

“Farmers, their Mission, their Work, their Difficulties & their Hopes.”

By Phil Jefferys (Australia)



Farming is all about the ‘Future’, our future, the world’s future. Farming is at the very basis of human survival on this planet and society depends on us. How do we work with and earn the respect and cooperation of those who often take us for granted? The way we as individual farmers and groups care for the land and produce food, may well determine if our grandchildren’s grandchildren have a future on this earth.

There are many issues challenging today’s farmers, several of them are: -
Farmers worldwide are not receiving an adequate return from the sale of their produce and we need a fair price to prepare for the future. We are price takers not price makers. Governments are doing away with marketing boards in favour of the ‘free market or free trade.’ Too often markets are our master rather than our servant. For instance, the purchasing power of supermarkets dictate the price Australian dairy farmers receive for their milk. These prices are very close to the cost of production leaving little room for the farmer to plan for the long term. ‘Fair trade’ will assist farmers more.

Powerful multinationals need to get their houses in order. The behavior of certain super markets, the oil and gas industry has shown scant regard for the health of the local populations. I think of the ruthless way some seeds companies have treated farmers who stood for justice as these companies developed their GMO products. This throws into deep question the role-played by governments in these negotiations. The Western world should not be surprised if the Eastern world mistrusts us while we harbour this kind of behavior.

Water has almost become the new gold. Climate variability is causing fluctuations in rainfall with some regions receiving low rainfall and others flooding. Human intervention and pollution, droughts and desertification of land, melting polar ice caps and glaciers receding at alarming rates will affect the lives of us all. Not one of us is able to live for long without water.

I have visited farmers in parts of Asia, Africa, South America and Europe and I receive articles and reports from colleagues who live in developing and in developed countries. I recently received a paper written by the Canadian Farmer’s Union. It is a sobering report comparing economic indicators from 1988 to 2007.

This paper is titled **“Free Trade”: Is it working for farmers?**

It states in part, “Farmers have doubled and re-doubled exports, adopted new technologies, switched to high-value crops, and poured billions of dollars of investments into our farms. At the initiative of our governments, we’ve become signatories to trade agreements. Farmers have done everything Free Trade and globalisation advocates recommended. The result is the worst farm income crisis since the 1930s.”

Question: Why hasn’t Free Trade yielded the predicted benefits for farmers and rural communities? Answer: These agreements don’t just shift trade flows, they shift power. If you would like to read the details of this paper, please see me after this session.

The effects and consequences of climate change and global warming will be the sting in the tail to all of the above and more. It seems to me that there are many Ostriches out there with their heads in the sand. How far do we have to continue down this path to self-destruction before we begin to see the light? What will it take to wake humanity up?

I want you to imagine that we are part of the crowd of thousands in the grandstands watching the World Rugby Cup Grand Final between France and Australia. The grandstand is on fire, burning fiercely and there are no fire brigades or emergency services to help us. We must decide for ourselves if or how we are to save ourselves. This imagined scenario is not unlike our challenge as farmers as we plan for the future of world farming and our survival.

At this conference I am interested in what it is that French farmers and agriculturalists can do for world agriculture. What is it that you from this country can offer to bring about the changes that are necessary to create sustainable food production for us all? What is your mission in life? Ponder this as we investigate these issues and challenges during the next few days.

I have been asked to speak about farmers, their mission, work, difficulties and hopes.

MISSION: --

There are large numbers of people in the world who do not receive enough food to eat. It is difficult to be exact but some 70,000 people a day die from the effects of malnutrition. How can we in all honesty continue to allow this to happen?

I think as farmers it is beholden on us to continually bring this issue to the attention of those who make the decisions and implement measures, to correctly plan and work through dialogue towards a sustainable future for all. We need to cast aside petty self-interest and focus on the issues that are important for the survival of the human race.

With oil prices rising as demand increases and production from some of the major oil producers beginning to fall, Ethanol made from plant matter will become a major source of energy. Who is going to decide whether a crop is grown for food or for fuel? Will it be the market and prices received or will it be by legislation what the raw material is used for. The rich in society will have greater access while the poor will miss out. How are the people who have difficulty affording enough to eat now going to survive? Will farmers receive an adequate share for their production of the raw material?

Another article that was sent to me is from The Guardian newspaper, November 6th 2007 written by a George Monbiot.

The headline "**The western appetite for biofuels is causing starvation in the poor world**" is followed by the comment "Developing nations are being pushed to grow crops for ethanol, rather than food - all thanks to political expediency."

"It doesn't get madder than this. Swaziland is in the grip of a famine and receiving emergency food aid. Forty per cent of its people are facing acute food shortages. So what has the government decided to export? Biofuel made from one of its staple crops, cassava. The government has allocated several thousand hectares of farmland to ethanol production in the district of Lavumisa, which happens to be the place worst hit by drought. It would surely be quicker and more humane to refine the Swazi people and put them in our tanks. Doubtless a team of development consultants is already doing the sums." End quote. I have a copy of this article if you want to know more.

