



Best Practice Guide to Stakeholder Consultation Cotton Research and Development Corporation

1. Introduction

This guide provides a set of guiding principles which apply to all rural research and development corporations (RDCs) – recognising that each RDC is different and consults differently with levy payers and other stakeholders (stakeholders). To ensure consistency, all RDCs should apply these principles to all stakeholder interactions and consultation plans. Cotton Research and Development Corporation will need to demonstrate how it has applied these principles at annual performance meetings with the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment and independent reviews of performance.

An overarching consultation plan, that outlines Cotton Research and Development Corporation’s approach to consultation, the mechanisms used and consultation activities must be published online – with a view to making it easy for levy payers to participate.

Initially, the overarching consultation plan is to be informed by feedback from industry representative bodies on ‘what good consultation looks like’ and the reconciliation with what RDCs undertake now. To ensure there is progress and continuous improvement the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment welcomes written feedback from industry representative bodies (IRBs) ahead of the annual performance discussions and will continue to work with RDCs, industry bodies through tri-partite meetings.

This document does not replace the Statutory Funding Agreement (SFA). The ‘Guidelines for Statutory Funding Agreements’ is mandatory under the SFAs and includes 3 relevant Key Performance Indicators to this guide:

- 1.1 Strategy prioritisation and development processes include appropriate consultation plans, based on the *Best practice guide to stakeholder consultation*.
- 1.2 Demonstrated industry stakeholder engagement in the identification of RD&E priorities and activities consistent with the consultation plan in 1.1.
- 1.3 Demonstrated incorporation of industry stakeholder feedback on RD&E priorities and activities. Where incorporation is not possible, demonstration of feedback to a stakeholder/s on why incorporation was not possible.

Importantly, this guide does not replace any existing legislative responsibilities or consultation plans held by RDCs.

2. Guiding Principles for all RDCs

Good stakeholder consultation can be designed around six key principles: **transparent; accessible; straightforward; well planned; fit for purpose; and responsive**. These principles underpin **meaningful, best practice consultation** that is conducted in a **genuine, frank, and respectful manner**. Trust should be at the core of interactions between RDCs, industry organisations and levy payers.

2.1 Transparent

RDCs must be transparent about their operations and expenditure, and the setting and implementation of research, development and extension (RD&E) [and marketing] priorities and activities. RDCs have a responsibility to be accountable to their stakeholders and an obligation to make any information related to performance available to their stakeholders. RDCs should:

- be **upfront with stakeholders about consultation expectations** by clearly documenting and communicating roles and responsibilities of the RDC, industry representative bodies, industry participants and other stakeholders, including the degree in which they will consult and when and how their views will affect the project or activity
- be open to, and willing to **accept feedback** from stakeholders
- **demonstrate** in a timely and respectful manner **how stakeholder input has been incorporated**
- where stakeholder input cannot be incorporated, be **clear about why not**
- **communicate key decisions** relating to members and levy payers, including Board deliberations, and **opportunities for input**
- **be transparent about why information cannot be shared** if unable to be completely transparent with stakeholders (for example if the information is confidential and cannot be publicly shared)
- **utilise platforms and forums such as AgriFutures Australia's grow^{AG} and evoke^{AG}** to share and engage.

2.2 Accessible

RDCs should ensure information is provided in a format that is easy for stakeholders to understand, through a variety of means that enables them to consult in the easiest and most appropriate way to suit their needs. RDCs should:

- **use plain English**, particularly when the issue is complex in nature
- ensure the presentation, format and platform is **easy to understand and appropriate**
- **include summaries** in written communication to ensure stakeholders can quickly identify information relevant to them
- **adapt or modify the consultation approach** depending on the need of the stakeholder/s, with online options where appropriate
- **publish key information and research** on website or other platforms, which are easily searchable
- ensure that all stakeholders are provided an **opportunity to contribute**
- **respond promptly to the queries** of stakeholders and show a genuine interest in their input.



2.3 Straightforward

RDCs should consider the needs and competing priorities of their stakeholders to ensure that they are able to consult in the most appropriate and simplest way. RDCs should:

- ensure that stakeholders are aware of the **time commitment expectations** and ensure consultation is efficient
- be **understanding of demands** already on their stakeholders, including other consultation processes, and seasonal considerations
- **monitor and evaluate where stakeholders rely on and appreciate regular consultation** and where stakeholders are feeling over-consulted
- consider **targeted or group requests** to reduce the burden on stakeholders and improve efficiency, particularly for smaller industries input is sought from the same stakeholders
- where possible, **streamline consultation across RDCs**, for example where a stakeholder may farm multiple commodities
- use **trusted and established industry pathways** to communicate with stakeholders.

