



Public Sector
Commission

Agency Capability

Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development

Executive summary



August 2023

Introduction

A review of the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development under the trial of the [Agency Capability Review Program](#) was carried out from December 2022 to June 2023.

The agency has a wide remit and plays a key role in supporting, developing and investing in the state's primary industries and regional communities that are key to the economic development of the state. It is also the state's hazard management agency for plant and animal biosecurity. When this agency is performing at its optimum so are those industries, communities and the state.

This review explores the importance for the agency to ensure it is prepared to respond to a major biosecurity emergency; its priorities across primary industries and regional development are clear and understood by stakeholders to strengthen relationships and maximise outcomes; and its workforce is designed to successfully meet current and future challenges.

The agency is to be commended for its ecologically sustainable approach to the management of WA's fisheries and this is recognised globally. The agency has effective approaches to leading research and development that have resulted in the successful commercialisation and trade of WA products. It has also demonstrated effective grants management supported by the consolidation of multiple systems.

With these strengths, and with the commitment from the executive, the agency can continue to drive improvements.

About the Agency Capability Review Program

The Agency Capability Review Program takes a comprehensive, whole of sector approach to improvement. It sets standards based on a clear understanding of what constitutes a high performing public sector agency in Western Australia.

The program is being trialled over 2 years (2021-22 and 2022-23) in 8 government agencies. This review is one of 2 undertaken at the same time.

Reviews provide valuable insight into how agencies can improve and deliver the quality of services expected of them. They also contribute to the development and improvement of the sector as a whole.

Reviews are conducted by independent lead reviewers with public administration expertise and experience. They are supported by senior executives from the government sector who are co-opted for each review as well as the Agency Capability Review team at the Public Sector Commission.

Each review is conducted against a standardised [Agency Capability Framework](#) of the 5 most significant areas of public sector management and administration. The framework is relevant and applicable to all agencies regardless of their remit, purpose, functions and services.

The framework supports agencies to ask 4 key questions:

- What are we meant to achieve?
- How well are we currently doing it?
- How do we know?
- Where can we do better?

Agency background

The Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development supports WA's agriculture, aquaculture, food and fisheries sectors; the development of these and emerging industries; and regional WA. This role includes being the state's hazard management agency for animal and plant biosecurity, supporting the sustainability of these industries, food security and trade investment for the state.

The agency is led by Heather Brayford PSM who was appointed Director General in November 2022. The agency's structure combines the supported ministerial portfolios across the 5 pillars with 3 deputy directors general and a managing director.

The structure includes:

- corporate services
- industry and economic development
- primary industries development
- sustainability and biosecurity
- Office of the Director General.

The agency's budget for the 2022-23 financial year was \$615 million.

At 30 March 2023, the agency employed 1,926 staff (1,792 FTE). This includes 136 staff (124 FTE) assigned to support and deliver functions on behalf of the state's 9 regional development commissions. More than 35% of agency staff are located across 25 regional sites.

The agency is responsible for administering a range of legislation, including but not limited to the:

- *Animal Welfare Act 2002*
- *Aquatic Resources Management Act 2016*
- *Biosecurity and Agriculture Management Act 2007*
- *Fish Resources Management Act 1994*
- *Regional Development Commissions Act 1993*
- *Royalties for Regions Act 2009*
- *Soil and Land Conservation Act 1945*
- *Veterinary Practice Act 2021*
- *Western Australian Meat Industry Authority Act 1979.*

Ministers

The agency reports to the Hon Jackie Jarvis MLC, Minister for Agriculture and Food; Forestry; Small Business; and the Hon Don Punch MLA, Minister for Regional Development; Disability Services; Fisheries; Seniors and Ageing; Volunteering.

Boards and/or committees

The agency supports government boards and committees that provide essential services and advice across a range of areas such as the ethical use of animals in science, biosecurity policy and industry funding schemes among others. These include groups such as the Biosecurity Council of Western Australia and Regional Development Council.

The agency employs staff who are assigned to work for the regional development commissions. It also supports the commissions through service level agreements.

Future operating environment

The agency's operating environment is becoming more complex and it needs to adapt and be future focused in its responses.

