



Minister for Agriculture and Food

Response to Carnarvon Floodplain Management Working Group Recommendations

The Carnarvon horticulture area is an important production district for Western Australia with approximately 170 plantations supplying much of the State's counter seasonal vegetables, early season temperate fruit crops, mid-season tropical crops, and year-round banana production. The estimated wholesale value of annual production from the area is \$100 million, which accounts for about eight per cent of the gross value of production for WA's horticulture industries.

Periodic flooding of the lower Gascoyne River floodplain at Carnarvon is a natural event. Many growers are protecting their property by undertaking practices that reduce the impact of flooding. Disruption, whether through flood, climate change, pest, disease or global events are becoming more common. Growers need to prepare their businesses to respond to these ongoing disruptions.

To support fruit and vegetable growers affected by the flood in Carnarvon in February 2021, I established the Carnarvon Floodplain Management Working Group (Working Group) to identify the issues, consider potential management options and make recommendations for implementation to reduce the impacts of flooding on landholders in the Carnarvon horticultural area.

The Working Group's recommendations have a strong focus on education and working with landholders and industry to resolve current issues. These recommendations provide an opportunity to bring the industry together to work towards a stronger future.

The Working Group has done well to develop a report with recommendations that support a strategic, long-term approach to meet the concerns of the Carnarvon horticultural industry.

Flooding as experienced in 2021 is expected every 10 years and these recommendations are a step towards ensuring a sustainable and resilient direction for horticultural business and government to plan, prepare, respond, and recover for future events.

I provide the following response to the recommendations in the Working Group's report:

Recommendation 1: Establish a governance structure to promote a coordinated and long-term strategic approach to floodplain management

The 2021 floods identified that there is an ongoing responsibility for local and state governments to coordinate activities for floodplain management with the horticulture industry. I **support** recommendation 1.1 to continue a Working Group to coordinate the long-term strategic leadership for the Carnarvon horticultural industry. Floodplain management groups in the past have ceased operating when there was no obvious crisis. The floodplain is dynamic and there is a need for ongoing awareness and coordination.

The Working Group should scope a new Terms of Reference (ToR) which will include confirming the membership, managing the implementation of the recommendations and identifying other industry priorities for resolution such as the value of horticultural properties.

The Working Group representation should reflect a broader cross section and should be expanded to capture industry participants such as Sweeter Banana, Gascoyne Water Co-operative and relevant stakeholders, the Department of Planning, Lands and Heritage (DPLH), and the Bureau of Meteorology (BoM) as required.

I support DPIRD leading the Working Group in the short term and transitioning to local government leadership within 18 months.

The recommendation for the Working Group to be represented on the Local Emergency Management Committee (1.2) **is supported** to ensure that initiatives from both groups are communicated and integrated.

I support the recommendation for a coordinated program of communication and education (1.3). Land ownership comes with responsibility. Land management issues fall across local and state government departments and a coordinated effort to communicate roles and landholder responsibility is important in effective resolution.

In response to recommendation 1.4, the Working Group is a platform for members to identify a way forward when on-farm issues fall within the remit of multiple organisations. **I recommend** the Working Group use this platform to resolve issues together and this is built into the ToR.

Recommendation 2: Undertake flood planning and mapping to increase understanding

As a priority, **I support** the recommendations for the development of a high-resolution digital elevation model through comprehensive surveys of the river and floodplain (2.1), and a new floodplain model to better understand flood behaviour, inform potential new engineering solutions and guide land use planning (2.2). The successful application to the Federal Government, developed by Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development (DPIRD) through the Carnarvon Flood Recovery program with the Shire of Carnarvon and the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation (DWER) will result in resources being made available to support the initiative.

The recommendation for the preparation and delivery of consistent communication on how the flood level measurements are reported by DWER working with the Bureau of Meteorology (BoM) and the Department of Fire and Emergency Services (2.3), **is supported**.

The installation of visual gauge boards along the river (2.4) **is supported** and the State Government will fund this. The gauge boards will enable growers, the Shire of Carnarvon and DWER to observe local river levels to improve awareness and decision making.

