



Department of Water and Environment – RDC Best Practice Stakeholder Engagement

RGA's response

November 2021

1. THE RICEGROWERS' ASSOCIATION OF AUSTRALIA

The RGA is the collective voice of Australian rice growers, representing around 1100 voluntary members since 1930. The RGA's main objective is to provide members with strong and effective representation on issues affecting the viability of their businesses, their communities and their industry.

The RGA is made up of eight branches located across the Riverina rice growing regions of NSW and Victoria. Each branch annually elects representatives to form the RGA Central Executive. The Central Executive represents their respective branches in determining RGA policy and projects.

The RGA is a member of the National Farmers' Federation, National Irrigators' Council and NSW Irrigators' Council.

2. THE AUSTRALIAN RICE INDUSTRY

The Australian rice industry is a global leader for improved water use efficiency, with water use averaging 0.85 t/ML between 2012-2020 across all growing regions (ABARES, 2021a; ABS, 2021). Rice production is, however, extremely variable, due to climate, water-sharing arrangements and competition for available resources. In recent years, this has been compounded by drought, resulting in two consecutive seasons with average General Security irrigation water allocations of less than 5% and some of the lowest recorded production levels. Increased yield, a higher average price per tonne and decreased water use will drive the continued success of the Australian rice industry.

The Australian rice industry is located predominantly in the Riverina region of south-west NSW, with two small industries also in the Northern Rivers region of north NSW and in Northern Queensland.

The Australian rice industry relies heavily on irrigation, mainly sourced from the Murray and Murrumbidgee river valleys. Provided water is available, the Australian rice industry is considered one of the world's most successful, delivering significant yields while leading the world in water use efficiency.

In a typical year the Australian rice industry produces around 800,000 tonnes of paddy rice with a farm gate value of around \$350 million. About 80 % of this product is exported. With value adding, the total industry worth is well over \$1 billion each year.



The rice industry is a significant economic contributor to the Riverina region of NSW. The towns of Griffith, Leeton, Coleambally, Finley, Jerilderie, Deniliquin, Wakool and Moulamein are highly dependent on rice production for their social and economic wellbeing.

Additionally, rice growers have individually invested more than \$2.5 billion in land, water, plant and equipment and collectively invested around \$400 million in mill storage and infrastructure through SunRice. They are also mixed farmers, using their land to run livestock and grow winter crops, generating regional economic activity and jobs year-round.

While the Australian rice industry is very small by world standards, it remains a very competitive supplier of premium rice products into world markets.

3. INTRODUCTION

The RGA thanks the Australian Government Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment for the opportunity to provide advice on best practice stakeholder engagement for Research Development Corporations.

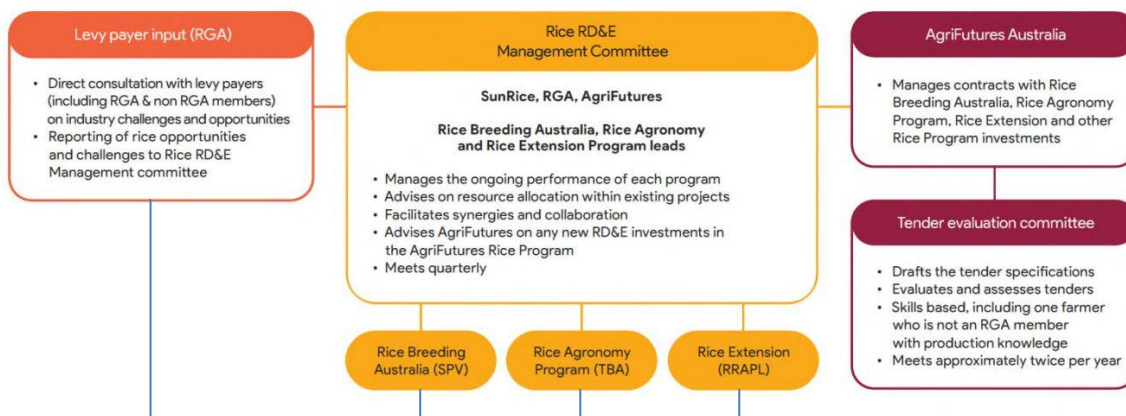
The RGA and the other rice industry stakeholders have a close relationship with their Research Development Corporation, AgriFutures Australia. The industry's relatively small scale when compared to other commodities with, use of broad acre irrigation, specialised agronomic requirements and with the majority of production across a defined geographic region of the NSW Riverina, setting it apart from other agriculture commodities. The RGA's relationships with growers, industry knowledge and history, puts it in an ideal position to facilitate and coordinate grower and industry stakeholder engagement.

