



National Farmers' Federation

**Public Submission to the
Senate Inquiry into Natural Resource
Management and Conservation Challenges**

29 August 2008



National Farmers' FEDERATION

Member Organisations



**Australian
Dairy Farmers**



ADFA



AGFORCE



CANEGROWERS



**CATTLE
COUNCIL
OF AUSTRALIA**



**COTTON
AUSTRALIA**



**GRAINS
COUNCIL
OF AUSTRALIA**



**NSW
Farmers
ASSOCIATION**



RGA
RICEGROWERS' ASSOCIATION
OF AUSTRALIA INC



SHEEPMEAT
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TFGA
Agriculture's Future
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Victorian Farmers Federation



**WOOLPRODUCERS
AUSTRALIA**

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National Farmers' Federation

The National Farmers' Federation (NFF) was established in 1979 and is the peak national body representing farmers, and more broadly agriculture across Australia.

The NFF's membership comprises of all Australia's major agricultural commodities. Operating under a federated structure, individual farmers join their respective state farm organisation and/or national commodity council. These organisations collectively form the NFF.

Each of these state farm organisations and commodity council's deal with state-based 'grass roots' issues or commodity specific issues, respectively, while the NFF represents the agreed imperatives of all at the national and international level.

Introduction

The NFF welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Senate Rural & Regional Affairs and Transport Committee Inquiry (Inquiry) into Natural Resource Management and Conservation Challenges.

This Inquiry is timely given the commencement on 1 July 2008 of the Federal Government's Caring for our Country program (C4C). C4C seeks to invest \$2.25 billion over five years to restore the health of Australia's environment and build on improved land management practices. Additionally, C4C seeks to become a "one stop shop" incorporating the previous NHT, National Landcare, Environmental Stewardship and Working on Country programs and will focus on the six national key goals:

1. Australia's national reserve system;
2. Biodiversity and natural icons;
3. Coasts and aquatic habitats;
4. Sustainable farm practices and Landcare;
5. Natural resource management in remote and northern Australia; and
6. Community skills, knowledge and engagement.

C4C is currently in a transitional year, providing base funding for regional NRM bodies, and introducing a new contestable funding round. Future investment in the "out" years will be undertaken in accordance with a national outcomes statement (yet to be announced by the Prime Minister), targets and an annual business plan (to be released in September each year).

NFF supports the regional delivery of NRM. This approach provides a more strategic and directed on ground outcomes. A key component of regional NRM delivery is the network of coordinators and facilitators. A focus on short term funding rounds has resulted in an environment less supportive to the retention of key human resources. As a direct consequence, the effectiveness and longevity of farmer engagement has been jeopardised by the continual need to re-establish relationships and networks.

Regional NRM organisations have a wide range in establishment from over 10 years down to around four years. For some NRM organisations that have been more recently established, there may be a need for further assistance measures to reduce any perverse outcomes from the new funding arrangements under C4C.

NFF and NRM

NFF has a long history of supporting investment in natural resource management. Starting in 1989, the NFF strongly supported the Decade of Landcare, formed an alliance with Australian Conservation Foundation, Australian Local Government Association and Greening Australia in 1996 for delivery of National Vegetation Initiative (the Six Point Plan), and more recently, the Environmental Stewardship Program (ESP) is an NFF initiative and is now included in the C4C program. The ESP is currently being trialled as a pilot program in the Murrumbidgee and Lachlan Valleys of NSW for Box Gum Grassy Woodlands on private land.

The NFF called for and strongly supported the establishment of Natural Heritage Trust (NHT) and its successor programs. The Six Point Plan referred to above, was also relevant to NHT and it is worthwhile reiterating those high level principles here:

1. Long term planning and commitment;
2. Regional delivery;
3. Innovative approaches to funding and incentives;
4. Monitoring and information systems;
5. Training and technical assistance; and
6. Clear definition of responsibilities.

More recently, Government programs recognise the importance that the Australian community places on higher level care of privately owned lands through the use of market based mechanisms. These mechanisms seek to pay farmers to actively manage high conservation value lands (including selective grazing, fencing and planting of vegetation) on behalf of the wider community.

