

10 September 2008

The Secretary
Senate Select Committee on Agricultural and Related Industries
PO BOX 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Submission to the inquiry into food production in Australia

Dear Sir,

There are two critical factors that interact both directly and indirectly upon food affordability and the ability of farmers to remain viable in the long term - land and water. People, agriculture and industry all require land and water, and all three are linked, intertwined or joined in some way; separating any or all will have detrimental consequences for consumers and business in general. Water is one of the most important issues facing Australia in the 21st century, however a less well documented issue is the lack of or affordability of suitable agricultural land particularly in areas relatively close to major capital cities.

It has been suggested by some that moving production areas to northern Australia would solve the current water crisis gripping the Murray-Darling basin. Unfortunately this idea has two fatal flaws; the vast majority of the Australian population live in the eastern and southern states, and affordability resulting from often complex logistical operations to place food into the various markets. Some production in the north has scope and will continue to increase from its current production levels, but food production needs to be in locations close to major markets. This ensures a ready supply of fresh produce (delivered daily to markets) transported over short distances to local or central markets (reducing transport costs) to consumers at an affordable cost. Having production areas close to major centres is particularly important in terms of minimising input costs (fertilisers, chemicals labour etc), and the economics of having established infrastructure are obvious.

It is time the community, industry representatives, and governments consider ideas that might have once been considered uneconomical or ideas that were considered outside the square. Australia has significant infrastructure already in the southern and eastern states; however what we do not have is sufficient water and appropriate government policy and regulation protecting valuable agricultural land in these areas. Instead of the ridiculous housing policies of this country, which seem to promote the spreading of cities without any sound infrastructure, governments at all levels need to re-examine how cities are planned and establish community expectations. The

population of many Australian cities have changed, along with expectations regarding housing, with preference often given to affordable unit/apartment/townhouse accommodation that is close to major infrastructure (trains, shops etc).

If Australian agriculture is to remain in this country it needs land and water, without these two critical elements Australians can expect to pay higher food prices, suffer massive fluctuations in food supply, and without surety of water and land, farmers will not remain viable. The environment will suffer in many ways, but particularly in terms of the investment of time and money by farmers who are the custodians of the land. Agriculture does need to change and accept that water is finite; however water is needed to ensure the long term viability of agriculture in this country. If production levels fall and Australians consume greater quantities of imported produce, the probability of massive fluctuations in price and availability are a real concern. Clearly past agricultural practices have had a detrimental impact on the environment, and any future actions and policy regarding land use and water need to be considered when targeting policy and regulation in this area.

Water management and allocation need to reflect climate change i.e. greater funding made available to allow farmers to change to more efficient means of distributing and using water. Also drought and climate change have impacted on rainfall and subsequent river flows, so water allocations need to reflect this. However, it is time to think outside the square and consider ideas that were either too expensive or considered unviable. Other countries have invested significantly in sourcing and distributing water for urban, industry and rural uses – unfortunately Australia seems have thought it unnecessary to do this, hoping that the drought will break and climate change will not affect us.

Land and water are the corner stones of agriculture and for that matter human civilization, I submit to the senate inquiry into food production in Australia that for food prices to be affordable, farming to be viable, and ensuring the protection of the environment:

- Arable land needs to be protected and “enshrined” as agricultural land, which must include areas in and around major cities
- Access to a constant supply of water is essential (water is needed to ensure urban populations grow and prosper, agriculture to remain viable and competitive, and to ensure our river systems remain healthy. We have to accept climate change is here, so while efficiencies gained through better water use will be critical, all the changes in the world won’t help without water).

- Food production should predominantly take place in and around major urban centres.
- The majority of all fresh produce should be produced in Australia.
- There needs to be a strong focus on science and agricultural R & D.

Regards,

Gavin Chirgwin