The rice industry selected AgriFutures Australia as its RDC (formerly RIRDC) as it considered the needs of rice may have not received the attention within GRDC. This decision has proven to be the correct one. The RGA continues to play a key role in maintaining a constructive working relationship with AgriFutures and other industry stakeholders such as SunRice and other producers to ensure the voice of the Levy Payer is heard.

More recently as a result of the doubling the rice R&D levy and requirement for step change in the industry, the level of engagement with AgriFutures and other stakeholders increased through the review of all the R,D& E programs funded by AgriFutures. This also included the finalisation of the 2021-2026 Rice Program Strategic Plan, which included scenario planning with the RGA, industry

stakeholders and growers. Another significant outcome from these reviews and engagement process included agreement on a revised structure for the oversight and delivery of R, D&E programs in the rice industry. This new structure aims to strengthen outcomes and accountability with input from levy payers at all levels as outlined in the figure below.

AgriFutures Rice Program Proposed management and investment structure



This structural change has been proposed to safeguard the Australian rice industry, with RD&E to be focused on the production of new varieties through the rice breeding program compatible with a water productivity target of 1.5 t/ML by 2026. This will be coupled with targeted agronomy and farming systems extension activities aimed at increasing adoption and uptake of technology and innovation in partnership with adjacent industries.

The RGA is aware that AgriFutures vision is to grow the long-term prosperity of Australian rural industries. They have three strategies to grow profitability and sustainability in their levied industries, which includes rice:

- Engaging industry participants in determining RD&E priorities.
- Investment in innovation that assists levied industries to be more profitable.
- Delivering outcomes to maximise industry uptake and adoption.

4. PAST EXPERIENCE OF GOVERNMENT AGENCY CONSULTATION

Over recent years the RGA and its membership have had a perception of a top down approach to government agency consultation. Our membership believe that much of this consultation came across as a box ticking exercise and just a mechanism to communicate what was going to be implemented, irrespective of any members views. Basin plan implementation and water reform with many reviews and reports are an example.

In relation to the rice industry's experience with RDC consultation with stakeholders, the RGA acknowledges that our experience is of a higher standard than what we often have with other government agencies. We collaborate well with AgriFutures Australia and continue to find ways to improve engagement. We have outlined measures and principles below that can be incorporated in the development of best practice guidelines, many of which are already in place with AgriFutures and the rice industry.

5. GUIDING PRINCIPLES TO EFFECTIVE AND INCLUSIVE STAKEHOLDER COMMUNICATION

There are some key principles that need to be considered when developing a guide to stakeholder consultation and engagement with levy payers. Understanding the needs and expectations of stakeholders is a critical ingredient to achieve success with any project or program, this sometimes treated as a fringe activity or one that can be outsourced. People will only respond if they are engaged and the levy payers should be seen as the investors – after all it's their money.

Key guiding principles include:

1. Treat the stakeholders as partners.
2. Communication is key – this needs to encourage two-way communication and should occur throughout the process and lifecycle of projects and programs. Multiple communication mediums and technology should be used.
3. Consult early and often – don't start with a plan, start with understanding the various participant's roles and objectives.
4. Planning – invest in careful planning of the engagement process and not only the product.
5. People – accept the fact that people don't always respond or behave in a rational or reasonable manner. Developing and understanding relationships is essential.
6. Take simple and timely actions throughout the process – this assists with outcomes.
7. Understand the risk of getting it wrong – share responsibilities.
8. Determine what success looks like and actively seek input.
9. Determine responsibilities throughout the process.
10. Be adaptive and prepared to change the consultation strategy as technology and stakeholders circumstances change.