The agency operates in an environment of increasing external challenges including:

- biosecurity incursions
- climatic changes impacting the state's fisheries and agriculture
- frequency of natural disasters and disruptions
- concerns about food security
- societal expectations around animal welfare
- sustainable management of resources and protection of the natural environment
- geopolitical landscape
- a challenging labour environment.

For the agency's future, this means:

- guiding primary producers to adapt to climate change
- supporting emerging industries for greater economic diversification
- regional development and investment
- increasing Aboriginal economic participation
- guiding changes in the nature and scope of farming practices
- addressing animal welfare issues
- responding to more complex biosecurity threats as a hazard management agency
- increasing certification and providing evidence to support continued market access and trade.

The commitment of the executive to the work to date and its engagement with this review are testament to the agency's ability to continue the improvement journey and to be able to respond to future challenges.

The review process

The review was undertaken by Dr Michael Schaper as the independent lead reviewer with support from Philip Wyles as Senior Reviewer co-opted from the Department of Training and Workforce Development, and the Commission's Agency Capability Review team. Dr Schaper has extensive experience working with governments in a number of Australian jurisdictions.

Dr Schaper is chair of the Wagering and Gaming Commission of Western Australia, chair of the Energy and Water Ombudsman WA, and national board member of the Australian Institute of Company Directors. He led the agency capability review of the Department of Mines, Industry Regulation and Safety and was recently a member of the 3 person independent panel appointed by the government state Cabinet to review the WA government's COVID-19 management and response.

The review looked at all 21 capabilities and identified 3 lines of inquiry for in depth investigation. This involved further engagement and investigation with the agency, and research into how practices might be improved and capability gaps addressed.

The review also identified strengths that the agency and sector can build on and share.

The review involved 6 months of investigation and research, collecting information as follows:

- a comprehensive review of a large number of published and unpublished documents
- 66 external stakeholder consultations, including 20 written submissions
- a self assessment by corporate executive against the Agency Capability Framework
- 2 half day corporate executive workshops, and several briefings and meetings with the Director General and executive team
- individual interviews with each corporate executive member
- visits to 5 agency sites including Northam and Geraldton, and tours of facilities in Kensington and Fremantle
- a comprehensive capability questionnaire gauging staff perceptions of the agency's capabilities
- a 'Have Your Say' challenge inviting staff to share what the agency does well, what can be improved and ideas for improvement.

What the review found

Key observations

- The agency achieves what it sets out to do and what is within its remit, however can operate more effectively and efficiently on a number of fronts. Overall, processes and systems are not as robust as they need to be and do not sufficiently consider the future operating environment. Compounding these issues are increasingly complex and time critical demands on the agency. Without concerted attention, the agency risks not being able to continue to achieve results and new opportunities for the state not being maximised, or worse, being lost.
- One of the most significant functions of the agency is as the state's lead agency for plant and animal biosecurity. With the high likelihood of incursions continuing to increase into the future, the agency needs to organise itself more effectively as *the* hazard management agency to adequately protect the state's agricultural, aquatic, environmental, social and cultural assets, to ensure market access for trade and investment growth. Corporate executive recognises this and has prioritised work to strengthen capability, systems and processes in this area and this should be continued.
- The agency has a robust and diverse scientific workforce dedicated to conducting agricultural and aquatic research to help protect, manage and enhance the state's natural land and aquatic resources. In particular, the agency's approach to managing the state's fisheries is considered world class.
- Primary industries support economic diversification of the state and play an important role in food security. The agency has a long and positive history of supporting the development and adaptation of foundational primary industries including sustainable fisheries and prosperous grain sectors. It now needs to gain a better understanding of the role it can, and needs to, play in industries it has not traditionally focused on – including new, emerging and burgeoning industries – and work to maximise their potential for the state.

