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Gene Ethics comments in response to the GRDC document

INVESTMENT ANALYSIS OF RESEARCH, DEVELOPMENT AND EXTENSION ISSUES IN AUSTRALIAN GRAIN FARMING SYSTEMS

The paper says the Grains Research and Development Corporation is: “dedicated to improving its processes to adapt to the changing needs of the grains industry.” Good, but GRDC should also extend its constituency far beyond the industry. This would also entail much wider participation and the free exchange of ideas than: “more transparent, flexible and collaborative responses to on-farm issues.” On-farm issues are important but GRDC also needs to embrace and respond to the profound environmental and social changes occurring in the broader society. It can do this in new and creative ways through greatly improved communication systems based on the internet. Our ideas are elaborated below in response to the specific questions posed.

GRDC will only create an “effective program for the delivery of farming systems R, D&E” if it also recognizes the broader context and constraints on farm and food industry operations. For instance, industrial agriculture will need to dramatically change in response to the scarcity and escalating prices of key inputs such as oil-based pesticides, fertilizers and farm fuels; climate change and environmental stress that will result in permanent water supply constraints; and a strong public preference for affordable organic foods (See National Enabling Technologies Strategy public opinion survey, October 2010).

The GRDC says it “gathers information on issues from a wide range of sources including growers and grower groups, farming system groups, State farming organisations and their Research Advisory Committees (RAC’s), researchers, Government, private consultants and internally within GRDC.” But GRDC should take a much more expansive and public interest view of its constituencies, as outlined below. All Australians have a vital and legitimate interest in the future of food and GRDC must engage with us all if it is to really fulfill its charter.

GRDC should also now critically review its decisions on backing technological winners. For instance, GRDC advocates for genetically manipulated (GM) crops and foods, despite a lack of good evidence that GM techniques could be used to deliver on the GM industry’s inflated promises. GRDC, the GM industry peak body Croplife, and the NFF jointly established and fund Agrifood Awareness which promotes only GM to the exclusion of other solutions. GRDC is complicit by promoting Agrifood and other pro-GM views in its editorials and publications, without any critical review or balance. GRDC’s

credibility has suffered as a majority of Australian farmers (and shoppers) want to remain GM-free. As a major grain trader, Australia enjoys a competitive advantage by being GM-free but this is in danger of being totally lost. Some Australian farmers now get a \$15/tonne premium for GM-free canola in local and international markets, and do not incur the extra costs of Monsanto's technology fees, chemicals and contractual constraints for GM canola seed.

Please favourably consider implementing our following proposals. We are ready to elaborate these further if the opportunity to meet or make a further submission is available.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bob Phelps". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right from the end of the name.

Bob Phelps
Executive Director

Question 1.1 – Are we missing any stakeholders?

Are we missing any other sources that need to be involved in the IDENTIFY stage?

Yes.

If so who?

The informed public (taxpayers who fund the government contributions, particularly non-farmer members of rural communities); the organic industry (e.g. Organic Federation of Australia and the certifying bodies); other rural research groups (e.g. Ecological Agriculture Association Australia, Environmental Farmers Network, Permaculture Association, Natural Sequence Farming Systems, Keyline, and so on), and policy groups (e.g. the Food Sovereignty Alliance, Food Connect, Gene Ethics, Greenpeace, MADGE, Network of Concerned Farmers, the Farmers Market Associations, Community Gardens Network, Cultivating Community, Slow Food, Choice, and many more) and any other groups that may choose to engage with GRDC processes.

Given the wide range of sources, in what ways could the GRDC gather this information in an accurate, more timely and efficient manner?

GRDC needs to both gather and disseminate information. Some mechanisms it might employ include:

- publishing online notices of proposed and present R&D projects, from their very inception;
- inviting submissions on new R&D proposals and on progress reports on existing projects;
- issuing questionnaires that explore community priorities for R&D investments;
- convening community forums to both canvass and inform community visions of Australia's food production and supply systems in the future;
- inviting articles and letters to the editor for publication in Ground Cover;
- candidly and openly reality-testing the successes and failures of GRDC R&D.

Question 1.2 – How does the GRDC co-ordinate across stakeholders better?

There are common issues regularly identified across the different sources at both a regional and national level. However **responses to these issues are articulated inconsistently and therefore require some degree of interpretation**. Whilst it is acknowledged that the industry identifies common issues well, it is important to questions whether it could be done better. Although the GRDC believes that better coordination across stakeholders in issue identification is required, we are cognisant that imposing common structures across different regions is unlikely to be effective as the relative skills, knowledge and methods of interaction differ.

