

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE
TO REPORT NO. 21 OF THE LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL'S GENERAL PURPOSE
STANDING COMMITTEE NO. 5 "MURRUMBIDGEE COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE"

The NSW Government makes the following comment and provides advice on action in train to address the recommendations in Report No 21 of the Legislative Council's General Purpose Standing Committee No. 5 "Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture".

Recommendation 1

That all rural communities' impact statements be assessed by the Regional Communities Consultative Council before being included in any Cabinet proposal.

Response

Rural Communities Impact Statements are prepared as part of all Cabinet proposals which have clear economic and social impacts on rural areas. The statements are prepared by agencies. There is a formalised process, outlined in Premier's Memoranda issued by The Cabinet Office, by which agencies prepare Rural Communities Impact Statements. This process ensures that every agency takes a role in assessing the impacts of policy proposals on rural communities, and takes steps to address issues before a proposal is discussed by Cabinet.

All documents considered by Cabinet are subject to Cabinet confidentiality conventions. It is therefore not possible to provide Rural Communities Impact Statements to the Regional Communities Consultative Council.

Recommendation 2

That the Department explore with other agencies innovative ways by which the residential facilities at the Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture can be reopened, recognising that residential facilities are essential for isolated students, indigenous students and farmers who may attend short courses at the Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture.

Response

Departmental officers have met with various stakeholders and other agencies including the Department of Education and Training to investigate options for the use of the College's residential facilities. The Department of Education and Training has advised that it is not in a position to take over the management of these residential facilities.

Planning is currently underway to reopen the Amaroo section of the facility for short course provision in 2005. It is expected that the Amaroo residential facility will provide a valuable adjunct to the educational programs delivered from the College, especially for isolated students.

Recommendation 3

That the Departmental working party examining the future of the Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture infrastructure develop a strategy for the use of the residential facilities in consultation with the local community.

Response

The Department of Primary Industries has worked closely with Leeton Shire Council and the College Advisory Council regarding the future operation of the College. A strategy for the use of the residential facilities has been prepared and consultation with the local community will continue. Bookings are now being taken for use of the facilities for conferences, displays and functions. The first guests used the residential facilities on 22 to 24 February 2005.

Recommendation 4

That the residential facilities remain intact and functional until such time as the working party examining the future of the College has completed its deliberations and reported.

Response

The NSW Department of Primary Industries has never intended to undertake any actions which would render the residential facilities inoperable. In fact, it has taken great care to maintain the facilities in an "as is" condition until options are found for their long-term use.

Recommendation 5

That the Government recognise the uniqueness and importance of agricultural education in New South Wales and continue to provide adequate financial human and capital resources to Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture, Yanco and the CB Alexander Agricultural College, Tocal.

Response

The Department of Primary Industries will continue to support agricultural education across NSW, and has a commitment to both Murrumbidgee and Tocal Colleges as providers of high quality education opportunities in agriculture and related areas.

Recommendation 6

That the Minister, in conjunction with the Advisory Councils of the Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture and Tocal College, continue to seek improvement of courses offered at the Colleges and effectively market these courses, to ensure both colleges remain Centres of Excellence in Agricultural Education.

Response

The changes announced in 2003 regarding Murrumbidgee College have led to a streamlining of Continuing Education delivery across the State. Now courses are delivered in a cohesive manner throughout the State with strong collaboration between both Murrumbidgee and Tocal Campuses.

The Department's officers and staff of both colleges continue to work assiduously in the promotion of agricultural education. The support from the industry for the Department's provision of agricultural education is strong and the Colleges' Advisory Councils provide a good link with community interests.

The Department's provision of agricultural education from Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture during 2004 has been one of the largest ever. The number of topics delivered by short courses rose from 13 in 2003 to 36 in 2004 and is expected to be 53 in 2005. The distribution of delivery sites has also expanded from solely being at Murrumbidgee College to 12 remote sites in 2005.

It was outlined in September 2003 that there would be an increase in the number of short courses offered on the open market. This has happened with 14 new courses offered in 2004 and another 13 being offered in 2005. This has been a major increase in opportunity for producers in southern and central NSW.

Short course enrolments rose from around 200 in 2003 to over 1000 in 2004 and is targeted to be over 1500 in 2005. This is an excellent outcome, particularly given these courses are

accessing producers and their staff often in very remote locations. This demonstrates the Department's commitment to agricultural education and its support for both colleges.

It is proposed that Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture campus will become a major Centre of Excellence in irrigation training, both for the state, nationally and internationally. Moves are underway to work with the Irrigation Association of Australia to this end.