



The Extension Gap

Twenty years of ABARES data on research and extension funding in
Australian agriculture

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Foreword

Before AgMap I spent several years studying soil management in the Barossa, Langhorne Creek, and Riverland as a research fellow at Adelaide University, funded by Wine Australia. The results were positive. With the right species mix, cover crops matched or beat herbicide on yield while adding nitrogen to the soil and improving ecosystem services. What was near impossible to quantify was engagement and adoption. The barrier was not agronomy, it was persistence fighting against spatial and temporal constraints - and no amount of extra soil data was going to shift that on its own. Somebody needed to stand in a vineyard and talk it through, season after season, in every region. I did my best, with webinars, workshops, reports, but the question remains - who changed practice because of that work? No one knows.

That experience shaped how I read the ABARES investment data when it landed in December 2025. The dataset tells a clean story: Australia funds a third more agricultural research than it did twenty years ago, and less of the work that carries research onto farms. I posted a few charts from it on LinkedIn earlier this year and they generated more discussion than anything else I have written there, which suggested the sector wanted the full picture in one place.

Well, here it is, built entirely from published ABARES data, with every figure produced from the public spreadsheet. I would be keen to hear where readers disagree.

Tom Lines
Adelaide, August 2026

Key findings

- Public funding for agricultural extension and advisory services fell from \$200 million in 2005-06 to \$80 million in 2024-25, a 60% decline in real terms. ABARES puts the average rate of decline at 5.7% a year.
- The fall was not steady. Extension funding grew to a peak of \$240 million in 2013-14, then dropped 67% in eleven years.
- Total agricultural R&D funding went the other way: up 37% in real terms over the same twenty years, reaching \$3.0 billion in 2024-25.
- Private investment nearly doubled, from \$740 million to \$1.4 billion. Private companies now fund 47% of Australian agricultural R&D and, on ABARES forecasts, perform just over half of it.
- The Commonwealth funds 23% more than in 2005-06, but the growth has come through indirect levers. Its R&D tax incentive grew from \$40 million to \$260 million while direct research through CSIRO and departmental science divisions fell 55%.
- State and territory governments, the historic employers of public extension officers, cut their agricultural R&D expenditure from \$710 million to \$410 million.
- The 2024-25 values across all series are ABARES forecasts; the extension series is forecast from 2023-24.

About the data

All figures in this report come from ABARES, *Agricultural research and development (R&D) investment in Australia - 2024-25 update*, published in December 2025 and compiled by Will Chancellor and Jared Greenville. Values are real 2024-25 Australian dollars throughout. Two definitions matter for reading the charts. Funding measures the cheques an entity writes; expenditure measures the research performed inside its own agencies. The two differ because entities fund each other - a Commonwealth grant to a university counts as Commonwealth funding but university expenditure. The 2024-25 values are ABARES forecasts built on imputed and partial data, as are the 2023-24 values in the extension series; forecast

years are shown dashed where a chart isolates them. Fuller caveats are in the methodology note at the end.

