



## **National Food Plan for Australia**

### **Submission from the Australasia-Pacific Extension Network (APEN) in response to the Green Paper**

#### **About APEN and Extension**

The Australasia-Pacific Extension Network is the peak organisation for extension professionals - people involved in community and rural development, adult education, communication and other related fields.

Extension is the process of enabling change in individuals, communities and industries involved in the primary industry sector and with natural resource management (SELN 2006).

Extension involves the use of communication and adult education processes to help people and communities identify potential improvements to their practices, and then provide them with the skills and resources to effect these improvements.

Worldwide, extension is being reborn in many new forms. Many different organisations and industries are realising the need to be involved in facilitating change across communities. To effect these changes, extension practitioners need to learn new skills and draw on the learning and resources of others to improve their practice and theory.

APEN plays a key role in Australia's food system by providing a platform for extension professionals to develop their knowledge and skills through cross-industry networking and professional development opportunities and by ensuring that the role of extension in driving change is valued by community, government and industry leaders.

#### **Who is APEN?**

Formed in 1993, our network represents about 500 extension professionals across Australia, New Zealand and the broader Australasia-Pacific Region. APEN has active groups in every state of Australia with new ones being added as the network grows. Our members are from government agencies, private practice, NRM bodies, Agricultural service providers and educational institutions.

APEN is an incorporated not-for-profit organisation, governed by a constitution and managed by a management committee that works in tandem with a secretariat. The committee is made up of the elected coordinators from each of the member regions, currently NZ, NSW, NT, WA, SA, Qld, TAs and Vic.

## **APEN Response to the Green Paper**

Central to APEN's response to the Green Paper on a National Food Plan for Australia is the need for an increase in funding for the RD&E 'trinity' of Research Development and Extension. However, to deliver the best return for the tax payer, the community ought to better understand the returns it can expect from RD&E, and the consequences of neglecting the 'E' component. In short, increased investment in and delivery of R&D without an integrated investment in extension and consideration of adoption issues, is unlikely to result in the desired level of innovation and uptake of new practices and technologies.

Recent research is now showing evidence that declines in productivity growth in Australian agriculture are likely linked to declines in public RD&E investment in general. Within this context, and the lack of attention given to extension and adoption issues in many industry RD&E strategies (Campbell 2012), it is also likely that expenditure on extension has also declined both in real terms and as a percentage of the total RD&E investment.

Thus, the challenge of declining investment in RD&E, and the need to effectively allocate that investment between the various RD&E elements, is a situation that needs to be addressed in any National Food Plan for Australia.

### **General response**

**Extension is an important and effective policy instrument for driving innovation and the continued international-competitiveness of Australia's food system. This contribution needs to be both recognised and supported by increased investment.**

Past reviews have shown that extension is a significant activity across rural and regional Australia in both the public and private sectors involving thousands of extension workers/facilitators and tens of thousands of landholders and community members (Coutts *et al.* 2005).

The majority of APEN's membership works directly with primary industries on issues related to innovation and change in Australia's food production systems and supply chains. Beyond our formal membership, APEN aims to represent all those involved in the delivery of extension or capacity-building services within Australia's food system. In 2005, it was determined that there were at least 4000 full-time or individuals involved in extension across both the public and private sectors, and possibly half that number again considering that many extension practitioners work in part-time positions. Most of this public sector and much of the private extension work is based on developing and delivering projects (Coutts *et al.* 2005).

Not only is extension a significant activity within Australia's food system – it contributes significantly to its productivity, profitability and sustainability.

Frequently this contribution is by contributing to the adoption (and adoptability) of commissioned research and development within an integrated system of research, development and extension (RD&E) operating together.

Given this importance of extension to Australia's food systems, it is of some concern to APEN that the Green Paper frequently makes reference to R&D on its own as a major solution to issues confronting Australia's food system and food-based industries, with inconsistent recognition for the 'E' component.

APEN contends that the language of 'RD&E' provides a better guide to innovation policy than the language of 'R&D' without the 'E'. This is of concern as omission of the 'E' component in discussions about research and innovation entails several risks. These include the failure to consider adoptability issues prior to embarking on R&D, and sub-optimal allocation of resources to extension and adoption activities, resulting in the failure to fully realise the intended benefits of investments in RD&E.

### **Extension – more than R&D plus E**

Extension's contribution to Australia's food system is not limited to supporting the adoption of R&D developed by professional researchers. For example, important innovations can occur in many ways, including through farmer-to-farmer learning, facilitated by the involvement of skilled extension professionals using new tools such as social media (e.g. Thomas and Robinson 2012).

Extension can also play a valuable role in building networks and relationships and capacity within communities and industries that enable the better sharing of innovations, and that promote resilience in the event of major setbacks. For a rich description of the many ways that extension can contribute to Australia's food production system, APEN commends the publication "*Extension Works: case studies demonstrating how extension enables change in rural Australia*" (SELN 2008)

### **Key recommendations**

**Any discussion about improving food production productivity and the innovation systems to support this should always refer to the 'trinity' of RD&E: Research, Development and Extension.** The language of 'RD&E' provides a better guide to innovation policy than the language of 'R&D' without the 'E'. The green paper frequently refers to R&D separately from extension when it should be using the language of 'RD&E', placing research, development and extension as joint partners within an integrated innovation system. This is of concern as omission of the 'E' component in discussions about research and innovation entails several risks. These include the failure to consider adoptability issues prior to embarking on R&D, and sub-optimal allocation of resources to extension and adoption activities, resulting in the failure to fully realise the intended benefits of investments in RD&E.

**Extension specialists should be invited to sit on decision-making bodies addressing innovation in Australia's food production systems and supply chains, including any Australian Food Council or similar body to emerge out of the National Food Plan.** APEN supports the intent to improve leadership and stakeholder engagement (and influence) on food policy issues. Regarding the options presented in Section 3.4.1, of the Green Paper, APEN supports the formation of a forum or council whose

membership extends beyond the relevant Ministers to include agriculture, fisheries and food business representatives, with participation by health, community and consumer representatives. Given their focus on enabling change and innovation, extension specialists ought to be represented on such bodies. As the peak body representing extension specialists in the regions, APEN is both willing and able to help identify suitably qualified and experienced extension professionals to perform in this capacity.

**Any further decline in the capacity of the public sector to engage in effective extension is not in the best interests of Australia's food systems.** Private sector extension/advisory services alone are insufficient to support change and innovation in important areas of Australia's food system. Public sector (and/or publicly-funded) extension is likely to have particular importance in facilitating the uptake of certain practices when there may be limited profit incentive for private sector providers to become involved, such as in areas of natural resource management and potentially animal welfare. Public/private partnerships are also critical in delivering extension services that maximize the reach and effectiveness of Australia's RD&E system.

## References

Campbell, A. 2012. 'Rethinking rural research in Australia' published online by 'The Conversation' 3 September, 2012. Online resource: available at [www.theconversation.com.au](http://www.theconversation.com.au).

Coutts, J., Roberts, K., Coutts, A. and Frost, F., 2005, The Role of Extension in Building Capacity - What works, and why, Cooperative Venture for Capacity Building, online resource: available at <http://www.crdc.com.au/index.cfm?pageID=125>.

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