



**National
Farmers
Federation**

Prime Agricultural Land

Policy Position

The National Farmers' Federation (NFF) recognises the importance of prime agricultural land. The long-term success of the agricultural industry will be dependent on continued access to land and water resources and requires a long-term strategy centred on the productivity of our food and fibre systems. Prime agricultural land is a crucial consideration in this process.

Prime agricultural land is an invaluable, natural resource that provides the capacity for Australia to meet increasing global demand for food and fibre. It also provides significant environmental and social outcomes. The NFF recognises that prime agricultural land is complex because: land conditions are not static, it is influenced by both soil quality and proximity to water resources, access to infrastructure, and future technology and innovation. It cannot simply be defined by cadastral or other boundaries.

A prime agricultural land policy must not be prescriptive, but would provide a strategic pathway/set of principles for Governments to manoeuvre around inherent difficulties of land use conflicts and the need to produce food and fibre for a growing population. While protecting land is important, decisions made by individuals on the best use of their land must not be compromised and must not stifle future innovation. The NFF believes that a prime agricultural land policy should not be limited to 'protecting' land per se, but rather to provide a framework/set of principles to maintain or improve long-term land productivity that would safeguard Australia's capacity to produce food and fibre.

The NFF has separately prepared a set of guidelines — *industry engagement guidelines for on-farm activities* as an addendum to this policy, to facilitate best practices for industry to respectfully engage farmers for potential on-farm activities.

Issue

Increasingly, land used for farming in Australia is declining whilst demand for food and fibre is increasing globally. However, agriculture remains Australia's dominant land use. The area for agricultural holdings has declined almost 66 million hectares between 1992-93 and 2016-17. Sustainable intensification has become increasingly important to meet the global increase in food demand, and while this has partially offset the reduction in food production due to a loss of land, this alone will not offset the loss of broadacre food production. Securing productive

agricultural land remains imperative to maximise Australia's food production potential.

Productive land in high rainfall zones along the coastlines and around cities are now being lost to urban expansion. The development of mines and expansion of onshore gas activities can risk the productivity of agricultural land where there are potentially irreversible impacts on the integrity of soil and water resources. Continued urban expansion and, more recently, the development of solar and wind farms has raised concerns about further losses of prime agricultural land, particularly as many of these developments occur in agricultural areas.

The NFF recognises that land conditions change over time, particularly with climate change expected to increase the variability of weather and decrease rainfall in many parts of Australia. Some areas have already seen a shift in the type of agricultural production due to a changing climate. Additionally, some areas have become areas of high agricultural value due to infrastructure developments providing greater access to water, particularly in irrigation districts. Given this complexity, protecting prime agricultural land will be a complex task requiring adaptation through time.

This poses a significant challenge to agricultural communities that rely on agriculture for their economic viability. While the NFF acknowledges the diversification of income projects and other land uses provide to communities, non-agricultural on-farm development must be managed in a way so as to complement or coexist with agriculture, not stifle it. The NFF's 2030 Roadmap seeks to stem the loss of productive farmland to protect agricultural land and water assets, and prioritise global food and fibre needs. With the right policy settings, Australia is poised to become a \$100 billion industry by 2030 and double production by 2050.

Acknowledgement of these challenges, and recognition of the importance of agriculture, have led efforts from several state and territory governments to protect prime agricultural land. In South Australia, Environment Food and Production Areas (EFPA) were introduced to protect vital agricultural lands surrounding metropolitan Adelaide from urban encroachments. The Victorian Government is currently looking to protect the long term future of strategic agricultural land in Melbourne's green wedge and peri-urban areas. The New South Wales Government has developed an evidenced based methodology to identify 'important agricultural land' and developed maps to identify 'biophysical strategic agricultural land' for protection. Similarly, the Queensland Government has sought to identify 'Important agricultural areas' (IAAs) and an 'Agricultural land classification' (ALC) to guide planning decision making.

However, there is not yet an agreed national policy to manage prime agricultural land.

Background

The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) predicts that, by 2050, the world's population will exceed 9 billion, and projects that food production (net of food used for biofuels) must increase by 70 per cent. Land for agricultural expansion is met with competition from:

- Resources industry;
- Conservation;

- Urban expansion;
- Renewable energy; and
- Carbon industry.

In 30 June 2017, approximately 51 per cent of Australia's landmass is now managed by farmers. Agriculture remains Australia's dominant land use, covering around 372 million hectares (ha). However area of agriculture holdings is declining, with a reduction of about 14 per cent (almost 66 million hectares) between 1992-93 and 2016-17. However, land use changes at the regional and local scale that have the potential to significantly affect the agriculture sector.

These changes can:

- displace agriculture entirely (for example from the expansion of urban and peri-urban residential areas or the conversion of use from farmland to conservation areas);
- reduce the net productivity from the land (for example from the expansion of rural lifestyle living in our coastal fringes);
- limit the range of farming practices that can be used (for example, neighbour pressures can limit the ability to intensify or use more efficient practices);
- put at risk the natural resources, such as water, on which agriculture production relies (for example through mining or onshore gas developments that interfere with groundwater); and
- put at risk our international reputation as producers of safe food (for example the risk of land and water contamination from the chemicals used in onshore gas activities).

Local, state and federal governments all have responsibilities and decision making powers that influence access to land for the agriculture sector. The responsibilities and powers are largely applied by either planning or environmental protection laws but the framing and delivery also need to involve the arm of governments involved in agriculture.

What the industry needs

The agricultural sector is seeking that all levels of government:

- recognise the important role that the agriculture sector plays — and will continue to play — in the economies of our local communities, our states and territories and our nation;
- develop a national agriculture strategy to guide Australia's vision for long-term and sustainable production of food and fibre;
- in acknowledgement of farmers local understanding, respect the right of an individual farmer to determine his/her own priority land use within existing planning requirements;
- strive for coexistence between land use practices where possible;
- recognise the importance of consulting local communities. They have a deep understanding of local issues, challenges and opportunities, especially for projects of significant scale;
- recognise that prime agricultural land is an irreplaceable resource that must be protected from permanent loss for agricultural use;

- invest in ongoing research efforts to improve land productivity and sustainable intensification;
- invest in resources that provide stronger scientific knowledge base to support regulators who make decisions on developments which have the potential to impact prime agricultural land;
- safeguard and invest in infrastructure to maximise the potential and sustainable intensification of agricultural land and enables greater control of supply chains, including water infrastructure;
- build a shared, public understanding of prime agricultural land and the role it plays in the production of food and fibre, and the broader environmental and social benefits it provides for farmers and the broader community; and
- provide certainty in the regulatory framework to support long-term investment for the sustainable development and management of prime agricultural land.

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