Farmers occupy and manage 61% of Australia's landmass; they are at the frontline in delivering environmental outcomes on behalf of the broader community¹. This underpins the long history and NFF philosophy for delivering good environmental outcomes on the land owned and managed privately by Australia's farmers, and that better outcomes will be achieved using incentives rather than regulation.

Federal Government Responsibilities

Primary responsibility for natural resource management rests with the State and Territory Governments. The Federal Government's responsibility is to administer the Environment Protection & Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (C'1th) (EPBC Act). The EPBC Act seeks to protect threatened and endangered species and ecological communities and to manage key threatening processes. It is questionable whether the outcomes sought and funded by the Federal Government have been achieved effectively and efficiently. However, the EPBC Act is the focus of another Senate Inquiry to which the NFF will make a submission in due course.

Historically, the Federal Government has sought to "buy" influence on NRM outcomes at a state level via Bilateral Agreements to invest in regional delivery of NRM, most notably to stop vegetation clearing. It could be said that State Government's "ceded" their financial responsibilities for NRM to Federal Government investment in regional NRM. Communities also viewed the actions of State Government's as seeking to fund core Departmental responsibilities with Federal Government funds.

There has been some criticism that this investment relationship between the Federal and State Government has resulted in less on ground outcomes. Perhaps this may reflect in part the administration costs of programs at both the State departmental level and the regional NRM delivery level. The new arrangements under C4C to directly fund regional NRM groups² may "free" up funds from part of this administration complexity into on ground outcomes.

NFF understands that the C4C program seeks to provide funds more directly to regional NRM groups; however such funding will be set at around 60% of historic levels. Additionally, NRM groups along with other Non-government groups (NGO) will be able to apply each year for a pool of contestable funds. This policy shift has resulted in some uncertainty for regional NRM groups and this concern has been mimicked in regional communities. However, NFF views the move to a pool of contestable funding as positive and that this will engender a move to more efficient regional NRM groups as these seek to identify more streamlined administration and program delivery options. At this stage, it is not clear how projects submitted under the contestable funding round will be assessed. NFF suggests that as a first basic principle, there must be fair and equitable assessment of the applications.

¹ Australian Government Bureau of Rural Sciences, *Land Use of Australia 2001-02*

² Where this submission refers to Regional NRM groups, NFF means the 56 regional NRM organisations around Australia such as Catchment Management Authorities.

The ability to measure NRM outcomes is problematic and will need to be better address through the C4C program. The Australia Farm Institute recently released a report³ that attempted to apply an economic value of environmental services provided by the agricultural sector. However, the difficulty identified in this report was that farmer investment in NRM was reported in terms of participation rates instead of actual outcomes, e.g. hectare of riparian zones fenced. This meant that it was difficult to assign a dollar value to NRM investment by farmers and hence reporting against deliverables. The C4C evaluation, monitoring and reporting framework will need to effectively deal with this past legacy.

NFF also understands that the Federal Government is focussed on the delivery of large projects (like Reef Rescue) where multiple objectives will delivery against many of the six national priorities, rather than funding small disparate projects. It is not yet clear how project assessment will provide the necessary mix of projects to deliver on the six national priorities. Neither is it clear how the Catchment Action Plans that identify the regional priorities, which may not match the national priorities, will be addressed and funded.

Lessons Learnt

Farmers have been the recipients of national funding for managing the community's expectations for biodiversity outcomes on private land. Farmers, however, will often match or better the funding received for NRM investment because it is in the best interests of farm profitability, productive capacity and conservation values.

Productive farming systems enable farmers to invest in NRM. Therefore, conservation goals need to be integrated into farming systems. Biodiversity can and does exist in production systems. It is about identifying the opportunities and programs that enhance biodiversity and improving the delivery whilst recognising that profitable farm businesses allows investment beyond any funding provided by NRM programs.

It is the experience of farmers that NRM programs work best in regions where there are NRM networks and community interest – and hence the success of programs like Landcare. This ethos underpins the value in locating program coordinators regionally, i.e. local knowledge to direct on ground action. Fundamentally, the relationship between the coordinators and farmers is critical. Relationships, knowledge and capacity are built up over the course of a project. A level of trust is established over time, and with a genuine relationship underpinning a cooperative approach to NRM investment. With short funding streams and lack of ongoing commitment, experienced and respected staff chose to leave for more secure employment opportunities.