The farmers of this world hold the key to our survival. It is our mission to convince our rulers, our governments that if they want the rest of humanity to survive they have no other option but to see that the world's farmers receive a fair go. (That's Aussie for a fair share.)

Our obligation is to work as a close-knit team, look for a sustainable future for farming, to provide the food for an ever-increasing world population. In doing so we must think and plan

for the long term. There are no short-term, quick fix remedies.

WORK: --

With six and a half billion mouths to feed, increasing pressure on our fresh water reserves, decreasing oil supplies and increasing levels of green house gases how do we as individuals, groups and countries find solutions to these challenges? There is no doubt that agriculture is receiving increasing publicity, but sustainable land management and farming is very complex.

For example, what happens to the family farmer in an Indian state where hundreds of small farms are being bought up by a corporation who want to create a series of large farms of around 30,000 acres in size? A few of the original owners who have been on this land for many generations may get a job working for the company but the majority will drift to the nearest city and join the slums that exist around cities in that country. Remember, small farmers achieve the highest production on each hectare of land.

We must adopt new technology and use alternative methods, strategies and clean energy. For instance in the UK there are massive possibilities for harnessing wind and tidal power to answer energy needs. These systems of generating power are much more expensive than using oil at the moment, but if these alternative systems of generating power are developed soon enough they could be the salvation for the UK.

Other countries are developing similar techniques and there is increasing use of natural gas. Solar and thermal energy are being harnessed to generate power. Nuclear power is used in this country to generate power and I am sure that used wisely this system of energy production may have greater use in the future. Just doing the next thing in the right direction can do much to develop alternative energy.

Tom Athanasiou, director of the American think tank EcoEquity speaking recently at a meeting of non-government organizations and the general public about climate change in Sydney said, "The world will only avoid catastrophic climate change if wealthy countries such as Australia recognise they have a responsibility to help poorer countries raise living standards and cut greenhouse emissions. Any future global climate change agreement that did not recognise the developing world's fight against poverty was doomed to failure."

He continued saying, "The situation is inherently international, Beijing and New Delhi and Washington and Paris and London all have to agree on something that is going to hurt." "Most importantly," he said, "Developing countries were not going to agree to anything that takes away their right to development. But without their participation, any agreement will fail."

DIFFICULTIES: --

There are repeated assertions of countries allowing a handful of multi national corporations to dominate the agri-food industry from the farm gate to the consumer's plate. Globalisation has evolved suiting big business and big government. It is said by some of the wealthy that this system benefits all, why then is the gap between the rich and the poor rapidly growing? Around the world there is the potential in many countries for massive unrest. The rich must help the poor to save our climate and mankind. Who is going to step up and take a lead?

Governments are attempting to solve issues by legislating change. Governmental policies must rebalance power and profits within the food system from production to consumption. Short-term policies in several countries have driven the agricultural sectors almost to extinction. The young people who would normally have taken on a role as farmers have left the land and work in the cities. Other countries have suddenly realised that the prices for food are rising and there is a scramble to get some younger people back on the land.

The world's climate is doing some very strange things. It is changing and the effects of this change will have an enormous impact on the world. Reactions to climate change are varied. Farmers who are the forefront of working with nature are seeing changes slowly taking place. They live with these changes daily in their own regions and know that something is happening.

Some governments and businesses are ignoring the issues, some are saying it is a natural cycle and others are starting to realise the potential impacts and are attempting to plan remedial actions. Different thinking between a country mind and a city mind is partly to blame for this.

Rising seawater may flood large areas of low level land; some of this land is supporting many millions of people. With increased food shortages caused by floods or droughts, there will be a flow-on effect creating billions of instant refugees. Poorer nations may resort to emigration looking for a chance to survive. How do we plan for this eventuality?

HOPES: --

This is the difficult question. The world needs new ideas.

My background is that of a Merino sheep farmer situated in the semi desert country of inland Australia. Wool from these sheep was used in the manufacture of woollen products such as suits, sweaters and socks. You might wonder what drives me to be part of Farmers' Dialogue and how did I end up here? In short it is my belief that farmers everywhere care for and use the land in an holistic way and produce food for the world's increasing population. It is my conviction to work with farmers to help bring about these changes and aim for a sustainable world.

We are not living for the next occasion but looking much further ahead. We need a vision of what is required, something that will stir in our hearts and minds as the reality of the future confronts us. Trusting that as we strengthen our friendships and clean up our motives we shall find the plan unfolding. As climate change takes place, what are our options? What is it that France has to offer the world in these rapidly changing times? Where does French Agriculture stand on the issues?

Why is there so much poverty in this industry that the world relies on? In the future where will our food come from?

I know there are many questions throughout this talk; I do not have a list of easy answers. Together we need to look for ways to tackle these issues. The only way to express these truths and how we help our friends and colleagues worldwide to address the subjects raised in this address is by attempting to unite farmers from all countries.

We all have similar hopes and aspirations. We all want to feed our families and we all want to develop our countries in a sustainable manner so that our grand children's grandchildren will have a decent future on this our planet. The future may well depend more on our willingness to change our ways rather than the technology required as that will follow.

Phil Jefferys

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