



Submission to the Australian Government

Agricultural Competitiveness Green Paper

*The sustainability of our agricultural systems is taken as a non-negotiable by
Australian society*

Response Submitted by

National Rural Women's Coalition Ltd

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About the National Rural Women's Coalition

Who are we?

The National Rural Women's Coalition (NRWC) is one of six Alliances funded by the Australian Federal Government through the Office for Women.

The NRWC Company works to support and grow vibrant rural, regional and remote communities through its Board, which comprises 5 Directors representing the following National Rural Women's Organisations and 2 Independent Directors:

- 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
- Aboriginal and Torres Islander Representative
- Independent Director

What do we do?

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

How do we do this?

By enhancing the wellbeing of women and acknowledging their contribution to Australian life through:

- 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
- Delivering innovative leadership projects, which can be accessed from the NRWC website: www.nrwc.com.au.

Scope of NRWCs response to the Green Paper

NRWC is pleased to have the opportunity to contribute to the Agricultural Competitiveness Green Paper. This submission has been formulated from information gained from rural, remote and regional women during formal and informal input (face-to-face, survey, conference proceedings, a summit, two roundtables and social media) opportunities throughout 2013 and 2014.

NRWC's submission will focus on the importance of an agricultural sector that places and supports primary producers in more central ownership and decision-making positions to ensure the sustainability of Australia's agricultural systems and to ensure the competitiveness of Australia's agricultural sector. In particular, we will focus on the issues of ***Infrastructure, Communications, Education, Skills, Training and Labour, and Research, Development and Extension.***

Infrastructure

Local infrastructure is the backbone of our rural, remote and regional communities' prosperity and productivity.

Having good infrastructure throughout rural Australia is essential if we are going to be looking at agriculture as a whole of industry and a people orientated industry. We must include the social deterrents affecting agriculture. This includes life style and access to services for not only primary producers but also local business and their ability to recruit employees and retain staff where rural Australia is a 'want to live in place'.

This would include a range of infrastructure facilities to enhance living as well as business access in rural areas including Government services.

- Governments MUST stop referring to providing services in rural areas as a cost, but when speaking of similar services in urban areas it is referred to as a service.
- Negative language needs to be changed to promote the importance of rural communities when talking about providing equitable services and infrastructure in rural Australia. Currently, the conversation is always about 'cost' and not the infrastructure or service advantages. This includes support for areas such as transport, good roads and rail services to ensure produce arrives at markets in good condition. There also needs transport for people to access services not available in their local area, to make social connections, so important for wellbeing of families and communities, access health services, sporting facilities, and all that make up the fabric of a healthy and productive community.

By providing the access to and availability of welfare, education and communications, the Government will enhance the wellbeing, and hence the prosperity and productivity of people, to ensure that there is a viable future for the rural and agriculture sector.

The NRWC recommends:

- That the social deterrents of agriculture and living in rural Australia are included when policy decisions are made regarding infrastructure across rural Australia
- That the negative language used when referring to rural infrastructure and services as a 'cost' be changed to a positive of commitment from a government who values rural communities and Australian primary production of food and fibre
- That all policy decisions regarding infrastructure, have a rural lens filter as a component of the decision-making

Drought

Drought has and always will be part of the Australian agricultural scene. We must protect and support those who live and are involved in primary production in vulnerable areas - this includes all food production from the land and water.

Drought is such an insidious element with a slow creeping effect over a long period of time on individuals, producers and communities. When local/individual resources have been diminished to be nothing, this slow creeping effect of drought on individuals has meant that help is mostly offered 'too little too late'.

Environmentally, the impact on an area and effect on the mentality on people has far reaching bearings on all involved. Intervention and or support to community/individuals must be earlier in many instances to assist in communities' or individual's ability to manage the process to recover from drought. The green paper asks, "How better to prepare for drought?"

The NRWC asks, "How can you prepare for drought other than implement good business practices and management of the land?"

Drought impacts in the following ways:

- All support must include the women involved in the enterprise as women shoulder much of the burden of drought as the one who provides the support to the family and in many instances works off farm to supplement the family's well being.
- Too many families have had to sacrifice children's education because of drought and availability of funds for education.
- Mental health and wellbeing is a condition of all drought affected communities and individuals. Support is often not available locally.
- As well as financial, people/personal and environmental aspects of drought, the animal welfare issue is critical, causing an even greater impact than facing the personal financial impacts.

The NRWC recommends:

- Rural Counselling services need to be available sooner and not when the drought is well established. Counselling should include both business and health/social wellbeing support.
- Financial education support for children of families affected by drought is essential. It is imperative that children are educated, and in rural areas access to higher education is only available away from home, deprived of many because of drought.
- Rural businesses must also be eligible for any support packages available to primary producers as they are a key component of communities.

Communications

The importance of a dedicated Australian rural, remote and regional communications strategy is non-negotiable for the survival of a competitive, productive and prosperous agricultural sector.

All business and government rely and expect everyone to have excellent fast communication. All business and government bodies assume that all people regardless of where they live have the same reliable communication tools available to them.

There is a very large discrepancy of availability, Internet speed and cost across rural Australia, with limited providers in most areas, along with large gaps in mobile phone communication.

The importance of digital technology availability in rural areas for communication, education, business transactions and health services cannot be over stressed. Agriculture relies on instant communication for marketing commodities to sell or buy at the right price and in a timely manner where there is limited communication the business decision and efficiency can be greatly effected.