³ Australian Farm Institute 2008, Estimating the value of environmental services provided by Australian farmers

Regional NRM organisations are therefore a key investment point. There also a range of different partnerships delivering good NRM outcomes. Industry initiatives are also effective in obtaining NRM outcomes through improved participation and delivery of a range of programs, e.g. the dairy, cotton and rice industries, Landcare, Southern Mallee Plan and Liverpool Plains Land Management Group. NRM failures include the high focus on trees to preserve biodiversity, the NSW Plains Wanderer debacle and the failure to address emerging weeds in the early stages of infestation.

However, the linkages to implementation of other Federal Government legislative requires can be ad hoc, e.g. implementation of EPBC Act listings. Farmers are often aware and know to go to their Local Government, State Government Departments or regional NRM groups for approvals under local and State legislation. However, there has largely been a missed opportunity to effectively engage farmers through the regional NRM organisations on their obligations under the EPBC Act.

For example, consent for farm development may require compliance with the state vegetation legislation so the farmer will obtain this through those channels. In some cases, compliance with state legislation does ensure compliance with Federal legislation. In other cases, it does not. Where it does not, the farmer may be unaware of matters of federal environmental significance on their farm, implement the farm development after gaining consent only to find they have contravened the Federal EPBC Act and possibly incurred significant penalties.

NFF's members have also reported that previous programs (NHT, NAP, NLP etc) has resulted in fragmented funding, and creating winners and losers at the farm level. Some farmers have been able to obtain funding, whereas others have not. Additionally, long term funding commitments are needed as landscapes are slow to respond to investment and to prevent a high turnover of NRM staff servicing and supporting the farm sector.

Farmers also have a range of catalysts for becoming involved with NRM investment. Typically the top 20% of farmers (the early adopters) are keen to try new propositions. This group are usually the most profitable farmers and can therefore take a chance on little or no return investments or who may have very strong NRM values. The next 60% will begin to uptake or become involved as they learn from the top 20% or change their value set, with any problems being resolved before they implement change (the late adopters). On the other hand, the bottom 20% may never become involved. There may be a range of reasons for this from farmers at retirement age and unwilling to spend their retirement funds, to unprofitable farmers to those who may be just unwilling. This range of farm adoption applies equally to uptake of direct farming technology as it does to NRM investment.

Members have reported that historically, there has been insufficient investment in Central Australia. The C4C program has recognised this with natural resource management in remote and northern Australia being one of the six national priorities. NFF notes that both ACF and WWF also have strong policy objectives for these areas as well.

Members also report that the funding approvals process has been too tardy and too focussed on annual approvals. As an example, the NSW Land and Water Management Plans were signed off for a 15 year term with bipartisan support at State and Federal level. However, each year, there is an annual approval process at both Federal and State jurisdictional levels that means that investment cannot commence on time at the beginning of the financial year. The 12 month implementation process is reduced by months while this Government approval process occurs. In the meantime, NRM staff are sitting waiting and hoping that they have a job, NRM groups continue to pay staff hoping that funding will be approved and that the organisation will not be out of pocket, and farmers are left waiting before they can implement on ground action.

Historically, much of the NRM investment on ground has been about trees. Biodiversity is much wider than this, and includes a wide diversity of flora and fauna. Outcomes for NRM must recognise that a range of habitats is desired from open grasslands to woodlands, and this can coexist in natural and modified landscapes, particularly within the productive farming system.

Building on Knowledge and Experience

To answer this question, there needs to be some analysis to better understand what has been tried, what the successes and failures are, what has been learnt and what the gaps may be.

One issue that appears to rise continually is the need to retain the key staff members who interact with farmers, and that this issue appears to be directly linked with a lack of stability and longevity with funding. The major issue for farmers is the retention of human capital skills and capacity. The very nature of short term funding streams has meant that it has been difficult to attract and retain key staff. Farmers need to have confidence that the people they deal with and respect will be around for a longer time frame.

There is an opportunity for regional NRM groups to be a more holistic one stop shop for farmers when seeking approvals for on farm investment. NFF particularly supports any attempts to streamline approvals for local, State and Federal Government legislative, regulatory and policy requirements. Simplification is long overdue to reduce the confusion incurred by farmers and possible negative compliance results such as substantial fines.

