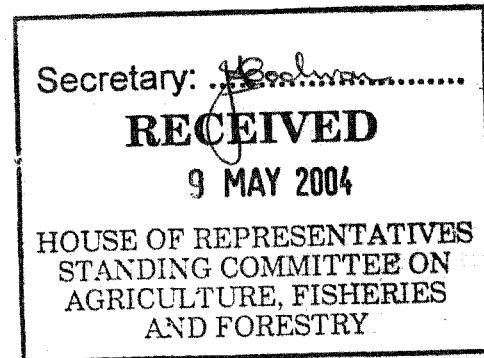


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4 May 2005

The Secretary
Agriculture Fisheries & Forestry Committee
House of Representatives
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600



Dear Chairperson,

I welcome this enquiry as I am strongly of the opinion that agricultural education in this country is in crisis. I cannot speak for Fisheries or Forestry, however I believe synergies would exist if Agriculture, Veterinary Science, Fisheries and Forestry were taught at one institution.

Agricultural training differs from other industries in that education and the industry do not interface to the degree that exist in other areas such as Medicine, Law and the trades. Our schools of agriculture and veterinary science do not interface with the real world of agriculture. In New Zealand and the USA, where I do have experience, the relationship between the education sector and the industry is strong and relevant.

One group in Victoria that does interface is the McKinnon group at the Melbourne Veterinary School, Werribee which is an exception; it offers an extension service to farmers. This interface has led to changes to the Veterinary course to make it more relevant to industry needs. The vet schools do have a problem servicing two distinct sectors: a growing city, small animal sector, and a rural industry large animal sector, some of which are in serious decline together with the horse sector. Despite the doom and gloom wool is still a major export.

In our beef business we work with both USA and NZ schools of agriculture these schools are actively involved in teaching, research and a great deal of extension work.

The interaction by schools of Agriculture with the Industry via extension activities, particularly in farm management is strong and welcomed by our counterparts involved in running rural businesses.

They also differ in that academic snobbery does not exist. That is the universities teach everything from a Ph.D to a certificate or diploma course, ie a reader in Plant Science could be supervising a Ph.D student while at the same time lecturing to a farm management diploma students.

Social interaction at the training level is very important in the agricultural sector. It is the start of the networking process which leads to greater interaction in later life between people in research, extension, service sector and rural management. Playing sport and other cultural activities are an important part of life-time networks.

Failure of Industry to Interface with Education Programs

Unlike Medicine and Law, agricultural students do not have to complete what I would regard as serious practical work on rural farm businesses. Only Marcus Oldham College, Geelong, has serious and stringent requirements for industry work as a formal part of the course.

Marcus Oldham College as a result has excellent industry contact and relevance as shown by the fact that they are one of the few educational institutes in agriculture that has more students applying than places.

Historically the Melbourne School of Agriculture had a relationship with the farming sector; however in the 1970s this seemed to change and the focus became one of training people for the Public Service, mainly the Department of Agriculture and Research Communication with the Real Industry diminished and for all intents hardly exists today.

The result is we have governments being advised by people with little or no understanding or sympathy for the real industry battling a very difficult climatic environment. This would apply very much to our bureaucratic veterinarians in head office.

Today we have very few academics who can relate to producers. When I was President of the Beef Improvement Association we obtained most of our speakers from the USA universities. Farm Management and Extension is a forgotten subject with only Bill Malcolm at Melbourne University capable of relating to producers – a sad state of affairs.

The very innovative Birchip Cropping Group in Victoria has been set up by farmers to do what our education system is not doing.

Hence I believe a serious change in direction and thinking towards agriculture including Food Science and Veterinary Science is needed.

Recently poor policy-making in the area of Johne's and the National Livestock Identification Scheme would not have occurred and has not occurred in New Zealand or the USA. As a result I believe of the close relationship between industry and training in these countries.

To implement such policies with major industry implications that should have required major feasibility or cost benefit studies and environmental impact statements and consultation with those in the industry to be effective indicates to me problems in the training sector.

The USA Beef Industry, for instance, has conducted two industry audits as a basis for policy-making and planning. Why we haven't conducted one is a mystery to me. Does it mean we haven't got people trained who could conduct such an audit, or does our industry still have elements of corruption that an audit would risk exposing them.

