

**Future Farmers Network  
Agricultural Competitiveness White Paper  
Green Paper Submission**

**Focus: Education, Skills Training and Labour  
Policy Idea 14—Strengthening agricultural education**

**Who we are?**

Future Farmers Network (FFN) is Australia's only national, independent organisation providing opportunities and services that support the future of Australian agriculture. FFN represents members aged 18 – 35 years from across all aspects of the industry, from young people who work on-farm, on remote and rural stations to those in industry support roles based in urban and regional centres as well as major cities. All our members have an important part to play in Australian agriculture and it is our role to provide them with a platform that supports, unites and enables them a voice.

As a cross commodity not for profit organisation that relies on membership and industry funding and support, FFN takes a leadership role in advocating, educating and providing support for young people working in Australian agriculture. We have a strong track record of engaging all industry sectors and forming valuable partnerships that achieve tangible outcomes for our members. Since the establishment of FFN in 2002, the Network has received over \$700,000 of member and industry partner support and \$200,000 from Government Grants. These funds have been invested by FFN in scholarships, training, educational and professional development events and the amount received since inception is a testament to the extent of our networks and the valuable work that we undertake to ensure Australia has an educated and engaged agricultural youth. FFN is an active and effective example of a united voice on behalf of Australia's agricultural youth.

**Executive Summary**

To ensure Australian agriculture's youth had the opportunity to share their thoughts and ideas on how to build a competitive future industry, FFN surveyed its membership in respect to the Agricultural Competitiveness White Paper. We found that overwhelmingly our members believe that working in Australian agriculture can provide a rewarding, long term and prosperous career. Of course there are issues to address, as any industry will have, however the sense of opportunity felt by young people is bigger than ever. Our survey resulted in FFN outlining nine (9) recommendations for the Agricultural Competitiveness White Paper. FFN has also been actively involved in the Blueprint for Australian agriculture and supports the recommendations for the Agricultural Competitiveness White Paper as detailed through that platform.

To further build on our initial submission FFN proposes two recommendations to the Green Paper based around **Policy Idea 14b Strengthening Agricultural Education.**

**The two recommendations are:**

1. that the Australian Government engages with FFN to attract new entrants to the agricultural industry; and
2. that the Australian Government supports the creation of a young farmer mentoring and networking program, led by FFN with the aim of engaging and supporting young people in Australian agriculture.

### **Introduction**

The current Agricultural Competitiveness White Paper process could play a valuable role in facilitating Australia's transition towards a more prosperous and sustainable future for agriculture. In summary, this submission addresses the following key matters in relation to the Green Paper.

- "Attracting new farmers to agriculture is important in safeguarding the transfer of knowledge and expertise to future generations and to reinvigorating the sector with fresh talent, ideas and enthusiasm. The number of young owner-operator farmers has declined since the 1970s. Since 1976, the number of farmers under the age of 35 has fallen by more than 75 per cent (Barr 2014).
- There may also be a case for support measures to attract existing and potential new entrants (such as mentoring, networking and training opportunities). For example, the Future Farmers Network (submission IP512) proposed '... a next generation program to help support young people in Australian agriculture'. Competitor countries such as the United States have programs devoted to training, outreach and mentoring of new and beginning farmers that complement local initiatives to build skills in farm and business management (including developing capabilities important for supply chain management such as branding and marketing)."  
(reference: Agricultural Competitiveness Green Paper, 2014)

FFN acknowledges that the Government is currently addressing these issues through improvements to agricultural education in high school curriculums and through their support of the Career Harvest Website. However FFN believes that there is further work to be done as gaps exist in the areas of attracting and retaining young people in agriculture. As the only national youth organisation with connections and support from key industry stakeholders, FFN believes it can work with the Australian Government on the issues at hand.

FFN believes that the future of Australian agriculture will be defined by the people engaged in the sector. The variety of opportunities, from highly technical roles through to business ownership, will continue to require a mix of labour sources and skill building mechanisms. Increased flexibility will be critical as agriculture competes with other sectors of the Australian economy.

Australian agriculture needs to access a flexible workforce with the right levels of skill to meet the demand for labour. Farmers need to be best practice employers and careers in agriculture need to be positively viewed. The sector needs to adapt to the challenge of labour shortage through various methods, including improving labour efficiency, new technologies and different approaches to attracting young people to the sector. Greater cross sectorial engagement is also needed as many issues facing agriculture affect it as a whole but are dealt with by each industry individually; the current landscape involves too much duplication and a lack of communication.

### **Attracting new farmers to agriculture**

Attracting new farmers to agriculture is crucial to its prosperity and sustainability. The statistics show that more people are leaving the sector and less people are entering. FFN knows that there is no shortage of willing, enthusiastic new entrants. A recent survey conducted by the Youth Food Movement (YFM) on their national audience of 16,000 conscious urban consumers found that 68% of them are considering a career in agriculture. FFN also knows firsthand that there are some fantastic, engaged young people in our membership who can act as champions and help to lead the charge in engaging new entrants to the industry. FFN members continually demonstrate their enthusiasm for the industry and passion to learn more about it at our events.

FFN believes the industry needs an organisation out there not only promoting agriculture as a career of choice but helping new entrants to map their way into, and through it. There are so many different opportunities available that FFN believes new entrants become overwhelmed and don't know where to start. Work also needs to be done on the improvement of Australian agriculture's image. People in the sector know the variety of opportunities that the future of agriculture presents, however the majority of those currently outside of the sector still have the media as their only point of contact, unfortunately the message they are getting is often negative.

