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**Submission to the Inquiry into the role of government in assisting
Australian farmers to adapt to the impacts of climate change**

We write this submission in a bid to highlight the importance of **social issues** in understanding farmer experience of climate change. Our comments are derived from our research on this matter, and in the case of Prof Frank Vanclay, a professor of rural and environmental sociology, a lifetime of social research into farmer motivations and concerns.

We describe the research we are undertaking into farmers' responses to climate change in some detail on the next page. Our key finding is that, although the majority of farmers believe that climate change is occurring, there is widespread confusion about its causes, and they are not convinced by the suggested need for urgent, on-going adaptation and mitigation.

The significance of this is that **resistance to change is not just about individual reactions, it is a broader social issue.**

The most important message is that this is a social issue, not just a technical issue. There is no silver bullet. This means that a diverse array of actions and pathways is required.

More action is needed to be taken to support farmers' ability to change, including the provision of information, financial incentives and social support.

On the next page we provide a summary of our research that informs these key points.

We are willing to be contacted for any further discussion on these matters.

Yours sincerely



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Community resistance to climate change: a case study of Tasmanian farmers

Aysha Fleming and Frank Vanclay

Introduction

Arguably farmers need to prepare for climate change in order to create benefits and avoid costs. Yet resistance to taking action to adapt to projected changes in climate or to mitigate emissions is widespread. The complexity of climate information, confusion in how to act, as well as the uncertainty about the efficacy of required actions and the consequences of these actions, all create resistance to changing behaviour. Knowledge of how farmers are currently taking up or resisting action in response to climate change is needed to better inform industry, policy makers, researchers and the broader community. Understanding the reasons behind resistance requires a shift from individualistic framings of reaction, to considerations of the wider structures of society and culture that affect all decisions and opinions.

Some 62 members of the agricultural community in Tasmania were interviewed using an unstructured conversational research method that sought to elicit the major issues facing farmers and their understandings and responses to climate change. The interviewees included 22 apple growers, 29 dairy farmers and 11 consultants. Although the research was based in Tasmania, there is no reason to believe that the results are not more widely applicable.

Key Results

Most (77%) think climate change is occurring, and about half (52%) believe that they have made personal observations of landscape change or change on their farm they link to climate change. Yet despite accepting that climate change is occurring, only some (19%) think it is anthropogenic in origin and the largest group (34%) was undecided about the cause.

Some (39%) were worried about the proposed inclusion of agriculture in the carbon pollution reduction scheme. They were distrustful of government actions taken to penalize farmers, especially during times of drought and financial strain when they are already struggling. They were angry that their current efforts to be environmentally sustainable were not being recognised or valued, especially as carbon stores in pasture, soil, orchards or shelter belts will not be recognized, at least under current plans.

Some (34%) are worried about the future of the planet to the point that their concerns inhibit action. They feel overwhelmed, that the planet is already on a path to destruction, or they feel that it is beyond the scope of their lifetime to create a solution and that it will be a problem for future generations.

While some (27%) see relative benefit for agriculture in Tasmania from a changing climate, they are unsure how to capitalize on this opportunity, beyond 'staying in the game'.

A similar number (26%) believe they are already taking action to target climate change, although these actions are generally responses to the current drought. Recognition of the need to capture, store and manage water on farm is high, but actions to prepare for reductions in the availability of water (whether through reduced rainfall and run-off, or legal restrictions) are steadfastly ignored.

A few (18 %) distrust scientists to the extent that they believe climate change is ‘just another Y2K’, invented for media hype and money. It should be noted that many farmers were required to outlay much effort and cost to become Y2K compliant and they now feel duped by what they now perceive as a scam. This distrust creates a great deal of resistance to even considering the idea of climate change.

Resistance

Resistance to change is not just about individual reactions, it is a broader social issue. This means that resistance does not occur within an individual’s head, or because of an individual’s personal characteristics – education level, personal motivations or situation, skills or beliefs. Resistance is created by common perceptions, norms and values held in society. In our society currently, resistance is being created because climate change is perceived as being:

- ‘just’ another environmental or global threat,
- too big to influence,
- an unmanageable and inequitable financial burden, and;
- too uncertain to warrant major action.

If climate change is seen as yet another environmental or global threat like pollution or the hole in the ozone layer, it is common to place blame elsewhere, for example on other industries (e.g. energy, transport) or other countries (e.g. China, India). It is also common to wait for a technological solution that will have relatively little personal effect (e.g. banning CFCs). Climate change is not currently perceived by farmers as something sufficiently urgent to warrant drastic changes in their lifestyle or farm practices.

If climate change is perceived as being too big to influence, because climate is something intangible, invisible and seemingly out of human control, it can lead to rejection. Climate change is dismissed outright, and can lead to feeling overwhelmed or hopeless.

Mitigation of climate change is seen by many farmers as a financial burden, rather than an opportunity. This can create anger and stress, because profit margins are further reduced and farmers risk viability. As a result, cost-cutting measures that are even more harmful to the environment may be utilised. There are potential financial benefits in acting now in response to climate change, but these are not widely recognised.

The uncertainty of climate change is often promoted by scientific and media reports. However, there is sufficient consensus about climate change amongst scientists, and while scientists say action should occur, many farmers are still unconvinced. While the future is always uncertain, the concept of uncertainty creates confusion amongst farmers. Ideally, managing for uncertainty should be about increasing options and buffering risk. However, climate change is not perceived by farmers as a likely future scenario to prepare for and protect against. Rather, climate change is perceived by farmers as being a distant event which may or may not occur, and, if it does occur, will require future changes rather than incremental changes now.

Recommendations

Our research suggests that although the majority of farmers believe that climate change is occurring, there is widespread confusion about its causes, and they are not necessarily convinced by the suggested need for urgent adaptation and mitigation. As a result, we believe that:

1. there is an on-going need for clear statements that the science is decided and the government will act on climate change;
2. there is a need for more research into the beneficial actions agricultural industries can take, and active extension of this information to farmers. However, more than just information is necessary. Support for farmers to implement actions and to work together is needed. This needs to include financial incentives, opportunities for building social networks, collaborations, recognition and rewards.
3. finally, the social value farmers hold and exercise as 'stewards of the land' needs to be recognised and encouraged.