Aims

The ‘Sustaining Our Natural Resources – Dairying for Tomorrow’ project aimed to: assess sustainability and best practice management issues in the dairying regions of Australia; survey current practice, production opportunities and attitudes among dairy farmers and other members of the industry; and develop programs to promote the adoption of best practice sustainable management.

Main Research Elements

The project’s main research components were: the collation of existing national data on the dairy industry; the development of an industry profile in each of the eight Regional Development Program regions; and a telephone survey of 1,800 dairy farmers across Australia about their on-farm management practices.

This research has allowed each region to develop its own Regional Action Plan and the industry to develop a National Strategy for continual improvement in resource management and productivity.

Background

The Australian dairy industry is mindful of its stewardship of land, soil and water resources, as these resources are the cornerstone of the industry’s continued viability and an asset for future generations. Natural resource management issues provide a series of challenges and opportunities for the industry in both the short and long term, including the integration of sustainability and productivity goals, and communication between the industry and the wider community.

This project has shown that Australian dairy farmers acknowledge the challenges that face them as natural resource managers. They understand that good resource management is good business, now and into the future.

The National Strategy and eight Regional Action Plans have been developed through close consultation with industry members throughout the dairying regions of Australia. This approach recognises that, while the dairy industry is an important part of the national economy, its product is generated on farms in regions, catchments and communities across the nation.

The National Strategy will generate momentum and help position the industry and its produce, while the Regional Action Plans will drive the programs and research needed to support on-farm action. Developing and encouraging the use of best management practices on-farm is central to both the National Strategy and the eight Regional Action Plans, through investment in research and development, education and training, communication and contributing to policy development.

Working within a catchment framework is particularly important to improve biodiversity and water quality. The Australian dairy industry is committed to building on its good track record by continuing to improve its management of natural resources.

The National Strategy seeks support from all sectors of the Australian community – Federal, State and Local Governments, regional authorities, community and catchment groups, and the dairy farming communities themselves – to help the industry fulfil this commitment.
What the Industry has Achieved so far

National, State and regional initiatives have produced (and continue to produce) knowledge that dairy farmers throughout Australia have applied to the benefit of both industry productivity and the environment.

The industry is proud of those achievements that have resulted in improved natural resource management and the adoption of best management practices.

Skills development in the dairy industry has been given significant attention over the past few years. To maintain and continuously improve its performance, the dairy industry must retain a focus on key skills and actively promote enhancement of management practices.

Focal Future Issues

A changing industry

Higher production is often linked with increased inputs and waste generation.

Any inefficiency in the use of inputs (e.g. water or nutrients) will have environmental consequences (through ‘leakage’ or waste).

As production levels rise, so too must the standard of environmental care.

Understanding of, and commitment to, best management principles is required, along with ready capital to invest in the necessary infrastructure.

Some on-farm investments are made for off-farm benefit and the responsibility for work that generates a public good needs to be shared across the community.

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Water quantity

The dairy industry recognises the importance of water use efficiency to maximise production from scarce water supplies, maintain flows in rivers and allow for further development.

Water use efficiency gains have already been made in the industry, with 80% of flood irrigators having developed water reuse systems.

Irrigation-induced salinity and raised water-tables have been identified as major issues affecting many rural industries

However, dairy farmers in many regions will need to become even more efficient in their use of both surface water and groundwater as, in the face of growing competition for water, allocations may shrink and prices may rise.

The irrigated dairy industry has made significant contributions to the management of salinity.

Soil conservation

For many years, the dairy industry has recognised the on and off-farm impacts of poor soil management.

Dairy farmers who recognise soil conservation needs are proactive in addressing them and adopt various management practices to maintain and improve soil condition.

Dryland and irrigation-induced salinity and raised water-tables have been identified as major issues affecting many rural industries.

The irrigated dairy industry has made significant contributions to the management of salinity through its participation in community-driven catchment plans and on-farm activities such as groundwater pumping and improved surface water management.

Dairy farmers in many regions will need to become even more efficient in their use of both surface water and groundwater.
Water quality

The dairy industry has been working with others in the community regarding effluent and nutrient management to improve the quality of water leaving dairy farms.

Most regional dairy industries have produced codes of practice for effluent management, in conjunction with State environmental protection agencies and in accord with national guidelines.

These codes of practice are being implemented.

The quality of water leaving dairy paddocks and milking areas can be improved further and this will be important as the industry intensifies, resulting in increased effluent generation and increased inputs.

Loss of native vegetation and reduced biodiversity

Areas recognised by the industry as requiring attention in relation to native vegetation include managing existing native vegetation, revegetating landscapes and managing native wildlife on farms.

In some regions (especially parts of the subtropics), native grasses can form part of the feed base but, generally, remnants of native vegetation are on lessarable land and along waterways.

Dairy farm environments also provide habitat for native species, such as water birds. Significant progress has been made on management of areas adjacent to waterways as wildlife corridors and riparian habitat. In 2000, 57% of farmers with waterways had all or most of them fenced off from livestock, 22% had fenced off most of their native bush areas from livestock and 55% had implemented some revegetation over the past 10 years.

For these measures to have their maximum impact, a continued effort, and recognition of farm and catchment benefits, will be necessary.

Greenhouse emissions

With the recognition of global warming as an issue, the industry appreciates the importance of reducing greenhouse gas emissions, including the potential for methane gas reduction and use, and improved management of organic matter, fertilisers and irrigated pastures.

The issue of greenhouse gas emissions is not confined to farms or the dairy industry.

The dairy industry looks to work with agencies and industries to maximise the benefits of improved techniques across the whole community.

Government and the community to ensure that planning regulations relating to land development will not negatively affect the dairy industry, and that there are appropriate mediation procedures in place to deal with noise and odour complaints in relation to dairy farms.

Land use change

The industry is aware of significant land use change in many dairy areas, including urban encroachment and the increased value of land.

Land use changes can create opportunities for catchments and the community to support the development of high value agricultural industries, such as dairy, in appropriate areas.
THE NATIONAL STRATEGY

The National Strategy involves a vision and a goal for the dairy industry encompassing natural resource management. These are supported by four specific objectives.

A series of interrelated national and regional actions will collectively contribute to achieving the objectives through seven key themes.

The Regional Development Programs’ involvement in developing the National Strategy is one of its strengths. The issues and appropriate responses can differ from region to region and the Regional Action Plans reflect these local production systems and their environment.

The Regional Action Plans build on what is already occurring in local and regional dairy communities – and on links the industry has with other community initiatives.

Goal

Manage natural resources in a way that sustains industry viability, maintains the resource intact for long-term use, and protects and enhances the wider environment.

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Vision

Dairying systems contributing to healthy and sustainable catchments and communities.

Objectives

♦ Use resources efficiently
♦ Protect and enhance on-farm resources
♦ Minimise the industry’s off-farm environmental impacts
♦ Be recognised as environmentally responsible.

Key Themes

Communication
Better communication within the industry and with the community.

Adoption of best management practices
Defining and promoting principles and practices to increase profitable production and maintain the condition of the environment.

Research, development and capacity building
Better understanding of how farm management interacts with catchment health.

Policy development
Further development of policies and incentives to support on-farm investments that generate environmental gains for community benefit.

Monitoring and evaluation
Investigating and adopting the means to record good practice so as to promote consumer confidence in dairy products.

Catchment and community planning
The provision of information and guidelines to help regional dairy interests contribute to local planning processes.

Coordination and revision
Assign accountability for actions and develop closer working relations within the industry.

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