2.4 Well planned

RDCs should plan well ahead, and give stakeholders advance notice about how they will be consulted and provide adequate time for them to prepare feedback and advice, to achieve meaningful input. RDCs should:

- ensure consultation is **purpose-driven, timely, appropriate, and adaptable**
- have **realistic timeframes**, taking account of seasonal pressures (i.e., sowing, harvesting and pruning), public holidays, the end of financial year and holiday periods, and being aware of competing activities
- **engage stakeholders early** so stakeholders can plan and prepare their input
- where a project is large and is likely time consuming, **provide stakeholders multiple opportunities** to provide feedback
- recognise and **link into industry events and annual general meetings**.

While considered consultation is best practice, there will be instances where shorter consultation timeframes are required – for instance on a critical emerging issue (e.g., biosecurity, international trade, or suddenly emerging management or organisational matters). On these occasions, an explanation should be given why the timeframe for consultation is short.



2.5 Fit for purpose

RDCs are expected to balance the long-term, short-term, high and low risk RD&E [and marketing] activities. Industries have a diverse range of stakeholders and there will inevitably be different needs and expectations to be managed. RDCs should:

- know what their **stakeholders want and need to know** and ensure consultation is tailored accordingly
- ensure that the consultation approach is **adaptable and tailored to the audience and/or levy payers** and considers their priorities
- base consultation on the most **appropriate methodology** (e.g. co-design, seeking comments on options to deliver an outcomes etc)
- **adjust consultation** depending on the issues under consideration, who needs to be consulted, and the available time and resources. Examples of ways to consult include, but are not limited to:
 - Discussion papers
 - Calls for comment or feedback
 - Forums, workshops or networks
 - Extension events, conferences
 - Social media
 - Surveys
 - Newsletters
 - Publications
 - Website updates
 - Webinars

2.6 Responsive

As part of their SFAs, RDCs are required to undertake monitoring and evaluation. This includes a commitment to communicate and demonstrate the results of RD&E [and marketing] activities and investments to stakeholders. RDCs should:

- **collect data** on what consultation methods are most effective (for example, which type of consultation yielded the most responses or resulted in the most information provided)
- regularly **evaluate and review** the ways that they consult stakeholders to ensure that they are effective
- look for **informal opportunities** to seek feedback and review performance
- be **evidence-based** and **accountable** to stakeholders
- be **aware of stakeholder consultation** fatigue and adjust consultation accordingly.

RDCs are encouraged to publish their plans for how they will monitor and evaluate their overarching consultation plan on their website.



3. Industry specific information

This section is a reconciliation between RDCs and industry on what good consultation looks like. It is to inform the development of an overarching consultation plan that must be published online – with a view to make it easy for levy payers to participate.

Organisational Governance

- Annual Report and Annual Operating Plan
- CRDC 2018-23 Strategic RD&E Plan
- Supporting corporate policies and documentation.

Process and Activities (including industry RD&E [and marketing] investment decisions)

- **Cotton Grower Panel** and Association **meetings** to hear directly from growers.
- One-on-one and face-to-face engagement with growers, including through attendance at **industry events, field days, regional meetings and workshops**.
- **Bi-annual consultations** with growers.
- CottonInfo – CRDC's joint venture with Cotton Australia and Cotton Seed Distributors to showcase and share information.
- **Annual R&D priorities forums**, bringing together the Cotton Australia R&D advisory panels to identify the gaps in the existing research portfolio and opportunities for new research.
- Develop an annual consultation plan with industry.
- **Discipline forums** with research partners to identify emerging research priorities.
- **Targeted annual call for research proposals** against the identified research priorities.
- **Bi-annual consultations** with the industry representative organisation.

Publications and Communications

CRDC has a range of documents that enable industry stakeholders to see their input reflected in RD&E [and marketing] activities and projects and receive ongoing invitations to engage on these activities:

- **Spotlight magazine**, issued quarterly.
- **newsletters, social media and media releases**.
- Regular **grower and stakeholder surveys** to seek direct feedback from stakeholders.
- **PLANET. PEOPLE. PADDOCK** Sustainability Framework, developed by industry.

