



Rangelands Policy Dialogue Speech on Behalf of AgForce

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AgForce was pleased to co-host the Rangelands Policy Dialogue in July 2019 along with The Royal Society of Queensland and NRM Regions Queensland, on behalf of the broadacre agricultural industry.

The overall purpose of the meeting was to amplify the collective wisdom of those present through synthesis and debate. My “Spark Plug” contribution below, on behalf of industry and AgForce, was deliberately provocative but done so in the spirit of a frank and full dialogue with other people who care, in the hope of contributing meaningfully to an important conversation:

Introductory Remarks

Crafting a declaration for a sustainable rural future in the rangelands – markets, debt, water, drought and climate change – is a lofty ambition. It is also one that industry applauds, given that we have simply been unable to do so until now. How many teachers, nurses, bank branches, small businesses, graziers, etc., have been lost in rural and regional Australia as our landscapes, biodiversity, and social, cultural and economic fortunes have gone backwards ...? How long has Rome been burning? The other Friday night I arrived in Charleville at 8.00 pm, hungry and thirsty. All the kitchens had closed and I went to bed that night with nothing but a couple of beers in my stomach.

It is no news to anyone in this room that the

rangelands include those inland environments where natural ecological processes predominate and where values and benefits are based primarily on natural resources. The rangelands of the semi-arid and arid zones cover approximately 80% of the Australian continent. The rangelands are an incredible natural resource but are not given anything like the visibility that other beautiful and rich natural wonders like the Great Barrier Reef are afforded. I am not necessarily arguing that they are as special or unique as the Great Barrier Reef, but I am arguing that their value and significance are not broadly understood, despite the best efforts of groups such as the Outback Alliance and the Australian Rangelands Society.

Learnings from the Past

For several years now, policy settings in Queensland relating to the rangelands and other landscapes of Queensland have been completed without a genuine or full engagement with industry or many others who have powerful and relevant contributions to make, care about outcomes and want to contribute.

The vegetation management legislation of 2018 and the Reef Bill of 2019 are classic examples. I do not raise these to politicise the conversation, but actually to do quite the opposite: that is, to talk openly and honestly in the hope that this strong conversation among friends who care equally

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and so deeply for the right outcomes will result in a quantum shift in this state's approach to our landscapes.

The fact is that detailed, numerous and in many cases scientifically based submissions have been completely ignored. This must fundamentally change if we are to get our collective knowledge, wisdom and energy onto this critical issue of sustainable management before it is too late. My hope is that this dialogue may provide a circuit breaker and a new beginning. We approached this dialogue in that spirit and with that intent. Here are some statements in support of this view:

1. Setting policy in isolation from industry or others who have a valuable contribution to make will not allow us to make the progress we want to and need to make. A genuinely broader engagement is needed.
2. Politicising critical debates leads to worsening economic, social, cultural, biodiversity and environmental outcomes. Again, the vegetation management debacle of 2018 can be used to show this clearly. Many examples, such as in the Mulga Lands, show economies going backwards as people find that the best economic opportunity for their land is to lock it up and accept carbon credits. What then happens is that a family leaves town, the farm no longer contributes any economic activity to the region, pests and weeds start to invade the landscape, and the mulga thickens and in doing so worsens environmental outcomes – biodiversity suffers because of that thickening. Mulga has been managed for thousands of years. The Mulga Lands can be managed in an environmentally friendly way that allows those landscapes to contribute to local communities. I so look forward to the day when I have options and choice for a meal on a Friday night in Charleville – I believe it is possible but will require strong leadership such as is being displayed at this forum.
3. Industry has a powerful contribution to make collectively and individually but is continually locked out and prevented from doing so. For example, we made some strong submissions for projects within the Land Restoration Fund which were dismissed without reason, and then AgForce was offered an MoU for a small amount of money and has been offered no stronger role despite a strong desire, the ability and the energy to be a much stronger partner.
4. Northern Australia is on the brink of exciting new agricultural development and employment opportunities, including helping Indigenous communities prosper from growing crops and cattle. New agricultural developments already have enough checks and processes to ensure feasibility through existing state-wide planning and vegetation management Acts. There is no need for further restrictive and costly Reef-centric regulations for farm design.
5. We can learn something from the first people of this great country of ours – Indigenous Australians. Rather than mass clearing land in football field-sized blocks, as is often misreported in the media, farmers are managing thickening vegetation on their properties to restore the land, much in the same way Indigenous Australians have been managing the land for more than 60,000 years: maintaining a balance between trees and grass with more open landscapes, encouraging healthy regrowth and a balance between the different types of vegetation that are more representative of pre-settlement times. Farmers know that where management of the land is taken away from the people who understand it the most, feral pests and plants thrive, increasing the risks of wildfire with greater fuel loads.
5. We live in a state of 13 unique bioregions. It is an incredibly beautiful and unique part of the world. Recognising that is a

