Salinity action plan

Department of Agriculture and Food, Western Australia

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In November, the Premier of Western Australia, Richard Court, released his government's strategy to tackle one of the State's most serious environmental problems — salinity. This article provides a summary of the action plan, full details are available in a two volume set ‘Salinity: a situation statement for Western Australia’ and ‘Western Australian salinity action plan’. Copies of the reports are available from Publication Section, Agriculture Western Australia, 3 Baron-Hay Court, South Perth 6151.

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Salinity is one of the State's most critical environmental problems, threatening major economic and social consequences. It is preventable and, in the long-term, reversible. Complete elimination is not realistic, but we can dramatically reduce its impact.

This requires coordinated action from agricultural land owners, the Government and the broader community. Catchment management and community participation are crucial to the action plan, which aims to:
- reduce further deterioration and wherever possible, recover existing salt-affected land;
- protect and restore key water resources and high value wetlands;
- maintain natural diversity; and
- protect towns and infrastructure threatened by salinity.

These aims will be actively pursued over three decades.

Successful salinity control requires management of saline groundwater. Deep-rooted perennials, especially trees and shrubs which can restore nature’s balance, will be a fundamental part of all salinity management strategies.

Solutions
To achieve the plan's aims the Government will ensure:
- another three million hectares of trees and shrubs are planted across the agricultural area;
- continued improvement in total water use of annual crops and pasture systems;
- shallow drainage for surface water control; and
- remnant vegetation is protected and managed to maintain it in perpetuity.

The Salinity Action Plan will be applied on the basis of three rainfall zones:
- greater than 600 millimetres per year, where farm forestry is largely proven and other perennial options exist;
- between 400 and 600 millimetres per year, where the high water use capacity of woody perennials will be especially important because of the combination of high groundwater recharge and high salt storage; and
- less than 400 millimetres per year, where extensive use of high water use cropping systems, complemented by strategically distributed revegetation with woody perennials, will be the major focus.

Implementation
The Salinity Action Plan will be implemented by creating an environment in which farmers and other investors can have confidence in their investment in restorative action by:
- ready access to information on commercially viable options by all farmers;
- Government support for land conservation and biodiversity plantings accompanying the implementation of other high water using practices;
- increasing effort in research and industry development of new commercial tree crops.

Implementation will also be achieved by the Government and the community establishing priority areas for on-the-ground action by:
- selecting 'focus' catchments to concentrate action and Government advice and providing fully coordinated support teams in return for agreements to implement; and
- establishing key 'recovery' catchments where priority is given to restoration/protection of water resource, natural diversity and wetland values and rural infrastructure.

Investment and funding
The approach will require a major long-term investment of time, money and effort by landowners. An additional $3 billion is required to ensure the planting of sufficient woody perennials to sustain the natural resource base for current and future generations. This means an investment of about $100 million every year for 30 years (about two per cent of gross production from Western
Agriculture in the State's south-west is a $4.5 billion a year industry - if salinisation worsens, we risk losing more than $60 million of productive farmland each year.

Australian agriculture. Much of this investment will have to come from landowners and private industry.

Private investment will be supported by Government spending, particularly where the public benefit is high.

The Salinity Action Plan will draw on:
- existing funding of $22.8 million per year, $15.1 million of State Government money and $7.7 million from the Commonwealth;
- redistributing $5.8 million per year from existing agency funds to salinity management;
- phasing in over three years an extra $10 million per year of State Government money, to implement the plan and particularly to support the remnant vegetation, recovery catchments and rural towns rescue components;
- phasing in over four years $18 million per year from CALM's resources by adjusting asset sales and debt reduction schedules, to implement a major commercial farm forestry program in the medium rainfall zone and on sandy soils on the Swan coastal plain;
- seeking $30 million per year of Commonwealth money allocated as follows:
  - $13.5 million per year for land conservation and biodiversity plantings;
  - $11 million per year for development of commercial woody plant crops and associated industries;
  - $1.5 million for additional plantings to support commercial plantations on key water supply recovery catchments;
  - $3 million per year for key natural diversity recovery catchments;
  - $1 million per year for a rural towns rescue program; and
- renegotiating funding arrangements with the Commonwealth to implement the plan.

State and Commonwealth Government investment in controlling salinity will be $87 million per year with much of the funds directed to on-farm activities, particularly establishment of perennials and protective fencing.

**Whole of Government approach**

The plan will be administered through a Ministerial Committee, chaired by the Premier and comprising the Deputy Premier and Ministers for Primary Industry and the Environment. The Committee will be advised by a State Salinity Council, made up of invited representatives of business, environmental interests and agricultural landholders, together with the chairpersons of:

- Soil and Land Conservation Council;
- Rural Adjustment and Finance Corporation;
- Farm Forestry Development Group;
- Water and Rivers Commission;
- National Parks and Nature Conservation Authority;
- Lands and Forests Commission; and
- Environmental Protection Authority.

The Council will draw on community and industry input and have the Chief Executive Officers of Agriculture Western Australia, Water and Rivers Commission, Department of Conservation and Land Management, and Department of Environmental Protection as advisers. The four CEOs will coordinate implementation and resourcing decisions through their agencies.

For more information call the Salinity Information Office on 1800 674 897.
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