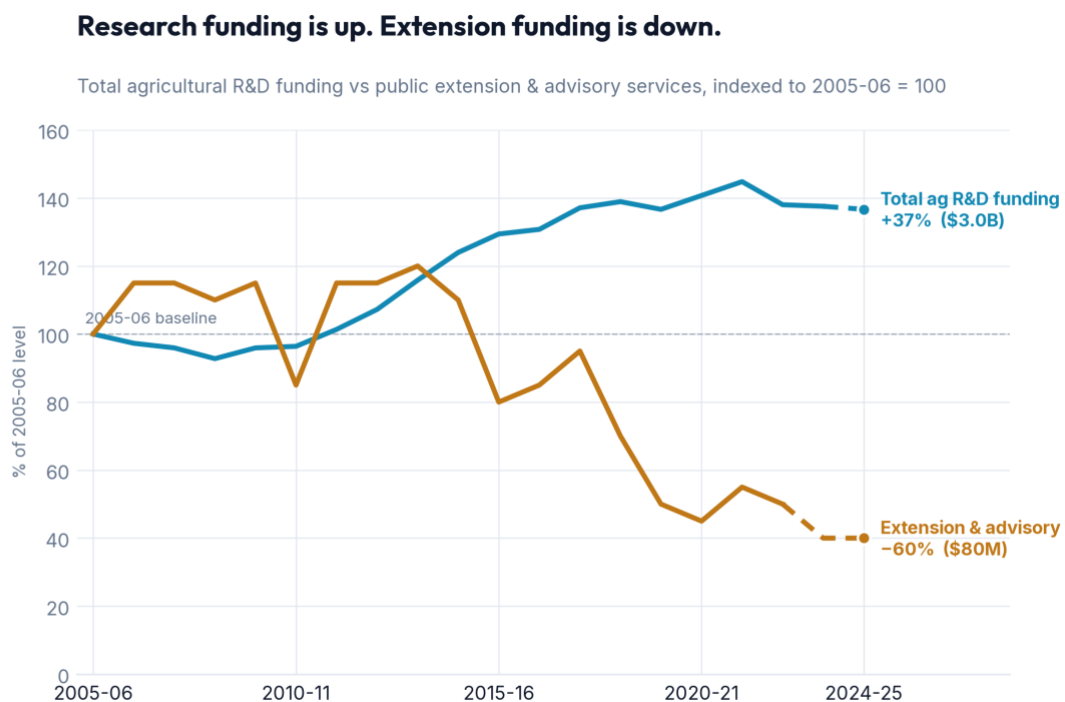
What extension is

Extension is the work of getting research off the page and into practice. In the field it looks like workshops, field days, farm walks and one-on-one agronomy visits; on the desk and in the ute it is webinars, podcasts, leaflets, technical notes and advisory reports. The formats shift with the decade. The purpose does not: put new research and better methods in front of the growers who can use them, and support the practice change that follows. The word itself is a leftover from universities “extending” their knowledge beyond the campus, but the function it names is as current as this season’s trial results.

In the ABARES series this work appears as “extension and advisory services” - the public spending line for government-employed advisors and the programs they deliver. That line is what the rest of this report tracks.

Research rises, extension falls

Indexed to their 2005-06 levels, total agricultural R&D funding and public extension funding tell the whole story in one chart. Research funding climbed almost continuously from 2010-11 to a peak of \$3.2 billion in 2021-22, and has drifted back since. Extension funding held its ground until 2013-14, then fell in most years after.



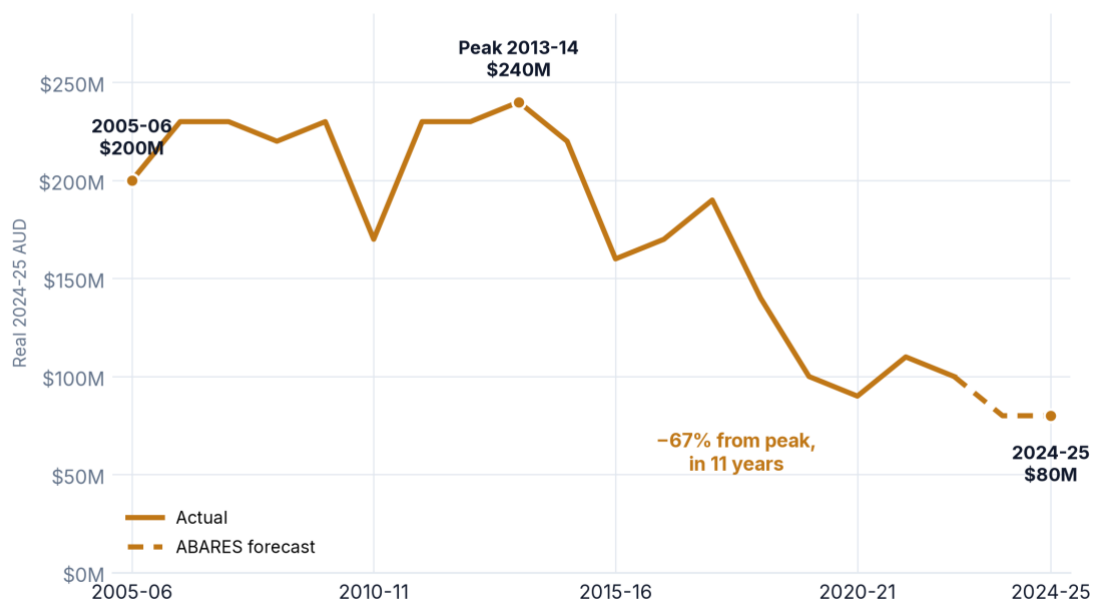
Source: ABARES, Agricultural R&D investment in Australia - 2024-25 update (Dec 2025). Real 2024-25 AUD. 2024-25 is an ABARES forecast (the extension series also 2023-24).

