Department of Natural Resources and Water

Sustainable Agriculture Evaluation

Alignment between NHT2 and NAPSWQ Sustainable Agricultural objectives and relevant regional NRM plans and funded regional investment strategies

Final Evaluation Report

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Executive Summary

The premise for investment in sustainable agriculture under the Bilateral Agreements between the Australian and Queensland Governments for the Natural Heritage Trust and National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality is the achievement of the relevant Resource Condition Targets and Management Action Targets contained in regional natural resource management plans.

The activities to achieve these targets usually involve the development and adoption of better management practices and / or farming systems which are expected to maintain or enhance the resource base and related ecosystems both on and off the farm. This involves the engagement of land managers to build their understanding of natural resource management issues and create an environment that supports and influences them to make changes to the way in which they manage natural resources.

This review has sought to identify and assess the impact of investment from the national programs under the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality and Natural Heritage Trust in sustainable agriculture in Queensland. It has considered sustainable agricultural initiatives that have occurred through the regional NRM bodies, cross-regional or Strategic Reserve projects and at a state level via the Sustainable Agriculture State-level Investment Program.

Investment in sustainable agriculture initiatives is wide-ranging and includes:

- Undertaking research to understand attitudes, drivers and constraints of land managers to land and water management.
- Building awareness and understanding among land managers of the regional NRM plan objectives for sustainable agriculture;
- Developing and trialing recommended land management practices or Best Management Practices (BMPs) (Much of the approach to working towards sustainable agriculture is underpinned by the development of Best Management Practices which can be applied at the paddock or property scale.);
- Developing property management plans;
- Supporting land managers to implement property management plans and change their land management practices through extension activities, training, market-based incentives, e.g. tenders, and grants / incentives.
- Monitoring, evaluation and reporting on sustainable agriculture initiatives.

On the whole, the sustainable agriculture initiatives at regional, cross-regional and state levels aim to contribute towards the achievement of agricultural practices and systems that are economically viable for producers and that minimise or avoid detrimental impacts on the natural resource base and related ecosystems.

At present, it is difficult to establish a clear picture of the progress being made towards sustainable agricultural industries. It is suggested that the following questions provide one way of determining progress at a regional level or industry basis:

- Are BMPs defined for the main industry/enterprise mixes in the region?
- If they are not defined, is research underway to define them?

- Are the links between BMPs and resource condition understood or being defined?
- Are the drivers and constraints to adoption of BMPs in the region well understood?
- Are extension programs in place to promote adoption of BMPs?
- What proportion of producers in the region is adopting BMPs and is this changing over time?
- Will our investments in sustainable agriculture result in positive outcomes for the resource base over time?
- How will we know when we have achieved sustainable agriculture?

This review has found that there is a strong commitment and willingness to develop agricultural practices and systems that are more resilient and profitable and can contribute to improving the condition of the natural resource base. There is a lot of activity occurring within regions and within different industries but there is ample scope to improve the overall understanding of how that range of activities fits within a statewide picture.

There is also a huge opportunity for the knowledge being generated through sustainable agriculture initiatives to be more widely communicated and utilised throughout the state.

The maturing of the regional NRM bodies and consequent strengthening of their knowledge and networks will place them in good stead to firstly collaborate more between themselves but also to work more closely with industry, state agencies and communities with an interest in sustainable agriculture in their respective regions. The importance of effective relationships or partnerships between sustainable agriculture stakeholders cannot be overstated.

Recommendations to help improve on the current approach to sustainable agriculture in the state are provided in relation to the findings, gaps, risk and opportunities presented in this report:

Need for an overarching direction for Sustainable Agriculture

i. Consideration be given to the development of a state NRM policy that provides strategic direction for the development of sustainable agriculture.

Reporting on Investment in Sustainable Agriculture

ii. If the reporting on sustainable agriculture investments and outcomes will be required in future, an agreed reporting framework for investment in sustainable agriculture will need to be developed.

Monitoring, Evaluation and Reporting

iii. Sustainable agriculture project proponents should provide a clear rationale for their projects based on a consistent project logic framework with evidence that the project considers both production and conservation objectives.

Partnerships in Sustainable Agriculture

iv. Regional NRM bodies strengthen their role in promoting and facilitating partnerships between stakeholders in sustainable agriculture.

v. Sustainable agriculture project proponents should provide evidence in project proposals of the partnerships to be utilised in projects, and that the partner's commitment to the project is independently verified.

Communication and Learning

vi. Improved communication and capacity building outcomes are sought from current investment in sustainable agriculture.

vii. Sustainable agriculture projects funded from future national and state funding programs require a communication plan to disseminate project findings.

viii. New sustainable agriculture projects are developed with a demonstrated, sound understanding of previous and current relevant studies and projects.

Economic Assessment of Land Management Practices

ix. Development of new management practices requires an assessment of the financial costs and benefits of those practices to land managers.

Achieving Sustainable Agriculture Outcomes

x. Research is conducted to assess the costs and benefits of market-based instruments and their potential application to complement existing extension approaches for BMP adoption.

xi. Further investigation is required to determine if the statewide agricultural research and extension capability is limiting the rate of development and adoption of BMPs (and if so, can it be bolstered?)