

PRIMARY INDUSTRIES MINISTERIAL FORUM

Communiqué

PRIMARY INDUSTRIES MINISTERS

13 FEBRUARY 2009

Ministers with responsibility for primary industries met in Canberra today for the fourth Ministerial Forum.

The forum was convened to commence intergovernmental discussions on the Beale report's biosecurity reform proposals and to discuss measures to deliver drought policy improvements.

Biosecurity reforms

The forum endorsed the principle of a strengthened partnership approach for managing biosecurity, including environmental biosecurity, as outlined in the report of the independent review of Australia's current arrangements, *One biosecurity: a working partnership*. Ministers agreed to work together so as to implement reforms that will strengthen Australia's biosecurity system and provide substantial benefits to our industries, communities and natural environment.

Ministers agreed to establish a formal agreement on a national biosecurity system by the end of 2009, covering:

- stronger science and risk-based approaches
- an improved working partnership across the biosecurity continuum (offshore, at the border and onshore), particularly in post border diagnostic and response arrangements
- agreed cost-sharing arrangements covering all relevant sectors
- improved information sharing arrangements and systems
- collaboration in optimising application of all available government investments in biosecurity services
- consultation on national priorities for major new investments
- arrangements for consulting on certain policy decisions and operational matters such as appointments to the National Biosecurity Commission
- increased Commonwealth responsibility for ballast water.

Ministers agreed to establish a working group of officials to progress development of an agreement and for that group to report back on progress by 30 June 2009.

Improving drought policy

Ministers reconfirmed the principles agreed at their 12 November forum for the development of an improved drought policy and with additional principles recognising:

- the role of farmers in natural resource management and their role in maintaining vibrant rural communities
- the importance of maintaining and supporting the natural resource base during drought and climate change.

Ministers agreed, subject to budget consideration, to specific measures to implement these principles, including:

- income support and safety net measures available to farm families facing financial hardship, regardless of the cause, including time-limited and capped concessions for on-farm and liquid assets
- assistance for farm businesses to prepare for future climate change and drought, including to support farm planning and business training, and to implement risk management, natural resource management and drought preparedness strategies
- improved research and development including seasonal forecasting
- assistance for farming dependent communities to prepare for drought and other hardships, and to improve the health of rural communities.

Ministers also considered the roles that the Commonwealth and State and territory governments should play in the co-operative delivery of a comprehensive drought policy. Decisions will be taken on these measures through budget processes over the coming months. Ministers agreed to commence work on an intergovernmental agreement to ensure that there would be a co-ordinated approach to communicating and delivering the new arrangements.

Ministers agreed that funding income support would be the primary responsibility of the Australian Government. Ministers also agreed that, in principle, and subject to their separate budget considerations, assistance for farm businesses to prepare for future droughts should be provided through a co-investment framework by the Australian and state and territory governments. States and territories will continue to engage in complementary services and community support activities for rural communities.

Ministers also agreed to explore options for attracting additional investment in the agriculture sector.

Ministers noted that the final Productivity Commission report *Inquiry into Government Drought Support* would be provided to the Australian Government Treasurer on 27 February and this would be taken into account in finalising the details of these drought reforms.

Ministers reaffirmed that the Exceptional Circumstances rules will not change for those producers currently receiving assistance in existing Exceptional Circumstances declared areas. Ministers agreed transition to a new policy should be as smooth as possible.

ENDS