

Agricultural competitiveness

This is the issue to be addressed in a Government “White Paper” to be prepared after a Task Force with this name has consulted around Australia. These papers are used as a basis for policy development.

I was given 15 minutes to address the Task Force recently in Devonport on your behalf. I was told “The Task force wants to hear from you about what you consider to be challenges for improving the competitiveness of agriculture, along with potential remedies”. I was given a very fair hearing.

15 minutes isn’t long, so I limited myself severely – as you can guess, there had been a great deal of background reading, and dozens of questions to choose from

It was encouraging to report on two initiatives which have actually happened in Tasmania, which you as avid readers will have learned about from previous columns

This is what I said:

“Challenges for improving the competitiveness of agriculture

- This submission focuses initially on the following questions posed in the issues paper

“How can new farmers be attracted to agriculture?”

“How do we attract the next generation of farmers?”

“How can we promote career pathways for the agricultural sector?”

The question “How can rural industries and Governments better identify and prioritize research, development and extension?” is addressed last

- I note that the Government is “committing \$2 million for a new programme to help teachers better understand the products and processes of food and fibre production”
- This is long overdue and to be applauded. I have attached the results of a pilot scheme initiated by Farmers Marketing Network Pty Ltd (Sydney) in which schools are paid to conduct commercial trials which can be used in their technical leaflets
- The student evaluation speaks for itself. It has to be said that the pilot was initially ranked 5th out of 5 “outdoor” projects by the teachers, but that has been turned around
- It was praised by Michael Brooks of the “New Scientist” who has been caustic about the textbook approach to science teaching in schools
- It is very difficult to “attract the next generation” and “promote career pathways” when teachers have these negative attitudes, and indeed the community in general. It is salutary to note that those involved in the 750 or so Stephanie Alexander gardens (supported by many millions of Government dollars) are led to believe that conventional gardening/agriculture is toxic, which is reinforced by the ABC “Gardening” programme. In perspective, about 2% of agricultural production is “organic”

Potential remedies

- It is to be hoped that the \$2 million new programme note above will address this
- It will, *if*
 - that overused noun “environment” is put into perspective
 - those actually involved in agricultural industry are involved in that help in a meaningful way, and it’s not left to academics
- The Farmers Marketing Network school/industry partnership scheme works. A Government programme to match \$ for \$ this, and other, industry initiatives would help it to achieve critical mass nation-wide and, more to the point, credibility

Prioritising research, development and extension

- I have attached an article on this topic I wrote as the Tasmanian correspondent for “Good Fruit and Vegetables” with an effective way to do this
- It works but, as Hugh MacKay wrote in his 1994 book :
“Why don’t people listen?”

It will be interesting to read the White Paper when it’s released