Figure 1: Total agricultural R&D funding vs public funding for extension and advisory services, indexed to 2005-06 = 100.

The extension series deserves a closer look, because the decline is commonly described as if it ran across the full twenty years. It did not. Public extension funding was \$200 million in 2005-06 and rose modestly through the following eight years. The collapse is concentrated in the decade after the 2013-14 peak: \$240 million down to \$80 million, a 67% fall. ABARES summarises the full series as an average decline of 5.7% a year, which is accurate as an average but smooths over the growth phase (see methodology note).

Two decades of public extension funding

Public funding for agricultural extension & advisory services, 2005-06 to 2024-25



Source: ABARES, Agricultural R&D investment in Australia - 2024-25 update (Dec 2025). Real 2024-25 AUD. 2024-25 is an ABARES forecast (the extension series also 2023-24).

Figure 2: Public funding for agricultural extension and advisory services, 2005-06 to 2024-25.

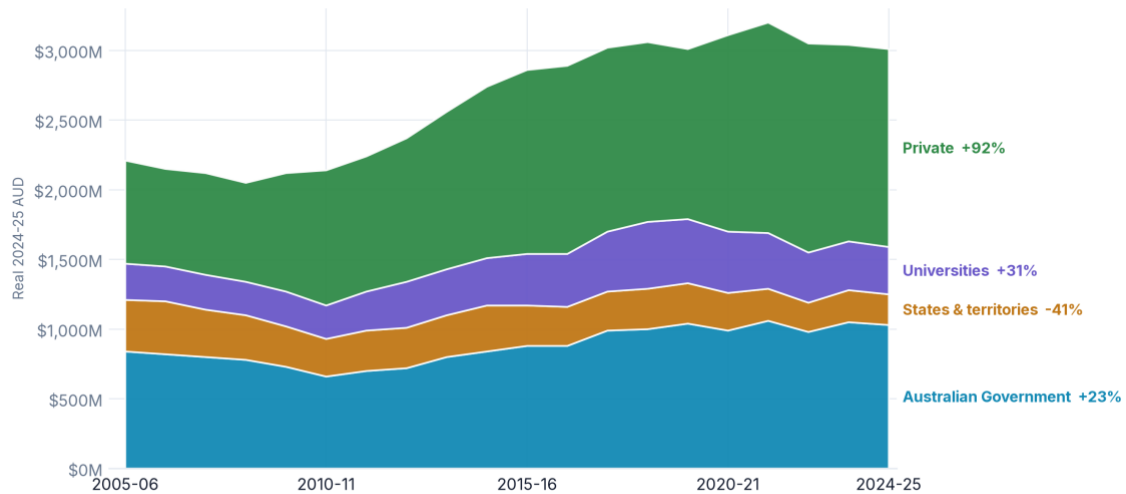
An \$80 million national line is worth sitting with for a moment. Australian agriculture produces \$88 billion of output a year on ABARES' own 2024-25 forecast. Other public money does touch adoption - RDC extension programs, the Future Drought Fund's adoption hubs - and how much of it this series captures is a definitional question (see the methodology note). But this is the only continuous national measure of public extension funding, and it has fallen to a third of its peak.

