

Reflections from a Grazier...

Presented by Charles Nason

1. Why are so few farmers here?

- Have we lost too much social capital in the bush?
- Farmers need to be involved in these forums as they are the ones who will make it happen?
- If they do not have these skills then the community need to ensure the have them.
- A case for public concern funding and support?

2. Commitment to the Landscape.

- We talk about the environment and landscape yet provide little funding to ensure it happens.
- A faculty of Rangelands Australia was established at UQ Gatton with MLA backing which was not continued.
- There is no agricultural policy course in Australia.
- The Rural R&D Corporations in the Vision 2050 paper estimated the value of the agrisystem at \$800 Billion which is half of the total economy of \$1.74 Trillion yet we invest little in its understanding, management or maintenance.
- You can not manage what you do not understand. The Charleville pastoral lab model should be used to understand other landscapes.

3. Production or Conservation?

- We need to change the present landscape culture and reward systems.
- Farmers have been paid and rewarded for production not conservation.
- We have been doing that for free.
- This is where Eco Services and stewardship payments have a role.

4. Legislation?

- Governments keeps changing the rules - this is called Calvinball.
- We were told originally to develop the land and it was a condition of the leasehold tenure.
- Now we are constrained from maintaining our productive tree grass pastures.
- Farmers are highly trusted in surveys, yet not trusted by governments.

5. Debt -a symptom of what ?

- Financially stressed farmers are flat out surviving with no time for caring for the environment and the need for off farm employment further reduces that ability.
- High debt figures do not indicate a viable industry.
- The traditional solution is to get big or get out - structural adjustment.
- The 1994 Senate inquiry stated that rural debt was a symptom of a much deeper problem.
- The low farm income problem was predicted 50 years ago.
- I would suggest our present economic models are not suited to agriculture, soils or non renewable resources. We need more appropriate models.

6. Social

- This structural adjustment results in fewer people in the bus - an increasingly barren soil landscape.
- Rural populations are declining, churches and shops are closing and schools are struggling to survive with very few students.
- But farming is more than a business, it is a calling.
- Suicides and depression indicate an unhealthy community.
- Why do other countries “subsidise” their farmers?

7. Future Landscape?

- The landscape of the past which supported less than 1 million indigenous people may be a poor or misleading model for the future.
- Our population is 25 million and growing faster than expected.
- Thus a higher focus on food production and sustainability is required.
- Fire has been the traditional method for managing the landscape.
- Mechanical - the pulling chain - may be superior as it would retain more carbon and nutrients, more ground cover and be more selective.
- Visible public lands do not inspire confidence in government capability in managing the landscape.
- Too much of the landscape is beyond fire.
- We need to create value for pests or wasted resources such as kangaroos. Maybe we need to put the roo back in the stew?



8. Drought

- The focus on the one climatic variable of drought ignores the other just as significant climatic variables, floods, frosts and cyclones.
- Floods cause 5-6% lower agricultural output in that year plus the following year (recent article in the economic record).
- The significant multiplier effect of agriculture is understood by a few but needs to be quantified.
- Producers are obligated to be more drought resilient but the community needs to partner in this process.
- Too many trees make farmers more drought prone, but the vegetation restriction amplifies this effect.
- We destock in response to dry conditions, surely there should be a corresponding obligation by the community to reduce the roo burden. They can be 50% of grazing pressure in a drought.
- Drought and other extreme events impact on the wider economy so the community needs to share some of the risk and cost due to adverse flow on effects.

9. Climate Change

- Farmers have been dealing with climate variability forever and agriculture is the most climate sensitive industry.
- But why are farmers so sceptical of the anthropogenic driver?
- We need to find common ground as climate change beliefs colour the approach to so many other policies and our approach to the landscape.
- Looking at human history, I believe we have more to fear from natural climate change.
- As a farmer, climate change policy is as big a threat as climate variability.

Over to you...