

The role of agriculture in natural resource management, economic growth and community life

The *Signposts for Australian Agriculture* project is a partnership between Research and Development Corporations, Government and the National Land & Water Resources Audit. It is funded by the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF) and aims to develop a credible and consistent framework for reporting on the contributions of Australia's agricultural industries to ecologically sustainable development (ESD)¹.

How does agriculture contribute to ecologically sustainable development?

The *Signposts* project hopes to address this question and focuses on:

- ▷ agriculture's contribution to ecologically sustainable development
- ▷ the effect of land use and management practices on ecologically sustainable development
- ▷ current management practices including natural resource and business management practices
- ▷ the capacity of land managers to change and adopt sustainable management practices and,
- ▷ the impact of major policy initiatives including participation in capacity building activities.

Coverage and scale

The *Signposts* project aims to assess the return from agricultural land uses now, and in the future, taking into account the full range of environmental, economic and social benefits and costs. The reporting framework will provide a basis for identifying and evaluating options intended to increase the value of the contributions agriculture makes to ESD.

The *Signposts* Framework will allow agricultural industries and government to:

- ▷ better inform the community of the contribution of agriculture to ecologically sustainable development in Australia
- ▷ inform rural policy development and implementation by better equipping government and regional bodies to assess trade-offs and target their investments
- ▷ provide nationally consistent, industry based, information 'signposting' opportunities and threats to the existing role of agriculture
- ▷ lay the foundation for more effective and efficient data collection, analysis and reporting partnerships
- ▷ inform industry benchmarking on the adoption of sustainable management practices
- ▷ support the evaluation of major whole of government policy/program initiatives from a sectoral perspective.

The framework will be used as the basis for a future *Signposts* report that complements the current efforts of industry and regional organisations to demonstrate their contribution to sustainability.

¹ The definition of Ecologically Sustainable Development (ESD) as defined by National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development and endorsed by all three levels of Australian governments will be used in this project.



Working together

Currently eight Research & Development Corporations (RDCs) are involved along with State Agencies and the Australian Government.

Signposts has completed a:

- ▷ preliminary framework for documenting agriculture's contribution to the triple bottom line
- ▷ triple bottom line profile of a select number of industries, including Grains, Wool, Meat and Livestock, Cotton, Horticulture and Dairy, based upon current Australian Government data and information
- ▷ stocktake of the current extent of rural Research & Development Corporations reporting on the triple bottom line.

Signposts will, in partnership, with Research & Development Corporations and government:

- ▷ further develop the framework to incorporate the "pathways" and sustainable management practices associated with ESD
- ▷ survey select industries based on the information needs of the revised framework and report on the results of the survey
- ▷ produce the *Signposts for Australian Agriculture* report to highlight how the framework can be used to provide useful information to industry, government and regional decision-makers. This report will

Further information

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include a national overview of the contribution of agriculture to ESD and threats and opportunities for the future.

Links with existing data and information projects/initiatives

The outcomes of the project will be linked to the:

- ▷ Audit's Integrative Resource Condition reports for the Intensive Landuse Zone and Rangelands
- ▷ National NRM Monitoring and Evaluation Framework
- ▷ Australian Government's State of Environment (2006) Report
- ▷ Australian Government Resource Condition Theme reports
- ▷ Land & Water Australia reporting initiatives.

Key activity areas

The National Land & Water Resources Audit is developing partnerships and linkages across government, industry and regional organisations to improve knowledge of the impact of agriculture on natural resources. The *Signposts* project is aligned to the Audit's strategic directions and will:

- assist research and development and industry organisations to use, collect and make accessible environmental, social and economic data
- develop and use partnerships with natural resource data and information custodians to ensure that information is being made available in an effective and efficient form
- provide industry, government and regional organisations with information from national collations relevant to their needs
- establish an honest broker role between differing jurisdictions and agency programs with respect to the presentation of compiled data and information.