



Slow Food® Hobart

AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT AGRICULTURAL COMPETITIVENESS GREEN PAPER

RESPONSE SUBMISSION FROM SLOW FOOD HOBART
3 SUNCREST AVENUE
LENAH VALLEY
TASMANIA 7008

slowfoodhobart@yahoo.com.au

Slow Food Hobart (SFH), as a Convivium of the organization Slow Food International, is committed to protecting traditional & sustainable quality foods, primary ingredients, conserving methods of cultivation & processing, & defending the biodiversity of cultivated & wild varieties.

The Slow Food philosophy encompasses :

GOOD – tasty, flavoursome & fresh

CLEAN – produced without straining the earth's resources, its ecosystems & its environments, & without harming human health

FAIR – fair pay & conditions for all concerned, from production to commercialization to consumption

SFH responded to the call for public submissions to the Agricultural Competitiveness Issues Paper (submission IP277). SFH's comments on the broad direction, and some specific policy ideas as detailed in the Green Paper, are now submitted for your consideration.

Infrastructure

There is insufficient freight capacity for the transport of Tasmanian agricultural produce across Bass Strait, with one or more containers destined for mainland, or overseas export markets being left on the wharf following each sailing of *The Spirit*. This is due to the on-going emphasis on passenger numbers over freight. The recently stated aim of the Tasmanian government to increase visitor numbers by 500,000 p.a. will significantly exacerbate this situation.

Ensuring adequate freight capacity across Bass Strait at all times is integral to improving the competitiveness of all agricultural producers in Tasmania. The current situation can particularly disadvantage small and medium enterprises (SME's) who have established overseas markets for their premium products. It can be more cost effective for these relatively low volume producers

to pay for a whole shipping container, even though they can only partially fill it, rather than consolidating their load with others via a third party shipper. This financial imperative is further exacerbating the freight capacity issue.

In a mature diverse economy there should be sufficient sea freight capacity for the timely transport of (often time sensitive) agricultural products, as well as tourists & their vehicles, Tourism can be a volatile market, whereas people will always need food.

Working with the States & Territories

The Australian and Tasmanian governments must jointly address the issue of insufficient freight capacity across Bass Strait (see above). Tasmanian agricultural production is continuing to expand as irrigation projects come on-line, and significant foreign investment targets the state's agricultural enterprises (due to the FTA with China, among others). It will be extremely frustrating for Tasmanian agricultural producers, small and large, if the full economic benefits cannot be realized due to the freight capacity issue.

Competition and Regulation

SFH is an advocate for (re)connecting consumers with food producers and processors, especially micro / artisanal / smaller agricultural enterprises. SFH considers the availability of as diverse a range of retail outlets as possible to be of fundamental importance to the entire agricultural sector. Farmers Market & Farm Gate sales give smaller producers the opportunity to maximize their returns, often giving them a lifeline to stay in business. A number of micro & small local producers on the verge of "giving up" gained a new lease of life when the Hobart Farm Gate Market was established. They have since expanded their production supplying a much appreciated range of fresh local products, as well as generating employment. Farmers Markets also perform an important role in strengthening the sense of local community.

Genetic modification - The government's stated belief that "farmers should have the choice to adopt approaches that best suit their business" cannot be applied to GM technologies. This technology requires government regulation since water, wind and pollinators do not respect boundary fences. GM pollen and plant material can be transported significant distances, endangering the agricultural productivity & economic livelihood of producers who have established *premium value GM-free export markets* which generate higher profit margins. Once GM material enters an agricultural area, those producers who have established such GM-free markets are required by those markets to prove that their own crop is GM-free. These enterprises should not have their profit margins eroded by incurring these extra monitoring costs.

Will Bennett's Ashby property, at Ross, is one of several in Tasmania now growing a dual-purpose Canola, which is both grazed (for fattening sheep) and used for cereal production. *There is a strong demand for such GM-free Canola from Japan's oil & stockfeed markets.* (Tasmanian Country, 07/11/14).

Country of origin food labeling – Australian consumers have a fundamental right to know that they are actually purchasing "Australian" fresh or processed food if that is their intention.

Finance, business structure & taxation

“Raise the exemption threshold....” The continued existence of “smaller” farms is one route by which younger people may be able to afford to enter the sector. Concern has been expressed about the increasing average age of farmers as well as the reputation of some for being too conservative, not willing to take risks & not open to new ideas. Younger farmers are generally those willing to take the risks, innovate, be entrepreneurial, value-add and generate new markets. Any financial policy which may go some way towards facilitating this should be considered.

Smaller agricultural enterprises producing one or a few crops, each with a high unit value, can operate on a totally sound financial basis. Large enterprises producing “commodity” crops can be susceptible to both significant fluctuations in global commodity prices totally outside of their control, as well as a pest or disease wiping out a significant part, if not all, of a crop.

