Credible science & good policy

The CRC for Irrigation Futures System Harmonisation Program is helping integrate science, policy, industry and stakeholders to configure irrigation that is more sympathetic to, and in tune with, Australian landscapes. In peri-urban western Sydney this is taking place through WISER.

A current review of science being undertaken through the program has highlighted to us several key challenges for System Harmonisation, one being how we nurture good science and deliver timely, knowledge-based evidence.

One stakeholder interviewed in the review said “…policy is made in a hurry …and scientists need to be mindful of this urgency.” Developing robust and reliable knowledge-based evidence requires credible scientists, and a large part of that credibility is earned by scientists publishing in reputable, refereed, international journals. This takes time.

The mismatch in timelines – policy wanting answers now and science needing time for reviews and cross-checking – is often challenging and success lays in achieving credibility for both policy impact and scientific publication. We can work to achieve this by building effective teams and partnerships, and by understanding and supporting both needs through effective dialogue. It’s easier said than done, but well worth the effort.

More about the science review in a later issue…

Keith Bristow and Jeff Camkin, Program Leaders
CRC IF System Harmonisation
**Farming survey**

The NSW DPI has commenced an extensive field survey of vegetable farms to address the uncertainty surrounding vegetable industry statistics in NSW. This survey links well with the water cycle modelling work in the WISER Project.

Current statistics are uncertain due to discrepancies between Australian Bureau of Statistics (2006) data and anecdotal evidence gathered from sources close to the industry.

The Horticulture Australia Limited (HAL) funded project involves collecting readily available data from multiple sources and conducting a field survey of the Sydney Basin and surrounding areas.

The field survey is being used to establish the number of vegetable farming establishments, their actual location such as GPS coordinates and the actual area devoted to growing vegetables on each farm.

An initial data analysis from the field survey suggests there are around 900 commercial vegetable growing properties in the Sydney Basin and that the total area devoted to the production of outdoor, hydroponic and greenhouse vegetables is less than 1800 hectares.

Peter Malcolm, NSW DPI

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**Social license**

Researchers from the University of New England’s Australian Centre for Agriculture and Law are looking into the social license to use water for irrigation.

After investigating the legal concept of a Duty of Care to protect the environment, they found that adopting a duty of care for landholders may not significantly improve environmental stewardship or reduce environmental conflicts. Since duty of care is a long-established legal principle with a deep tradition of interpretation, the various attempts to turn it into a statutory provision may strike major problems of interpretation and practical application.

The researchers are also examining the efficiency of using triple bottom line reporting to assist in preserving the right to irrigate. The study suggests the high costs of provision of voluntary triple bottom line reports, coupled with the lack of clarity about the extent of corporate social responsibility, could prevent management adopting this approach.

Paul Martin, UNE

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**Water rights & responsibilities**

The CRC for Irrigation Futures defines ‘irrigation’ as meaning the deliberate application of water for growing plants. The NSW Water Management Act 2000 regulates people’s access to water for growing plants (irrigation) but treats those irrigators getting their water from the town supply very differently to those with access licences to take water from rivers and creeks.

If you have an access licence it will specify your rights and responsibilities (including rules about access during times of drought). But if you are using water from the town supply for irrigating, say a golf course, what are your rights and responsibilities?

Your water supplier (probably Sydney Water) will have legal rights and responsibilities under the NSW Water Management Act 2000 but you probably do not! So what rules of supply in regard to issues like availability during drought or water quality apply to your business? Issues of legal access to water for irrigation will get even more critical as we consider the use of alternative water supplies such as storm water.

Ian Atkinson – CEO, Cooperative Research Centre for Irrigation Futures

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**Did you know?**

Some estimates suggest that about 80-100 gigalitres of Sydney’s drinking water supply is used for irrigation of backyards, playing fields, parks, vegetable farms, nurseries and others. This volume of water represents about one-fifth of the current total water use in the Sydney Metropolitan area.

Paul Rasmussen

**What do you do?** I’m Chairman of the Hawkesbury Lower Nepean Water Users Association and I act on behalf of more than 650 commercial farmers and food growers in the Hawkesbury.

**What are you passionate about?** Making sure that Hawkesbury farmers have land security for farming and sufficient water for crops so they can continue to grow fresh food for Sydney.

**Why are you involved in the WISER project?** I’m involved because the WISER Project can provide the scientific research to support the key message that we need our farmers to grow our fresh food.

**How do you plan to contribute to the WISER project?** By providing advice and highlighting priorities from farmers’ perspectives at WISER meetings and focus groups.

**What do you hope to get out of this?** Scientific data and a highly professional report which may support that better use of water for farming and irrigation will be beneficial for the population of Sydney and its farmers.

Paul may be contacted on paul@australia-house.com.au or 0412 366 633.