

## From the President



A round of consultations marked my RACI involvement in the autumn.

The first was a stakeholder workshop with the Product Safety and Integrity Committee (PSIC), a body that reports to the Primary Industries Ministerial Council. Its members are representatives of

the Commonwealth Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forests, their counterparts in the states and territories, officials from the Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority and the New Zealand Food Safety Authority, and people from other Commonwealth Departments and CSIRO.

The business of the PSIC is to provide policy advice on matters that affect the safety and integrity of farm products, food and animal feed. Their field of operation includes agricultural and veterinary chemicals, fertilisers, environmental contamination and residues.

A new three-year work plan of the PSIC will start in July 2008, so the purpose of this annual workshop was to review the current work plan and discuss future directions. The big issue is getting consistent control of use regulation and compliance in the states and territories. They retained those powers when they ceded the power of registration of agvet chemicals to the national authority in the early 1990s.

Some interesting items in the current work plan were a usage data collection, establishment of standards for chemical contaminants in fertilisers, and the capability and capacity of analytical laboratories. The data collection links maps of agricultural production areas with chemicals registered for use on those particular crops, and a pilot study in Tasmania to see how actual usage compared with that estimated by the mapping technique. Raw data have been assembled, and we await the publication of the study. A working group, in conjunction with industry representatives, is preparing a report on fertilisers, and we can expect to see it late in 2008. There is already a National Cadmium Minimisation strategy, to deal with one particular contaminant of superphosphate. Finally, the laboratory study seeks to know whether Australia has and will have the ability to meet demands for chemical analyses in the food, environment and health sector. It's a fair bet that the answer is 'no', but so far the project has just assembled a database of laboratories and no conclusion on supply of trained chemists has been reached.

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) has had a team working on what are called 'security chemicals', being those that might be used by terrorists to create disturbances in our society. They have already dealt, albeit rather clumsily, with ammonium nitrate, but now a list of 92 substances is being considered along with a framework management plan. It is not envisaged that specific regulations will be introduced, but rather that existing regulatory regimes will be used to enable closer scrutiny of the chemicals. Chlorine, for example, is already the subject of a good deal of regulation regarding production, transport and use, and manufacturers have implemented their own plan to ensure that this dangerous substance does not get away. Hydrogen peroxide, a potential precursor of explosives, is another matter, however, since it is widely available at retail outlets. The packages are small but an assiduous shopper could accumulate quite a lot.

The COAG people have consulted widely and identified three stakeholder groups - community, industry and government(s). I have recommended that they add a fourth - the chemistry profession, as represented by RACI.

The last one on my round was the meeting of stakeholders called by the Review of the National Innovation System. Nobody thought there was a 'system', at least nobody at the session I attended, because there seems to be a number of programs - 169 identified so far by the review - that are more or less independent. The meetings around the country ran in three sessions, with audiences drawn from academe, government and industry/business. I chose the third of these options. The Review Chair, Dr Terry Cutler, had already done 13 of these presentations so his spiel sounded well practised. He called for people to propose changes, not just to identify problems, and he suggested there could be an important role for government procurement programs that could give preferential treatment to innovative products. Polarised views were expressed about the role of university research in the scheme of things and about the success or otherwise of Cooperative Research Centres (CRCs). Following the receipt and digestion of submissions, we can expect to see a Green Paper (the Cutler Report) by July and a government response - a White Paper - before the end of the year.

The Year of Reviewing Everything also includes a review of the CRC system by a member of Cutler's team, Professor Mary O'Kane, and a review of the support for research and development through the tax system, and both of these will be taken into account when the Cutler Report is compiled.

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