What do you believe is the most appropriate way of coordinating these activities across stakeholders in your region and across the nation?

The GRDC should encourage a diversity of opinions, even though they require more negotiation, mutual understanding and compromise for their productive resolution. As part of its review processes GRDC should redevelop its Vision and Mission statements and program goals in partnership with the community at large. These processes should produce broad public and political consensus about GRDC priorities and targets for the next 10, 20 and 30 years. They would also help to secure public confidence and resourcing for agreed R&D programs which are now under funding pressure. With these guideposts firmly in place and a consensus about priorities, GRDC could more readily reconcile the different priorities and views among its diverse constituencies. GRDC could then also pay more needed attention to nurturing democratic processes to resolve

conflicting priorities and encourage, rather than constrain, the diversity of visionary views that will be needed to adapt to dramatically changing circumstances.

Question 1.3 – Is the GRDC identifying the issue appropriately and in sufficient detail to allow an appropriate response?

To achieve a greater understanding of common issues, an accurate and common interpretation of what the issue actually is must occur. What is the real problem and how does it fit within the context of the whole farming system? What format/means should we use to capture this information to ensure the right response is made? Do we need a standardised approach that allows more systematic exploration of the issues raised? How can we collect enough detail on issues to determine their scale, level of importance and the likely degree of difficulty in developing solutions?

We propose solutions later that will also address these questions.

Question 1.4 – How do you wish for this level of consultation to occur?

As outlined above, the GRDC currently receives information from multiple sources that continue to provide valuable input into the development of investment plans. Given the expanding function of growers, grower groups, agribusiness and private consultants in undertaking R, D & E activities and advising on targets, what is the most effective method of consultation in your region?

Our proposed solutions below should also address these questions.

Question 2.1 – Is the IDA model of fast track, normal and large scale initiatives a good one?

Pathway 1 is a new initiative aimed at short term projects (1-3 years) with a small amount of resources available for rapid investment to ensure a more timely response to issues requiring relatively little high-end research.

Pathway 2 maintains the current GRDC investment process.

Pathway 3 is another new pathway for investment in major initiatives which have the capacity to address issues that are common on a regional, or more likely a national basis. The intent of Pathway 3 is to establish mechanisms to engage a broad range of stakeholder representatives in contributing to a more intensive planning process to ensure the realisation of longer term outcomes. Caring for Country and the Water Use Efficiency projects have adopted a formalised project management structure in the past utilising tools such as Program Logic to ensure appropriate outcomes, outputs and monitoring strategies are defined. The intent is to more consistently establish such mechanisms and disband them when the issue has been satisfactorily addressed.

Is the adoption of the three potential pathways for future investment appropriate?

Pathway 1 needs to be refocused as development and extension services, soundly based in evidence that has already been collected through previous R&D. Resources should only be allocated to these sorts of projects where sustainable solutions can be deployed. Bandaid strategies to cushion the impacts of immediate problems or crises without longer-term solutions are doomed to recur. For instance, weeds resistant to some chemical groups will pose more difficult and costly management problems unless a well-informed strategic plan is implemented. If the experience in North Dakota is repeated here, for example, widespread growing of Roundup Ready canola in response to present resistance will spread feral canola plants in remote natural and disturbed environments. Roundup tolerant wild radish and turnip may also follow.

Pathway 2 should augment Pathway 1, where some additional focused research of limited duration and cost is needed to ensure that the effectiveness of development and extension services is optimized.

Pathway 3 should become the main focus of GRDC work to achieve its agreed long term Vision and Mission and “to ensure the realisation of longer term outcomes”. This long term approach appears to be undermined by the short-term notion that: “The intent is to more consistently establish such mechanisms and disband them when the issue has been satisfactorily addressed.” We applaud the: “Caring for Country and the Water Use Efficiency projects” adoption of “a formalised project management structure utilising tools such as Program Logic to ensure appropriate outcomes, outputs and monitoring strategies are defined.” What is lacking here is a process for constant critical evaluation, reassessment and reality-testing of successes and failures in an open and transparent way as these programs evolve. Static systems will not deliver the goods.

Is the adoption of a fast tracking mechanism for short-term projects that require little research a sound mechanism to increase responsiveness and flexibility in addressing onfarm issues?

