

Barbara Grey

12 December 2011

Committee Secretary
Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Committee
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Sir/Madam

Re: Inquiry into higher education and skills training to support future demand in agriculture and agribusiness in Australia

Brief Background

My husband Ralph and I are primary producers, of intensive irrigated cropping. We are located in the village of Mungindi (population 700), SW Queensland, and approximately 500 km from Brisbane. Our business primarily grows cotton, and has an average gross income of between \$1M and \$5M, depending on the seasons. We currently employ 4 permanents, 1 part-timer, and 2 casuals; during crop harvest we employ additional casuals.

We have witnessed considerable changes since we commenced farming in Mungindi in the 1980s. For example, in those early days the telephone consisted of a 'party line', a single line with multiple independent connections managed by a manual exchange operator. This was extremely primitive when compared to today, whereby we have instant telephone and internet access when standing in the middle of a farm field.

In the context of our ever-changing, evolving landscape, we will discuss the education and skills training situation, the challenges and possible solutions as it relates to our business and our industry, against the Committee's Terms of Reference.

- **The adequacy of funding and priority given by governments at the federal, state, and territory level to agriculture and agribusiness higher education and vocational education and training**

We believe that current levels of funding, and the priority given, are inadequate. The problem starts with the commitment of governments at the primary-school, commencement levels of education, with the progressive reduction of agricultural-related content in the school curriculum. With little or no awareness of the important and valuable role agriculture plays in providing our nation's food and fibre, the consequence (in our increasingly urbanised landscape) is a public which possesses a narrow or non-existent understanding of career opportunities in agriculture or related industries.

The answer rests with support for agricultural content in our school curriculums. With this then goes a dedicated commitment, both within and outside our industries, to promoting clear career pathways.

Much also rests with how we portray and promote an agricultural occupation. For example, being mindful of the language we use, as illustrated by the traditional term “farmer” (with its connotations of long days in the hot sun working manually from dawn to dark) versus the somewhat more appropriate term “professional agriculturalist”. When we started farming, a tractor was a relatively crude engine with set tyres, horse-power, lights, and if lucky, an enclosed cabin. Today, the sophisticated machine requires considerable operator skill, equipped with auto-steering, GPS/satellite guidance, application technology/mapping, infinitely variable transmission, and implement steering.

If we consider the vast changes in the agricultural landscape over the past 30 years, what will the operating environment look like in 2050? With certainty we can expect mammoth changes, and we must therefore ask, will Australia be ready to feed and clothe not only our population but the expected burgeoning global population? Will we be able to meet the demand and take advantage of opportunities? We have to be ready to manage and operate equipment and technology that has as yet not been created or invented, to address production circumstances that we cannot imagine.

- **The reasons and impacts of the decline in agricultural and related educational facilities**

We ask ourselves, where does the “decline” start, and we believe it rests with the disconnect between the Australian consumer and their knowledge of where their clean, green food and fibre comes from. The once-strong connection between those people who live in metropolitan, urban areas with a relative who lives and works in rural, regional Australia has diminished. As previously noted, the lack of personal connection and insight in to Australia’s agricultural production has been compounded by the gradual decline/withdrawal of agricultural-related subjects from the education curriculum.

The outcome then becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, with students who reach tertiary level study with little or no exposure to careers in agriculture or related industries. This is compounded by the lack of marketing emphasis on careers in agriculture. The impact of this at the farm and industry levels is a lack of skilled Australians prepared to undertake work in agriculture.

- **Solutions to address the widening gap between skilled agricultural labour supply and demand**

With the increasing competition for capable labour, both permanent and casual, and the difficulty in attracting Australians to live west of the Great Dividing Range, in our business we have had to increasingly rely on the employment of ‘back-packers’ to fill our labour requirements. Overseas back-packers enjoy coming to Australia for a working holiday, and with their short-term work focus (and at a considerable cost to our business) the two words ‘working’ and ‘holiday’ often become confused.

While presenting one option to satisfy a labour requirement, it constitutes a false on-farm economy. With their limited 3-month tenure, the training expenditure is considerable and on-going as we train each new incumbent, the majority of whom have not had any prior agricultural experience.

We contend a short- to medium-term solution would be to extend the visa options available through the introduction of something along the lines of an Agricultural Training Visa. This would have a minimum 12 month term, though preferably with up to three year tenure, for people coming to work in Australia's agricultural industries. The 12 month term could be particularly appealing to younger people looking to pursue a 'gap year'. A key part of the Visa's success lies in its administration in 'real time', that is, it must not involve a protracted processing time.

The Visa would be more effective and efficient means of delivering on-farm training. It would also provide one way to address the increasing competition we face with the mining and energy industries. The Visa needs to be tied to and focussed on agricultural-related industries, as we believe that if opened up to our competitors, we will immediately lose our candidates to these well-resourced energy industries.

While we hear and appreciate the argument that training expenditure should be directed to Australians, the reality of the situation is that there are insufficient Australians prepared to commit to living in regional, rural or remote areas, or to an agricultural job. We recently ran an advertisement for a permanent position as a farm mechanic, and received nil response. In the past 9 months we have employed 6 back packers, of which we still have 2. This is far from our preferred scenario, but the only one available to us.

- **The impacts of any shortages on agricultural research**

The government's commitment to research, in partnership with producers and industry stakeholders (for example, Cotton Cooperative Research Centre, Cotton Research and Development Corporation, Cotton Australia, Cotton Seed Development) has resulted in the Australian industry growing cotton by world's best practice. *Our industry's viability has been, and continues to be, underpinned by productivity gains achieved by dedicated research and development.*

Every year there are many and varied challenges that face our industry and agriculture at large. To site one example, dedicated research to address water use in our production cycle of this critically limited resource, has lead us to be the most water-use efficient cotton producers in the world. Now our industry faces the challenges of carbon emissions, herbicide and pesticide resistance, environmental stewardship, urban encroachment and mining encroachment, and climate change to name a few.

Primary producers and industry stakeholders need the on-going commitment and financial support of government agencies to invest in all stages of the research and development along the supply chain, if we are to maintain our position as the best food and fibre producers in the world. The government's progressive reduction in research and development funding does not send an encouraging or positive signal to those students considering a career in agricultural-related sciences.

Given the time it takes for our scientists to acquire their professional qualifications and practical experience, we believe the actions taken now will have enormous ramifications for future R & D.

While the face of farming is becoming ever-more sophisticated, more demands are being placed on the efficiency and effectiveness of primary producers. Higher production with the resource base either diminishing, becoming more expensive, or restricted, or through increasing mandatory charges, for example OH & S compliance, water availability issues, roads and transport charges. An expectation that agriculture's industry stakeholders can self-fund the necessary research and development is unfeasible, and not in the greater public's interest if we are to maintain a national position of clean, green primary production, and strong food security.

- **The economic impacts of labour shortages on Australia's export oriented agricultural industries**

We are primarily cotton produces, which is an exported commodity. We are often not in the position to grow opportunity crops when seasonal conditions allow, owing to a shortage of skilled and semi-skilled workers. In our business, it is one thing to make an investment plan around your machinery, but another to make such a plan around your labour. It is increasingly difficult to attract capable staff to rural, regional areas.

We would like to be in a position to seize the opportunities with the growing demand from Asia for food, however, we are severely limited in our human resource capacity to respond.

Thank you for the opportunity to present our views on these important issues.

Yours faithfully

Barbara Grey