Who pays now

The R&D total kept rising because the funding mix changed underneath it. Four groups fund Australian agricultural research: the Commonwealth, the states and territories, the universities, and the private sector. Twenty years ago the states put \$370 million a year into agricultural R&D, more than the universities and about half what the Commonwealth contributed. They are now the smallest funder of the four, and the only one that has gone backwards.

Who funds agricultural R&D

Total agricultural R&D funding by funder, 2005-06 to 2024-25



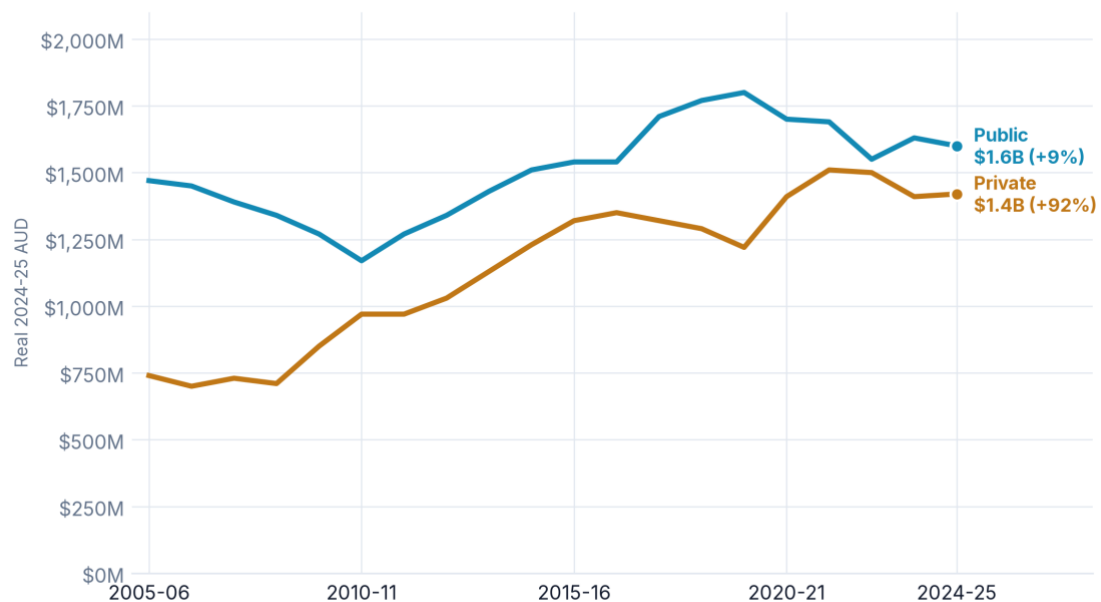
Source: ABARES, Agricultural R&D investment in Australia - 2024-25 update (Dec 2025). Real 2024-25 AUD. 2024-25 is an ABARES forecast (the extension series also 2023-24).

Figure 3: Total agricultural R&D funding by funder, 2005-06 to 2024-25.

Private funding is the line that reshaped the system. It ran flat through the late 2000s, grew strongly from 2009-10, and has closed most of the gap with the combined public total. Public funding in 2024-25 was \$1.6 billion against private funding of \$1.4 billion. In 2005-06 the ratio was two to one.

Private funding has nearly caught public

Public vs private agricultural R&D funding, 2005-06 to 2024-25



Source: ABARES, Agricultural R&D investment in Australia - 2024-25 update (Dec 2025). Real 2024-25 AUD. 2024-25 is an ABARES forecast (the extension series also 2023-24).

Figure 4: Public vs private agricultural R&D funding, 2005-06 to 2024-25.

