

5. Conclusions

Around the world farmers are increasingly moving towards EMS implementation (generally based on ISO 14001) to provide them with a management approach into which they incorporate other specific areas, such as BMPs, QA and OH & S. In part, this reflects a growing knowledge of the existence of ISO 14001, but also represents a desire to improve the way environmental impacts are managed and to substantiate claims of ‘environmentally friendly’ production systems. EMS, as a tool, fits well into these roles. Other farmers do not yet perceive a need to adopt the formalised approach of the ISO process and choose to meet their current management requirements through other processes. This is often achieved by relying on the informal management approaches already in place (Knowles and Hill 2001). The path chosen is a result of personal preference, the degree of ‘proof’ required for environmental stewardship, and personal style of management. For many industry sectors, EMS has been used for much longer, yet only now are the sorts of issues raised in this report being examined. Early consideration of such issues for the Australian agricultural sector is highly beneficial, as workable solutions can be found earlier, barriers overcome more quickly, and adoption of EMS facilitated.

The experiences of farmers detailed in the current study provide fertile ground on which to begin the development of EMS tools for Australian agriculture. Building on existing industry initiatives will both promote ownership and encourage involvement, particularly if use is made of ‘industry champions’ to promote the concept. However, there will also need to be substantial development of support and extension services (whether through governments or private providers) within Australia to provide farmers with the assistance they require when developing either EMSs or other forms of enhanced environmental management. At present, many state government departments have neither the staff nor the knowledge to successfully support farmers in EMS implementation.

Moomaw (2001) suggested moving from EMS to wider ‘sustainability management systems’, which would incorporate increased community and social aspects and reporting. For agriculture, this may currently seem to be too great a step, given that heavy industry, with a much longer association with management systems, has not yet moved in this direction. However, integration of OH & S and social aspects within EMSs was shown to be possible in this study, with many of the EMS farmers not only including these areas in routine management, but also using integrated auditing to show that they were doing so. Good EMS design allows for integration, with the call for sustainability management systems being met already in many of the EMSs used on Australian farms. The demands for food safety animal welfare, and environmental stewardship were believed by farmers in this study to be increasing, and farmers were relying on their improved record-keeping and management to help them meet these demands.

Coglianesi and Nash (2001) highlighted that while a number of benefits arise from EMS implementation, there are still a great many questions to be answered as to the use of EMS as a policy tool. These questions are also relevant to agricultural application of EMS, and consideration of the agricultural and industrial applications of EMS at the same time would seem sensible.

In particular, it will be important to follow up whether the use of an EMS does provide greater long-term environmental benefits than non-systematic approaches. If, as Corbett and Russo (2001) postulated, businesses with poorer environmental performance get the most out of EMS implementation, then it is possible that the benefits reported by farmers in this study may be minor compared with the outcomes achieved by farmers who do not have such a focus on environmental matters.

A follow-up study in five years' time would provide very interesting comparisons to the data contained within the current report. In addition, as the number of farms using EMSs grows, paired comparisons between farms with and without an EMS in specific industry sectors would also prove useful in determining differences in approach and outcomes.