FFN is currently working on these initiatives at a national level. Through addressing school leavers at University open days to promotion of agriculture and its range of opportunities through our website and social media platforms, FFN is actively recruiting new people into the sector. FFN is to begin working with organisations outside of agriculture such as the Foundation for Young Australians (representing 600,000 members) and the Youth Food Movement (representing 16, 000 members) in 2015 to expand the sectors promotion.

**Recommendation 1 on Policy Idea 14b:** That the Australian Government prioritises raising the profile of a career in agriculture to new entrants. Attracting new people to the sector is critical to its prosperity and sustainability. By engaging FFN, as the only existing national non-commodity agricultural youth organisation with direct links to young people and proven success in delivering events and learning opportunities to young people, we can provide a platform for the success of future programs. FFN acknowledge the Australian Government's investment in Career Harvest however FFN believe further work to leverage on this existing platform to enhance and provide greater services to people interested in a career in agriculture should be considered. FFN conducted a Career Mapping Review in 2012 in consultation with wide stakeholders including farmers, agribusinesses, Career Harvest stakeholders, Agrifoods Skills and Rural Skills Australia. FFN recommend the Australian Government provide a \$200,000 commitment towards the implementation of the integrated career mapping program which will provide embedded links to all Universities, VET programs, and agribusiness opportunities and provide a channel for the Australian Government to implement the National Workforce Development Plan recommendations. Action is required now for Australian agriculture to provide a clear career opportunities message to bring the sector to a level consistent, and with the right resource allocation better, with what has been achieved in the mining and energy sector. FFN recommend the Australian Government investment is seed funding and as a partner FFN will allocate resources to ensure sustainability and currency of the project.

### **Establishing a young farmers mentoring and networking program**

FFN is adamant that establishing a young farmers mentoring and networking program is vital to retaining young people in the sector. Young people in agriculture need such a broad range of skills from accounting to science and media training, equally important is the need for young people to receive up to date information on the issues affecting the sector. The agricultural landscape continues to shift and new opportunities arise on a monthly basis, whether its free trade agreements, changes in policy, a shift in consumer demand, a change in environmental laws or breakthroughs in technology it is vital that young people are kept up to date. Each of these situations presents new challenges or opportunities and in the current landscape being left behind or being out of the loop can have serious consequences. To ensure the success of young people in agriculture we need to equip them with the skills and knowledge needed to forge a sustainable future. Overwhelmingly our members believe that working in Australian agriculture can be a rewarding, long term and prosperous career. Of course there are issues to address, as any industry will have, however the sense of opportunity felt by young people is bigger than ever.

Rather than chasing new initiatives in this area FFN believes the work can be achieved by supporting existing structures. FFN currently has a national platform that keeps young people informed of educational opportunities, key industry issues and opportunities. FFN also runs a series of national events aimed at bringing young people together to network and hear from industry experts on issues affecting their industry. As an example FFN's Youth Agricultural Central (YAC) brings together all of Australia's industry youth groups for a two day professional development program and relevant upskilling. The successful event showcases our ability to be able to bring together young people

from a range of industries across the country to help build their capacity, develop both personal and professional skills, provide updates on critical industry information and a platform to discuss issues impacting upon agricultural youth. Another example is FFN's Young Beef Producers Forum (attended by the Hon Barnaby Joyce in 2013) which saw 250 beef producers under the age of 35 from all over Australia converge on Roma in Queensland's South West in November 2014. Producers left the forum inspired to go back to their daily roles and continue to play an active role in the future of the beef industry.

**Recommendation 2 on Policy Idea 14b:** That the Australian Government supports the creation of a young farmers mentoring and networking program in partnership with FFN. FFN recommend that the government make use of existing National platforms that have a track record of engaging and working with key stakeholders and young people in the sector, such as FFN, where there is proven success in the delivery of programs such as the 2014 Young Carbon Farmers program in partnership with the Australian Government and events such as the Youth Agricultural Central (YAC). As outlined, FFN recommend that the Australian Government investment be a partnership where seed funding can be provided by both the government and FFN to further leverage our Network's industry partnerships to ensure sustainability for the initiative. FFN recommend the Australian Government provides seed funding investment of \$120,000 towards the establishment of a young farmers mentoring and networking program in partnership with FFN.

## **Conclusion**

While the Agricultural Competitiveness White Paper provides a significant opportunity, there is still further work required before the sector can be confident with the options put forward to date. The final Agricultural Competitiveness White Paper must have a strong and clear vision for government policy that not only impacts farm businesses, but also enables a strong agricultural value chain. In addition to this, FFN has been a long term supporter and champion of the National Farmers' Federation led Blueprint for Australian Agriculture initiative. FFN believe it is vitally important that the government approach must align with the Blueprint for Australian Agriculture and have a range of deliverables that underpin the vision.

To further support the Australian Government in the implementation of the Agricultural Competitiveness White Paper, FFN can assist the government by facilitating access to Australia's agricultural youth. FFN can provide valuable policy input, facilitate youth round tables on industry issues and provide relevant up to date statistics on the opinions of the 18 – 35 year olds we represent. FFN's plans for 2015 include the formation of geographically based "think tanks" to enhance the opportunities for our membership to have a voice in industry, implementation of youth trade delegations to emerging and established markets including the recent Free Trade Agreement countries along with a greater presence, and strengthening our current presence, in the national educational and professional development opportunities to Australia's agricultural youth.

The key to a prosperous and sustainable future for Australian agriculture is the people it attracts and retains now. FFN calls on the Australian Government to give this issue the focus it deserves and to consider the recommendations put forward by the Future Farmers Network.