

Submission to the Australian Federal Government Senate Inquiry

“Higher Education and Skills Training to Support Future Demand in Agriculture and Agribusiness in Australia”

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Brief background on Norfolk Island

Norfolk Island is a self-governing external territory of Australia located off the north east coast of New South Wales. Norfolk Island is approximately 8 km long and 5 km wide, and also includes two small, uninhabited islands (Nepean Island and Phillip Island) which are located to the south of the main island.

Norfolk Island is important as part of Australia’s European history. Initially settled six weeks after the founding settlement at Sydney, it is one of Australia’s oldest territories. As an area of convict settlement spanning the era of transportation to eastern Australia between 1788 and 1855, Norfolk Island provides one of the foremost national examples of a convict cultural landscape. In March of 1790, Norfolk Island received some 300 new people to its shore, and the reef its first British ship. The ships "Sirius" and "Supply" had brought two companies of Marines plus families of convicts and their children from Sydney, where dwindling supplies of food had become a serious problem. The 540-ton " Sirius" and most of its provisions were lost on the coral reef in Norfolk Island.

The island's main purpose was to provide food for Sydney¹. Maize, wheat, potatoes, cabbage, timber, flax and fruit of all kinds grew well in Norfolk Island. The population peaked at more than 1,100, and the emancipated convict families became the first 114 pioneer farmers in Australia and cleared about a quarter of the island.

The convict history of Norfolk Island resulted in the Kingston and Arthur’s Vale Historic Area, along with other Australian convict sites, receiving World Heritage status in July 2010.

Current economic situation on Norfolk Island

Without Commonwealth government assistance the Norfolk Island Government would have run out of money to pay suppliers by June 2011.²

Who is Eco Norfolk Foundation Inc?

EcoNorfolk Foundation is a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting ecologically sustainable development in and from Norfolk Island and aims to foster leading edge, progressive research within a global framework and as a result, address local environmental issues in parallel.

¹ History of Australia by Arthur W. Jose 1924

² Norfolk Island Government (2010a) Administration of Norfolk Island Financial Statements for the year ended 30 June 2010, Norfolk Island Government: Norfolk Island.

As the Founder of Eco Norfolk Foundation Inc I was asked to prepare a brief submission to this inquiry identifying the key factors that inhibit the development of a sustainable level of agribusiness in this remote community.

In discussion with a number of members of Eco Norfolk and others involved in related primary production and/or environmental matters on the island, we have restricted this submission to addressing the two key issues; freight costs and access to higher education, particularly vocational education and training.

The major problem associated with the high costs of freight relate to the lack of any freight or other rebate this matter has already been discussed by the Senate. See Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Legislation Committee, Hansard 12 February 2012 page 107.

Firstly the huge freight costs both to and from the island mean that production is limited to local use only. This means a significant amount of food which could be grown on the island is imported. It also means that products with a value added component including dairy products such as cheese, and animal products including meat, skins, wool etc can not be supplied to the mainland.

An additional concern regarding the excessive freight cost relates directly to the capacity of farmers who wish to develop organic certification. Currently the cost of non toxic materials means that simply to grow enough for local use fertilizers must be used. While many producers would prefer to use organic fertilizers it is financially uneconomic.

At this time a number of small producers have simply found the cost of materials such as food for pigs and poultry renders productions completely unmanageable particularly when trying to compete with bulk purchases of frozen meats from Australia.

For example a local small farm, Pig and Whistle which until recently ran between 200-300 free range poultry, bred pork for local butchering and consumption and maintained a small breeding herd of cattle has ceased production. The owner was unable to sell her pork as once the feed and butchering costs were included she could not compete with bulk frozen meat. The wholesale import of shelled bulk eggs meant the local market of restaurants vanished. She now has 30 chickens, just enough to supply friends, no pigs and 3 cows.

Norfolk Island has the capacity to develop a strong market for food and other agricultural products given its reputation as one of the most unpolluted places on the planet however the current unsubsidised freight costs mean this is simply not an option. Were such subsidies, which exist for King Island and Tasmania in place it would encourage development in this area. Such infrastructure as exists is old and would not meet Australian production standards however local small producers do not have the capacity to extend or upgrade. Despite a large population of cows no pasteurizing facilities exist and it is not within the island's means to establish one.

Secondly the dwindling incomes of the islands small producers meant that the skills built through generations are being lost. Families no longer can keep their children here supported by the small holding. There is no way most can afford to pay for them to attend agricultural college which would at least enable the young to earn hard cash in the Australian economy with the potential to return to the family farm at a later date.

A significant number of the island young have gone to the mines in WA and QLD where the skills and/or qualifications they acquire have no application here. They are seen as being lost to the community.

Within The Final Report Norfolk Island Economic Development Report Recommendation 2. Human Capacity Development, it is suggested that new roles of administering the apprenticeship financial support scheme be developed. It also suggests the need for a community information source for accessing adult education.

While the school has been fortunate in being able to provide education from kindergarten to Year 12 there is a serious lack of further educational development. While there is some Vocational Education and Training capacity it is primarily on a fly in fly out basis. Experience in other remote communities' shows that this is a serious hindrance to the capacity to receive accreditation and qualification. This is particularly relevant given that the full national accreditation system still relies on State/Territory acceptance. This is also a problem for islanders from a New Zealand background.

In the higher education sector it is beyond the capacity of most local families to support children through a 3 or 4 year degree and, has been shown again from other remote communities, the disconnection from family and community does not auger well for completion.

A number of families have indicated that the only way for their children to receive vocational qualifications or higher education is through the mining sector or the military. This loss of the future adults of the island has increased the slow but steady trickle of families leaving the island.

Conclusion:

The Island is in urgent need of the following:

1. Some relief in the form of freight subsidy particularly for agricultural imports and exports
2. Infrastructure development in the agricultural sector
3. Support for both distance learning and transport costs for mainland vocational and higher education
4. Provision of a more coordinated information system regarding access to all post secondary educational opportunities.

Finally:

The example of the Pig & Whistle is, it had a side benefit in that methane production from the effluent could have produce electricity. The island has a heritage of food security, it appears to be losing this capacity due to bureaucratic overburden. It should be a primary facet of education policy on the island, the risk to the island is not diminishing it is getting worse due to world fuel prices. The calorific content of a hundred dollar bill is not high, when you are standing in a supermarket with nothing on its shelf, because a ship could not get in due to inclement weather or the cost of transporting of imported product suddenly becomes uneconomic. That is why local production of food should be of paramount importance, the capacity building for this to happen is even of more import.

Thank you for the opportunity to realise these issues with the Committee.

References :

History of Australia by Arthur W. Jose 1924

Norfolk Island Government (2010a) Administration of Norfolk Island Financial Statements for the year ended 30 June 2010, Norfolk Island Government: Norfolk Island.

The Final Report Norfolk Island Economic Development Report

Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Legislation Committee, Hansard 12 February 2012 page 107.