



**Hon Sue Ellery MLC  
Minister for Education and Training  
Leader of the Legislative Council**

---

Our Ref: 61-10585

Hon Matthew Swinbourn MLC  
Chair  
Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs

Email: [env@parliament.wa.gov.au](mailto:env@parliament.wa.gov.au)

  
Dear Mr Swinbourn

Thank you for your letter dated 17 May 2018 regarding Petition No 58 – Agricultural Education Farms Provision Trust (the Trust). I apologise for the delay in providing this response.

As you are aware, the State Government has committed to budget repair measures to deliver sustainable growth and an operating surplus by 2020-21. The Government has indicated that all sectors of the community will contribute to this endeavour, including Government agencies.

State Government funding pays for the staff, buys the equipment, and pays for the operations of farms at the five Western Australian Colleges of Agriculture and at ten other farm schools attached to mainstream schools, six regional and four metropolitan. Those taxpayer-funded farms then generate an income by selling their produce. Each college and the Esperance Farm Training Centre retain 60% of the income they generate from selling produce and 40% of gross income is paid into a cost centre called the Agricultural Education Farm Provisions Trust. These six schools, as well as nine smaller farm schools that are not contributors to the Trust, can continue to apply to the Trust for funds to enable them to purchase larger items of plant and equipment – as they currently do. The smaller sites benefit from an approximate allocation of 10% of the total annual Trust budget.

I would like to clarify that the Trust is not a trust in the legal sense. The Agricultural High Schools Trust Account was set up in 1990 as a Government Operating and Trust Account under the authority of the then Chief Executive Officer of the Ministry of Education. The current arrangements for the Trust Fund were established as a Department of Education Operating Account in 1999 after the closure of the Trust Account under the delegated authority of the Treasurer.

In response to Petition No 58, regarding the 20% dividend being taken from the Trust, all activities, potential risks and anticipated expenditure were carefully assessed to ensure that efficiencies in service provision are able to deliver Government objectives and cost savings to assist with the State budget. The reallocation of funds from the Trust to the State budget is not expected to affect the ability of schools to run their farms and educate their students. It may affect the scheduling of large purchases made by individual sites, but this has always been variable because it is dependent upon fluctuating farm revenue.

In response to the letter from the Chair of the Combined Agricultural Advisory Committee (CAAC), students will continue to receive practical, hands-on experiences, and quality education and training. The involvement of the local advisory committees and links to industry remain unaffected. The Trust will continue to support sites experiencing difficulties caused by seasonal and market forces.

The amount of funds spent on 'fixed costs' is overestimated in the letter. It is actually approximately 25% of the Trust income, not 40% as stated. The remaining funds are allocated to sites, based on need, via an annual application process. It is yet to be determined when in 2019 the 20% dividend to the Department of Education will be realised. The Department is in the process of making this decision.

The safety standards for vehicles, plant, equipment and machinery will not be compromised. Individual sites set aside funds in their farm budgets to provide for regular repairs and maintenance of plant and equipment. In addition, Trust funds are also set aside for unforeseen repairs and maintenance, which is available to all sites with agricultural programs. The Trust endeavours to provide sites with the latest technology and keep abreast of industry standards, and is able to replace machinery more readily than many other farms would. Regular monitoring of replacements will be undertaken to avoid machinery becoming run down.

Services provided by the CAAC are essential to ensure the quality of the agricultural education that students receive is not compromised. The colleges and schools value and appreciate the advice and support provided by the CAAC and their local farm advisory committee members. The reduction of Trust funds will not have an impact on the equity of the distribution to sites. Only the total amount of funds available for distribution to sites will be affected.

Consultation with the CAAC was not undertaken because the funds in the Trust are, and have always been, the Department's funds, as described above. The Department determines how these funds are expended.

In response to the letter from Hon Mia Davies MLA, the Department provides public funds to five Western Australian Colleges of Agriculture through the student-centred funding model for the running of the school programs. Additionally, approximately \$15 million is provided towards farm and residential operating costs. The Trust receives approximately \$1 million from farm-generated revenue. This amount fluctuates depending on seasonal changes and market prices.

The reduction in funds is not expected to affect student enrolments, nor the quality of education and training provided to students. Student graduation will not be affected by a marginally slower rate of refreshing equipment, as achieving the Western Australian Certificate of Education is an academic standard based on the full range of students' studies in courses and vocational qualifications. Modern equipment enhances these experiences, and will continue to do so, but student completion of schooling on the farm sites is not in any way compromised by the removal of approximately \$200 000 from the pool of funds used to purchase equipment. In practice, this means that some equipment may be replaced every five years, rather than every four years, which is still significantly ahead of typical practice on privately owned farms.

There will be no impact on farm safety, as regular safety audits of plant and machinery will continue to be undertaken by each site. Replacement plan schedules will also continue to be regularly reviewed and monitored at the site level.

The Western Australian Curriculum includes specific content related to food and fibre production, which presents an opportunity for more students to engage with an agricultural context. Significant work is being undertaken to expand agricultural education initiatives throughout the State beyond the 16 sites with farm operations. A working party has been established to develop interagency projects. The Department of Education is working with the Department of Training and Workforce Development and the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development to develop strategies relevant to agricultural education. The Department of Education will continue to support the improvement and expansion of agricultural education and training in public schools.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Petition.

Yours sincerely



**SUE ELLERY MLC**  
**MINISTER FOR EDUCATION AND TRAINING**

**12 JUN 2018**