisations with vocational training. We have seen the merging of traditional advisory and extension services with vocational training already in New South Wales, through the Profarm program, and in other states through the FarmBis program. I think, and the network believe, that this is a desirable development which provides more opportunities for producers to gain recognition for the sorts of activities they generally take part in. I think that research and development corporations and cooperative research centres should be encouraged to engage with vocational skills based training. Our network has seen some very positive developments with the CRC for Australian Weed Management in the development of good technical resources for training.³²

- 5.31 In its submission, the Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE argued that the VET sector was better placed than research bodies to provide extension services and that strong links between VET and research were essential. NMIT suggested:

Creating clearly defined links between research and the VET sector to ensure that the outcomes of research applicable to rural industry producers be made available to them in a timely basis, through creation of direct links with VET and through the allocation of clear roles. Research organisations in Australia have not proven themselves able to efficiently address extension

31 Rural Training Council of Australia NSW, Submission no. 62, p. 5.

32 Mr Darren Bayley, *Transcript of Evidence*, 21 October 2005, p. 13.

training needs and the outcomes of some research never becomes available to producers.³³

5.32 The Queensland Government also believed that 'rural industries would benefit from much closer links between the VET sector and the providers of advisory, extension and research services'.³⁴

5.33 In evidence before the committee, Professor Roger Swift, Executive Dean of the Faculty of Natural Resources, Agriculture and Veterinary Science at the University of Queensland, highlighted his own experience with the integration through co-location of research, extension and training resources at the University of Edinburgh as a model for agriculture in Australia:

...earlier in my career I was employed in Scotland, at the Edinburgh School of Agriculture. That was part of the University of Edinburgh, which was my appointment, but it also taught subdegree diploma students and it also had all of the advisers for the east of Scotland advising on pigs and sheep, cereals and so on. We all worked in the same building. When I gave my lectures, I would invite an adviser to come in and talk about his particular case. When we applied for research, we would all talk together: what are your problems, and how do you solve them? What research should we do to do this? We would bring in the farmers. It is the best example I have found of an integrated teaching, research, advisory extension organisation, and it really came out of co-location.

...We would develop focus centres which would be based in strong universities with strong research. We would co-locate the local DPI and part of the CSIRO division with them, but the DPI would be researchers and extension officers. We could try to rebuild or re-create that entity. That entity failed in Scotland. It did not fail but it was pulled apart because the different people putting in the funds were not sure that they were getting their money's worth. They destroyed the entity so that they could control their bit of it better. It was not pulled apart because it did not work; it was pulled apart because the managers could not abide something working but their not knowing how it worked.³⁵

33 Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE, Submission no. 26, p. 9.

34 Queensland Government, Submission no. 51, p. 11.

35 Prof. Roger Swift, *Transcript of Evidence*, 24 May 2006, p. 4.

Industry filling the void

- 5.34 During the course of the inquiry, the committee found many examples of industry groups filling the void left by the decline in State extension services. For example, to address its concern about quality control of information, the Irrigation Association of Australia (IAA) is developing a certification program for consultants and service providers. To supplement 'dwindling government advisory services', IAA currently funds two industry development officers together with Horticulture Australia Limited and State agencies. IAA says this is cost effective and believes State agriculture departments and other relevant agencies should be encouraged to explore the expansion of this program. The IAA submission noted that 'the potential for industry and government to work with commercial sector agents and industry development officers and research officers is immense'.³⁶
- 5.35 Mr Graham Truscott (ABIF) explained how the beef industry mobilised to cope with a loss of extension services that threatened the implementation of Breedplan:

One of the real problems of the beef industry is that a lot of the extension work previously has been done by the state agricultural departments and over last 20 years at least we have seen a continual drawing back by those departments and removing of people from the extension role. We know that because a number of the breed societies et cetera have actually employed those people as they have come onto the market. Also, in the beef industry the key genetics development tool is Breedplan, and the extension of Breedplan has been left largely to the breed societies and ABRI. Towards the end of last year, we got to the point where the last extension officer being employed, Brian Sundstrom, was in fact retired and they were not going to replace him. Therefore, it actually reached crisis point because, as you will read in the papers, the Breedplan technology is very advanced. It is world-leading genetics evaluation and estimation technology that is used by geneticists in the pork industry, chicken industry et cetera, and we are expecting farmers to use this tool. We are asking a great deal of our farming base to use this advanced technology. Without training they cannot do that.

