

Proof positive—Australia still doing well by doing good

The benefits to Australia of investing in agricultural research and food security internationally are under review by the Crawford Fund. Here the head of the Crawford Fund's task force, the Hon. Neil Andrew, reports on key findings.

Neil Andrew



I firmly believe that Australian investment in international agricultural research helps ensure food security and farm productivity, for this country and for the world.

It leads to increased food and incomes for hungry and poor people in developing countries, who mostly live in rural areas. By improving their farming methods and skills, Australia is also supporting regional economic growth and peace. An upcoming study by a Crawford Fund task force, which I have the honour to lead, will consider benefits accruing to Australia and developing countries from our aid program.

While international agricultural research in general, and ACIAR's program in particular, should be aimed primarily at improving economic welfare in the developing countries, it is in the nature of new knowledge in agriculture—drawing on the skills and expertise of Australian researchers—that it can serve the interests of Australian producers as well.

Our study will show convincingly that it does.

Together with Margaret Reid AO, Dr Tony Gregson AM and Dr Denis Blight AO I had the pleasure of calling on Australia's Foreign Minister Julie Bishop recently and was pleased to find her sympathetic to our findings and supportive of the work of ACIAR.

STUDY PUBLICATION

I am pleased that publication of our study has been preceded by this issue of ACIAR's *Partners* magazine, which has also focused on benefits to Australia. It is hardly surprising that the two documents, albeit prepared separately, have reached similar conclusions.

There are, however, important distinctions between the two. While this commendable magazine provides examples of ACIAR's work and partnerships benefiting Australia, our report is the result of a process that

commenced in March 2013. It involved national consultations, comments on a draft report and a discussion paper, as well as a commissioned meta-review of published analyses of costs and benefits to Australia.

SUPPORTING AUSTRALIAN FARMERS

Our report also points to ways that ACIAR's great work can further support Australian farmers, with a range of recommendations that I expect *Partners* readers will find of interest.

Of particular relevance to this issue of *Partners*, our commissioned high-level review demonstrated an impressive return on investment of between 50:1 and 70:1 by ACIAR and research partners in Australia and developing countries. This return:

- came from a sample of just 10% of ACIAR's total bilateral research program;
- greatly exceeds the total investment in ACIAR-led bilateral research to date; and
- most of the return results from increased farm incomes in developing countries, although it also led to advances in the productivity of Australian agriculture.

Like this magazine, our report has numerous examples of benefits and I raise just a few here.

Australian grain growers benefit financially every year by around 10 times the value of our annual investment in international agricultural research.

They achieve higher yields and/or have lower costs through using new seed resources ('germplasm') that we receive from the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research Centres, particularly the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center, the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-arid Tropics and the International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas, supported by ACIAR, the Grains Research and Development Corporation and other Australian research groups that appreciate the benefit they receive through such support.

The Global Crop Diversity Trust, the World Vegetable Center, the Centre for Agricultural Bioscience

International and other international centres also share their knowledge and resources with Australia.

In the protection of orchard and field crops, through work by ACIAR (and partners), Australia now:

- is prepared against some potential invading mite pests of honey bees (CSIRO) which would threaten pollination; and
- understands control of fruit fly pests, including species entering Australia (Griffith University) and those formerly preventing our growers' access to the Japanese mango market (Queensland Government).

As an orchardist I confess to a parochial interest in a portion of ACIAR's work. Consequently, I was particularly interested to learn of ACIAR's work, supported by the Crawford Fund in a related master class, on citrus greening, a disease that if it were to enter Australia could destroy much of our citrus plantings.

FOOD SECURITY

It is imperative to food security that researchers, the world over, are abreast of the rapid changes and possible breakthroughs in modern agricultural science. Developing-country postgraduate students and scientists sponsored to visit Australia engage in research here. Both ACIAR and the Crawford Fund play roles in this regard. Australian researchers work abroad gaining experience and capacity, which yield unquantified benefits to Australia. These include:

- fresh thinking on Australian agricultural issues;

ACIAR and Crawford Fund supported research, including germplasm collection in regions where many of our commercial crops originated, has had an enormous impact on the development of improved crop varieties in Australia.

PHOTO: BRAD COLLIS

- new scientific tools and insights in developing countries that can also apply in Australia;
 - opportunities to understand and prevent threatening biosecurity risks; and
 - high credibility for Australia in international scientific forums and peer-group meetings, and among internationally respected colleagues.
- The aim of aid-supported agricultural

research must always be to increase global food security and reduce poverty by enhancing agricultural productivity and by increasing international trade. This research can also enhance the potential for Australian agricultural production, research capabilities and biosecurity.

It was a great pleasure for me, as a former Speaker of the House of Representatives, chair of the Crawford Fund Board and commissioner

of ACIAR, to serve on the task force and to see ACIAR sustained through the change of government so that it can continue its good work for farmers in the developing countries and in Australia. ■

More information: Copies of the Crawford Fund's task force report will be available shortly on the fund's website (www.crawfordfund.org) or by contacting the office on 02 6188 4370.