



## **MEDIA RELEASE 22 Mar 2010**

### **RESEARCH CONFERENCE HIGHLIGHTS FOOD NEED**

The recent Australian Institute of Agricultural Science and Technology Conference held in Canberra highlighted the challenges facing agriculture in producing enough food to feed the world.

World population will reach 9 billion by 2050 and require a doubling of food production just to maintain today's standards.

National AIAST President Geoff Thomas said that this will need to be achieved with less land and water for agriculture, less and higher costs for fuel and chemicals, and in an environment where seasons became more difficult.



With the publicity on things like climate change, the importance of food security has been less well publicised, despite the fact Australia has a responsibility to meet the food challenge just as much as it needs to play a role in things like greenhouse gas reduction, Mr Thomas said.

To meet the food challenge Australia needs to develop smarter technologies and systems that require far greater investment in research, development and extension. However governments had reduced investment in this area as they give preference to such things as health, education and welfare. It is time to rethink this approach, Mr Thomas said.

Agricultural production had grown by around 2.5% per annum (which is the highest of any sector apart from telecommunications/IT) but has flattened off over the last ten years. Evidence presented to the Conference showed that a major cause of this decline is a drop in R&D investment.

Peter Kuhlmann, Chair of SAGIT, who along with Australian Grain Technologies and the Australian Centre for Plant Functional Genomics were among the sponsors for the Conference, said, "we have been living off of the stock of results from past research and it is now urgent that we replenish it".

Farmers are making a huge contribution through their levies but they can only do so much without government support by way of research infrastructure, including a pool of experienced scientists to lead the work, Mr Kuhlmann said. One cannot expect industry to pick up all of these costs given that it is not just farmers but the whole community which benefits.

Mr Thomas said that winning investment in research R,D&E was not easy in the current political environment and required not just the AIAST, but all groups involved in the industry to:

- Establish a clear and single vision for agriculture so conflict in the messages was avoided.
- Adopt a fresh approach to communicating to the public the importance of agriculture to Australia and the world in terms of:
  - Meeting the food challenge in terms of volume and food safety.
  - The role of farmers in managing the environment with 54% of our land being managed by farmers, 94% of who actively undertake natural resource management.
  - The role of agriculture in managing green house gases.

- The importance of agriculture and related industries which support 1.6 million jobs, 50% of which are in the cities.
- Maintaining rural communities which are central to our cultural identity. While the number of farmers has fallen there are still 125,000 farmers dedicated solely to agricultural production, and which in most cases are the mainstay of their community.
- Work together in selling the importance of agriculture and increased investment to the community and to governments.

Mr Thomas said that while many issues came out of the Conference which must be addressed, this “repositioning” of agriculture in the public mind was one of the most urgent and where AIAST would take an important lead.

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