

SOUTH AUSTRALIAN DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE – A HISTORY UNTIL 1980

V.K. Lohmeyer

Written in c. 1981: a scanned version of the manuscript was lightly copy edited by Bernard O'Neil in October 2006, but the content and the author's interpretations remain the same; last updated 11.10.2006.

SUMMARY

The early colonists were quick to use the land for production of food and fibre for their own use and for trade purposes. Wheat grew well in the newly cleared lands and South Australia quickly established itself as the granary for the new colonies. Sheep were brought in from neighbouring colonies and rapidly multiplied. Vines and fruit crops were established as rapidly as favourable land could be cleared.

For a while all was well but declining fertility in the 1870s threatened the fragile economy of the colony and prompted the government to set up a commission in 1875 on ways of providing technical and agricultural education. The commission recommended the formation of a Department of Agriculture, but this was not to be acted on until the turn of the century. Following the commission's recommendation, a Professor of Agriculture was appointed in 1881 and Roseworthy Agricultural College opened in 1885.

Following droughts in 1885 and 1886, a Select Committee set up to find ways of improving agricultural production accepted the suggestion of a witness, Mr Molineux, to set up an Agricultural Bureau system, controlled by a Central Bureau. Its task was to collect and disseminate information of value to the rural industries. The Central Bureau was set up in 1888 and was the forerunner of the Department of Agriculture.

Meanwhile, pests and diseases were troubling the rural industries as evidenced by the passing of the *Thistle Act 1862* and the *Vine Protection Act 1874*, the latter Act as a result of the threat of the introduction of phylloxera from Victoria. The Commissioner of Crown Lands administered these Acts.

Specialist instructors and inspectors were added to the Central Bureau, which was eventually disbanded by the government in 1902, leaving the appointed professional staff of six officers comprising the Department of Agriculture.

From these beginnings the Departmental staff has been expanded to meet demands made from time to time for advice and expertise on rural matters. Particular demands following expanded production after World War I and World War II resulted in staff increases and expanded services. Research staff expanded rapidly in the 1950s–1970s when increased State funds, Commonwealth funds and industry trust funds became available.

* * *

From the days of first settlement in South Australia men have turned to the land to produce food and fibre for their sustenance and trade.

Undeterred by the hardships the settlers quickly took up land for gardens, fruit and cereal crops and the pasturing of animals. Displaying remarkable ingenuity and industry, large acreages were soon cleared and the volume of some produce soon outstripped the local demand. Flocks of sheep were imported into the new colony to graze on native grasses and shrubs.

By the end of the first decade the colony supported over 600 000 sheep, 60 000 cattle and 2000 horses. Wheat was successfully grown on about 20 000 acres (8094 ha) with yields averaging 20 bushels/acre (0.5 t/ha). Over 100 acres (40 ha) of vines and 300 acres (121 ha) of fruit crops had been planted and were yielding well.

Interstate markets were being supplied with rural products and trade had been established with overseas countries including New Zealand and England in wheat and wheat products, South Australia being the first State in Australia to export this commodity.

By the 1870s there was considerable expansion of the rural industries. The sheep population exceeded 5 000 000, cattle numbers were over 2 000 000 and some 80 000 pigs were raised on mixed farms. Over 100 000 horses provided traction power for cereal farms which approached 1 500 000 acres (607 030 ha) with 1 300 000 (526 092) being used for wheat.

But the pioneer agriculturists with little knowledge of their new farming environment and no tradition for a permanent farming system, ran into difficulties as soil fertility declined, threatening the very existence of cereal growing over large areas. By mid 1870 the average wheat yield had fallen to 8½ bushels/acre (0.2 t/ha).

A concerned government appointed a commission under the chairmanship of Sir Henry Ayers to 'enquire into the best means of providing agricultural and technical education'. The report of the commission brought down in 1875 had as its first recommendation the establishment of a Department of Agriculture 'to collect and disseminate information which may be of value to those engaged in agricultural, pastoral and horticultural pursuits'.

The commission, envisaging the provision of some services to farmers also recommended that 'moderate fees be levied for laboratory and technical services to producers'.

It is interesting in passing to note that about one-third of the practising farmers giving evidence before the commission could see no value in setting up a department, some citing the indifferent influence of the Victorian Department of Agriculture which at that time comprised a Secretary, an analytical chemist and one office boy.