- critical underpinning to making genuine progress and is largely missing to date.
6. It is essential that we support those eager to push boundaries and make strong progress, as well as legislating to bring along their tail or encourage them to pursue other vocations. I will only fleetingly mention the Best Management Practice fiasco today – but what an incredible opportunity was lost when the government requested data held by AgForce on behalf of participating farmers. We must work diligently to support best practice and push boundaries at least as strongly as we work on legislating minimum standards for environmental performance.
 7. Don't underestimate the interest, intellect and desire of graziers, farmers and industry in rolling up our sleeves and getting stuck into this. It is a resource that has not been well used to date. The majority of graziers, those who work the land every single day, are trying to do the right thing and improve the landscape, to leave it in a better condition for future generations than the way they found it. But working out what the right thing is isn't always easy. There exists a complex relationship between federal, state and local government legislation that needs simplifying in order to deliver clearer, more accurate advice to landholders about managing vegetation and their land. Legislation related to how landholders should manage woody vegetation has changed 40 times over the past 20 years. We also have the situation in some locations where areas of land are considered exempt and therefore available to be managed and used for grazing under State Government vegetation management legislation, but certain local councils now require landholders to secure their approval before they clear any trees; and then, as recently as two weeks ago, along came new 'blue dot' trigger mapping

that seeks to override everything else and leave landholders in a situation where they can't manage their land at all.

Agriculture has the environmental credentials to make a difference. If I return to my earlier example of the Great Barrier Reef, the agricultural sector has led the way by enacting measures that significantly reduce the risk to the Reef through the adoption of sustainable and efficient farming practices, while at the same time increasing food production. Agriculture has also done more than any other industry – including urban utilities like sewage treatment and power generation – to reduce runoff and greenhouse emissions. The goal for agriculture is to reach carbon neutrality by 2030, and as an industry we are well on the path to achieving this. Agriculture is contributing more than 80% of the total emission reduction contracted under the Australian Government's Emission Reduction Fund (ERF) auctions. Were it not for our sector, Australia would have no chance of achieving its emission reduction targets at all.

Lessons for the Future

Can we genuinely take those lessons and apply them fully to strengthening our future trajectory? Can we step over our partisan political positions and out of our bubbles and fully embrace these and other learnings? If we cannot we are doomed to more of the same, and the consequences of that are difficult to contemplate. I offer the following points in support:

1. Industry can contribute so much more economically, socially and environmentally. We request that other sectors and the broader Queensland community give us that chance.
2. Landscapes need a long-term plan based on science and learnings – and baselined correctly. That will allow, for example, all parts of the community to move forward with confidence and surety. Sure, new learnings should be bought into the

framework, but the fundamental framework needs to be set – with a correct baseline giving comfort around environmental and biodiversity aspects.

3. Policy settings currently are fundamentally wrong. This dialogue is necessary and important in correcting settings in a way that allows a strengthening of these critical environmental, biodiversity, social and economic trajectories whilst we still have a little time on our side.
4. Bipartisanship is critical given the long-term nature of this undertaking: an incredibly lofty and difficult ambition, but one we must strive for if we are serious. We often talk about leaving the landscapes in a better position than we found them for the benefit of future generations – this is a critical underpinning to that objective.
5. We have a bold ambition – otherwise we would not be here. No bold ambition (and particularly one that will be difficult to achieve) will survive without a strong vision and purpose that is set by and supported by the broader community.

6. It is not too late for a bold and ambitious reset, and landholders and industry want to be at the table, doing their share of the lifting and learning and being a strong and central part of the solution.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I wish to make two points:

1. AgForce and industry have a resolve for continuing collaborative development of pilot projects in several bioregions to build on-ground understanding of alternatives to the current punitive approach to controlling management of regional ecosystems. Alternatives can be constructed to build natural capital and resilience of regional ecosystems through financial support of landholders and with conducive policy settings that reward them for good practice.
2. AgForce and industry applaud this dialogue initiative. We hope it is the start of something meaningful and big. We want to play our part and believe we have a lot to offer. Thank you to those of you who have helped in bringing this together.

Author Profile

Born and brought up in New Zealand, Michael has spent his personal and professional life involved with agriculture and regional and rural communities. In his current role as Chief Executive of Agforce Queensland Farmers Ltd, Michael works for and on behalf of broadacre producers across Queensland.