The private rise is not a bad-news story in itself - more research investment is good for the sector whichever ledger it sits on. But private R&D behaves differently from public R&D: findings are rarely

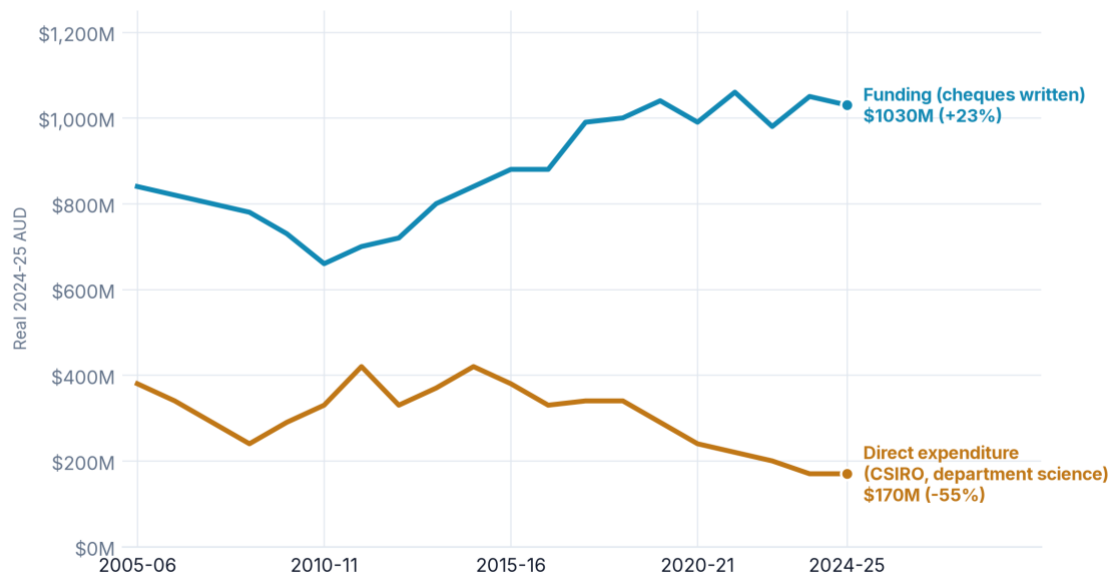
published or data shared, and priorities follow commercial return. The composition shift matters most for the producers who depend on the public, published kind.

Inside the Commonwealth ledger

The Commonwealth's headline number grew 23% over the twenty years, from \$840 million to just over \$1 billion. How it spends changed more than how much. In 2005-06 the Commonwealth performed \$380 million of research directly, through CSIRO and the science divisions of the agriculture department. By 2024-25 that direct expenditure had fallen to \$170 million.

The Commonwealth: more funding, less direct research

Australian Government ag R&D funding vs its own direct expenditure, 2005-06 to 2024-25