While the government of the day did not act on the commission's first recommendations, it accepted a number of other recommendations and following on a motion by Mr Basedow MP in 1879, appointed a Professor of Agriculture 'acquainted with analytical chemistry, physiology and other sciences bearing on agriculture', and purchased a farm at Roseworthy for experimental and demonstrational purposes.

Professor Custance, as the first Professor of Agriculture, arrived in the colony in 1881 and soon

selected a site at Roseworthy for the experimental farm. Basedow's motion had called for the establishment of an Agricultural College and this was subsequently built at Roseworthy and opened in 1885 with Professor Custance as its first Principal. It has continued as an agricultural training institution ever since with many of its graduates serving as valued technical officers with the Department of Agriculture.

However, at this stage there was no such State service.

The dramatic effect of the use of superphosphate on cereal yields stemming from the work of Professor Custance, and later Professor Lowrie, at Roseworthy is well known; however, it took many years before farmers generally accepted the need for regular phosphatic manuring in cereal areas.

But the droughts of 1885 and 1886, together with depressed mineral prices, marked a period of stagnation and decline in the colony's economy. In 1887 the government appointed a Select Committee comprising five members from each House of Parliament to 'investigate the best means of improving agricultural production in the Colony'.

While the Committee seemed enamoured at the possibility of turning South Australia into one big vineyard as a means of boosting the economy, it reported favourably on Albert Molineux's suggestion for the creation of an Agricultural Bureau system.

This appealed to the government and in 1888 the Central Council of the Bureau was established with Cabinet approval, comprising within the first year three parliamentarians, the Professor of Agriculture, the Conservator of Forests, the Director of the Botanic Gardens, the Chief Inspector of Stock with Molineux as Secretary. Next year several practising farmers were added to the Central Bureau.

The 'objects and constitution' adopted embodied the main objectives envisaged by the 1875 Commission for the recommended Department of Agriculture, which in very broad terms were to collect and disseminate information of value to the rural industries.

But weeds, pests and diseases had already resulted in protective-type legislation such as the *Thistle Act 1862* and the *Vine Protection Act 1874*, the latter to guard against the introduction of phylloxera from Victoria. These and subsequent amending Acts were administered by the Commissioner for Crown Lands.

With the Central Bureau a focus for agricultural matters, appointed experts and inspectors under various Acts were placed under its control. A number of such appointments were made, the earliest being an Inspector of Fertilizers in May, 1892, a Horticultural Instructor, Inspector of Fruit and an Inspector under the *Foul Brood in Bees Act* in July 1894, a Dairy Instructor in March 1898 and a further Inspector of Fruit in August 1898.

It is clear that from its inception the Department's functions embodied both a protective role through the administration of Acts and regulations and an advisory role to better inform farmers and so boost the economy through increased rural production.

It is probable that the Minister found the administrative arrangements whereby the Central Bureau, which was not responsible to him, but controlled the activities of public servants under his jurisdiction, less than satisfactory, for in 1902 the Butler Government disbanded the Central

Bureau, leaving Professor A.J. Perkins, as Secretary, in charge of the professional staff which now formed the Department of Agriculture solely responsible to the Minister of Agriculture.

In the place of the Central Bureau, a Council of Agriculture, later to become the Advisory Board of Agriculture, was appointed. These organisations while having various degrees of influence with the Minister had no direction over the professional officers of the Agriculture Department.

The professional staff was gradually expanded to extend expertise in various areas. A Poultry Expert and Lecturer was appointed in 1905 and in the same year a Chief Inspector of Cattle and Veterinary Surgeon was transferred to Agriculture from the Central Board of Health.

From these early beginnings, the Department expanded its expertise as the State governments of the day saw the need and provided finance. The pattern of setting up experimental farms and orchards in various parts of the State mainly to test new crops and new varieties of existing crops was established.

The Department was essentially a State service but did act for the Commonwealth by administering the plant quarantine regulations and the commerce, fresh fruits and general exports regulations as they affected South Australia. The Stock and Brands Department, before its amalgamation with the Agriculture Department, administered the animal quarantine regulations. The Commonwealth government reimbursed the costs of these services.

It was not until after World War I that rapid-progress was made in most lines of agricultural production, with war service land settlement schemes making significant contributions. By 1925 the number of dairy cows had risen to 160 000 and of pigs to 90 000, while 16 000 000 pounds (7257 t) of butter, nearly 4 000 000 pounds (1814 t) of cheese and 5 500 000 pounds (2495 t) of bacon and ham were being produced. The methods followed by the dairy industry were, however, far from satisfactory, so the government appointed four additional Dairy Advisers, bringing the total to six, and also commenced operating five Herd Testing Associations to help improve the quality of dairy cattle.

