

RSPCA Australia submission
**Modernising the Research
and Development
Corporation system**

20 December 2019

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Agriculture Innovation and Productivity
Department of Agriculture

Via: HaveYourSay website

Dear Advisory Panel members

Modernising the RDC System Discussion Paper

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission into the review of the rural research and development corporation (RDC) system.

Please find below our response to some of the discussion questions on which you are seeking feedback. Of key concern to RSPCA Australia is the suggestion that all RDCs should be permitted to directly engage in lobbying and advocacy activities designed to influence public policy by proposing to lift current restrictions on agri-political activity.

From an animal welfare perspective, this could mean that RDCs would be able to use tax-payer funds to lobby against animal welfare reforms that are not only science-based but also widely demanded by the community. RSPCA Australia believes that RDC involvement in industry advocacy activities is highly inappropriate and risks undermining the otherwise legitimate role RDCs play in research, development and extension services.

The RSPCA looks forward to participating in this ongoing review. Please do not hesitate to contact us should you have any questions or require further information.

Yours sincerely,



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RSPCA Australia

MODERNISING THE RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION SYSTEM RSPCA AUSTRALIA SUBMISSION

The following submission addresses the discussion questions on which the Department of Agriculture seeks feedback. RSPCA Australia has only responded to the questions we believe are relevant to our work in improving the welfare of farm animals and to raising community awareness about farming practices across the livestock sector.

1 Is the current RDC system delivering value for levy payers and taxpayers? In what ways?

It is widely acknowledged that livestock industry research, development and extension is important to the long-term viability of the sector. Improving animal welfare must be a priority in industry research programs. An essential aspect of industry and government-funded research is peer-review and publication of research results. This will ensure transparency and accountability, particularly where the research has involved expenditure of public money.

4 What are some of the cross-sectoral issues being faced by the wider agricultural sector?

Cross-sectoral issues specific to animal welfare in the livestock sector include:

- Understanding and providing opportunities for animals to experience positive affective states
- Replacing aversive practices
- Replacing high-confinement housing systems
- Reducing water/feed curfews
- Improving on-farm euthanasia and mass euthanasia
- Improving handling & stunning at slaughter
- Addressing barriers to adoption of improved practices
- Measuring and monitoring industry performance and communicating to the public

Some of these issues also relate to the wider agricultural sector. In addition, however, the need to address the current and future impacts of climate change (including drought, fires, floods, heat stress, etc) is an issue facing all agricultural sectors, as is jointly contributing to mitigation efforts to reduce the sector's contribution to greenhouse gases and the resulting animal welfare impacts for farmed and wild animals.

5 How can RDCs increase collaboration to ensure better investment in, and returns from, cross-sectoral, transformative and public good research?

RDCs could consider the introduction of external community and animal welfare representatives to advisory committees involved in overseeing the expenditure of public money on public good research projects including those involving animal welfare. Livestock sectors need to ensure their R&D programs reflect an awareness of emerging issues and a responsiveness to growing consumer expectations that may impact their industry. If the livestock sector is to gain or maintain public confidence, it will, in addition to public attitudes research, need to facilitate ongoing engagement with a range of stakeholders representing various interests. This engagement needs to be meaningful and industry action should demonstrate that stakeholder views have been heard.

6 What are the cultural changes necessary in RDCs to achieve a modern fit-for-purpose RDC system?

RSPCA Australia has long advocated for the establishment of an independent body tasked with developing national standards and guidelines for farm animal welfare in Australia. A key role of this body would be coordinating the allocation of public funding for animal welfare scientific research, including public funds currently dedicated to rural RDCs for such purposes. If the joint funding model is to persist, increased scrutiny is required of the expenditure of public funds to ensure they are allocated to research, development and extension activities that meet public expectations.

9 How can we encourage increased investment in the RDC system from the private sector and international partners?

What is required is improved communication of the research, development and extension activities in progress and completed, as well as publicly available information outlining the results of the research and the degree to which extension activities have led to adoption by those who are intended to benefit from the research (i.e. tell the story about the tangible benefits). Greater transparency will lead to greater interest and potentially greater investment, including from non-government and non-industry sources of funding, which, in turn, will contribute to the sustainability of the livestock sector as a whole. Evidence of collaboration and avoidance of duplication will give potential partners the confidence to invest in worthwhile research, development or extension. In this respect, it would be worth considering an online animal welfare RD&E hub where all this information is available and which will make it easier for investors and those needing funding to find one another. So, even if the system might be somewhat fragmented, at least the information can be found in consolidated form.

12 Where should the balance of investment between R&D and extension lie?

Effective extension is critical to realising the intended outcomes of research and development activities. Adopting new approaches to animal husbandry and risk mitigation involving new technologies and practices requires significant investment in on-farm extension services, without which, improved animal welfare outcomes may not be realised leaving the industry exposed to social licence shocks. Extension services should therefore be a key priority of RDCs and receive equivalent time and investment as that dedicated to the research and development priorities.

13 How could RDCs play a stronger role in extension service delivery, in light of existing private and state government extension efforts?

If state government extension activities continue to decline, then it seems that the RDCs may increasingly take on the role of extension provider. Part of the project funding and development phase, would therefore need to consider the extent and type of extension activity required to ensure adoption. This highlights the importance of involving the end-users in the early planning stages.

15 How could industry and levy payers drive increased uptake of R&D?

There is an absolute need to address barriers to adoption of new technologies or improved practices coming from this research. As research results are adopted, ongoing investment in research will ensure that livestock producers have access to best practice technologies that will improve productivity, their long-term viability and, importantly, animal welfare.

16 How might RDCs be able to increase their role in policy R&D and participate in policy debate alongside industry representative bodies?

It is important that research and development services of RDCs remain independent, and are seen to be independent, of agri-political activity including industry representative functions and lobbying

or advocacy efforts designed to influence public policy. Lifting restrictions on RDCs engaging in such activities would risk undermining the integrity and credibility of RDC research agenda and output as it could be seen to be agenda-driven.

The fact is RDC policy research and knowledge development is currently used to contribute to the public policy debates. The research and knowledge base is presented to industry representative bodies who then use it to promote their industry's interests and priorities. This is an appropriate separation of functions. If RDCs were to start engaging in these advocacy and lobbying activities directly it would raise questions over their objectivity and impartiality and whether it was appropriate that they continue receiving public funds. Under such a model, RDCs would effectively cease to be research and development organisations and would risk becoming advocacy-driven organisations.

As a general principle, taxpayer funds should not be utilised for industry lobbying and advocacy priorities as some of these priorities may not be consistent with the broader public interest.

17 If RDCs were to play a greater role in this area, how could this activity be clearly distinguished from partisan and political activity, which must remain a role for industry representative bodies?

It would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to ensure that RDCs did not engage in agri-political activity, if current restrictions on agri-political activity were lifted.

To maintain the integrity of the RDC system's role in producing quality research, development and extension outcomes, RDCs must maintain their independence from agri-political activity. If this separation in function is removed, many organisations from the animal welfare, environmental, health and other sectors may begin questioning the allocation of public funds to the RDC system.

SUBMISSION ENDS



The RSPCA is Australia's leading animal welfare organisation and one of Australia's most trusted charities. The RSPCA works to prevent cruelty to animals by actively promoting their care and protection.

RSPCA Australia

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