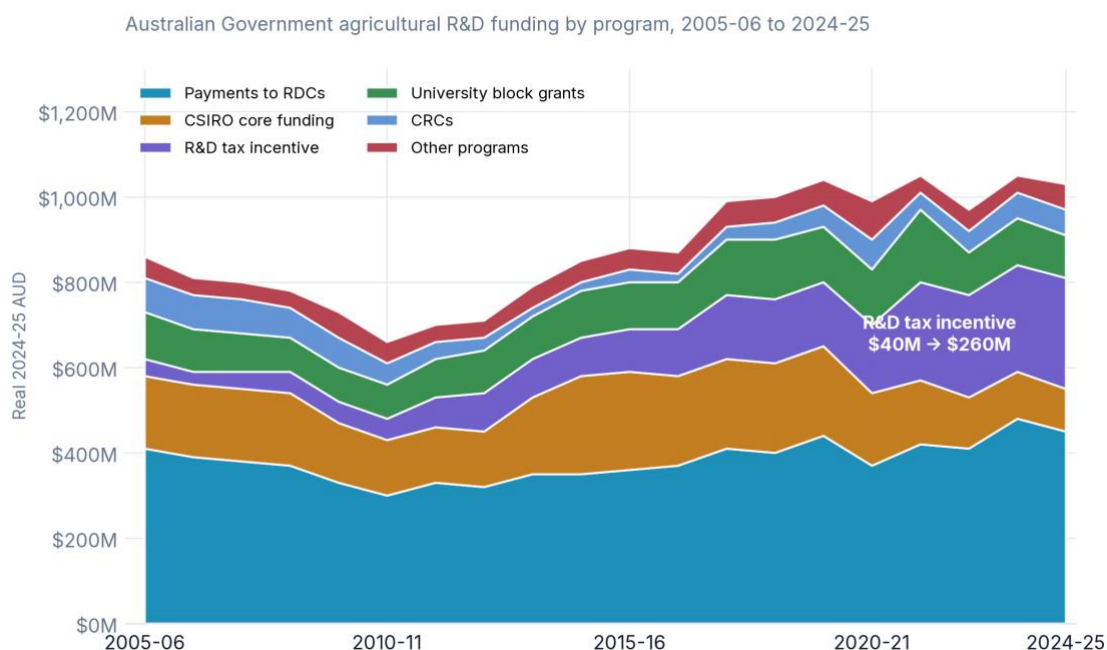


Source: ABARES, Agricultural R&D investment in Australia - 2024-25 update (Dec 2025). Real 2024-25 AUD. 2024-25 is an ABARES forecast (the extension series also 2023-24).

Figure 5: Australian Government agricultural R&D funding vs its own direct expenditure, 2005-06 to 2024-25.

The growth sits in two indirect levers. Payments to the rural research and development corporations remain the largest single line at \$450 million. The fastest-growing is the R&D tax incentive: \$40 million in 2005-06, \$260 million in 2024-25, now the second-largest Commonwealth lever in agriculture. The tax incentive is economy-wide law rather than agricultural policy - its growth reflects what companies claim, not a ministerial decision about farming - but the effect on the ag ledger is the same. It subsidises companies to research their own questions, and it carries no obligation to publish findings, share data or make results available to the wider industry.

Inside Commonwealth funding: the tax incentive takes over



Source: ABARES, Agricultural R&D investment in Australia - 2024-25 update (Dec 2025). Real 2024-25 AUD. 2024-25 is an ABARES forecast (the extension series also 2023-24).

Figure 6: Australian Government agricultural R&D funding by program, 2005-06 to 2024-25.

For a large agribusiness that runs its own trials and applies the results internally, this architecture works well. For a mixed farmer in the mid-north of South Australia who relies on published trial data, it changes little, except that the fastest-growing slice of the national research effort is the slice they will never see.

Who does the work

Measured by expenditure - who actually performs the research - the shift is starker than the funding picture. The private sector performed about a fifth of Australian agricultural R&D in 2005-06. On ABARES' forecast figures it now performs just over half. Universities grew their share too, and now perform more than either level of government.

