

Communiqué 6

Soil Research, Development and Extension Strategy Implementation Committee meeting – Sydney, May 2016

The Soil RD&E Implementation Committee held its sixth meeting in Sydney on the 10th May 2016 with representatives attending from CSIRO, Federal and State agencies, Research and Development Corporations and Universities.

Name change

The Soil RD&E Implementation Committee is part of the development and implementation of the National Primary Industries RD&E Framework. The Committee decided to adopt a new working title to provide a clearer indication of the intent of our activity and objectives. From now on, the activity will be known as the 'Australian Soil Network'. When expressed in banner form the full working title will be 'Australian Soil Network - implementing the National Soil RD&E Strategy'.

Update from the National Advocate for Soil Health

General Michael Jeffery has been appointed for a new term as the National Advocate for Soil Health through until 2017. This affirmation and continuation of General Jeffery's role by the Australian Government is a significant achievement. The extension of the appointment emphasises the need for a focus on educating the Australian community and influencing researchers and land managers, regarding the importance of maintaining and sustaining soil health and condition. General Jeffery provided an update on his activities as part of coordination with the priorities of the Soil RD&E Strategy.

Outlook 2016 Conference

Neil McKenzie presented a talk 'Australian soils – significant risks but excellent opportunities' on behalf of the Soil RD&E Implementation Committee at the National Outlook Conference in February 2016. Outlook provided a valuable opportunity to highlight the importance of soil to agriculture and to our economy and to communicate progress in soil management and remaining challenges. It was also an opportunity to calibrate how soil issues are viewed within the leadership levels of government and industry. All of the Outlook presentations are available [online](#).

The Outlook Conference provides an ideal forum for the Soil RD&E Implementation Committee to provide a regular report on the status of soil resources in Australia. The Soil RD&E Strategy is considering whether to present on a regular basis at this forum to complement the industry outlooks, providing an update on at least one key soil issue each year.

Prospectus for our five priorities

There are five national Soil RD&E [priorities](#) that are central to the Committees activities. At the 2016 Planning Forum it was agreed that a prospectus should be prepared with a clear and compelling value proposition for investment for each of these priorities. A prospectus for the five national soil RD&E priorities will form a major component of a national plan for soil RD&E. This important task will inform investment across the five key priorities by articulating the benefits of each priority area, the scope of RD&E required, and the most appropriate mechanisms to deliver on the priorities.

The Soil RD&E Implementation Committee will commence this task by developing the prospectus for one priority area with a view to this forming a 'blueprint' for the other areas that will follow. The priority 'developing better information systems for soil-related knowledge exchange' was chosen to be the first prospectus to commence. A new generation of technologies is available to build the ICT infrastructure that will enable accessible and readily generated soil information. This information is integral to the 'Big Data' revolution in agriculture.

Capability audit update

The capability audit undertaken during the formulation of the Soil RD&E Strategy provided a valuable baseline for understanding the scale of investment and structure of the workforce involved in soil research, development and extension. It is more than five years since the first capability audit and anecdotal evidence suggests that significant changes are occurring.

The Soil RD&E Implementation Committee needs to have a clear understanding of trends in investment and workforce structure to fulfil its function. The Committee will undertake an update of the capability audit that considers the size of the workforce and investment or expenditure by field of research. The audit will assist in reviewing how well current expenditure aligns with our priorities, it will assist with identification of capacity gaps, and will help in planning Australia's future soil RD&E capability needs.

CRC proposal

The CRC Program was established in 1990 to improve the effectiveness of Australia's research effort through bringing together researchers in the public and private sectors with the end users. There is strong interest from a number of organisations involved in the Soil RD&E Implementation Committee to develop a coordinated CRC bid for the next round that has the support of the leading soil institutions in Australia. Western Sydney University will convene a discussion about this CRC proposal and welcomes input from other organisations.

Australian Council of Deans of Agriculture representative

Neal Menzies was welcomed as the Australian Council of Deans of Agriculture representative on the Committee.