- As the lead department for regional development, the agency has worked with regional development commissions to clarify roles and it is now important for those outside the commissions to be clear about the regional development agenda and what this agency is delivering as its priorities.
- Across its entire remit the agency has functions delivered regionally, with one third of staff based in regional WA. There are ambiguous staffing structures and uncertainty about agency representation in each region, with a lack of a single position or authority for stakeholders to engage with.
- The agency's scientific and research work underpins industry leading work, including breeding and commercialisation of market leading apple breeds.
- The agency needs a clearer understanding of its role in Aboriginal economic development including what it is responsible for and its function as leader or partner. If the agency does not resolve this, there is likely to be ongoing duplication of effort and service with other agencies and loss of opportunities for the state.
- The agency has a wide and complex array of relationships with industry bodies, community grower groups and consumers. These relationships are generally viewed positively but are frequently at a person to person level and not structured to ensure ongoing success if key individuals leave the agency. This is unsustainable. Stakeholders are aware of certain specific roles of the agency but lack a detailed understanding of the agency as a whole and its strategic priorities and this must be addressed.
- This is a complex agency with many different functions broadly structured under 5 pillars with different processes and approaches. The agency is still bedding down many of the functional and operational matters arising from the 2017 machinery of government changes. Aspects such as a new integrated human resources system and IT services are now providing staff with a single system. Although these have addressed a large number of issues, some gaps still remain such as reporting capability. In addition, the implementation of the new systems was not managed as effectively as it could have been, and this is still causing challenges for staff.
- The agency's efforts to consolidate grants through one platform has supported improved management and oversight of the many grants the agency administers across its various portfolios.
- The agency has a broad workforce that includes technical and subject matter experts. A high proportion of staff is over 55 years. The absence of workforce and succession planning is a significant risk for the agency to deliver on its activities in both the immediate and medium term future.
- The agency is not adequately responding to poor staff behaviour and this inaction is noticed by staff. Inadequate processes and support mechanisms exacerbate this and it is important for them to be strengthened.
- Budget underspends have been an ongoing issue for the agency with a range of contributing factors identified including poor financial literacy, lack of sophisticated business systems, and inconsistent and immature project and program management. The executive is aware of the implications of this and has made positive progress in this last financial year.

Lines of inquiry

Following analysis and assessment of the agency's capability, 3 lines of inquiry were developed to inform areas of focus and to direct performance improvement efforts. Addressing all 3 will take significant planning, time and resourcing to ensure effective long term results.

Line of inquiry 1: Enhancing biosecurity preparedness and capability to ensure effective response to increasing incursions and major threats

As the lead agency for the state's response to biosecurity emergencies, being prepared to respond to major biosecurity emergencies is a critical mission for the agency. Given the high risk and cost imposed in any biosecurity incursions, it is arguably the agency's greatest responsibility.

The agency has a history of successfully responding to many plant and pest incursions. However, the number, size and scope of plant and animal biosecurity incursions in the state have grown significantly in recent years. With challenges and incursions expected to continue to grow, there is a number of areas in which the capability of the agency could be improved.

For this agency to successfully fulfil its role as a hazard management agency there needs to be a broader understanding and acceptance internally of its legislated roles and responsibilities. Structures and systems need to be put in place for when the agency is required to respond to major biosecurity events such as foot and mouth disease and lumpy skin disease.

The emergency management function sits in the largest pillar of the agency – sustainability and biosecurity. To carry out this role more effectively, it is important for this responsibility to be understood and its priority instilled more broadly across the agency's culture and functions. This means all staff, regardless of their occupations and individual responsibilities, recognise and support that responding to a major biosecurity emergency is critical.

Many stakeholders are not satisfied with the current level of communication from the agency about major biosecurity preparation matters. In going forward, the agency should consider providing information more frequently, perhaps in line with the internal preparedness work, to build trust and manage the expectations of groups that may be affected by a large biosecurity incursion.

While the agency increasingly finds itself responding to many relatively small scale incursions on a regular basis, there is value in conducting periodic 'test runs' or 'stop-start' activities for potential future large scale biosecurity emergencies. This might involve the agency dealing with a hypothetical outbreak to stress test its capacity to deal with such situations. Scenario planning of this kind is starting to occur as part of the agency's 'Road to HMA: Hazard Management Agency' work but is in its early stages.

Ensuring there is sufficient staffing capacity to deal with sudden and unexpected outbreaks is a challenge. With many highly specialised technical, professional and scientific roles, the agency notes that it can be difficult to move staff quickly and easily into frontline roles when a biosecurity incident occurs.

The recent formation of reserve staff should assist in responding to biosecurity incursions. The agency has also identified the benefit of considering specific roles for staff in the case of an emergency response based on their current roles, skills and knowledge. This would give clarity to staff about the roles they would play if they were called on to be part of the response to a major biosecurity incursion and also allow the agency to better plan its workforce. This work needs to be supported by more mature and accessible systems including the human resources system to easily identify staff who have undertaken appropriate training and are available to be deployed.

