

PRIMARY INDUSTRIES MINISTERIAL COUNCIL MEETING COMMUNIQUÉ

Primary Industries Ministers from across Australia met jointly in Brisbane on Thursday, 10 April 2003 to consider progress on issues impacting on Australia's primary production sector. This was the third meeting of the Primary Industries Ministerial Council. Specific issues dealt with by Council are detailed below.

Drought and Climate Situation and Outlook

Ministers received an up-date from the Bureau of Meteorology on the climatic situation and noted indications that seasonal conditions are expected to return to near normal over the next three to four months. However, Ministers also noted that a return to 'normal' rainfall patterns is not guaranteed and that eventual recovery from the drought may not be uniform across regions.

Ministers agreed that, when the drought eases, governments, industry and other relevant farming, industry and community organisations should review the effectiveness of Commonwealth and State drought policy and programs, taking into account lessons learned from the current drought. They noted the intention of the Commonwealth Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, the Hon Warren Truss MP, to convene a conference (likely to be held in the second half of the year) to hear suggestions on how Commonwealth and State/Territories drought assistance measures can be improved. State/Territories Ministers, National and State farmer organisations and other relevant organisations will be invited to attend. An Options Paper will be prepared taking account of the outcomes of the conference for consideration by Commonwealth and State Governments.

The meeting congratulated NRAC and the Drought Task Force on the speed of processing Exceptional Circumstances applications.

Agricultural Trade Issues

Ministers noted the importance of the current WTO negotiations on agriculture under the Doha Round and FTA negotiations with the US and Thailand and reinforced the importance of these negotiations for future economic growth in rural and regional Australia. They emphasised the need for these negotiations to produce substantive new market access opportunities for agricultural products and agreed that State/Territory Governments should be kept informed of developments.

Ministers recognised that trade is a two way street and that it is to be expected that other countries would put pressure on Australia to provide new opportunities for access to the Australian market. Ministers considered a number of trade disputes and their implications for Australia's agricultural production and quarantine controls. They reinforced however the need to maintain Australia's relative pest and disease free status and reiterated that decisions on pest and disease free status be based on sound science.

Ministers also discussed the implications for Australian agricultural trade of recent events in Iraq and in particular maintaining and protecting access for major exports such as wheat.

Genetically Modified (GM) canola

Ministers considered a range of issues related to the possible commercial introduction of Genetically Modified (GM) canola. The present state of industry preparedness for the first year of possible commercial production of GM canola was noted. Ministers also noted that a national monitoring program for industry arrangements for GM canola is under development. Council supported a cooperative and consistent approach to the development of GM zoning legislation in those States where it is under consideration. Ministers requested the Commonwealth to prepare briefings on the market experience and outlook for GM crops in Europe, Asia and other countries and on the trade and WTO aspects that need to be taken into account in Australia. These briefings were requested within six weeks for consideration by Ministers out of session.

Biosecurity Developments - Update

Australia's approach to quarantine has been criticised by some trading partners, and international scrutiny of Australia's approach to quarantine has been heightened by some current WTO actions.

The Council noted the international developments relevant to Australia's biosecurity policy, and the status of some current major import risk analyses.

The partnership approach among Commonwealth, State and Territory governments is important to Australia in dealing effectively with biosecurity issues. Council endorsed the need for a strongly cooperative approach between Commonwealth, State and Territory governments to maintain Australia's effective, transparent, and science-based approach to managing biosecurity risks.

Animal Health Issues

Council considered a range of important animal health issues and agreed to the development of a long-term strategy on animal health, which would include key actions arising from Exercise Minotaur. Council agreed on the need to secure reliable supplies of vaccine for emergency use in an outbreak of FMD and agreed that the costs of securing these supplies be shared between Commonwealth and State Governments and industry. Council also noted the development of a TSE Freedom Assurance Program and agreed on the absolute need to meet international requirements on surveillance and testing and that regular reports would be provided on auditing of compliance obligations.

Livestock Identification and Tracing

Ministers agreed to develop a risk-based national approach to livestock identification and tracing for cattle and sheep.

In respect of cattle, herd-based identification and tracing arrangements will apply where cattle go from property of birth directly to slaughter or live export.

However, where cattle go to saleyards, feedlots or other properties before slaughter or live export, individual (NLIS-approved) animal identification devices would be applied prior to leaving the property of birth. Both mechanisms would be linked to a central database.

For sheep, flock-based identification and tracing arrangements would apply across the board, using NFIS approved devices linked to a central database.