Coordinator networks are strongly supported as they are the face that interacts with the farmer. The relationship needs to be built up over time and trust developed. The farmers come to see the coordinator as an asset and resource that they can turn to for assistance & advice and engagement on NRM. With the withdrawal of funding for NRM coordinators, there is concern from farmers that this will result in a lack of coordination at regional and inter-regional levels, vital networks and ongoing relationships will be severely affected, culminating in limited on ground outcomes.

The regional NRM coordinators have been seen as extremely vital particularly in areas where the NRM regional is very large, like in remote Australia. This is mainly due to the vast distances, small populations and the capacity within the region to engage farmers in on ground NRM outcomes.

Costs and Benefits of Regional NRM Delivery

The majority of the costs in delivering NRM outcomes are borne by farmers. As stated previously, funding of NRM outcomes on farms by Governments is more than exceeded by the investment in NRM by farmers. A copy of the NFF's farm facts in relation to NRM, which demonstrates this, is attached for your information (Attachment 1).

Regional delivery of NRM is supported as a means of practical implementation of regional NRM objectives at the local and regional scale. Regional NRM organisations are also well placed to leverage investment and delivery with and by local partners.

NFF notes that historically there has been a very administration heavy management of NRM delivery, with Federal, State and regional delivery organisations. In proceeding to the C4C program, there must be an objective to cut the inefficiency and administration to free up funds for on ground outcomes. The C4C program seeks to remove one layer of bureaucracy, i.e. the State Governments. This will assist, but efforts must be undertaken to maximise expenditure in delivery, without the expense of due corporate governance. NFF supports efforts to reduce these duplications.

NFF does not have any firsthand knowledge and experience of the costs of regional NRM groups. However, it would be safe to assume that further efficiency gains can be made in some, if not most, of these regional organisations.

National long term strategic approach

NFF has supported longer term strategic approaches to NRM. Whilst NHT/NAP sought to do this, these efforts were constrained by annual Federal Budgets and three year election cycles, with current Governments unable to commit future Governments.

There is a real need to find funding mechanisms that go beyond annual Federal budgets and three year funding rounds. While C4C is a four year program, there is an annual business plan. The Government has noted that projects may be able to go over multi-years, but the detail will be in the Business Plan.

NRM on ground efforts are intrinsically linked to long term outcomes. It takes time for revegetation areas to grow, it takes time for salinity to be managed, and it takes time to improve the condition of soils and so on. The length of NRM outcomes is therefore long term.

The ever changing nature of programs and short term funding streams does not assist for on ground management, e.g. a weed controlled today, may become a problem in ten years and will depend on plant physiology.

The process of continually applying for funding can also be time consuming, resource intensive, has tight time frames and distracts project staff for the real on ground work. Guaranteed funding for NRM groups of around 60% of historic will assist. But NFF understands that this may not be actual level received by some regional NRM groups.

Once funding is received, appropriations of project funds must occur within the designated financial year. This prevents good management of limited funds, with unspent funds being expended to prevent the funds being returned to Government. This is a perverse and unintended consequence.

There must be capacity in both NRM and Research & Development organisations to have the capacity to have un-profiled appropriations across different financial years as one means of maximising the NRM and other outcomes and minimising perverse outcomes.

NFF supports the concept of a longer term strategic approach to funding of NRM. There is only one example in existence for such an approach. The NSW Land & Water Management Plans (LWMPs) covering the Murray, Coleambally and Murrumbidgee Irrigation Corporations are such an example and do have some limitations. The LWMPs were a 15 year agreement between farmers, the corporation and the NSW and Federal Governments to implement on farm and system wide best management practices, including NRM.

The basis of the LWMPs included bipartisan support in an effort to go beyond election cycles. However, annual budget processes of Governments have limited the effectiveness of the 15 year time of the LWMPs. In other words, farmers had to await annual appropriation of the funds from both State and Federal Governments before being able to proceed. There have been a number of situations where one jurisdiction has withheld its final appropriation for some months.

The longer term approach is not just beneficial from a funding perspective. A longer term strategic approach to NRM will also allow for long term monitoring and evaluation of the outcomes, which will lead to increased learning's from NRM projects, improve decision making through an iterative process for NRM investment.