Who performs the research

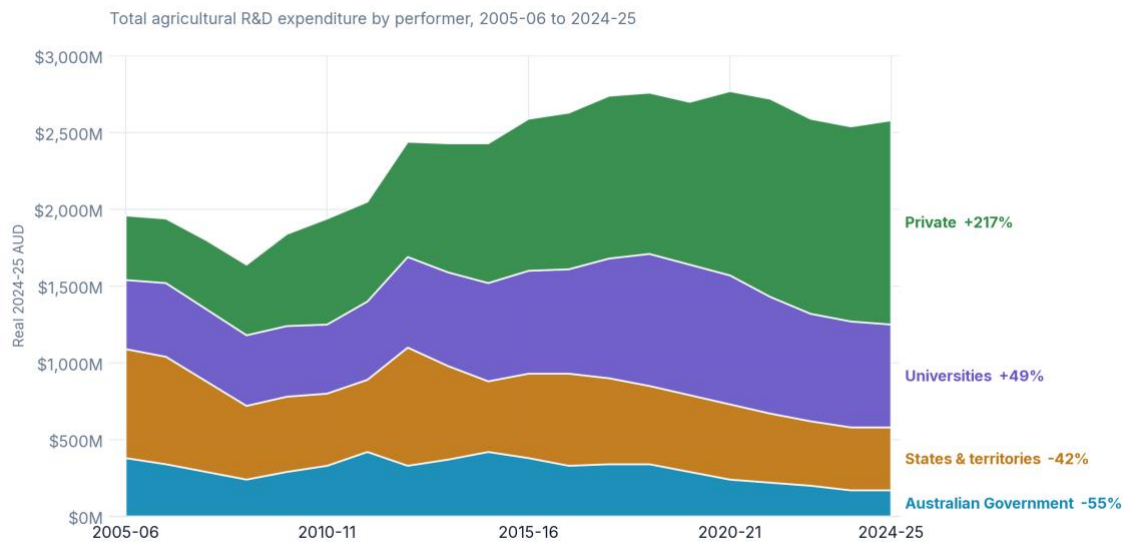


Figure 7: Total agricultural R&D expenditure by performer, 2005-06 to 2024-25.

The state and territory series is the one with the longest consequences for extension. State agriculture departments performed \$710 million of R&D in 2005-06, more than a third of the national total. By 2024-25 that was \$410 million, about a sixth. These departments - NSW DPI, Agriculture Victoria, PIRSA and their counterparts - were where public extension officers lived: the district agronomists, livestock advisors and regional scientists embedded in farming communities. Hunt, Birch, Coutts and Vanclay traced the staged withdrawal of that workforce from the 1990s onward, and the expenditure series shows the fiscal side of the same retreat.

States and territories have stepped back

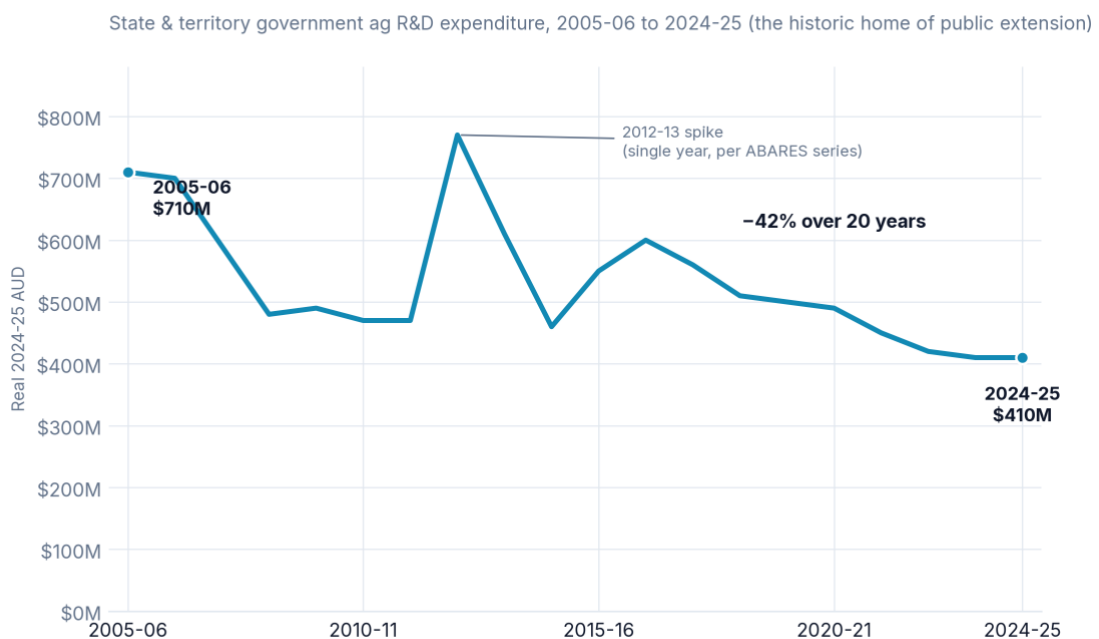


Figure 8: State and territory government agricultural R&D expenditure, 2005-06 to 2024-25.