Foreign Investment

This is rapidly becoming a significant factor across all sizes of agricultural enterprise in Tasmania. SFH agrees that there should be improved transparency of foreign investment. Slow Food Hobart is not in a position to comment further on this area.

Education, skills & training, and labour

SFH is supportive of any Government initiative which truly improves the availability of training tailored to the needs of micro, small and medium businesses.

SFH supports the push for upskilling and education of Australian residents but also recognizes the considerable current gap in available skills and strongly supports the consideration of relaxing the rules between the transfer from a 417 working holiday maker visa and 457 work skilled visa for those visa holders who are experienced, willing and capable of working in agricultural areas.

SFH supports the investment in the Primary Industry Education Fund to develop teaching and learning resources for primary and secondary students and regional populations. Advocates /ambassadors or case studies that can be communicated articulately to the wider population about successful farming transitions, succession planning may also assist with the public’s perception of farming/agriculture and farmers beliefs in opportunities available.

Drought

The Bureau of Meteorology (BOM) needs to be adequately funded on an on-going basis so that it can provide the most timely and accurate medium and long term weather forecasting service for Australia’s agricultural producers. As extreme weather events become “the norm” these enterprises are going to become increasingly reliant on such information in order to make sound business decisions. This will require long term investment by the BOM in adequate qualified staff, and appropriate hardware and software tools.

Ongoing funding for agricultural research is also an imperative to assist with understanding climate variations including drought and its impacts on agricultural practices.

Water and natural resource management

Constantly searching for ways to generate more water for agricultural use is not necessarily the only option. Sensor technology is now so advanced that system-wide installations can detect pH changes (indicating contamination) and pressure changes (indicating leaks) in “real time”. The

Singapore Water Authority has installed such a sensor system and staff now know in less than 0.1 seconds that they have a problem and its exact location.

Currently 50% of the world's agricultural land is threatened by salt water, and a lack of fresh water has been declared the planet's most drastic problem by the World Bank. Inexpensive solutions that utilize diluted sea water are on the verge of becoming commercially viable. In October 2014 a salt tolerant potato, developed in Holland, beat 560 competitors from 90 countries to win the prestigious USAid grand challenge award. This development did not involve GM technology, just the help of an elderly Dutch farmer who had a knowledge of thousands of different potato varieties. Several tonnes of these Texel potatoes have now been shipped to Pakistan where they will be trialled on land currently unproductive due to sea water encroachment. (The Guardian Weekly, 07/11/14).

SFH, as part of Slow Food International, is totally against Coal Seam Gas development. SFH would encourage all agricultural enterprises to value water resources. Farmers to consider alternative irrigation/watering regimes to ensure maximum benefit/ minimum water loss.

Research, development and extension

Since Honeybees underpin such large swathes of the Australian agricultural sector, government funding for research into (i) the life cycle of the *varroa* mite, with a view to finding a permanent cure, and (ii) what triggers the small hive beetle to attack hives should both be assigned a very high priority. Establishing bee insurance populations for the small hive beetle in Tasmania and for the **varroa** mite Australia wide would be beneficial.

Biosecurity

Australia is now the only country in the world still free of the *varroa* mite – the parasite that has devastated bee colonies around the world. Many agricultural crops in Australia are dependent on Honeybee pollination, with one hectare of carrots or onions requiring 10 hives of bees to be successfully pollinated. There is no guarantee that the mite will not enter Australia, and the use of chemicals, once the mite has established itself in hives, is not always successful.

(www.beesdownunder.com).

Tasmania is now the only State in Australia to still be free of the Small Hive Beetle (SHB), a pest that entered the country from South Africa. SHB is a major threat as it consumes brood, pollen and honey. It cost Queensland beekeepers at least \$2.7 million in hive losses and ruined honey last year (Weekly Times, 19/11/14). (www.beeaware.org.au).

Last year, Tasmanian beekeeper Lindsay Bourke exported pallets of live bees from 2,000 of his hives to Canada in order to help their pollination and honey industry. In the upcoming autumn he will be exporting live bees from 3,600 of his hives to North America.

Publicly-funded Quarantine Services are an integral part of the agricultural sector and contribute directly to the economic wellbeing of Australia.

Accessing International Markets

If the Government pursues any of the proposals listed, their remit must take into account the needs and requirements of SME's (as well as those of larger scale producers). SF believes in farmers receiving a fair price for their produce – this is an ongoing issue for Australian farmers particularly SME's.

Reciprocal market requirements

What levels of quality assurance/quarantine security and residue testing are in place for perishable goods from international markets wanting to access Australian and Tasmanian markets?