Capacity of regional NRM groups to engage land managers

Regional NRM groups have been established for varying time frames (upwards of 11 years). Other NRM groups, notably NGOs, are fragmented across the countryside. As an example, there are a multitude of regional Landcare groups but little representation from groups such as Greening Australia, ACF and WWF. Other networks that have good capacities are industry based, such as dairy, rice and cotton implementing best management practice type programs that delivery industry and NRM outcomes in a holistic way.

The capacity of the groups other than the regional NRM group to administer projects will vary. Regional NRM groups have extraordinary capacity to prepare and lodge submissions, the governance arrangements to administer projects, and the monitoring and reporting frameworks to report on project deliverables and financial acquittal.

NFF believes that the industry and regional NRM groups are ideally placed in the future, particularly with a focus on large integrated projects, to draw together the regional interest groups, put together large projects for funding approval, and the manage project implementation. The various regional partners are well placed to assist implementation on parts of a total project. This concept will allow assist in developing specialised skills sets with organisations cooperating through partnership arrangements to capitalise on those skill sets.

Therefore, while regional NRM groups are one of a number of regional groups who can engage farmers, the regional NRM groups are not the only solution to engagement. The key is whichever groups engages, they and their staff need to develop long term relationships with farmers that engenders trust and capacity to be seen as supporting farmers.

Part of the role of regional NRM groups is to better coordinate the local objectives for NRM against the six national priorities. This could be done via meetings of all relevant local stakeholders ahead of the business plan being released each year. Such a meeting could develop local priorities against the national priorities and targets, and from here develop joint projects. Delivery, once funding is approved, could be through one or more of the local NRM stakeholder groups.

Comprehensiveness of C4C

NFF believes that it is too early to provide an answer to the question raised in the Terms of Reference. The release of the C4C business plan may assist in better understanding whether the program is more or less comprehensive. As the release of the Business Plan will not occur until late September or early October, and the Prime

Minister is yet to announce the National Outcomes Statement, these cannot be included in any assessment by NFF.

However, some general observations may be pertinent.

The C4C program seeks to cover the Federal Government priorities in landscape management. These are incorporated into the six national priorities. These priorities also more generally cover partly the Federal Government's responsibilities under the EPBC Act. Nor does the C4C program seek to integrate State and Local Government or perhaps regional NRM priorities.

C4C does not seek to integrate all Federal Government NRM outcomes, specifically climate change and water. NFF are concerned about the creation of "policy silos", i.e. where development of one policy occurs in isolation of the impacts that may arise in other NRM policy areas. Most notably, Federal Government policies for Forestry, Carbon sink forests, Managed Investment Schemes, salinity utilise tree plantings to deal with the NRM issues to hand. However, all will have a negative impact on the water yield of catchments and this has been recognised with policy development seeking to address this, e.g. the development and implementation of a new sustainable diversion limit in the Murray-Darling Basin. The latter will impact on entitlement holders and upper catchment farmers, but the third party impacts of the original policy do not take this into account. NFF recommends a more holistic view of NRM policies to take account of any perverse or unintended policy outcomes.

NFF's members on numerous occasions have raised concerns about the impact of emerging weeds on the environment, which has failed to gain the appropriate preventative funding under the C4C predecessor programs. It is vital that C4C provides funding to control emerging weed infestations prior to the weed becoming a much larger issue for the environment and farmers.

The remaining issue for the C4C program into the future is the protection of threatened species. Historically, threatened species have been managed by regulatory instruments and recovery plans. As a consequence, there have been perverse outcomes and disengagement by landholders. This has resulted in lost opportunities for good engagement and education. There is a real need to develop improved methods of protecting and enhancing threatened species. Partnership based programs offer the most cost effective approach to deliver long term outcomes. This was part of the premise behind the NFF's Environmental Stewardship Program, which is now being included and rolled out under the C4C.

Other issues

Ministerial Advisory Committees

NFF understands that the Federal Government is currently reviewing the various Ministerial advisory committees. NFF would urge the Federal Government to move towards replacing these committees sooner rather than later so as to provide the

relevant Ministers with a mechanism to provide strategic advice on NRM policies and the practical application of programs.