Structural Change

I can only speak for Victoria where in fact food production and processing is still the core business of the State, a change in one state may lead to changes in others.

Victoria badly needs a centre of agricultural excellence to support its major industry. Is it relevant to have two schools of agriculture at Melbourne and Latrobe and a school of agribusiness at Monash, while veterinary science is taught at Melbourne and Werribee? A centre in agriculture that combined the three schools of agriculture and agribusiness together, that got itself involved in providing everything from a Ph.D to a certificate in agriculture and become involved in extension is needed.

A centre of excellence in agriculture could be set up outside of Melbourne and a centre such as Werribee or Geelong where research centres are already in place and where facilities for social and cultural activities exist for both students and staff.

Victoria I believe, badly needs a new innovative approach to agriculture that would increase the interaction between industry and training. Agriculture needs a fresh image to portray it for what it is – an innovative, very high tech sector of the economy.

Agricultural education, whether it be livestock, crops, fish or trees, the prime purpose should be to train people whose purpose is to improve productivity and sustainability in agriculture and food production. Sadly the lines of communication between industry and training are very limited at present and this focus is on industry negatives.

My observation of Agriculture in the Secondary School programs is that it is declining as a subject and that pupils who choose this option are regarded by the system as second rate. The impression I have gained that the emphasis seems to be on land degradation, salinity and revegetation which are the negatives that Agriculture is subject to in the press. The positives of modern soil biology, Plant and Animal science and husbandry need emphasis.

Modern Agriculture is innovative, high-tech and exciting. It involves for instance computer genetic technology, GPS sowing, satellite mapping, water probes, innovative fencing, modern silage, harvesting and feeding out. The science of ruminant nutrition particularly in the Dairy Industry is probably more advanced than Human Nutrition. IVF technology was largely developed by co-operative works between Melbourne Women's Hospital and Animal Scientists using sheep.

Marketing of Food and Fibre is another avenue where innovation and imagination using our best brains is badly needed. The USA Beef Industry is changing from a commodity mentality to a product branded beef industry, a turn around that sees beef consumption per head increasing in the USA.

I recently attended an Executive Development program for Primary Producers in Christchurch where we were exposed to the New Zealand Merino wool progress via a bright young chap who had developed the ICEBREAKER woollen clothing concept and turned it into a multi million dollar business.

Today's youth are consistently being exposed to agriculture's negatives which I am now aware starts at the school level. The State system could and should provide schools of excellence for secondary students. I refer you to Senator M Fifield's maiden speech to the Senate where he highlights this need.

NSW has this system in place at Farrer College, Tamworth and at least two other colleges.

Victoria is groping with what to do with the Old Department of Agriculture Colleges of Dookie, Longerenong and Glenormiston. There is a need to explore the case whether one or more of these colleges should train Secondary students in Agriculture.

The old collegefarms should be Commercial Demonstration Farms run by the University Extension Service with Commercial Management and financial returns made available to all and sundry, with a view to bringing the centres of learning into contact with industry.

Lincoln, New Zealand stopped training students in farm skills on college farms in the 1950's. Farm skills are now learnt on real world farms where work place discipline and human interaction is important.

Some three years ago I attended a junior farm fair in Wisconsin with my friend Professor Bob Nasbaum from the University of Wisconsin who was judging the hogs, the lambs and the steers being paraded by proud and energetic young Americans. There I met a young lady who was paid by the Federal Government in Washington to indoctrinate 10,000 kids in her area how important agriculture was to America. This needs to happen in our country. It is something the Federal Government could put in place immediately.

A serious change in attitude direction and thinking towards Agricultural and Veterinary Science is needed. With all due respect to others I would rate the top 10 per cent of Rural Business Managers the top Managers in Australia given the difficult environment that they operate in is an unreliable climate and an increasingly hostile and negative bureaucracy.

Donald B. Lawson OAM, M.Ag.Sc.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Don Lawson", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION HELD BY THE COMMITTEE

ATTACHMENT TO SUBMISSION NO. 15

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SUBMISSIONS ARE HELD IN THE COMMITTEE OFFICE**