

PRIMARY INDUSTRIES MINISTERIAL COUNCIL

COMMUNIQUÉ

PIMC 9

26 OCTOBER 2005

Primary Industries Ministers from across Australia met in Launceston on Wednesday 26 October 2005 to consider progress on issues impacting on Australia's primary production sector. This was the ninth meeting of the Primary Industries Ministerial Council. Specific issues dealt with by the Council are detailed below.

Avian Influenza Developments

Council considered recent developments with the evolving avian influenza situation in the Asian region, and globally, and noted advice concerning the state of preparedness of the agriculture sector to rapidly respond to suspected cases of the disease in poultry or wild birds in Australia. Ministers endorsed the importance of the forthcoming national disease simulation "Exercise Eleusis" to be conducted 29 November to 1 December 2005, in testing the effectiveness of a whole of government approach in responding to an outbreak of avian influenza. Council was also informed of the recent changes in Australian Government biosecurity policy to strengthen arrangements for the importation of live birds and eggs.

Trace Levels of GM Canola in Australian Canola Production Systems

Council noted that trace levels of genetically modified (GM) canola had recently been detected in Australia's non-GM canola production systems. Council agreed to a nationally consistent definition of threshold levels in canola grain and seed for traces of those GM events approved by the Office of the Gene Technology Regulator. In doing so, Council noted that it was not the intention of governments to adversely impact on the pending canola harvest. Council also agreed to adopt a threshold level set at 0.9 percent for canola crop, noting that this threshold is applicable in the European Union. Council agreed that threshold levels for seed (for commercial seed for sale) should be 0.5 percent for the coming two seasons in 2006 and 2007, and there after the intention is to set a limit of 0.1 percent.

Council agreed that where jurisdictions wish to adopt a GM free standard, industry will be required to develop effective testing, standards and protocols for a supply chain able to provide confidence that the grain is free from GM material. Council also agreed to give effect to the threshold levels and standard testing arrangements through state and territory GM moratoria legislation in the first instance with a view to appropriate national arrangements being examined in the longer term.

Council noted progress with the review of the *Gene Technology Act 2000 (C'th)* being undertaken by an independent Panel. The independent Panel's report is due for release in June 2006.

Progress Report of the Agriculture and Food Policy Reference Group

Peter Corish, President of NFF, provided a short progress report of the Agriculture and Food Policy Reference Group and an outline of key issues currently being considered.

Drought Policy Reform

Council received presentations from the Bureau of Meteorology on current climatic conditions in Australia, and from the Chairman of the National Agricultural Monitoring System Steering Committee on encouraging progress with the development of a National Agricultural Monitoring System to streamline Exceptional Circumstances application and assessment processes.

Council supported the fact that the National Agricultural Monitoring System is being based on sound scientific advice and input from key rural stakeholders.

Council also recognised the many improvements that have already been made to the existing drought support policies and programs, in recognition of the severity and length of this drought and the hardship and suffering experienced by many farmers. This includes enhancements by the Australian Government, including streamlining the Exceptional Circumstances (EC) assistance process by removing the requirement for a new application to be lodged for areas approaching the end of the third year of EC assistance; providing more generous interest rate subsidies under a relaxed asset test; providing an increase in the income test for relief payments; providing additional counselling support; and offering a second round of drought Envirofund grants.

State Governments have also continued to provide substantial assistance to primary producers during this ongoing drought including direct grants, transport subsidies, relief from statutory charges, community grants, additional rural counselling services and drought support workers, and programs that assist with drought-proofing, such as special conservation loans.

Council requested that Standing Committee further investigate possible new initiatives to encourage communities and farmers to better prepare for drought, or ameliorate its consequences. Council requested Standing Committee consult with a small reference group of key stakeholders as a matter of priority to develop proposals to harmonise Australian and State/Territory preparedness arrangements and drought declaration processes for future droughts so as not to change the ground rules on farmers already suffering hardship from the impacts of the current prolonged drought.

Council stressed the significant changes already made to drought policy and assistance measures during the course of this prolonged drought, and looks forward to further measures being implemented for future droughts.