So it became an initiative of the Australian Registered Cattle Breeders Association and ABRI to replicate in the south a program

36 Irrigation Association of Australia Ltd, Submission no. 14, p. 7.

that was developed in the north to put extension services in for Breedplan. That southern beef extension program was developed to be able to take about four young extension people and build their skills by using some of the older extension people who are getting close to the end of their career – with no-one in the middle – to try and educate these young extension people. That project is now being implemented, and it will deliver about 65 workshops throughout southern Australia across the next four years, specifically designed to help farmers – people on the land – understand the Breedplan technology and the target markets, design breeding programs and use the Breedplan tooling to design select genetics to best hit target markets.³⁷

- 5.36 In evidence before the committee, Mr Arthur Poole (Australian Dairy Farmers Ltd) told the committee that his organisation has moved into providing extension services that link VET to extension:

The other area that I feel that we hopefully show a lot of leadership is in extension...On the back of the drought, we undertook a project called Dairy Moving Forward...That has gone to the heart of addressing the needs of a certain section of farmers that need more support in developing on-farm change and on-farm learning. One of the big things we will do with this new initiative in the formal VET sector is link that better to extension, to the departments of primary industries around Australia, to the companies and their field staff. We feel that there is a degree of farmers, probably 15 to 20 per cent, maybe even higher, in dairy that will take up learning no matter how you give it to them, in what form, when, where or what. They will be information seekers, and they will take up the latest technology or even existing technology very rapidly. We feel that in terms of building relationships and one-on-ones, that can still be done. There is probably something like 2,000 to 3,000 service providers who see farmers on a fairly regular basis. The concept of one-on-one may have been thrown out of the DPI sector in Australia, but we have far from thrown it out of the dairy industry. The initiative under Dairy Moving Forward, called Taking Stock, was a one-on-one based initiative. It was working with factory field staff, DPIs, rural counsellors, basically anybody who was having regular contact with dairy farmers, to promote the concepts of business management and of linking business management to on-farm

37 Mr Graham Truscott, *Transcript of Evidence*, 10 March 2006, p. 28.

change and to on-farm learning. We are heading towards 2,000 farm businesses going through that program. We will not lose that initiative. It needs to be better linked to the VET sector so we can formally move people in from one-on-one activity into learning activity.³⁸

- 5.37 Mr Poole indicated that the dairy industry was adapting to the new extension environment, something other industries could take in hand:

If there is something else that I think other sectors can learn from, other than the Dairy Australia GOTAFE initiative and the Melbourne University hours, it is the Taking Stock initiative. We have changed our tune as farmers; we would as happily invest in the development of skilled service providers as we would in ourselves as farmers. That takes a lot of guts again to make that judgment to actually invest in a group of people that support you rather than investing in yourself directly. We strongly believe that we need to do that to have change.³⁹

- 5.38 The limits of industry initiative, however, are highlighted by the apiary industry. In its submission, the NSW Department of Primary Industries observed that State departments of agriculture have traditionally provided the major source of extension and advisory services to the beekeeping industry, but that these services are not as strong now as in the past. Moreover, there are few, if any, private consultants available to provide advice on honey bee management practices.⁴⁰ The need for ongoing government assistance in this case would appear compelling.

Committee Conclusions

- 5.39 In the committee's view, there is an urgent need for the national coordination of agricultural extension services in Australia. A national extension framework, which defines the roles and responsibilities of governments, industries and extension providers, is essential. This will arrest the decline in State extension services and provide direction and support to industry and private providers. It will give end users – the farmers – a clear indication of who will be providing extension services and what they can expect from extension services.
- 5.40 The link between research and extension needs to be explicitly emphasised. One is little use without the other. Funding arrangements for

38 Mr Arthur Poole, *Transcript of Evidence*, 14 November 2005, p. 72.

39 Mr Arthur Poole, *Transcript of Evidence*, 14 November 2005, p. 72.

40 Department of Primary Industries NSW, Submission no. 91, pp. 10–11.

all government funded rural research activities should include a component for extension and training. The provision of extension should become an integral part of any research program.

- 5.41 Within this context, there is much to be gained by integrating the activities of researchers with educators. Co-location of research, extension and training activities has the potential to create synergies that would remain unrealised while these activities are conducted within separate silos.
- 5.42 The committee acknowledges the good work of the industries cited above and others to meet their own extension needs, and the increasingly valuable contribution of private sector advisers and consultants in the extension field. These developments are welcome. The committee believes that industries are, on the whole, best able to define their own extension requirements, and sourcing them from the private sector allows for a great deal of initiative and flexibility.
- 5.43 Nonetheless, the committee is of the opinion that State Governments have been remiss in allowing the extension services provided by their agriculture departments to wither away. State services provided structure and continuity. They were a reliable source of independent advice and a storage bank for corporate memory. The services they provided, and to some extent still provide, were a vital foundation for the transfer of information and skills. There is an urgent need to reinvigorate State Government extension services.

Recommendation 28

- 5.44 **The committee recommends that the Australian Government, in conjunction with State and Territory Governments and industry, develop a national extension framework to coordinate the provision of agriculture extension services nationally, and define the roles and responsibilities of governments, industry and extension providers.**

Recommendation 29

- 5.45 **The committee recommends that the Australian Government include a**

specific extension component in all funding arrangements for agricultural research organisations in receipt of federal funding, including rural Research and Development Corporations and Cooperative Research Centres. This funding should be provided in addition to, not at the expense of, research funding.

