

Discussion Paper:

The shape of Australian agricultural advocacy for 2030

Introduction

The National Farmers Federation's Roadmap for increasing the farm gate value of output to \$100 billion a year by 2030 has been universally adopted in policy circles. This is a challenging target that puts pressure on all segments of the industry to be at the peak of their capability. A robust, independent examination of the contribution of the industry's organisations is vital to ensure that appropriate architecture is in place to achieve the goals that have been set out.

The objective of this review is to ensure that the process of advocacy is 'fit for purpose' in a policy (and social) landscape very different to that of past decades.

The NFF has commissioned the Australian Farm Institute (AFI) to consult with members and stakeholders and develop options and ideas to inform a strategic roadmap for agricultural industry representation and advocacy structures 2021-30.

This discussion paper is the first step¹ in reviewing the state of agriculture's representation and advocacy. It canvasses a wide spectrum of issues that confront agriculture's advocacy groups to stimulate thought and discussion about how the advocacy task can be improved.

In the next phases of the project AFI will interview key decision-makers and stakeholders to crystallise the critical issues that will define 'fit for purpose' advocacy to 2030. Much of the discussion on advocacy has to date focused on the 'what' and 'how' of models – what's missing is *why* the sector advocates. These interviews seek to understand: **What's the purpose of Australian agricultural advocacy, and how can that best be delivered?**

The remainder of this paper briefly introduces some of the fundamental issues that bear on the effectiveness of Australian agricultural advocacy over the period to 2030. Many of these are not new issues, nor are they necessarily 'easy fixes', but rarely are they addressed collectively in an overarching framework with a clear focus on outcomes.

The issues discussed are not intended to define the limits of the review nor indicate where it will be focussing its efforts. They are intended to stimulate thought about factors that may be limiting the effectiveness of advocacy and to encourage discussions about how advocacy can deliver more for the Australian agricultural industry in the next decade and beyond.

What does advocacy set out to achieve?

Clarity of purpose is a key ingredient of success in any endeavour. This review of agricultural advocacy to 2030 will consider what agricultural advocacy is expected to deliver and how clearly its purpose is understood by advocacy organisations and by the agricultural industry.

¹ This initial consultation process will inform a draft report to NFF. Stage 2 of the project will be a deep dive into issues uncovered in Stage 1 and the responses to the draft report which will be distilled into a final report and strategy map.

Australian agricultural advocacy comprises a matrix of organisations. All are busy pursuing a range of issues, big and small, on multiple fronts. But is it clear what all the activity aims to achieve? Are the organisations working to a common purpose that is widely understood? If not, how is this affecting the outlook for 2030?

A quick scan of relevant organisation websites finds statements such as:

- ...uniting growers with a strong voice*
- ...a lobby group for farmers*
- ...championing the rights of farmers*
- ...help make farmers lives better and enhance our future*
- ...the peak producer organisation representing the industry*
- ...ensuring the long-term growth, viability, competitiveness and profitability of broadacre industries*
- ... to lead Australian agriculture*

These statements pose some questions around the objectives of advocacy to be addressed by the review:

- Do these types of statements really convey what the industry expects of its advocacy groups?
- How effective are organisation's statements of objectives in focussing the advocacy effort?
- Would a focus on issues such as productivity, growth or profitability give stronger guidance to the organisations and strengthen relationships with members?
- How should non-financial objectives such as social responsibilities be addressed as part of the objectives?

The challenges facing agricultural advocacy in the coming decade

At its core, advocacy aims to influence opinions, policy and actions on behalf of the industry. Advocacy organisations are an intermediary between the industry that the organisation represents and a range of target audiences. Advocates must on one hand assess the interests of their constituents and, on the other hand, understand the motivations of the target audiences they seek to influence. This is a complex undertaking and presents a range of challenges for agricultural advocacy. Some of these challenges, which the review will address, include:

