



FOOD SECURITY AND FARMER DECISION MAKING GO HAND IN HAND.

**A submission to the Agricultural Competitiveness Taskforce
April 2014**

Issue 1: Ensuring food security in Australia and globally

Issue 2: Farmer decisions for improving farm gate returns

I see a strong link between food security and farmer decision making because a clear understanding of the need for food and how it is produced will be vital for Australia to produce more of it. It is through knowing the facts and the exchanging of ideas that the agriculture sector can go forward. If everyone, Australia wide, has a good understanding of our diverse agricultural industries and the environment they operate in then we can all work together to carry them forward. So to make this work it is of vital importance that city consumers have an understanding of our farming scene to overcome the yawning divide between the two.

My submission does not offer any solutions or opinions on new farming areas, or best farm practises, others will no doubt have valuable ideas on those fronts. I believe we need to go back to a basic level of education from which all opportunities will flow. Ignorance and misinformation can be a massive barrier to progress. Pro animal organisations are expert at tapping into people's emotions, which often result in isolated or out of context shock situations becoming accepted as main stream truth.

The other side of this coin is the inherent lack of promotional skills many farmers have. They are poor at communicating effectively against such attacks, or even be able to put a defence forward for any procedures they use which appear wrong to an outside observer. Mulesing of lambs is one such classic example. Hence the need for a grass roots education for all Australians in the way our agricultural industries work.

Current attempts to bridge the city/rural divide are good, but often only reach the converted. Some young farmers are active on Twitter and Facebook, but I doubt the average city dweller subscribes to them. Is their content riveting enough to maintain urban dwellers

attention? I think not. Effective mass media communication is an art which takes training and practise to master, and no individual farmer has the expertise of profession outlets.

Other events such as Farm Day do get city people out onto farms for a short time. This again only appeals to those with an interest in doing so. I think most urban people believe that food will always be available in a shop near them, and if they have choice and competitive pricing they are happy. Those who make a conscious decision to buy Australian are to be applauded, but honestly many buy on price.

Successful rural reinvigoration can only be achieved by giving people true information and knowledge on the sector. If this is achieved they can take an informed position on any issue, no matter what it is, and act progressively.

I propose this process of knowledge needs to start at school. Australia now has a national curriculum which presents the perfect way for all children to be taught the same content. We accept that a subject like Australian history should be taught to all children, so I suggest that we need a new subject, or at least a module of an existing one, called 'Australian Agricultural Production and Resources' It would look at historical events, geographical features and crops we produce and sell. This will be a theory based subject and so will not require any digging of dirt or feeding of animals, allowing it to be delivered at every school. Of course field excursions would be a valuable part the content.

As adults we know that we probably groaned and rolled our eyes at the prospect of learning some subject or other, but at a point later in life called on that knowledge to make a career choice, or to complete some task at hand. Teaching the young mind is the golden opportunity for agriculture to break away from only being the realm of those born to it, and become a valued part of our society. It has to become valued more highly, because we all have a stake in agriculture whether we like it or not: WE ALL EAT. This often seems to be forgotten.

The scope for content can be quite diverse and should begin with a discussion of fire stick farming used by the traditional owners. The climate and geography of Australia creates many differing regions and so that can be looked at along with the farming practises within them. We also boast a strong innovative tradition, the invention of the stump jump plough, combine harvester and the breeding of the Federation wheat variety to name a few. It should also look at climate variability and economics.

The second part to my submission builds on the first and is to create a new class of employment I call the Dual Job. For example if you are an office worker in a CBD, wouldn't it be great to have the opportunity to get away from that for a while and work in the country? The same could be said for country people who could be given the chance to work in the city, this must broaden everybody's outlook and experience base. Job security in both workplaces would be essential.

This suggestion would of course need coordination between government, employers and unions, along with suitable training. The opportunities are there now with seasonal work for harvesting of many crops crying out for people. There are also jobs in child care, health, teaching and retail in rural areas which lack support.

Examples of this kind of thing do occur now within rural regions. Sons learn a trade before coming back on farm, farmer's wives work off farm for extra income, bringing their off farm expertise to the farm business.

To conclude, with knowledge comes the ability to make better informed decisions and a strong base on which to rebuild the Agriculture sector, supported by all communities. The resurrection of Ag will not come through one initiative, but through many working together. Politics and the media grab often want a single statement fix for a problem, alas in my opinion it is never that simple,

David Catford

My background in brief:

- I am a fourth generation farmer and have been part of our family farm since 1983, managing it since 1994. I am married to another fourth generation farmer, Andrea, and we have three children aged 19, 17 and 15.
- Our farm is mainly broad acre cropping, also with beef cattle and prime lamb production.
- I was educated both locally and at boarding school in Adelaide which has given me insights into city-country relationships
- I have served on Primary and Secondary school Governing councils, taking a turn as Chair of both.
- I have experienced the transition from the Australian Wheat Board was a government entity to a publicly listed company, to its takeover by Agrium. In the first instance it provided growers with a guaranteed wheat price, then becoming a servant of the shareholder, to today's foreign owners.
- I was part of a Regional Development Board initiative to start a value adding grain business between seven farming families between 2006 and 2010.
- My wife and I now operate a value adding lamb meat business, which caters directly to city customers. It allows us to achieve an acceptable price regardless of seasonal supply and demand.
- I believe Australia must support family based farm ownership as it is the most cost effective way to manage our land.