Hunt and colleagues also document the pattern inside the contraction: when state budgets tightened, extension went before research did. The next section offers a reading of why.

Why extension lost ground: an interpretation

The sections above are ABARES data. This section, and the below, are interpretation, and should be read as such.

Everyone in the sector agrees that the interface between research and producers matters. So why does a function everyone endorses keep losing funding rounds?

My reading is that extension has been the line item with limited evidence behind it at budget time. Research defends itself with countable outputs: publications, patents, variety releases. Extension produces practice change, and practice change is genuinely hard to count. What exists is snapshots - a post-event survey, an occasional adoption study - and nothing continuous. The producer who could not make the field day but quietly implements the research a season later is invisible to every current measure.

There is also a longer history at work. The privatisation of advisory services that began in the 1990s moved much of the day-to-day agronomy relationship into commercial hands - farm consultants, agronomists attached to input suppliers, bank-adjacent advisors. That workforce is skilled and it fills real gaps. Its incentives are commercial, which shapes what research reaches which growers and on what terms. A practice with no product attached has no salesforce behind it.

What would turn it around

I wrote on LinkedIn earlier this year that the transfer efficiency between knowledge generation and farmer understanding is a direct multiplier on the value of all agricultural R&D. Australia now generates knowledge at a rate of \$3.0 billion a year. I believe a few percentage points of that transfer efficiency are worth more than everything the country still spends on extension.

Rebuilding public extension investment is a case that has to be made to treasuries, and treasuries move on evidence. The evidence requirement is specific: continuous measurement of reach and engagement, across regions and industries, including the producers who never attend an event. Build that, and extension can defend a budget line the way research always has.

Full disclosure: AgMap is one attempt to build exactly this infrastructure, which is why I care about the argument and also why you should weigh it accordingly. The case stands or falls on the ABARES data above, not on who builds the tool.

The recommendation of this report is correspondingly narrow. Before the sector argues for more extension money, it should put the measurement infrastructure in place that makes the argument winnable.

About AgMap

AgMap (agmap.org) is a map-based platform that makes Australian agricultural research discoverable by location. Trials, projects and field events sit on a single interactive map, so growers can find the science relevant to their area and researchers can see their work reach the communities it is meant for. Funders get the same picture from the other side: where engagement is happening, and where it is not. AgMap is built in South Australia by its two founders, Tom Lines and Joe Marks.

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Methodology and caveats

All values are real 2024-25 Australian dollars as published by ABARES. ABARES restates the full historical series to latest-year prices in each update, so dollar figures here will differ slightly from earlier ABARES publications describing the same years. Figures are rounded as published, generally to the nearest \$10 million; percentages are computed from the rounded public data.

The extension series covers total public funding for extension and advisory services, Commonwealth and state combined. It is not a state-only figure, and it excludes private advisory activity. Adoption-adjacent public spending that runs through other channels - RDC extension programs, Future Drought Fund adoption hubs - is not separately identified in the release, so the series is best read as the continuous core of public extension funding rather than the totality of adoption support. In the extension series, 2023-24 and 2024-25 are ABARES forecasts based on imputed and partial data; in the funding and expenditure series, 2024-25 is the forecast year.

ABARES' headline decline rate of 5.7% a year is computed on its internal unrounded series. Recomputing from the rounded public spreadsheet yields approximately 4.7% a year. This report quotes the ABARES-published figure with that caveat. The peak-to-trough figure of 67% is computed directly from the published values (\$240 million in 2013-14 to \$80 million in 2024-25).

The one-year spike in state and territory expenditure in 2012-13 (\$770 million) is a feature of the published ABARES series. Its cause is not documented in the release and it is treated here as a single-year anomaly rather than a trend.

References

ABARES (2025), *Agricultural research and development (R&D) investment in Australia - 2024-25 update*, December 2025. agriculture.gov.au/abares/research-topics/productivity/agricultural-research-and-development-investment-in-australia

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Acknowledgements

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