Public Land Responsibilities

As a general statement, farmers around Australia are concerned about the lack of funding applied to the management of public lands. There is an increasing focus on purchasing private land and water for public ownership to redress the balance between public and private ownership, particularly for high conservation value properties. Such investment is not insignificant.

However, there must be recognition of the responsibilities of Governments to manage these assets. The most common criticism is the lack of Government investment in weeds and vermin control and fencing where these assets adjoin private lands and the impacts of inaction on native flora and fauna and third parties such as neighbours.

Weeds and pests form part of the six national icons specifically under biodiversity and natural icons, but are also relevant to the management of public lands held under the national reserve system.

NFF suggests that the Federal Government considers:

- Property management plans for each land asset purchased using Federal Government funds, which includes targets and management actions to control weeds, pests and feral animals (including wild dogs); and
- Providing an enduring annuity fund to implementation of these property management plans, and in particular control of weeds and pests.

Conclusion

NFF has supported Federal Government investment in NRM programs. The C4C program builds on three decades of investment by combining disparate but connected programs into a one stop shop.

NFF also supports ongoing regional delivery of NRM using regional NRM groups. NFF also supports the Federal Government's move to a pool of contestable funding, noting in particular that regional NRM groups are able to apply for these funds, have a critical role in identifying important large regional projects. Regional NRM groups are ideally situated with governance, financial accountability and reporting mechanisms to manage project on behalf of collaborators with joint delivery with other organisations.

However, a contestable pool of funding will also engender a culture more conducive to efficient delivery of regional NRM.

The NFF have made a number of observations and suggestions for improvements to the current C4C, particularly relating to longer term funding streams and the need for regional NRM groups to drive local coordination of projects.

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Attachment 1: Australian farmers - frontline environmentalists.....⁴

- **Farmers occupy and manage 61% of Australia's landmass**, as such, they are at the frontline in delivering environmental outcomes on behalf of the broader community.
- Australian Government Bureau of Rural Sciences, *Land Use of Australia 2001-02*.
- Over the past year, more than **986,000 hectares of environmentally-sensitive farmland was fenced-off and put out of production to protect it**.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Agricultural Commodities 2005/2006*.
- Australian farmers spent **\$3 billion on Natural Resource Management (NRM)** over 2006-07, managing or preventing weed, pest, land and soil, native vegetation or water-related issues on their properties. More than **\$2.3 billion was spent on weed and pest management**, while **land and soil-related activities accounted for \$649 million** of total expenditure.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Natural Resource Management on Australian Farms 2006-07*.
- Australian farmers are planting more trees for environmental purposes than a decade ago. In 1991, the Agricultural Census recorded that farmers planted 9,000,000 tree seedlings for conservation purposes. **In 2001, farmers planted 20.6 million tree seedlings for NRM**. On average, **each Australian farmer plants 150 tree seedlings a year, solely for conservation purposes**.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Agricultural Census, 1991 & 2001*.
- **Australian primary industries have led the nation in reducing greenhouse gas emissions - a massive 40% reduction over the past 16 years (1990-2006)**.
- Australian Government Department of Climate Change, *National Inventory by Economic Sector 2006, 2008*.
- NRM is an important activity on the majority of Australian farms. In fact, **NRM practices are employed on 94.3% of Australian farms**.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Natural Resource Management on Australian Farms 2006-07*.
- Farmers improving their NRM practices reported doing so to **increase productivity (88.6%), farm sustainability (88.4%) and better environmental protection (74.5%)**.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Natural Resource Management on Australian Farms 2006-07*.
- **71% of farmers reported barriers to greater NRM activity**, including a **lack of financial resources (78.9%), time (63.1%), government incentives (40%), age and ill-health (22.2%)**.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Natural Resource Management on Australian Farms 2006-07*.
- In 2008, the Australian Government developed a one-stop program under the \$2.2 billion '**Caring For Our Country**' initiative, recognising the work farmers already do in sustainable agriculture and protecting Australia's natural resources, to encourage greater undertakings. The National Farmers' Federation (NFF) is intimately involved in the development, implementation and promotion of these programs, as well as those that complement it - including the \$50 million '**Environmental Stewardship**' and \$130 million '**Australia's Farming Future**' programs, both initiated by the NFF.
- Australian Government Federal Budget 2008.

⁴ Source: <http://www.nff.org.au/farm-facts.html>