

SUBMISSION FOR WHITE PAPER ON AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTIVITY

Fire, flood and drought have ruled the Australian landscape since records have been available, and based on the botanical evidence provided by natural vegetation communities these conditions have been restraining and restructuring land use here for millennia past.

We should reasonably expect that any changes in agricultural systems aimed at improving productivity will have to operate against this background. Furthermore, the frequency, intensity and localities within which each external influence operates can be assumed to remain largely beyond immediate planning management.

Productivity depends on continuity of inputs. These can be human, affecting management and operational skills and the application of research, physical e.g. water supply and economic e.g. cash availability for capital and operating purposes.

Governments over the past two generations have been moving conspicuously away from supporting agricultural research. At a NSW Farmers pre-conference address I asked the head of the Department of Agriculture in NSW under then Minister Ian McDonald why research stations in the Northern Rivers were being closed and research staff made redundant. The reply was that the basic research conducted on the stations had gone as far as it could and modern computer programs were available to improve result recovery. The implication was that political expediency was relaxed about research findings being manipulated like social media brain bursts.

Research has certainly moved on from the basic exploration of plus and minus tests in greenhouses and field plots. Modern science dictates that improvements in productivity can with certainty be anticipated from a greater knowledge of genetic influences on cell function, on the chemical reactions associated with disease entry and control, genetic modifications affecting internal physiology for plant management during growth and harvesting and food management to control post-harvest waste. This is not a time to be shutting down agricultural research since long term improvement in agricultural productivity will not be achieved without investment in basic research at the genetic and micro-physiological level. The priorities for encouraging dedicated and high level agricultural research, set against the three dominant natural hazards identified earlier, are central to any program for improving long term productivity.

Political expediency probably boils down to keeping your seat in Parliament with all its perks and privileges and most importantly making sure your constituents will vote favourably next time. The rise of social media now means that there is a plethora of “popular” science swirling through MPs’ offices with a critical mass that can mask its triviality. This affects agricultural science as it relates to animal welfare, the use of chemicals, food fantasies and most alarmingly to the presentation of reports from research organisations favouring a political agenda. At some stage Government has to face the fact that this subliminal influence needs to be addressed, not by suppression, but by placing “popular science of the moment” content on the agenda when agricultural research priorities are being determined so that appropriate rebuttal (or acceptance) can be made openly.

Preventative barriers against the three natural hazards can be raised by using a “factory farming” approach for specific high value food crops. These enterprises are well developed in high population centres in Europe, for instance, where proximity to final markets overcomes major cost restraints from storage, handling and transport. The most obvious way for achieving similar ends in Australia is to have highly effective factories located alongside major metropolitan markets. The problem that then

arises is one of conflict of land use based on the relative returns from factory farming and real estate development.

An alternative is to encourage the establishment of high productivity agricultural factory production centres where there are natural advantages in energy availability and water, but where Government has an accepted responsibility to maintain effective transport infrastructure. Rail is the obvious answer where part of the delivery strategy can be integrated with the transportation system e.g. through temperature and atmosphere control.

With regard to water availability, it is time to have a long hard look at the facts around dam construction. Mention the word dam now and the full force of Green inspired social media claptrap is mobilised to present water storage as akin to the end of the world. The opposition is very carefully crafted to put fear into politicians depending on our short electoral cycle. Agriculture does not lend itself to short cycles – what happens this season affects farm productivity for seasons into the future and the infrastructure for farming has to be seen in the same time span as any other major infrastructure. I am worried about the degree to which political pressure has skewed the direction of research in our major organisations. I may be completely wrong, but CSIRO for instance, always seemed to be able to come up with a doom and gloom report on the climate whenever a Green influenced Government policy was about to be announced. I seem to remember reports about the agricultural potential of Northern Australia being highly pessimistic whereas now there seems to be a change in appreciation of northern potential. The term environmental is now being used so loosely and broadly as a mantra for doing nothing that it is about time we looked at the three primary restraints I defined earlier and set out practical priorities to address as far as possible their most restrictive effects. If in doing so it offends some social media lemmings so be it.

From an economic perspective, and with productivity depending on the ability to manage continuity of beneficial inputs, one of the best management tools available has been the Farm Management Deposit scheme. The scope for investing in farm management deposits could be broadened to reflect the higher costs now associated with larger and more specialised plant and equipment, replacement and maintenance. Government could also look at providing tax relief when funds are drawn back into the farm enterprise from other property mortgages not necessarily of themselves non-taxable.

Much publicity is now being directed towards a need for major investment in broad scale agriculture as diverse as grain, sugar, livestock and tree crops such as nuts. The experience with managed timber investment schemes is pertinent- success in primary industry depends as much on science and practical know-how now as it ever did and simply throwing cash at a project without competent and experienced preparation and on the ground management simply won't work.

Managed forestry schemes did provide an out for many landowners making low returns from relatively small properties and facing old age. The corollary to this was a decline in the rural population and economic distress for smaller townships. Large scale investment in agriculture will not address this issue.

Not all crops are either suitable for or attractive to large scale investment, and this includes fruit crops one of which is my interest. Retaining diversity of ownership of smaller viable properties benefits rural communities. The rise in popularity and success of self-managed super schemes has been important for continuity of management and re-investment of wisdom in smaller properties and should continue to be encouraged.