



Future Farmers Network Agricultural Competitiveness White Paper submission

Focus: Enhancing agriculture's contribution to regional communities – How do we attract the next generation of farmers?

Who we are?

The Future Farmers Network (FFN) is Australia's national, independent organisation providing opportunities and services to support the future of Australian agriculture. FFN represents members from across all aspects of the industry including those on farm to remote stations; stock and station agents; commodity traders; and those from banking and industry support roles located in our major cities. All our members have an important role to play in Australian agriculture.

Executive Summary

To ensure that all young people working in Australian agriculture had the opportunity to share their thoughts and ideas on how to build a competitive future industry, FFN surveyed its membership in respect to this submission.

The survey results found eight key areas, which young people working in Australian agriculture felt needed attention and which would help attract and retain the next generation of agricultural professionals. These eight key areas are discussed in greater length in this submission.

Can you have a prosperous career in agriculture?

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.

"There is plenty of opportunity within the primary industries, global opportunities, given the impacts of rising middle classes in South East Asia, rising demand for protein consumption and furthermore a greater consumer knowledge of their food and where it comes from - particularly in niche markets, such as organic and low food kilometres" FFN NSW member.

"Absolutely. I have had fantastic opportunities and job offers since graduating from university, and young farmers or simply young people working in an agricultural area are incredibly well supported by the industry. One could also simply cite our proximity to Asia as a fantastic global opportunity for Australian agriculture both now and in the future." FFN VIC member.

As long as the industry and community can support young farmers overcome perceived industry obstacles, then young people will remain on the land, helping feed and clothe our fellow countrymen and Asian neighbours.

Recommendation 1: The Federal Government through the Department of Agriculture establish a next generation program to help further support young people in Australian agriculture, addressing industry issues making it easier for young people to stay in agriculture.

Recommendation 2: The Federal Government through the Minister for Agriculture and Department of Agriculture engage with the Future Farmers Network to work with young people in Australian agriculture to address industry issues.

City perceptions

The way metropolitan Australia thinks and perceives people working in agriculture remains a dominant issue for young people entering and working in the industry. FFN members main concern was that people living in cities had no idea where their food and clothing came from, thought that farmers were uneducated, socially backwards and living in the past, as the below quotes indicate.

“I think that people assume that I sit on a tractor all day complaining about the weather. I also think that people in cities care about food production but are often nervous about asking questions because they don't understand some of the language we use and no one likes to feel dumb” FFN SA member.

“I think on the whole there is much misunderstanding from city folk on what actually happens on farms. I feel that city people are so removed from the country lifestyle and the ways of farming that they do not even understand simple things such as where their food comes from or how it is produced.

“As a recent university graduate I feel that people even in country areas under value the importance of people that work in the agricultural industry and misjudge their intelligence somewhat for example other students think that studying ag science is for dummies when in actual fact it requires in depth scientific prowess. Overall I think that the wider community could do with some education in the agricultural area.” FFN NSW member

Young people working in Australian agriculture would like to see their city counterparts more educated on what the reality is of the industry, explaining the scientific nature of modern farming and the skill set farmers need to have to remain competitive in today's marketplace. Equally it must be noted that a baseline study aimed at understanding city perceptions of Australian agriculture and its workers must be undertaken. This will help identify what the real perceptions are and set out what can be done to correct false perceptions.

Recommendation 3: The Federal Government commit to funding the agriculture within society perception study through the Blueprint for Australian Agriculture, an initiative of the National Farmers Federation, and accept and help implement the findings of the study once completed.

Hours and pay – are they really a factor?

Work and pay conditions were not leading factors when it came to FFN members making the choice to work in agriculture. Obviously it is important for young farmers to have a steady income which they feel meets the effort they have put in, otherwise their involvement in agriculture will become unsustainable and see them leave the sector all together.

FFN members reported working between 70 and 80 hours a week on farm and while they acknowledge that these hours come with working on the land it is still important to have time for off farm activities. The survey asked members: *Is the amount of hours you work on-farm a factor in you deciding to start/continue working in agriculture?*

“Both yes and no. At the moment no, but if I take a role on the family farm then yes it will be, as I would like hobbies outside the farm. Normal farm working hours are huge and it's easy to not have a life outside the farm, but ties to things you like doing outside the farm are incredibly important” FFN QLD member.

“No, I want to continue working in agriculture because it is my passion” FFN NSW member.

Recommendation 4: The Federal Government, through the Department of Agriculture, to fund a next generation farmers program which will provide off farm socialisation opportunities for young people in agriculture, also helping to combat social isolation in regional and rural Australia.

Where can agriculture actually take my career?

While there is genuine passion and desire for young people working in agriculture there is a worrying trend that young people once completing their studies do not have a broad understanding of where a career in agriculture can take them throughout their careers. 75 per cent of surveyed members reported that they did not feel their educational institution provided them with enough information about their potential career pathway in agriculture.

FFN believes that there is already a wealth of agriculture career mapping already undertaken and if more resources were put into career mapping exercises for youth in agriculture it would result in duplication. However what is needed is one central platform to pull all this information together which is user friendly and easily accessible to young people working in agriculture or thinking about starting a career in agriculture.

Recommendation 5: The Federal Government, through the Department of Education, fund the Future Farmers Network acting as the peak body for young people working in Australian agriculture, to create, host, update and promote a “Map my career in agriculture” website. The website will easily show young people what their potential career journey in agriculture can be and link existing but fragmented information.