Line of inquiry 2: Establishing greater clarity of priorities and strategic focus on primary industries and regional development to enhance benefits for WA

A fundamental theme across much of the agency's operations is the absence of a clear, whole of government approach to primary industries and regional development. This significantly effects the agency's ability to clearly articulate its priorities and value to the state.

Without clarity of purpose and clear articulation both internally and externally of the agency's fundamental goals, staff, broader government, industry and citizens continue to find it difficult to understand the value the agency brings to the state. Stakeholders express concern that this could result in missed economic and development opportunities and frustrate the industries the agency supports.

Due to the agency's broad remit, it appears to have 'too much on its plate' and this is hindering its ability to strategically focus on ways to support and contribute to the success of the state's primary industries and regions. Without defined priorities in these portfolios, the agency continues to spread itself too thinly at the expense of the success, diversification and development of primary industries and the regions.

There are similarities mirrored in the regional development space. While the roles and responsibilities of the regional development portfolio are clearly defined and documented, stakeholders are unclear about the role the agency plays and its priorities in the regions as well as its future intentions.

A clear articulation of the agency's priorities is a necessary foundation for improvement in several capability areas.

While there are discrete areas in some pillars that carry out prioritisation work, this is not occurring consistently across the agency and continues to reinforce silos. This results in disjointed, non-collaborative work focused only on the outcomes for each discrete area. With the more recent priority work, there is the opportunity to develop a consistent process to align government and agency priorities which can flow through all pillars and divisions.

The agency's Primary Industries Plan is a broad collection of priorities across the pillars of the agency but it is not clear what industries the agency is prioritising. Instead, the plan encompasses all the state's primary industries and the factors that could potentially impact or are already impacting them. The plan is considered a contributing factor to why staff in this area are stretched and why stakeholders are unclear about the agency's priorities in this sector. The plan is due for renewal in 2024 and the agency is keen to focus its efforts and define and articulate priorities through this mechanism more sharply.

The agency and commissions are working on an updated regional development framework to support the large body of work and set out roles and responsibilities of the entities in the portfolio. The framework should identify priorities in developing the regions and the role it intends to play.

The agency has recently put effort into enhancing relationships with the 9 regional development commissions. With clear priorities, the agency and development commissions need to consider how to leverage and support each other's work to drive government priorities and better outcomes for the regions and state.

There is a general lack of understanding of the agency's priorities and value add for the state. Both the agency and stakeholders would benefit from more messaging around successes and the work being done.

The agency could use the priorities work that executive and leadership teams are currently undertaking to improve internal and public facing communications across both the primary industries and regional development areas.

Line of inquiry 3: Designing a workforce for continuity of service delivery

The agency has a unique and diverse workforce that includes technical and subject matter specialists and a large regional presence. However, there is little workforce planning across the agency to support its remit, future challenges and responsibilities, and to meet the expectations of ministers and the community.

The agency's workforce is ageing at a rate faster than the general WA population and the rest of the public sector workforce. There is not a commensurate increase in new staff to replace them when they retire.

The agency faces a particularly difficult challenge in recruiting staff to cover 25 regional offices. There is limited Government Regional Officer Housing coupled with a high cost of living in regional locations, limited travel budgets, a restricted job seeker pool and, depending on the location, lack of social amenities, incentives and career opportunities.

Like most agencies, staff are the largest single item in the agency's budget. That said, the agency currently lacks a comprehensive workforce plan. This has a major impact on its ability to attract, retain and promote the right mix of people to deliver on its critical functions.

The creation and implementation of a foundational workforce plan is the first step. The plan needs to provide a snapshot of where the agency is currently and include estimated future needs; identify barriers to fulfil those needs; and develop strategies and provide tools for overcoming the barriers. The agency could consider making workforce planning a standing agenda item at corporate executive meetings to elevate visibility.

A workforce plan and approach that address regional workforce challenges can help make regional employment more desirable, affordable and rewarding. It can also help develop a culture where time spent living and working in the regions actively assists career progression and is seen and valued as such. The practical management of major regional centres (such as Albany, Northam, Geraldton and Bunbury) needs to be addressed.

For the agency to adopt biosecurity as a core tenet of its work, workforce planning should consider whether the current regional management structure is fit for purpose and whether the appointment of designated site managers might be appropriate for major regional centres.