No.

If not, why not and what would you do differently?

Short-term approaches that are not integrated with a broad long-term strategic vision are generally band-aids that will soon require further ad hoc attention at even greater expense. Such a cycle of wasteful crisis-management can only be effectively modified by more emphasis on and resourcing for Pathway 3 programs that serve the broader vision of sustainable bioregion management.

Question 2.2 – How do we achieve consistency in deciding which action to take?

If a framework such as that depicted in Figure 3 is adopted there needs to be a common approach to determining if identified issues are best addressed via R, D or E activities or a combination of these.

Priority setting will be clearer and easier if the overall long-term goals and objectives have been agreed and most resources are applied to achieving them.

A main feature of this action is determining what information is already available. How can review of current information be achieved most efficiently and effectively?

Improved, open information storage, access and retrieval systems. A ‘Wiki’ approach to gathering and disseminating information. Rural communities are a huge repository of generally undervalued and ignored wisdom which needs to be given a home. Their information, advice, opinion and argument deserves a place on the internet and in print to be seen and discussed. Agreed solutions to many of rural Australia’s profound problems would emerge from the creative capacities and collaborations of practical as well as theoretical food and fibre producers, scientists and citizens generally.

How do we best gather this knowledge and information when so many of us are time poor?

Make every interested person into your agents of change. A ‘Wiki’ site, like Wikipedia would create the domain where ideas and visions could reside. GRDC shouldn’t delude itself that it has to do everything. It will best serve Australians by being a smart facilitator of the whole community’s efforts to make Australia a safe, secure and sovereign food

producer for decades to come.

Is there a need for facilitators to undertake this action? How else could this occur?

Yes, excellent facilitators are needed as catalysts to get the ideas and visions flowing. They will emerge if the communication mechanisms are provided to enable them to do their job. Promoting regional and local facilitation would be best, to build the community networks appropriate for solving common challenges in which people have a real stake. Providing a framework (like Transition Towns) within which communities can find the optimum solutions for themselves will be most enduring and effective.

Question 2.3 – What is the most effective feedback mechanism to all stakeholders on decisions made?

Given the importance of establishing what type of information is already available in relation to specific issues, what is the best mechanism to ensure that current information is communicated to stakeholders as well as feedback on the response (R, D or E) that is or needs to be undertaken?

Every communication channel should be used and participants should have choice about the mode of interaction and delivery. For instance: the internet with wiki-site, blogs, email newsletters, e-reports and e-discussion papers. But for those without the internet, print or visual media both internal - such as Ground Cover - and in the general could be more engaged with GRDC constituents through invited articles and letters to the editor to provoke debate.

Question 3.1 – Do we have the required skills and capacity and if not how do we get them?

Do we have the necessary skills available to conduct both short term and long term farming systems R, D&E projects on a regional level? Do farming systems groups, agribusiness and consultants, have the required skills to conduct the most effective and coordinated D&E responses and if not can they (should they) be developed internally or accessed through another party (e.g. other groups, university, CSIRO, DPI etc)? This also includes reviewing current knowledge and extending generated information.

Feeding the nation is a top priority and everyone who wants to should be engaged in achieving the goals and vision. Harnessing the enthusiasm, skills and diversity of the whole community with the mechanisms already discussed can put GRDC in the best position to fulfil its public interest charter.

Question 3.2 – How do we co-ordinate activities?

What are the appropriate mechanisms to co-ordinate R, D&E activities across providers and across regions so that synergies can be captured, knowledge and experiences shared and greater benefits to all participants are realised?

The national broadband network is being rolled out to meet exactly this need. If GRDC begins now to prepare for this major national innovation, with an enormously improved website presence and functionality, it is set to facilitate a revolution in problem-solving in rural Australia.

Does this require a dedicated co-ordination role?

Co-ordination and facilitation would follow from providing the infrastructure and functionality needed for all segments of the Grain sector – from seed to spoon – to engage in this exciting and visionary enterprise.

Question 3.3 - What is the most effective feedback mechanism to all stakeholders on results generated?

Are we extending the results of R&D in the most effective way?

No. Putting them out on the web for all to read, utilise, augment, criticize, improve, etc. will be the most beneficial and effective means to facilitate extension services.

If not, why not and what improvements could be made that are most suitable for your region?

If access to information and advice are maximized, the use and benefit will also be optimized.

Gene Ethics: 22/10/10