Council requested a report back to the next meeting in April 2006 for further consideration by Ministers.

Food Regulation Issues

Council noted several issues of interest on the agenda for the upcoming Australia New Zealand Food Regulation Ministerial Council (ANZFRMC) meeting to be held on 28 October 2005, including a proposed standard for Country of origin labelling. The proposed standard includes measures to strengthen the provision of origin information, including requiring unpackaged fruit, vegetables, seafood, pork and pork products to identify a specific country of origin. The Australian Government indicated that it intended to support the proposed standard, and in addition, would direct FSANZ to consider the feasibility of extending country of origin labelling with two or less “whole food” ingredients. The Australian Government considered this would see the significant improvements proposed for unpackaged foods implemented without delay, and ensure FSANZ considered extending specific Country-of-Origin- Labelling to packaged foods, by March 2006. The Australian Government urged jurisdictions to support this position at the forthcoming ANZFRMC meeting.

ANZFRMC will also consider recommendations of a review of Food Standards Australia New Zealand Assessment and Approval Processes. The recommendations outline options to streamline existing processes and protect confidential commercial information whilst maintaining the primary objective of public health and safety.

Rural Financial Counselling Service Program

Council endorsed overarching national principles for the Australian Government’s Rural Financial Counselling Service Program, which will provide a consistent approach for implementing improvements to the program’s delivery arrangements. These principles will benefit rural and regional clients by improving access to the program and its free and responsive service. The Australian Government will continue to develop with participating State and Territory jurisdictions bilateral agreements to deliver the services that are consistent with the overarching national principles..

Farm Forestry National Action Statement

Council endorsed a new Farm Forestry National Action Statement and Implementation Plan. The Statement outlines actions for the Australian, State and Territory governments and the forest and wood products industry to further develop farm forestry. The Statement outlines a vision to increase the adoption of commercial tree growing and management as a widely accepted element of Australian farming and as a component of regional natural resource planning.

Forest Industry Development and Investment

Council noted that the forest industry, through the Australian Government’s Forest and Wood Products Council (FWPC), is developing a strategic plan – the *Australian Wood and Paper Industry Growth Strategy* – to promote, develop and expand the Australian wood and paper industries. The Strategy seeks to provide a realistic and achievable roadmap for industry renewal and growth based on innovation, competitiveness and long-term sustainability. Council recognised that forest industries were an important means of developing regional economies and reaffirmed its support for regional forest industry development as one element of an integrated approach across a number of industry sectors.

Forest and Wood Products Australia

Council was informed of a proposal from the Forest and Wood Products Council, chaired by Senator Macdonald, for the development of a new forest and wood products company to fund forest R&D, marketing and promotion. Council noted that the FWPC would consult with state jurisdictions regarding development of proposal including funding arrangements.

Establishment of a Formal National Working Group to Address Domestic Animal Welfare Issues

Council considered a proposal from Victoria that the existing Australian & New Zealand Companion Animal Working Group (ANZCAWG) be formalised as a working group under the Primary Industries Ministerial Council to consider domestic animal issues. Council referred the proposal to Standing Committee for further consideration and report to Council in April 2006.

National Biosecurity Strategy

Council noted progress on the development of a National Biosecurity Strategy and endorsed in-principle a proposal for an Australian Biosecurity System for Primary Production and the Environment. Council requested Standing Committee to establish a joint Primary Industries and Natural Resource Management Steering Group to progress the development of the Australian Biosecurity System, with a view to incorporating the work being undertaken by the NRM Ministerial Council on invasive species. Council requested that the Steering Group report back within six months with a work program and a progress report on priority issues.

Indigenous Reconciliation Action Plan

Council noted that both the Primary Industries and Natural Resource Management Standing Committees had reviewed their approach to addressing Indigenous reconciliation in the light of COAG decisions in mid-2004. In particular, nine broad “themes” had been identified as the basis to further progress Indigenous reconciliation actions, including potable water; marine seascape management; weeds, pests and diseases; indigenous participation in land conservation management. Council underlined the need to give priority to this work and requested that Standing Committee, in reporting back in October 2006, outline individual State achievements..