6. RESPONSES TO THE DAWE QUESTIONS

“To inform guidance to RDCs on stakeholder engagement, we are seeking your organisation's specific input on appropriate consultations between RDCs and industry, including responses to the following questions”; quote from a department email.

6.1. What are the issues on which RDCs should consult with levy payers?

The RGA believes RDC consultation should involve:

- The process of allocating levy payer funds to RD&E.
- RDC's budget and reserves policy management.
- Assessing the needs of individual commodities when investing government RDC funds to cross industry-Council of RDC's projects including the Agriculture Innovation Australia projects.
- Projects undertaken; the successes, progress of those underway and project failures or underperforming projects.
- RDC funded projects that analyse future Australian and International trends that may impact farm profitability.

6.2. How levy payers would like to be consulted (for example face-to-face consultation or written material, newsletters, emails)?

- Levy payers need to feel they are valued and understood by the decision makers that invest RDC funds. Levy payers generally contribute their own time and knowledge voluntarily to participate in consultation. This needs to be at least acknowledged if not compensated for.
- Respected, engaged and high performing commodity-grower member organisation should coordinate levy payer consultation in collaboration with RDC stakeholders. This will enable high level engagement, while ensuring only appropriate communication is delivered to levy payers.
- Levy payers need to be consulted by:
 - Annual industry conferences/events that include detailed presentations of some of the key projects undertaken. These conference/events can include snapshots of the remaining projects where links to more information is made available and encouraged. They should be all of industry events that include; grower awards, recognition of industry member achievements in advocacy, industry leadership, business management and presentations of general interest to industry stakeholders e.g. The RGA annual conference should deliver some of the communication and allow levy payer feedback.
 - Through grower extension group meetings and field days.
 - Podcasts and short informative videos.
 - Facilitated biannual events where levy payers are invited to review and workshop existing and proposed RD&E projects.
 - Feedback given during grower membership organisation meetings e.g. Central Executive meetings.
 - Online surveys (with the ability to be anonymous).
- Stakeholders need to be involved throughout the entire lifecycle of project/program. Treat them as a partner. Often, stakeholders are interviewed or participate in a focus group and have no other contact with the project until the end.

Activities could include:

 - Reviewing concepts
 - Participating demonstrations/trials.
 - Participating in retrospective lessons learned.
 - Providing additional information for unclear requirements.
 - Pilot programs or performing user acceptance tests.
 - Approving changes when they occur.
- All events need to provide the opportunity for feedback on current projects and emerging industry needs.
- Additional consultation should occur through grower one on one surveys. This could be included in questions used in sustainability reporting. Only a small but representative percentage of levy payers would be surveyed annually.
- Levy payer consultation should include sharing and promoting farm developed innovations (developed by levy paying farmers). The consultation needs to allow for farmer developed innovations to be acknowledged and shared. This demonstrates a bottom up approach to the communications.
- Levy payers consultation must include communication that clearly identifies how their feedback is reviewed with the final actions clearly identified highlighting the justification for the decisions made. i.e. “closed loop” consultation that shows true respect from the levy payers and other stakeholders.

6.3. How often levy payers would like to be consulted?”

- Throughout the process in various forms and mediums.
 - Consultation as part of an industry conference; Annually.
 - Through grower extension group meetings and field days.
 - Podcasts and short informative videos; Three per year with online feedback mechanisms.
 - Levy payer RD&E review workshop; Bi-annually or combined with the current R&D annual workshop.
 - Feedback given during grower membership organisation meetings; Three to four time per year e.g. Central Executive and or Branch/Industry meetings.
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