

## Communiqué

### Soil Research, Development and Extension Strategy Implementation Committee meeting - Canberra, February 2015

The purpose of Australia's National Soil Research, Development and Extension (RD&E) Strategy is to ensure the national soil RD&E system generates and applies the new knowledge necessary to meet future challenges in soil use and management. The strategy includes developing and implementing a process for national coordination and prioritisation of investment in soil RD&E. Annual national soil RD&E forums will be run to assess cross-sector and regional soil RD&E priorities, consider opportunities for soil RD&E, and report on achievements. Implementation of the strategy is to be led by CSIRO working in close collaboration with other Australian agencies delivering soil RD&E (i.e. State agencies, Universities, and Research and Development Corporations).

The Soil RD&E Implementation Committee held its first meeting in Canberra on the 24th of February 2015 with representatives from CSIRO, Federal and State agencies, Research and Development Corporations and Universities.

#### **Committee governance and membership**

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The Committee's first order of business was to appoint a Chair. Iain Young was the successful candidate. A deputy Chair, Georgina Kelly, was also appointed. The Chair will not act as a representative of a particular jurisdiction, organization or sector on the committee. An Executive Officer, Jennifer Alexander from the Department of Economic Development, Victoria, has been appointed to support the committee and assist in the implementation of the strategy. The commitment to this strategy is reflected by the willingness to share responsibilities across a number of organisations.

Membership of the committee was considered. The Australian Government Department of Agriculture had previously requested nominations during the finalisation of the Strategy and interested agencies had been invited to commit resourcing in return for membership. Current membership will be checked against the previous processes for nomination and resource contributions. The primary requirement is for a member agency to either play a 'major national role in providing or funding soil science RD&E', along with preparedness to commit resources. The opportunity for agencies who are not members of the Implementation Committee to contribute to working groups was noted. Development of a terms of reference for the committee will include a mechanism for adding members.

#### **Research priorities**

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Development of the science research priorities on soil and water for the Commonwealth Science Council was discussed. The Commonwealth Science Council held its inaugural meeting on the 27th November. The Council strongly supported the development of national science and research

priorities. They also supported identifying two or three practical challenges for each priority. These priorities and practical challenges are intended to help focus the nation's research effort, and help assure that some public funding for research addresses the most important questions facing the nation and include one on Soil and Water and another on Food. The priorities are designed to align research excellence with Australia's needs. They represent community interests, industrial strengths and growth plans, comparative advantages and global trends.

The need for well-articulated and detailed RD&E priorities was emphasised and it was noted that a synthesis of previous soil research priority setting processes would be valuable.

The Soil RD&E Strategy provides a key resource for the Soil and Water Expert Working Group. Much of the preliminary analysis and identification of priorities for the Working Group has been done and a list of priorities was developed following the meeting and submitted to Soil and Water Expert Working Group, chaired by Mr John Gunn, CEO of the Australian Institute of Marine Science on the 2nd of March 2015.

### **Australian Soil Assessment Program**

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The National Committee on Soil Terrain (NCST) provided a key input into the development of the Soil RD&E Strategy – a report outlining the proposed Australian Soil Assessment Program (ASAP). The NCST report provides a comprehensive plan for reengineering the national soil information infrastructure so that it can provide the required data and information to regularly assess the condition of soils and their responses to land management across Australia. It was agreed that the report should be made available on the Soil RD&E website once the website is developed.

A summary of the Australian Soil Assessment Program (ASAP) was presented to the Implementation Committee. This included an outline of the need for national soil data infrastructure, the need for soil information at sub-paddock scale, and the need for the monitoring and forecasting of soil condition.

It was noted that soil and land survey programs were most active and effective during the Accelerated Program of Land Resource Assessment in the Decade of Landcare (1990-2000). A complex set of factors led to a reduction of effort over the next 15 years. The soil management challenges facing Australia are large (e.g. SOE 2011) and there is a clear need for much better information on the condition and trends in the status of Australia's soil resources. Some renewal of the survey, monitoring and complementary RD&E activities is therefore essential.

### **Program support, funding and business development**

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Most agencies involved in the Soil RD&E Strategy have budgets that are reducing in real terms. Furthermore, some of the large Australian Government programs into soil and land related areas have been scaled back during the last few years (e.g. the Natural Heritage Trust and then Caring for Our Country). The Soil RD&E Strategy implies redirection of existing funds and in some cases new investments (e.g. ASAP) along with the development of partnership agreements (e.g. for managing shared infrastructure).

The committee discussed ways of increasing investment into soil RD&E. Suggestions included:

- Coordination and facilitation around larger national opportunities.
- Developing proposals for National programs.
- Building national consortia to deliver such programs
- Developing proposals for components of the National Centre for Soil Health Research (Soil Advocate recommendation).
- Developing RD&E priorities that are attractive to both industry and RD&E providers.
- Facilitating deep engagements between funders and RD&E providers about priorities and capacity to deliver
- Enhancing industry engagement