The NRWC recommends:

- The development through the skilled and effective use of communications and information technology be realised through the provision of cost-effective infrastructure and training programs tailored to the needs of rural, remote and regional communities by:
 - Expansion of mobile coverage
 - Improved digital literacy for communities
 - Improving digital infrastructure – using existing and expanding infrastructure to rural, remote and regional areas
 - Affordable pricing for internet connections and volumes
 - Effective research to underpin the communications policy

Education, skills and training, and labour

“The agriculture sector needs an appropriately skilled, available and affordable workforce to support future growth and competitiveness”.

Education and training at all levels must be at the forefront of any strategy to revitalise rural, remote and regional Australia for an equitable society.

Education, skills and training have the potential to transform lives by giving people opportunities, which, in turn, can drive social mobility.

- A vibrant, balanced social economy needs a similar dynamic skills system that is not hampered by too many regulations and an over-complicated bureaucracy.

Skills are vital to our future and improving skills is essential to building sustainable growth and stronger communities. However, to deliver skills there needs relevancy to the needs of people and a commitment from individuals to encourage change in attitudes and behaviour.

Research has shown us that improving and extending skills can also enable people to increase their productivity and prosperity, participate more fully in society, leading to more cohesion, more understanding and tolerance, more engagement in decision-making.

Although learning and skills are not always about qualifications there does need to be a strategic investment in training which gives a real return to meet the needs of individuals, industry and government. There also needs recognition of prior learning of qualifications.

Labour: there needs to be a supply of labour both daily and seasonal to ensure the growth of primary industries.

- The NRWC endorses the importance of labour market flexibility and the ability to access labour when needed.

By identifying, engaging and supporting local talent through relevant skills acquisition for a future, businesses are encouraged to recruit, train and retain the youth in agricultural industries.

To ensure a business remains viable, employers need to access skilled labour that will help the enterprise be profitable and productive.

People, for both social and economical reasons, need assistance to acquire the 'right' skills to find sustainable work with the prospect of progress. This complementary and supplementary process, investigating in personal and business development, has wider social, environmental and economic value, particularly as there becomes a partnership among the individual, the industry and the government as training programs are funded and promoted.

Apprenticeships bring together individuals and employers – both working together for personal and professional development.

- Vocational qualifications which meet the needs of the economy, must have recognised, professional standards program has clearly demonstrated the capacity to effectively and successfully accommodate the training and assessment needs.
- The NRWC recommends a checklist to enable all Career guidance services to provide clear and transparent information, including the outcomes of their choices, to all learners.

Questions to be considered:

- What are the options open to them based on existing education and skills?
- What benefits will training to obtain more skills bring them?
- What are the implications for their lifestyle needs?

A lack of continuity, a perceived short-term focus of prospects will impede the confidence motivation and desire to be successful.

The NRWC recommends a one-stop web portal for schools, the hosting of teacher professional sessions, linking key organisations together, communicating news, events and research to its network, arguing for the inclusion of food and fibre in the national curriculum and being the peak body for Government, industry and educators to approach for advice in relation to primary industry education matters.

The NRWC recommends:

- Positive outcomes to support the economy through a competent skills based system which:
 - Reduces the skill deficiencies at local and regional through early identification and by providing opportunities for all adults to learn in all parts of the country
 - Increases and strengthens the number of skilled people at all levels
 - Increases the productivity and employment opportunities
 - Increases the investment of training through apprenticeships, vocational training by employers and a commitment from individuals
 - Provides an innovative blended learning delivery platform through access to available and affordable internet access
 - Provides realistic living away from home allowances for students to access affordable tertiary agriculture degrees
 - Lessens the over complicated bureaucracy and regulations

Research, development and extension

Setting the Rural Research Agenda

Australian needs investment in Research and Development to ensure productivity, efficiency and continued viability of farming systems and the agriculture sector.

Effective policy and decision-making are derived from good research and evidence as well as the knowledge and professional judgments of recognised practitioners.

- While the NRWC applauds the Government's rural Research and Development policy statement, the NRWC seeks an on-going funding commitment to strengthen the productivity, the competitiveness and the social and environmental success of the rural sector.

Historically, the benefits to the Australian economy from Agricultural Research and Development are significant in securing Australia's food production and supply. However, to constantly be on top of the challenges facing Australia such as drought, food security, the changing climate patterns, and the threat of pests, diseases and weeds, all sectors of agriculture must be vigilant.

"The long-term growth of the agriculture sector is closely related to its ability to access innovations that maintain or enhance competitiveness". Innovation is central for the farming sector to continue to develop and take advantage of new opportunities, of new processes for sustainability, of existing and emerging technologies and expansion into new markets.

The NRWC Recommends:

- Innovative and creative rural research solutions be inter-related and interconnected across the social, environmental, economic and political spheres.
- The Australian agricultural industry, supported by Government initiatives, ensures that producers are part of the research and development innovations.

Summary

The National Rural Women's Coalition believes:

- Agriculture on land and in the sea underpins productivity growth by supporting innovations through education, technology, science and infrastructure research and development funding to support global competitiveness and productivity growth of the food supply chain.
- Meeting the challenges of the future, such as gearing up for climate change, reducing water use and waste streams and re-engineering food products to better meet population health needs, will require improved profitability within the industry.
- The NRWC supports increased funding of rural research and development to improve productivity through innovation in using our natural resources.
- **Women in rural communities (especially women as farmers) play a crucial role in current global food production and must be part of any solution to future food security challenges and pressures.**
- **The NRWC encourages the government through the Agricultural initiatives of the Agricultural Competitiveness Green Paper:**
 - **To develop principles and practical strategies that inform rural, remote and regional policy, decision-making and industry extension processes for improved learning on agricultural competitiveness through the use of new technologies by rural women**
 - **To identify social, cultural, economic, institutional and technological factors that foster or hamper access to and the use of new technologies by rural, remote and regional women across the different agricultural sectors and industries**

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