Areas of strength

Area of strength 1: An ecologically sustainable approach to managing WA fisheries

The agency has a robust and diverse scientific workforce dedicated to conducting agricultural and aquatic research to help protect, manage and enhance the state's natural land and aquatic resources. In particular, the agency's approach to managing the state's fisheries is considered world class. Managing for results, the agency has achieved internationally recognised sustainability benchmarks as one of the first fishery management agencies in the world to introduce Ecosystem-Based Fisheries Management (EBFM) across all fish and aquatic resources.

The EBFM approach is holistic, taking account of all ecological resources from dolphins to fish and coral reefs as well as accounting for social and economic factors in deciding how to manage the state's fisheries.

Every year the agency assesses managed fisheries to determine the sustainability status of the state's most significant commercial and recreational fisheries. The agency also develops harvest strategies for each resource to manage the ecological, economic and social objectives for that resource.

Four universal management principles are identified to ensure an ecosystem/holistic approach is adopted irrespective of the industry¹:

1. What impacts are the activities under our control having on the assets that are managed?
2. What impacts are these activities having on the assets that other parties manage?
3. What economic/social benefits and costs are generated from these activities and our use of these assets?
4. What activities managed by others affect us?

The principles of the EBFM approach are transferrable and can be adopted more broadly in other areas of the agency. They can also be employed by other agencies seeking to achieve ecologically sustainable development.

Area of strength 2: Agency led research and development leading to successful commercialisation and trade of WA products

The agency's research activities serve several key purposes:

- safeguarding WA's reputation as a reliable producer of premium products
- promoting international competitiveness and value growth within the sector
- improving food security
- facilitating scientific inquiry, innovation and adaptation to drive industry transformation, productivity, economic growth and employment.

¹ Fletcher, W.J., D.J. Gaughan, S.J. Metcalf, and J. Shaw, 'Using a Regional Level, Risk-Based Framework to Cost Effectively Implement Ecosystem-Based Fisheries Management', *University of Alaska Fairbanks*, 2012.

The agency's scientific capacity (infrastructure and experts) ensures the practical application of products, processes and knowledge in primary industries and that they are tailored to WA's unique circumstances. Additionally, the agency also invests in research, partnering with universities and industry collaborators.

An example of where the agency has achieved success through research collaborations with industry is its breeding and commercialisation program for new apple varieties. Established in the late 1960s, it is the only apple breeding program in Australia and focuses on developing apple varieties well suited to WA's climate. With a small team of highly skilled staff, the program covers all operational aspects from breeding strategies to commercial evaluation. Notably, the program has generated internationally acclaimed varieties such as Cripps Pink (Pink Lady™) and Cripps Red (Sundowner™), and the ANABP 01 (Bravo®) which was released in 2014. These high quality apple varieties create significant commercial opportunities and have helped reinforce the WA apple industry's continued growth. The government has established trademarks on these varieties which ensures ongoing royalty streams with commercialisation and market expansion entrusted to the WA Fruit West Co-operative.

Area of strength 3: Successful consolidation, coordination and management of grants

The agency administers grants to a wide range of stakeholders that benefit all Western Australians, enabling:

- increased delivery of social and community services
- expanded opportunities for businesses and primary industries, regional WA, aquatic, pastoral, agricultural and natural resources
- research and innovation.

For the year ended 30 June 2022, the agency issued more than \$82 million in grants and subsidies.

Before machinery of government changes, each of the 3 predecessor agencies administered its own grants via individual systems. Following the changes, one of the first priorities of the new agency was to consolidate all grants onto a single platform.

All grant processes, guidelines, criteria and application processes are located on a single cloud based platform called 'Smarty Grants'. The user centric approach of this tool and ability of the process to ensure effective results have helped the agency administer a large number of grants. Using the one system ensures processes and data collation are consistent which in turn assists with evaluating outcomes across all grants.



We are proud to deliver our services from Whadjuk Noongar boodja. We acknowledge and pay respect to Elders, Traditional Owners and Custodians from the many land and language groups of Western Australia.

Copies are available in different formats on request.

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Public Sector Commission | 2 Havelock Street, West Perth, WA 6005
T 08 6552 8500 | E admin@psc.wa.gov.au | WA.gov.au

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