



Submission by *Australian Women in Agriculture Ltd* to the Inquiry into the role of government in assisting Australian farmers to adapt to the impacts of climate change

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Committee Secretary  
Standing Committee on Primary Industry and Resources  
PO B0x 6021 House of Representatives  
Parliament House CANBERRA 2600

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Dear Committee Secretary

Australian Women in Agriculture Ltd (AWiA) is pleased to make a submission to this Inquiry. AWiA is a national organisation with members from all states and territories of Australia and from diverse backgrounds including primary production, research, education, consulting, service industries and politics.

Australian Women in Agriculture is committed to promoting the advancement of women in agriculture by:

- Uniting and raising the profile of women in agriculture,
- Addressing rural and agricultural inequities,
- Working to ensure the survival of agriculture for future generations,
- Securing local, regional and international recognition,
- Achieving the status of a political and economic force.

Australian Women in Agriculture core values are:

- Caring for people, the environment, rural families and communities,
- Ensuring the viability of future agricultural production,
- Respecting the culture, beliefs and philosophies of other people,
- Communicating to enable women to share their experience and develop effective networks,
- Providing leadership to facilitate change in the community

Within the framework of the above commitments and values, we view agriculture as a complex system wherein social, economic and environmental imperatives are inextricably linked. In so far as it is possible to separate these imperatives, this brief submission is structured around how the social, economic and environmental adaptation of farmers to climate change can be influenced by government.

### **Social Adaptation**

The accumulating scientific data indicates that significant action is required on climate change, on an accelerated basis, for both adaptation and mitigation. The major social change this will require demands unequivocal leadership and a clear consistent message from government at all levels. Any gaps between government response to climate change and the need for action on climate change leads to uncertainty for the community and business, with consequent higher future costs, lost opportunities and frustration.

Climate change is lived experience for primary producers and rural communities, struggling to adjust to water scarcity, high temperatures and altered agronomic and production conditions as well as coping with severe weather events and catastrophic bushfires and floods. For farmers, change will be driven by their own understanding and ability to respond to climate change on farm and locally, as well as by the perceptions and actions of the broader community. Farmers often express frustration that their efforts may be offset by the actions and policies of others and about the lack of recognition of farmers as responsible land managers and food producers. Governments therefore need to clarify and strengthen incentives and schemes to enable households, agriculture and industry to reduce carbon emissions, develop energy self-sufficiency and manage water in a sustainable manner so that all sectors of Australian society are working together towards sustainability.

Meaningful change in community attitudes and behavior requires a diverse approach incorporating information, education, incentives and support. Adherence to the principles of community development, namely: empowerment/ownership of activities by communities; valuing the local knowledge; collective working and encouraging participation and inclusion; balancing process with outcome; being sensitive to cultural/political paradigms; and sustainability/longevity (not just 'blow in/blowout') is particularly important during times of major change and adjustment.

In the context of community development, short term funding and contracts for drought support and rural adjustment services are counterproductive. It takes time to build trust and rapport and networks and partnerships and this social capital can be lost when there is a regime of constant change of staff and programs. A more positive approach is sustainable programs based on evidence and focused on building community capacity to manage social and environmental change and changing business situations.

The stress that rural communities are under makes it difficult for them to focus on vital strategies for the future. There is a continued need for getting information out to communities despite existing efforts – evidence from cold calling by drought counsellors and Centrelink in the Benalla, Campaspe and other local government areas of Victoria indicates that a significant minority of farmers and small businesses are still unaware of the range of drought assistance available to them. Given these findings despite the intensity of information campaigns, it is possible to assume that this minority is also unaware of the many other programs and services available under climate change initiatives.

The size and diversity of governance jurisdictions is a major challenge for all organisations in regional areas, not just in communication and distance but in identifying localised pockets of disadvantage. Here regional planning could play a vital role in cutting through the complexity of services and programs on offer, particularly if roles and structures for coordination and governance are clearly identified within and between agencies. Better understanding of community needs and how to link these needs (short and long term) into strategic planning is considered essential for facilitating the changes needed for adaptation to and mitigation of climate change.