Animal Health Issues - AUSVETPIANS

Council endorsed two AUSVETPLAN disease response strategy manuals on Porcine Respiratory and Reproductive Syndrome (PRRS) and Bee pests and diseases. The manuals will enable emergency management of pests and diseases in the relevant sectors to be based on sound technical analysis which will link strategies, implementation and coordination in emergency management.

Model Codes of Practice

Council agreed on measures to support the wool industry’s commitment to phase out mulesing by 2010 and endorsed an appendix to the *Model Code of Practice for the Welfare of Animals – The Sheep*. The Code was revised to implement minimum standards for mulesing and a timetable for implementation of accreditation of mulesing operators.

Council also endorsed a revision of *Model Code of Practice for the Welfare of Animals – The Camel* and noted that the *Australian Code of Practice for the Care and Use of Animals for Scientific Purposes* was recently revised and published by the National Health and Medical Research Council to reflect scientific changes and community attitudes.

Property Management Systems

Council noted progress in the development and application across jurisdictions of a range of property management systems (PMS) in agriculture, tailored to regional and industry needs. Council also noted the emerging need to build on existing programs and frameworks and to develop a national approach to property management systems as a basis for advancing on-farm profitability and sustainability and implementing a mechanism to achieve catchment and regional scale natural resource management outcomes.

Council agreed to establish a joint Working Group with the NRM Ministerial Council to investigate the feasibility of, and design requirements for, a national approach to PMS.

Citrus Canker National Eradication Program

Council agreed to fund a revised strategy for a more aggressive response to achieve successful eradication of citrus canker in Queensland by February 2009, as agreed by the National Management Group. Council approved the long-term strategy proposed by the National Management Group to restore the citrus industry in the Emerald region and agreed to a total budget of \$19.412 million to 2008-09, subject to the budgetary processes of jurisdictions.

Branched Broomrape Eradication Program

Council noted the progress made towards eradication of the branched broomrape weed, and agreed to the continuation of the eradication program. Council also approved in principle the budget arrangements for the next three years and agreed to a budget of \$2.307 million for 2006-07.

Agricultural Trade – Review of Developments

Council noted the reported developments in the agricultural trade area. Council welcomed thorough examination of the potential benefits of Free Trade Agreements with China, ASEAN, Malaysia and the United Arab Emirates and encouraged Australian agriculture and food producers to continue to engage with Government in this process.

Council noted the challenges in the WTO Doha Round of agriculture negotiations and agreed to the need for Australia to work closely with the European Union, United States and partners in the Cairns Group, with a view to achievement of successful outcomes providing real commercial benefit to Australian farmers.

National Veterinary Registration

Council noted progress on the development of a system for national registration of veterinarians by mutual recognition and that a paper on a system for national registration will be brought forward for consideration at the next Council meeting.

Horticulture Business Code of Conduct

Council noted progress in the development of a mandatory Horticulture Code of Conduct. The development of the Code was an election commitment of the Australian Government and aims to improve the clarity and transparency in trade transactions in the wholesale fruit and vegetable markets. Council also noted the views of jurisdictions regarding coverage of the code and allowable trading options.

Implementation of NLIS in Cattle with the Northern Territory

Council noted progress made and planned for by the Northern Territory to have the National Livestock Identification System (NLIS) for cattle fully implemented from 1 July 2007. This will provide national consistency in the mandatory adoption and use of Radio Frequency Identification Devices (RFID) as a means of identifying and tracking livestock movements.

Developments in Animal Welfare

Council noted progress in implementation of the Australian Animal Welfare Strategy (AAWS) and acknowledged the ongoing shared governmental responsibility to drive implementation of the Strategy's objectives. Council also discussed the recent developments in the industry's response to the PETA campaign against the wool and sheep industry, in particular in relation to mulesing and the live sheep export trade.

Council noted the successful Middle East OIE Regional Workshop. A further workshop is scheduled for 13 November 2005 involving Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members to progress animal welfare issues relating to the live animal export trade to the Middle East.

Council also noted progress on the future development of Model Codes of Practice following a recent consultancy review. Final recommendations for Standing Committee consideration are currently being developed.