By 1927 the total area under crops passed 4 000 000 acres (1 618 745 ha). With buoyant grain prices, and subject to pressure from primary producers for advice and assistance, the government strengthened the technical staff of the Department by five additional Agricultural Advisers and a Superintendent of Experimental Work. In addition two Horticultural Advisers were appointed for irrigated fruit districts.

During the depression years of the 1930s, prices of primary products were forced to such low levels that there was no incentive to boost production and there was little alteration to the technical staff of the Department, which boasted only 37 total permanent staff at the outbreak of World War II.

During the 1920s and 1930s two events were to have significant influences on the Department. The first was the establishment of the Waite Agricultural Research Institute as part of the University of Adelaide in 1925. Under the terms of the enabling Act the Institute provided a service in plant pathology, entomology and botany to the Department and engaged in agricultural research. This effectively blocked any appointments to the Department in these areas until after World War II. The provision requiring the University of Adelaide to provide these services was later removed from the Act.

The second event of significance was the establishment of an Agriculture Faculty at the Adelaide University in 1930. One of the first graduates (Alan Beare) was later to establish the Soil Conservation Section in the Department to help tackle the terrific soil erosion resulting from poor farming practices of the depression years. The faculty would later supply a steady stream of graduates required by the Department during the post-war period.

The post-war demand for foodstuffs and fibres and the need to apply new technology available after the World War II resulted in the State government providing greatly increased funds to expand the services of the Department. Cadetships were made available for training at both universities and some specialist agricultural college courses. But it was the advent of the Commonwealth Dairy Industry Extension Grant in 1947 and later the Commonwealth Extension Services Grant (CESG) in 1952 together with funds available from industry research funds, e.g. Wheat Industry Research Funds and Wool Industry Research Funds, which enabled a very rapid build up of staff during the 1950s, 1960s and into the 1970s. During the three years ended 1973 the Department received from sources other than the State government an average of 25% of its total funds for boosting particular extension or research projects. This was spent in the ratio of about 1.7:1 between the research and the extension areas. The fetters on research previously imposed by the government's funding agreement with the Waite Institute no longer applied and research was extended to most aspects of production and also to post-production handling of many products. The research staff of the Department expanded at a greater rate than other areas of departmental activities.

The regulatory responsibilities, providing protection to the rural industries, were not neglected by the governments during the post-war period. Large sums were spent on the eradication of fruit flies in efforts to prevent the spread of these pests to commercial areas, and there was increased activity of effort to prevent the introduction and spread of weeds, pests and diseases in the State.

During the 1970s some redeployment of government services took place, with the Vertebrate Pests Authority and the Rural Adjustment Section being transferred from the Department of Lands to the Department of Agriculture. In October 1975 the Fisheries Department was amalgamated with the Department of Agriculture but a change of government in 1979 saw the return of the Fisheries Section once more as a Department responsible to its own Minister.

The 1970s also saw the Department's first direct involvement in an overseas project with the setting up of an experimental farm in Libya. The overseas activities were extended to a number of Middle East countries and represented an important phase of the Department's work.

The rapid expansion of personnel in the period 1950–80 brought with it administrative problems, necessitating a number of structural changes. Basically the Department evolved on a specialist interest area, these developing into Branches. In the 1950s Branches were grouped into Divisions. However, the Branch remained the basic unit of the Department, each responsible for the regulatory, advisory and research activities in its particular sphere of interest. A Division of Extension Services and Information provided back-up extension services to the advisory staff in the Branches.

In September 1973 Sir Allan R. Callaghan, at the invitation of the government, brought down a report on proposals for the future organisation of the Department, recommending regionalisation of its services into five regions.

The government accepted this and steps were taken to implement the recommendations. The first region, in the South East, was commissioned in July 1977 with the last region (Central) to be implemented during 1981.

The cessation of the Australian Extension Grant (previously CESG) in 1981, together with a harder State government attitude towards expenditure by the government, required a re-appraisal of some activities resulting in a consolidation phase within Department.

To foster trade with overseas countries, the Department's activities were expanded during the 1970s to include experimental/demonstration farms in some Middle East countries.

The expanded activities and members have required structural changes to the administration of the Department which is now organised on a regional basis.