

SE **Business**

HD **Farmers look to bright side to repair image**

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It is rare to go to a gathering or conference of primary producers these days and not hear a discussion steeped in angst about the public image of farming and farmers.

So sensitive have farmers become to the accusation that they are always heard, seen or portrayed in the media as “whingeing farmers” that many now only dare to whisper when they want to talk about the difficult issues they may actually be confronting — drought, bank debt, climbing power costs, supermarket bullying and low cattle prices to name just a few.

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Instead there is a new focus by farm organisations on telling the positive stories of their members in an attempt to redress the negativity and old-fashioned “We’ll all be rooned, said Hanrahan” image of farmers that still dogs the industry today.

Part of the push is an attempt by the rural community to bridge what it sees as a widening chasm between the city and country — to address the disconnect that now sees more than three-quarters of city teenagers admitting in a recent survey they know nothing about agriculture or how their food is produced.

By telling good news stories about farming, the hope is clearly that more young people may consider careers in agriculture, at a time when there is a severe skills shortage and six jobs available for every university agricultural science graduate.

Boosting the positive image of farming has another spin-off too. Vocal farm leaders such as NSW Farmers president Fiona Simson fear the disconnect between Australian society and its dwindling band of primary producers has become so bad that not only are farmers no longer as valued as they were when Australia once rode the sheep’s back, but the actual “right to farm” is under threat.

Simson believes that having a “social licence” to be farmers, and to farm the land as they see fit, using best-practice techniques, is now under threat.

“This has resulted not only in a loss of stature and respect for farmers, but, on a practical level, it equates to many layers of bureaucracy governing the way we operate, and that is having a huge impact on our bottom line,” Ms Simson told a recent farmer gathering in northern NSW near Grafton.

“In days gone by, people thought you were lucky to be a farmer. “Today the community has become detached from farming and the whole process of growing food, and we are finding ourselves increasingly on the defensive against other industries, activities and land uses that compete for the same water, soil and land.” At the heart of the negativity around farming, mostly from within its own ranks, is the difficulty so many farmers have in making ends meet and providing a decent living for their families.

With farmgate prices and profits still low — in some industries still at the same real levels as in the 1970s once inflation is taken into account — most farms now struggle to support more than one family or one generation.

It is certainly a key reason few farmers encourage their children to go into the same industry — and why so few children of the land see a future for themselves back on the home farm.

Agriculture Minister Barnaby Joyce repeated his insistence last week at the Global Food Forum dinner in Sydney that the family farm will and always remain the cornerstone of Australian agriculture.

But he accepts that unless profitability at the farmgate is increased — a quest Joyce says drives his passion and commitment as Agriculture Minister — more farmers will find themselves overcome by debt and struggling to **buy** food, pay their bills and the banks.

Up and coming Liberal MP for Hume, Angus Taylor — himself a country boy from Nimmitabel on the Monaro and author of last year's seminal report Greener Pastures, which concluded Australian agriculture needs \$600 **billion** of investment, much of it foreign, to flourish — put it more starkly.

He said farmers in 1900 received more than 80 per cent of the retail or **sale** price of their product. By the 1950s, the farmer's slice had shrunk to half.

Nowadays, most farmers receive just 10 per cent of the final consumer price of the food they grow — the rest is devoured by the processors, the middlemen, the supply chain and the retailers.

"Farmers have nowhere to go, no more room to give and very few more efficiencies they can make at the farmgate," Mr Taylor said.

With 14 per cent of farm profits spent satisfying red-tape requirements, he urged urban Australia to think about what was happening, especially in regard to mushrooming laws and regulations around environmental issues, land use, food-chain traceability and safety, and animal welfare.

"If there is a community benefit, if there is a moral good involved, the community must pay," Mr Taylor said.

"Don't lumber the farm community with environmental contracts (or laws) that might diminish the value of their farm — unless you are prepared to put (broader society) money behind it." The irony of all this soul-searching about negativity is that there should be little need for farmers to resort to this slightly fake and forced "positive" storytelling to redeem or mend the way their profession and businesses are viewed.

Australian agriculture is already a tremendous success story and has an outlook that is only becoming more rosy with every passing day, as demand for food and protein from the world's growing nations such as **China** accelerates at an unprecedented pace.

As Bega **Cheese** chairman Barry Irvin said at the Sydney Global Food Forum dinner, there is "great opportunity out there in agriculture".

Even if local superannuation funds are too slow to see the opportunity, foreign companies, wealthy private investors and overseas funds — not imbued with the out-of-date image of Australian farmers as being slow-talking, straw-chewing, and slightly backward larrikins of the land — are already talking with their feet and money.

As Mr Irvin said, it's been such a tough environment for Australian farmers over the past two decades that the ones who have survived are those who are the best, most efficient and intelligent operators — who could now survive anywhere in the world. "I think the reality for Australia (farmers and industry) — to insulate ourselves from the inevitable boom and bust cycles — is to value add, to deliver high value, premium products that buffer us a bit," Mr Irvin said.

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