Recommendation 3: Reduce impacts through waterways management

I support the recommendation to manage floodways and riverbanks to reduce the impact on horticultural properties and the natural environment. In response to this report, the State Government has provided funding for a Development Officer (recommendation 4.1 as below). Their responsibilities will include undertaking the review of new data to identify areas susceptible to flooding on public and private land (3.1) and assisting the development of management plans to maintain floodways to reduce future impacts (3.2, 3.3, 3.4 and 3.5). The recommendations to develop a budget and source funding to undertake the remediation works on public lands through the submission of applications to State and Federal grant programs (3.6, 3.7 and 3.8) by the Shire of Carnarvon, DWER and DPIRD **is supported**. The State Government has provided leverage funding to assist these applications. An ongoing funding mechanism to maintain the floodways should be identified through the Shire of Carnarvon.

Recommendation 4: Reduce loss through improved soil conservation and land management practices

In December 2021, the WA Soil Health Strategy was released. The WA Soil Health Strategy promotes the need to strive for sustainable and profitable land systems and share responsibility for addressing threats to productive soils. Prosperity of Western Australia's

primary industries depends on the health of our soils and increasingly, on community and market expectations for their sustainable management.

As noted above, in response to this report, the State Government has supported the recommendation to employ a dedicated Development Officer. This position will be based at Carnarvon for three years (4.1) and will lead education of and engagement with growers in the Carnarvon horticultural area. The Development Officer will assist with the development of flood management plans and will work to ensure there is clarity of the responsibilities that come with managing a horticulture business on this floodplain including managing soil, land and crops appropriately. Further funding will need to be identified by DPIRD to continue the role for the recommended five years. **I support** the recommendation that this role will support growers to implement best practice (4.2) which will reduce the impacts of flooding and mitigate the manageable risks to them and their neighbours.

To build competence and resilience in the businesses, **I support** the recommendation to promote existing programs such as state and industry funded Building Horticulture Business Capacity, the federally funded Farm Business Resilience, and industry driven Freshcare Environmental Code of Practice (4.3).

In line with the WA Soil Health Strategy, **I support** the development of a WA Government policy on future soil restoration within the Carnarvon horticultural area (4.4) with industry.

The State Government has managed multiple previous soil restoration programs, which were intended to support growers when extreme floods occur. These programs appear to have discouraged the adoption of practices which preserve and enhance the environment and minimise the risk to the natural resource. The cycle of flood followed by large volumes of soil being replaced, rather than minimising the losses through appropriate management strategies and practice, is unviable in the long term. There is a role for industry to be empowered to better manage the risk and lead programs in the future.

Recommendation 5: Improve waste management

The Carnarvon horticultural industry promotes an image of clean, green production and hosts a vibrant farm to fork tourism industry. The failure to appropriately manage waste presents a real risk to the reputation of the horticultural and tourism sectors.

A coordinated approach between individual landholders, community industry and Government is needed to improve waste management and reduce inappropriate dumping practices.

Western Australian's waste generation rates are higher compared to other jurisdictions, while our recycling rates are lower. I acknowledge this performance partly reflects some of the unique characteristics of WA such as our geographical size, isolation from markets, and vast regional and remote areas. Despite this, there are significant opportunities for the Carnarvon horticultural industry to improve their local waste and recycling practices.

I support the recommendation for community engagement, acceptance, and awareness in 5.1, 5.2 and 5.4 as key drivers for change.

I support recommendation 5.3. It is important for industry to engage and audit growers in relation to the management of on-farm waste and I will make up to \$30,000 available to progress this engagement and audit process. However, waste management is the responsibility of businesses and landowners. For example, growers, when purchasing chemicals, enter into a legal binding commitment to appropriately dispose of the waste. This needs to be fully understood by the growers and enforced by retailers. Programs already exist to support improved practices. These include programs such as Freshcare and Guidelines for Environmental Assurance in Australian Horticulture (2014).

DPLH has an important role in managing Crown land in the floodplain (5.5). **I recommend** DPLH is invited to join the Working Group to resolve waste and other issues related to their portfolio.

The WasteSorted grants (5.6) are anticipated to open in August 2022. Through the Working Group, **I support** industry, DPIRD, and the Shire of Carnarvon developing an application to investigate options to manage horticultural and chemical waste.

Hon Alannah MacTiernan

Minister for Regional Development; Agriculture and Food

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