### **Economic and Production Issues**

Rural communities acknowledge the support of governments under current drought policy for assistance in drought preparedness in the medium term and for the provision of welfare to drought affected farm families in the short term. They also acknowledge the need for proactive adaptation strategies and solutions that improve management for the longer term and for greater resilience for business and community.

These include:

- support for research and development for new crops, animal and plant genetics and technologies for drier, hotter environments;
- financial assistance direct to business to manage production and financial risk;
- communication, awareness and dissemination of information;
- better seasonal forecasting and risk management tools; and
- training for planning and decision making.

The areas of training which primary producers and communities require, alongside the traditional education for production agriculture include:

- business financial management;
- financial and farm software;
- decision making and planning;
- information and communication technology;
- adapting to climate change - on and off farm challenges;
- water scarcity and planning;
- succession planning;
- estate planning;
- numeracy and literacy;
- occupational health and safety;
- business and community governance;
- new enterprises; and
- carbon trading and environmental services.

The impact of drought and the ongoing uncertainties of climate change on financial position, workload, self-esteem and mental health are such that additional training and planning opportunities are very low on the list of farmers' priorities. This is exacerbated by the high fuel, transport and living costs faced by rural residents, poor access to quality childcare and a major problem with low literacy and numeracy skills amongst primary producers.

As financial hardship is a major barrier to participation, education and training programs must be affordable (low or no cost), accessible and targeted to community needs. Small groups or one-to-one interaction assists those with poor communication skills and low self-esteem. Local delivery offsets transport and time resources and providing childcare might encourage more people to attend. It is hoped that the training offered under the FarmReady program through DAFF will incorporate these principles and topics to ensure the effectiveness of the program.

In their extensive survey of farmers in the Mallee, Birchip Cropping Group (2007) reported that business management and financial planning were the most commonly identified skills gap, followed by the need for dealing with the issues of rural decline and the importance of leadership. A workshop run by the Bouverie Centre in Stawell, central Victoria found that access to Rural Financial Counsellors was the most urgent need. This evidence vindicates the necessity for both short term support and long term capacity building from government if adaptation to climate change is to be effected.

## **Environmental Issues**

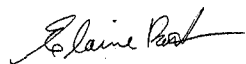
Whilst some areas of Australia may experience increased rainfall under climate change, the majority of currently productive agricultural regions will experience decreased rainfall. The interaction between climate change and water scarcity, and the significance of water for agriculture and food security, demonstrates the necessity to act on water, carbon emissions, alternative energy and sustainable natural resource management in an integrated and urgent manner. Progress in this area requires increased funding for research into natural resource management under climate change, including social impact and adjustment research, and then provision of major funding for incentives to implement these findings.

As water security is of crucial importance to agricultural productivity and rural communities, it is vital to investigate and introduce efficient and effective water recycling solutions (such as 'closed loop' systems), and provide incentives for homes and business to be independent of an external water supply thereby taking the pressure off existing infrastructure. The current ownership structure of water distribution systems in Australia and the available water conservation incentive schemes do little to encourage self-sufficiency and water conservation of households, agriculture and industry. A similar situation pertains in the energy and carbon reduction industry – until individuals and communities are confident that their efforts towards sustainability are not offset by the unsustainable practices of commercial interests, there is little incentive or community goodwill towards these efforts.

All of the above discussion verifies the objectives and strategies in the National Agriculture and Climate Change Plan. However, there needs to be increased investment and rapid intensification of the activities in the Plan, particularly because of the rapid deterioration of the natural and economic environment experienced since the Plan was originally developed.

Australian Women in Agriculture Ltd would welcome the opportunity to expand further on this submission and make a presentation to the Committee in response to this Inquiry – please direct enquiries to the President.

Yours sincerely,



Elaine Paton, President

Dr Patricia Hamilton, Secretary