

Regional Communities

In the south west region of Victoria, if the agricultural sector has a sniffle, the whole region gets a cold. Our region is strongly based on agriculture. When farmers have reduced income, they don't spend. The business's which service the agricultural industry are then affected. They don't spend. People are laid off. They cant spend. Other industries and business suffer. More unemployment. Real estate values drop. It is a never ending downward spiral.

Agriculture is grossly undervalued in Australia by both the general public and the government.

According to Maslows Pyramid – hierarchy of needs, the three most important foundational aspects for humans are the physiological needs of food, water and shelter.

In Australia we take food for granted. It is always there on the supermarket shelves in abundance. But we want a better product – at a cheaper price. Greater abundance – at a cheaper price.

Yet we forget our farmers – the ones providing the food and fibre. The ones struggling through drought, reduced prices for their product and increased costs. The ones getting 'squeezed'.

I think it is time for normal Australians to be woken up and realise where their food comes from. Some have – but the majority have not. It's time to get back to basics. To realise how important it is to meet those basic needs identified by Maslow. To value them. To value food and fibre production. To value our farmers. To pay a fair and reasonable price for quality food.

Food security

In Australia, alarm bells only ring if foreign investors wish to buy an Australian business that is valued above \$248 million. Overseas buyers, such as China and Arabia know this – so they are buying up smaller farms which adjoin each other to sneak in under the radar. A classic example of this is where huge parcels of land between Wallaura and Ararat have been purchased by foreign owners.

The following is quoted from an article. "Qatar-based Hassad Foods, which is the agricultural arm of the Qatar government, recently agreed to pay about \$35 million for more than 8000 hectares of sheep-grazing and cropping land in Victoria's Western District.

The secretive deal includes five homesteads around Willaura and Dunkeld, near Ararat, and is believed to be one of the largest acquisitions of Victorian pastoral land in recent history. The company's \$100 million portfolio also includes 6800 hectares in Canowindra, New South Wales, and a 125,000-hectare holding in Queensland's Clover Downs for \$18.5 million." - See more of the article at:
<http://farmlandgrab.org/post/view/18826#sthash.hCi1zdNL.dpuf>

They are no doubt securing their food security – at the expense of ours. Countries highly dependent on food imports, including Qatar, Saudia Arabia and China, have developed strategies to "ensure their own people have access to food in case of a food crisis"

Whilst in the short term they will trade within Australia, in the long term this may be different. They will be exporting their produce to their own countries – but Australia will receive no benefit.

One possible solution would be to somehow ensure that Australia receives a benefit from a product exported by a foreign owner of Australian soil. Not an Australian owner. We do not wish to stifle exports,

but we do wish to stifle a foreign owner providing food for their own country on Australian soil with no benefit to Australia.

At this stage we have no idea how much land is under foreign ownership. I think we need to know. And I think it needs to stop. An embargo needs to be put in place immediately whilst this is investigated. The current system is not detecting that our own best agricultural land is being sold up to overseas buyers from under us. This land grab will not only affect our food security but will also affect local regional communities.

In October 2013 it is reported that the Indonesian Government wish to purchase 1 million hectares of Australian farm land to breed cattle,

A 2010 report by the [Australian Bureau of Statistics on ownership of agricultural land](#) says 45 million hectares had "some level of foreign ownership". This represents 11 per cent of Australian agricultural land.

We are losing our best food producing land to foreign ownership. We are in effect reducing our own food security. We have already reduced our food security by 11% (Note: This figure could be even more as it is our better agricultural land being sold). How much more do we want to lose?

Soils

The future of thriving agriculture will be reliant on healthy soils. And healthy soils are only possible when land managers make fully informed decisions when it comes to the treatment and management of their soils. Healthy soils will grow healthy plants and animals, which in turn provides healthy food for the population. Our future is dependent on the future of thriving agriculture.

Developing effective, efficient, long-term techniques to improve soil health is essential for thriving agriculture. Improvement in soil structure, soil pH, organic content and nutrient performance is possible through changed management practices and leads to better production and financial returns. Soil improvement can be achieved through improving soil acidity, increased organic matter and biological activity.

Our most important natural resource is our soils. Soil acidity and soil structure decline are real threats to thriving agriculture. The Parliamentary inquiry into impacts and trends in Soil Acidity, March 2004, estimated the value of agricultural production lost due to soil acidity in Victoria to be \$470M annually.

A vibrant, thriving agriculture which is productive, profitable and protects and enhances our best natural resource – the soil – is the ultimate aim. The growing emphasis on food security and climate change highlight that farmers need to be flexible and adaptive. Farmers need to consider options and alternatives to improving soils and pasture production. To make informed decisions, farmers need to be able to understand the different management options available.

There is a farmer based groups called the Soil Health Group, based in SW Victoria. In a few short years it has held many events with attendee numbers usually well over 100 for each event. This strongly indicates the desire by land managers to know more about caring for their soils.

The Landcare movement across Australia has been significant. Landcare could be re-vitalised by a subtle twist to 'Landcare – Soilcare'. Using the Soil Health Group methodology, there is the ability to increase farmer knowledge and action on soil health and thriving agriculture.

I have recently resigned as Executive Officer to the group due to work commitments and the fact I was volunteering 1-2 days per week for the Soil Health Group, which was unsustainable for my business. But I

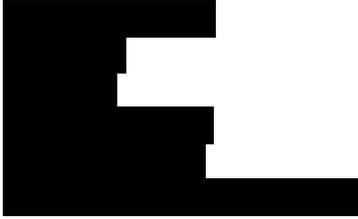
fully believe in the strength of this group and am extremely proud that it has had such an impact in such a small amount of time. I would be happy to discuss this concept with you if you wish to explore this further.

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