Succession planning and financial management

For family operated farms looking to hand the farming operations from one generation to the next, succession planning and implementation remains one of the major barriers to retaining young people in agriculture. Making sure these family businesses are financially viable and finances are managed correctly is another key factor.

The vast majority of surveyed FFN members (90%) indicated that being able to afford the services of a succession planning and financial management consultant was their main barrier in undertaking planning. The membership agreed that government assistance to make the provision of these vital business services attainable is essential.

“My grandfather’s farm is currently being torn apart by a very long and unsuccessful succession planning process. Help is needed in the areas of planning for succession before it is needed to be implemented. Also maybe we shouldn’t talk about it as succession planning as I think that scares my grandfather, maybe just call it future planning as that’s what it is and that to me sounds like a much simpler and easier task to do” FFN QLD member.

“It [government assistance] would encourage more families to participate in succession planning, which as we know is integral in achieving the farm being passed onto future generations and managed in a successful way that fulfills all family wishes” FFN NSW member.

Recommendation 6: The Federal Government, through the Department of Agriculture, create a succession planning program, aimed at helping finance family farms to implement succession planning as the farm transitions from one generation to the next.

Climate variability

There is no doubt that climate variability plays a role in the life of all Australian farmers. Depending on the location of farmers, climate variability events such as floods, fires, tropical cyclones and droughts will eventually impact farmers.

FFN and its members believe that governments on all levels have a role to play to reduce the effects of climate variability events on the agricultural community, inclusive of measures to reduce total greenhouse gas emissions. While there have been efforts made to reduce emissions and assist farmers who have experienced climatic events, FFN believes that governments need to take greater action and sooner if real change is to happen.

“This variability only pushes me harder to be involved in sustainable agriculture and a part of rural communities. Due to the uncertainty and extremes of environment it is even more important to be involved in planning for the future and being involved in carrying out these plans. No I don't think the response to climate variability is adequate. We need to be investing more resources in plans and infrastructure to ensure agricultural sustainability and profitability through all climate situations” FFN QLD member.

“It [climate variability] doesn't impact on my decision to stay in the industry. I feel industry & government should be investing more in longer term research, current 3 year funding cycles are not long enough to give good outcomes for such a complex problem. In addition, research should be more multi-disciplinary with climate scientists, ecologists, agronomists, and environmental scientists working together for solutions rather than independently” FFN SA member.

Generally there was a consensus from FFN members surveyed that climate variability was not a major factor in them deciding to enter or remain in the agricultural industry, rather they realized that climate variability and climatic events are part of living on the land and better preparedness and land management practices to help reduce emissions and deal with natural disasters when they happen need to be factored into farming operations.

Recommendation 7: The Federal Government increase the greenhouse gases emission reduction target from five per cent to 10 per cent and create long term climate variability research projects that last up to five years which focusses on a multi-disciplinary approach.

Workforce issues

While difficulties attracting employees to work in regional and remote areas of Australia is nothing new to the agricultural industry, FFN members reported that the task had become increasingly harder due to competition from the mining sector. Its high wages and good job availability makes it incredibly difficult for farmers to compete with and often results in good laborers leaving farms where they are needed, to work in the mines.

“Competition from mining is significantly affecting the availability of labour in regional areas” FFN QLD member.

“It's hard to compete pay wise with energy sector jobs and salaries” FFN VIC member.

Recommendation 8: The Federal Government, through the Department of Agriculture, to better resource the existing National Education and Skills Taskforce to implement and drive the National Workforce Strategy to assist the agriculture industry in attracting appropriate labour.

Combating social isolation through building vibrant regional and rural Australian communities

The majority (65%) of surveyed FFN members indicated that they live in vibrant regional and rural Australian communities and also noted that building a vibrant community does not happen by itself, it takes the work of the community to remain active, put on events and be welcoming to newcomers.

“We have a busy little community that is very welcoming to newcomers, especially since we have a large international/backpacker/grey nomad workforce who comes through twice a year to help harvest fruit. We are pretty lucky to have a lot of hard working community members” FFN NSW member.

“Walgett is the strongest community I have ever lived in- everyone gives 110%, is willing to help out and very vocal on farming issues and just generally gets things done. They have a very strong art group, rugby committee, sports, and a very strong agricultural community. It's incredible what you can get involved in here and where it will take you” FFN NSW member

There are of course other regional and rural towns which are not vibrant and where people suffer from social isolation. In this regard FFN and its members believe that the federal government has a support role to play in the provision of better services to regional and rural Australia which includes better infrastructure, greater access to health and education services and support for existing community clubs and initiatives.



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“Increased public transport, our town is currently serviced a few times a week which is fantastic, and very much appreciated, access to high-speed and low cost technology, and visits from people from the city/regional towns are always welcomed, whether for a social occasion, for example concert or footy try-outs at the school or for health or education like Lifeline or Queensland Health people” FFN QLD member

“The government can help by supporting community events and clubs, I feel this is especially important when there has been a bad season or during periods of drought. It reminds people they're not alone” FFN VIC member.

Recommendation 9: The Federal Government, through the Department of Agriculture, to create and support a community grant scheme where communities experiencing, or are at risk of social isolation, can apply for funding for community activities aimed at reducing social isolation.