



Best Practice Guide to Stakeholder Consultation Forest and Wood Products Australia

1. Introduction

This guide provides a set of guiding principles which apply to all RDCs – recognising that each RDC is different and consults differently with stakeholders. To ensure consistency, all RDCs should apply these principles to all stakeholder interactions and consultation plans. Forest and Wood Products Australia 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 Forest and Wood Products Australia’s approach to consultation, the mechanisms used and consultation activities should 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 Agreements (SFAs) or the companion document. 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 should be set out in an overarching consultation plan, based on the *Best practice guide to stakeholder consultation [note this has been slightly updated in the draft Guidelines out for comment]*
- 1.2 Demonstrated stakeholder consultation in the identification of RD&E priorities and activities consistent with the consultation plan in 1.1.
- 1.3 Demonstrated incorporation of stakeholder feedback on RD&E priorities and activities. Where incorporation is not possible, demonstration of feedback to a stakeholders/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**.

2.1 Transparent

RDCs must be transparent about their operations and expenditure, and the setting and implementation of RD&E 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**, such as annual general meetings
- **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 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/s, which are easily searchable
- ensure that all stakeholders are provided an **equal 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 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 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.



Good consultation for Forest and Wood Products Australia ...

... incorporates the following governance, processes and activities, publication and communication products, that is a reconciliation between the RDC and industry on what good consultation looks like. This is to inform the overarching consultation plan that will be founded on the *Best practice guide to stakeholder consultation*.

Organisational Governance

- Annual Report and Annual Operating Plan.
- FWPA Strategic Plan 2020-25 – which guides R&D investments for the period to 2025.
- Supporting corporate policies and documentation.

Process and Activities (including industry R&D investment decisions)

- Holding **one-on-one discussions** with key stakeholders.
- Convening **industry advisory group and reference group meetings** aligned to the national representative associations, including establishing a **stakeholder reference group** in the development of the strategic plan.
- Participating in **industry association forums**, in **sectoral strategy setting meetings** and other open meetings.
- Attending and presenting to **industry conferences and seminars**.
- **Sponsoring** industry events.
- Convening project **steering committees** and **working groups**.
- Contracting targeted **consultancies**.
- Online survey forms and **industry wide survey** for initiation of the new strategic plan.

Publications and Communications

Forest and Wood Products Australia has a range of documents that enable industry stakeholders to see their input reflected in RD&E activities and projects and receive ongoing invitations to engage on these activities:

- **e-newsletters** (ForWood, R&DWorks, StatisticsCount, WoodSolutions and ForestLearning)
- **Paid advertising** of Forest and Wood Products Australia activities, and **embedded content** in industry trade media.
- Online **public data dashboard** and a **members statistics data dashboard**.
- **Website, social media channels and media releases**.