Ministers agreed to aim for implementation by 1 July 2004 for cattle and 1 July 2005 for sheep, noting that full implementation will be dependant on a range of practical considerations which will need to be worked through by Industry and their respective State/Territory government.

Forests and Environmental Services

Council noted that there was a significant opportunity and challenge for governments and plantation and farm forestry stakeholders to work in cooperation with regional NRM bodies under the National Action Plan and Natural Heritage Trust to deliver environmental services. Council agreed on the need to identify areas with plantation potential and where revegetation would yield the greatest environmental benefit. Council recognised that the environmental services provided by plantations have no current market value and supported work to identify how to confer value on these services, including how public funds might be used to leverage private investment into these areas.

Council recognised the important role of NRM committees in furthering land use change initiatives, and agreed that governments will work in concert with regional committees, industry groups and other stakeholders to assist in the formulation of their regional plans which address salinity remediation revegetation priorities and/or harness commercial revegetation opportunities. Council recognised the need to develop on-ground initiatives in the lower rainfall areas and indicates support for one or more catchment scale pilot schemes.

Council also agreed to a Victorian proposal that the Commonwealth and Victoria would prepare a report to Council's consideration on impediments to investment in sawlog plantations and development of secondary markets for plantations on options for removing them.

Branched Broomrape

Council approved \$2 million funding in 2003-04 to eradicate Branched Broomrape in South Australia. It also agreed to support similar funding for 2004-05 and 2005-06 subject to satisfactory progress and budget processes. The parasitic weed can have a major impact on many horticultural crop yields as well as its seed contaminating cereal harvests. A concerted effort of quarantine, control and research activities in South Australia is preventing spread and is leading to eradicating the weed in infested areas of South Australia. A review by weed experts indicated that the program is on track for the long-term aim of eradication.

Council's Role in Animal Welfare

Ministers considered the possible role of Council in non production animal welfare issues and agreed that Council should accept an extension of their role to consider significant issues that would clearly benefit from a national approach. In doing so, Council noted that non-production animal welfare issues are also relevant to other Ministerial Councils. Most non production animal welfare issues would continue to be handled at State/Territory level.

National Coordination of the Ban on Routine Tail Docking of Dogs

Ministers considered a proposal for a nationally coordinated State and Territory ban on the routine tail docking of dogs for cosmetic (ie non-therapeutic) purposes. The Ministers noted that some jurisdictions have proceeded, or will proceed, with implementation by 1 December 2003 of the necessary legislative mechanisms to enact a ban. Other jurisdictions are considering their positions. Ministers agreed to seek to finalise a national position on this issue by 30 June 2003.

National Aquaculture Policy Statement

Council considered and endorsed a National Aquaculture Policy Statement by Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments recognising the contribution that aquaculture makes to the Australian economy and regional development. The Policy Statement sends a clear signal to the Australian public, aquaculture industry and domestic and international investors of Australia's strong support for the sustainable development of the aquaculture industry in Australia.

Red Imported Fire Ants - Eradication Program Update

Council noted the progress of the red imported fire ant eradication program. The Program, which is being carried out principally by the Fire Ant Control Centre of the Queensland Department of Primary Industries, has been underway effectively for two seasons. Interstate surveillance has been increased and no red imported fire ants have been detected outside Queensland. Monitoring and surveillance continues to indicate that fire ant nests are being killed at the rates required for eradication by 2006.

Rural Veterinary Review

Ministers discussed the recent report on the Review into Rural Veterinary Services. Council noted the Review found, that while the current levels of service are largely meeting the needs of livestock producers and the public, enhancements will be necessary to ensure future requirements are met. The Review recommended the wider integration of rural veterinarians into the provision of government services, including the establishment of a veterinary reserve for utilisation in an animal disease emergency. The Review's recommendations relating to livestock identification and performance standards are already being addressed by Council and its committees. Council requested that Standing Committee consider the Review's recommendations and after consulting stakeholders, provide advice to Council by 31 May 2003.

Australian Rural Women's Trade Initiative

Council considered a NSW proposal for an ABARE research program to examine the impacts of trade liberalisation on developing countries, and particularly on women and families in those countries.

The proposed research would provide input to the Australian delegation to the IV World Congress of Rural Women to be held in South Africa in 2006.

Council agreed there was a need for wider consultation with stakeholder groups before further considering this proposal. Council requested Standing Committee to review the proposal and report back to the next Council meeting.