



MEDIA RELEASE

**AUSTRALIAN AGRICULTURE NEEDS NEW APPROACH TO EASE WATER
CRISIS, SAYS VISITING SCIENTIST**

Adelaide, February 7, 2008: A leading international expert in semi-arid farming believes changes are needed in Australian agriculture to preserve our scarce water resources and make primary production more sustainable.

Dr Bridget Scanlon - Senior Research Scientist in the Bureau of Economic Geology at the Jackson School of Geosciences, University of Texas, Austin – is calling for changes in water use, land use and consumer lifestyles to ensure the sustainable future of agriculture in semi-arid regions like Australia.

Dr Scanlon, who's in Australia for the five-city Birdsall-Dreiss lecture tour hosted by the International Centre of Excellence for Water Resources Management (ICE WaRM), has set five priorities to improve the sustainability of semi-arid farming.

- Switching irrigation farming to regions with higher humidity to increase its sustainability
- Government subsidies and grants to encourage rain-fed agriculture rather than irrigated farming
- New product labelling so consumers can identify food produced by irrigated farming
- More planting of trees among crops to reduce salinity
- Lifestyle changes to reduce consumption of meat and increase consumption of vegetables and cereals, which require much less water to produce

Dr Scanlon says current approaches to irrigated agriculture in semi-arid regions like Australia simply aren't sustainable.

"Irrigation was responsible for 90 per cent of the consumption of global fresh water resources in the 20th century," Dr Scanlon says. "Yet it represented only 40 per cent of global food production. That equation doesn't balance.

"But salinity in Australia is a major problem as well – so there are limitations on the expansion of rain-fed agriculture under the current conditions.

"Moving irrigated agriculture to more humid regions with higher rainfall would help increase its sustainability and planting trees in with crops would be a significant step in fighting salinity.

"Governments have a role to play by using grants and subsidies to encourage rain-fed agriculture ahead of irrigation," she adds.

Dr Scanlon believes consumers will play a crucial role in driving primary producers to reduce water use and create more sustainable farming.





“Consumers are demanding more information about their food,” she says. “They want labels which show exactly what’s in their food and whether it was naturally or organically grown. The next step is labelling which indicates whether food was produced through irrigated farming. More and more people will be making purchasing decision based on the sustainability of the farming which produced food items.”

Dr Scanlon also says one of the most effective ways of saving water is for consumers to eat less meat and more vegetables and cereals.

“Livestock farming is incredibly water intensive,” Dr Scanlon says. “Producing one kilogram of bovine meat takes around 13,500 litres of water. The same quantity of vegetables takes around 150 litres of water, while a kilo of cereal uses around 1000 litres of water.

“Rather than taking shorter showers, we all could save much more water by switching from meat to a vegetable- and cereal-based diet.”

Dr Scanlon is delivering the Birdsall-Dreiss lectures for ICE WaRM in Perth (February 6), Adelaide (February 7), Melbourne (February 11), Canberra (February 12) and Sydney (February 14).

Dr Bridget Scanlon:

Dr Bridget Scanlon is the Senior Research Scientist with the Bureau of Economic Geology at the University of Texas in Austin - one of three units in the newly formed Jackson School of Geosciences. She leads a research group which assesses the sustainability of water resources, particularly focusing on climate variability, land use and the impact of changing land use. Much of the research studies the impact of climate variability and the conversion of natural ecosystems to agriculture on groundwater in semi-arid regions like Australia. Dr Scanlon received a BSc majoring in Geology at Trinity College, Dublin and completed her MSc at the University of Alabama. She gained a PhD from the University of Kentucky (Lexington).

About ICE WaRM:

The International Centre of Excellence in Water Resources Management (ICE WaRM) is Australia’s leading water resources education, training and research organisation. ICE WaRM has helped create Australia’s first water resources management master degree, graduate diploma and graduate certificate programmes for local and international students. It also hosts award-winning study tours for representatives of overseas governments and water authorities and assists in the development of industry and community-focused research. ICE WaRM was established in 2004 as a Federal Government initiative, supported by the South Australian Government, and is based in Adelaide. Its founding partners are the University of Adelaide, the University of South Australia, Flinders University, Deakin University and the University of Central Queensland.

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