**FIA2 Speech – Farming in the 21st Century**

Did you know that the hardworking Australians who put nutritious food on **your** plate everyday are 94% more likely to commit suicide than the rest of the Australian population? That’s twice as likely! Australian farmers are vastly undervalued by society and are being cruelly exploited at the mercy of the large supermarket conglomerates we fund daily with our purchases. Due to abysmal market conditions and non-existent protection laws, many farmers are feeling the so-called ‘pinch’ as a ‘slap to the face’, as a result of the explosion in costs within the last decade and undeniably, the last 3 years, while getting paid **even less** for a crop that is expected to be unrealistically perfect. Good morning, I’m (REMOVED PERSONAL INFORMATION) a 3rd generation banana farmer from Innisfail, and today I will be informing you of the dire crisis faced by our irreplaceable Australian farmers.

Just like every other industry in Australia, there have been soaring costs of **certain** supplies and resources, but us Aussie farmers have it even harder, not only have **all** of our base costs such as fuel, fertiliser, wages, transport, etc significantly increased, many farmers are severely suffering from a lack of workers to be able to actually pick and package their produce. While the prices for fresh goods are constantly increasing for consumers, farmers are being paid the same as they were **15 years ago**, while these large greedy supermarket conglomerates (Coles & Woolworths) are recording record profits. Meanwhile, a vast majority of Australians are struggling to make ends meet, and buying fresh, healthy produce is often an impossible task as it is often out of stock or disproportionately price gouged so that only the greedy supermarkets are profiting. An article published by the ABC states that Coles and Woollies made 643 and 907 million dollars in profits alone last year during a time of record inflation and cost of living crisis (RBA, 2023). These inadequate prices in turn leave **all** farmers being barely profitable or most incurring crippling debt just to package a crop for market. *No seriously.* It is a heartbreakingly common practice in many industries to dump perfectly fine produce; the simple fact being it costs them less to ‘drop it on the ground’ than to send it to market where they get nothing for it. *How is this acceptable?* Coles and Woolworths hold a duopoly over the fresh food sector, being able to pay farmers quite literally ‘Whatever they want’. You wouldn’t work in an industry or job that had no award or base wage where your boss could choose your salary, that’s absurd. Yet, our hardest working and vulnerable industry is expected to tolerate this due to no actual laws to protect farmers from these greedy capitalist pigs whose only goal is billions in profit. We get minimum wages, so why don’t the people who feed us have protection too?

Furthermore, the greedy supermarket pigs aren’t the only arrogant pests us farmers have to face. Take for example the banana industry, we throw away as much as 40%, yes **40%,** that’s **almost half** of the entire crop before it even makes it off the farm (War on Waste, 2017).Considering Australians eat 5 million bananas every day, that’s **2 million wasted daily** and the equivalent to over **half a billion** perfectlyedible bananas wasted every year! This downright mind-boggling amount of perfectly edible fresh produce is simply wasted because it doesn’t meet retailer’s perfectionist standards. This issue came as a major shock to many Aussies as it was at the forefront of Craig Reucassel’s award-winning documentary *War on Waste*, in which the first episode highlighted how tons of bananas were being thrown away each week for being, ‘too long, or to bent’. This occurrence isn’t limited to just banana farmers, other farming industries such as the Avocado industry threw away 200 tons of perfectly edible avocados last May alone due to having slight marks on the skin (News.com, 2022). *Why are we letting this happen when thousands are starving?* We are being played to the mercy of greedy supermarkets while the rest of us stand idle, getting our empty pockets bled dry.

These ruthless conditions for our farmers have led to a mass exodus of the industry entirely with the farmers left facing the worst mental health pandemic in the country’s history. An ABC report from 2019 states that we have lost over 16,000 dairy farms in the last 40 years. **This is so utterly and indisputably atrocious**. That’s more than 1 farm closing **every single day** for the last **40 years straight.** Think about that next time the milk shelf is empty or you buy Cole’s brand. That is thousands of livelihoods and jobs unnecessarily destroyed. This also opens a gap for abysmal foreign imports, that indisputably have no sanitation controls whatsoever. This further allows profits to go offshore to billion-dollar multinational corporations, destroying Australia’s self-sufficiency and hardworking labour forces. Despite Australian farmers being among the most resilient group of people in the world, the Government Health website reports that the farmer suicide highest rate is one of the **highest** in the country, with farmers being **94% more likely** to take their own life than the average Australian. The aforementioned problems are real, serious, issues, that are taking the lives of the hardworking men and women who put food on our plates. Remember that you need a lawyer, builder, or policeman once in your life, but **at least** three times a day you need a farmer just to survive.

So, how can we fix this? The best solution to this catastrophic issue will be to push your elected officials into supporting laws that give farmers a ‘minimum wage’ for their produce, these could be simple laws that force supermarkets into paying a fair price for produce considering global conditions and considering cost increases. *But why do farmers need special treatment in order to make a profit?* With 99% of farms being family owned in Australia, you are supporting small and rural communities grow, not the pockets of some multi-millionaire CEO (Farmers.org, 2018). While pushing for protection laws will be a gigantic task, it is up to **you** as a consumer to support our vulnerable farmers where possible. You can start by becoming a conscious consumer, avoiding imported produce by checking labels and supporting roadside stalls or farmers’ markets where the funds go straight to the farmer, and not to a billion-dollar conglomerate. It has been a pleasure to speak with you all today, and please remember that only a farmer can feed you.

Thank you.

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