



Submission No 30

Inquiry into Australia's Overseas Representation

Name: Mr J Laurie
President

Organisation: National Farmers Federation

8 February 2012

Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade
Department of House of Representatives
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600
AUSTRALIA

Dear Committee Secretary,

Inquiry into Australia's overseas representation

The National Farmers' Federation (NFF) was established in 1979 and is the peak national body representing farmers, and more broadly, agriculture across Australia. The NFF's membership comprises all of Australia's major agricultural commodities. Operating under a federated structure, individual farmers join their respective state farm organisation and/or national commodity council. These organisations form the NFF. Following a restructure of the organisation in 2009 a broader cross section of the agricultural sector is now able to become members of the NFF, including organisations from the breadth and the length of the supply chain.

The NFF notes that the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade has been commissioned to inquire into and report on Australia's overseas representation. The Committee has been charged with examining:

- the activities that Australia's diplomatic posts must undertake;
- their geographic location and spread;
- the appropriate level of staffing, including locally engaged staff; and
- the affect of e-diplomacy and information and communications technology on the activities of diplomatic posts.

The NFF has had significant engagement with Australia's diplomatic posts over many years, particularly on trade advocacy matters. The assistance provided by Heads of mission and staff on these occasions has been invaluable in the NFF achieving its desired outcomes through its international engagement.

The NFF has focussed heavily on international engagement to educate and communicate with farmers, Governments and the broader community about the rationale for our trade policy and the advantages to agriculture and the broader global economy in pursuing trade liberalisation. This has involved a number of overseas delegations to key markets such as Japan, the United States and Korea. On each of

these occasions, Australia's diplomatic posts have been an invaluable source of information, advice and assistance in arranging agendas and facilitating the visits.

As an example, in recent times the NFF has been a recipient of funding under the Australia-Japan Foundation to undertake a program to build links within the Japanese market with the aim of assisting to conclude the Free Trade Agreement. This advocacy has focussed on building ties with the Japanese national farm group, JA Zenchu. To date, this program has been extremely successful thanks to the assistance of the Australian Embassy staff in Tokyo who have ensured that our advocacy is well targeted and that advocacy opportunities in Japan during our visits are maximised.

The NFF also notes with concern that the global trading environment is becoming more challenging through an escalation of behind-the-border measures and technical trade barriers. It is in such areas that Australia's overseas postings such as the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF) Agriculture Counsellor positions have been vital in facilitating the smooth flow of product.

Under budgetary pressure, DAFF has recently reduced its presence of technical counsellors in its European and United States posts. This loss of 'in country' technical advice limits Australia's ability to respond quickly to technical trade and market access issues and minimise disruption to trade. The NFF urges the Government to provide additional technical capacity through a greater presence of technical specialists in overseas posts in response to a growing need to resolve technical market access issues in markets such as the United States, Mexico and Russia.

In addition, the NFF notes that the agriculture portfolio is expanding as issues such as climate change, food safety and food security, biosecurity, animal welfare and environmental sustainability require more policy focus – and likely compliance issues for third country suppliers. This again reinforces the importance of Australia overseas postings as a reliable source of market intelligence on matters that could potentially be a restriction on the flow of agricultural goods.

The NFF has valued the assistance provided by the Australian Government postings in our international engagement strategies. For further information regarding the NFF views on this matter, please contact the NFF General Manager – Policy, Charlie McElhone on (02) 6269 5666.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J. Laurie', with a stylized flourish at the end.

JOCK LAURIE
President