AGROMILLORA

25 September 2015

Committee Secretary
House of Representatives Standing Committee on Agriculture and Industry
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

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Dear Committee Members

Submission to Parliamentary Inquiry
The role of technology in increasing agricultural productivity in Australia

We refer to the Parliamentary Inquiry into the role of technology in increasing agricultural productivity in Australia and are pleased to submit this letter on behalf of Agromillora Australia. We commend the Committee on the scope and timeliness of this Inquiry.

Introduction to the Agromillora Group

Agromillora was founded in Barcelona, Spain in 1986. The name Agromillora was derived from the Catalan words for "agriculture" and "improvement" which emphasises our group wide focus on agricultural innovation. The objective of our organisation is to propagate and supply growers with high quality commercial plants and to develop improvements in farming systems and plant biology.

In the three decades since inception, Agromillora has grown to become the world's largest plant propagation nursery of commercial species of fruit and nut trees. Last year, our group produced and supplied over 60 million trees and rootstocks. We supply many horticultural industries including almonds, olives, citrus, grapes, stone fruits, nuts and berries. We now have 10 subsidiaries and over 1,000 employees worldwide including a newly formed subsidiary in Australia.

The importance of innovation in horticulture

Recent estimates indicate that in the next 40 years, mankind will need to produce as much food as it has done in the past 10,000 years combined. This incredible prediction clearly illustrates the enormity of the challenges ahead for global agriculture.

The Agromillora Group recognises that the increased demand for food and the limited supply of suitable land and water resources point to an increasingly urgent need to focus on farm innovation to drive efficiency and productivity. Put simply, our challenge is to produce significantly more output with limited or fewer inputs.

Improvements in the efficiency of agricultural practices

From our perspective, there are two evident forms of innovation upon which productivity gains can be achieved and on which we are primarily focussed. These are: (a) improvements in plant biology; and (b) innovations in farm management systems.

(a) Improvements in plant biology

In a horticultural sense, a tree is a biological machine engaged in the production of a biological product, primarily fruits or nuts. However, unlike industrial machinery which has evolved into highly sophisticated forms, our stock of biological machinery is largely still in the very early stages of development with significant room for improvement to gain higher yields and better quality output with the same or lower inputs.

At Agromillora, we recognise the benefits that will flow from continued improvements in plant biology. We are also of the view that the task of improving plant biology is dependent on the efforts of many as opposed to any single organisation. For this reason Agromillora's strategy to support improved plant biology is aimed at encouraging activity across the broad population of plant breeders by developing tools to better enable the commercialisation of their output.

To this end, our international Plant Platform has been developed as an independently hosted international distribution network into which plant breeders can securely deposit new genetic materials so they can be quickly and widely distributed. Our Plant Platform aims to encourage breeders by utilising our organisation's international reach as a means of rapidly and securely protecting, distributing and exploiting their genetic materials in global markets, thus accelerating the breeding process and rewarding its participants.

(b) Innovations in farm management systems

The mechanisation of farm management in horticulture is showing significant promise for improvements in farm productivity and profitability. In particular, mechanisation is enabling substantial reductions in the utilisation of farm labour for pruning and harvesting, which is of a particular advantage for countries with high labour costs and labour scarcity such as Australia.

Australia has a proud history of innovation in horticultural mechanisation having played a pivotal role in the mechanisation of the wine industry through the development and use of grape harvesting equipment several decades ago. Agromillora is equally proud to have since adapted these systems to enable the mechanisation of other crops including olives and almonds.

Our Super High Density systems are enabling growers of olives, almonds and many other crops to mechanise their orchards and achieve significant gains in productivity and profitability. Indeed, the use of new hybrid rootstocks that are adapted to hedge row based planting formats enables the use of commercially available pruning and harvesting equipment, thereby eliminating a substantial portion of labour from the production and farm maintenance processes.

From the level of international interest in our high density systems and their successful implementation across multiple crops we are confident that the outlook for global horticulture includes significant savings in labour and other resources achieved through advanced mechanisation.

Barriers to the adoption of emerging technology

In response to this inquiry's terms of reference, Agromillora would encourage the Australian Government to continue to support the acceleration of innovation through various means, including financial incentives and the lowering of barriers that inhibit the improvement of plant genetics.

In particular we would encourage the lowering of quarantine barriers in respect to the importation of in-vitro plant materials. In most cases such materials bear no risk of foreign pest or disease due to the extensive cleansing processes the materials undergo in the initiation stage of reproduction.

We believe that an accreditation system allowing the importation of limited quantities of in-vitro plant materials from pre-accredited foreign plant laboratories would ensure Australian growers and breeders have faster, easier and more reliable access to the vast body of international genetic material whilst ensuring any risks are maintained at extremely low levels.

Naturally, our organisation supports the maintenance of border protection measures to prevent the transmission of pest and disease. However we believe that an allowance of limited quantities of imported in-vitro plant materials from Australian certified foreign laboratories would greatly enhance Australia's efforts to improve its plant biology with minimal associated risk. As a result we encourage the Government to review its stance on the importation of in-vitro plant materials.

In conclusion

On behalf of the Agromillora Group we commend the Committee on this timely inquiry.

We are energised by the outlook for Australian agriculture and believe that Australia is uniquely positioned to take a leadership role in not only the production of food products for global markets, but also the process of innovation that is currently underway. We thank you for taking the time to read and consider our submission.

Yours sincerely

MARK UEBERGANG
Director