- **Engagement:** How to maintain and increase engagement between organisations and industry constituents.
- **Free riders:** How to combat the free rider problem that allows industry members to reap the benefits that advocacy delivers without participating in the organisations.
- **Structural adjustment:** How the purpose of advocacy changes as industries structurally adjust.
- **Competition for attention:** industry advocacy has become highly competitive with seemingly every segment of the economy, large and small, represented by an organisation clamouring for the attention of decision makers and the public. Is agricultural advocacy succeeding in influencing policy and public opinion against this competition?
- **Partisanship:** policy, public debate and media coverage have become more politicised and partisan, with less importance being placed on coherent policy and an evidence base. How must advocacy adjust to the more politicised environment?
- **Social pressure:** There is an increasing array of public interest pressure groups expressing concern about how agriculture operates. With many issues being fought out between social interest groups rather than in the political process, it is important to examine how agricultural advocacy engages with social interest groups which may have opposing or conflicting agendas.

- **Focus on function:** Traditionally advocacy groups have focussed on developing policy and promoting policy to government. Many are also registered employer organisations to give them standing in dealing with trade union matters. Are these functions still the central focus for advocacy? If the effort has moved to encompass other issues, is the balance between the government and employer advocacy effort and other issues consistent with the industry's priorities?
- **Funding:** Maintaining adequate funding for the task ahead requires a clear sightline on what the organisation is designed to achieve. Legacy industry advocacy groups are finding it difficult to pay their way and to make the desired impact, particularly when compared with more effective citizen groups. Does the organisation have a future-fit business strategy? Is there a conflict (real or perceived) between sources of funding and organisational objectives?

What are the other challenges that agricultural advocacy faces? The review is keen to hear about the challenges that organisations and members of the industry consider as critical, and will assess other issues and challenges raised by key decision-makers and stakeholders during consultations.

Where can agricultural advocacy look for guidance on addressing the future?

As well as clarifying the purpose of advocacy for the Australian sector, the review will look to relevant global examples for guidance on how to be more effective delivering on advocacy objectives. Agricultural advocacy in Australia has obvious differences to advocacy in other industries and overseas but there may be opportunities for Australia's agricultural advocacy to learn from the advocacy activities of big business, unions, environmental groups, social-political influencers such as GetUp! and Crikey.com, and foreign agricultural advocacy groups.

There are also many examples of corporations engaging in advocacy that may offer guidance for agricultural organisations. What lessons can agricultural advocacy learn from the corporate sector about getting a message across to government, responding to community groups or shifting obstacles in the working environment?

On many issues Australian agricultural advocacy has placed a strong emphasis on national economic and social wellbeing supported by clear, evidenced-based policy platforms. Yet this is not the only way to influence government decision makers, social interest groups and the public. Success in winning public support and securing government action in many cases turns more on good visual communication, passionate presentation and appeals to emotion than on the strength of the evidence.

Methods employed in agricultural advocacy should be examined against the backdrop of how:

- other advocacy groups pursue their objectives,
- communication channels are harnessed to build public engagement in issues and
- political decision making is influenced.

Where does the balance lie between reliance on a sound policy platform, communication with stakeholders and application of political pressure in maximising success in achieving advocacy's objectives?

An inwards vs outwards focus

Traditionally, agricultural advocacy groups are outwardly focussed – addressing threats and challenges that arise from interests outside the industry. In framing an updated purpose and role for advocacy organisations for the future, is there a broader role for advocacy organisations in nurturing the industry?

Opportunities can be identified in which a trusted industry organisation could operate inside the industry to support growth, productivity and resolution of social issues. Involvement in programs such as Landcare is one example, but could be extended to include group extension and technology evaluation, training and skill development, or business advisory activity. Other opportunities include involvement in industry self-regulation and standard-setting, such as the Australian Farm Data Code. There are many examples of farmer groups undertaking these activities, but mostly outside of the advocacy organisations.

This review presents an opportunity to consider views on whether an industry organisation can contribute to the industry's future by working with producers on issues that directly impact individual businesses in addition to the resolving the constraints imposed externally or broadly across the industry.

The strategy of addressing the challenges

All the advocacy organisations have boards or councils which must oversee this process. In a corporate organisation a board sets targets and standards, then management is charged with achieving those outcomes. The roles of the board and management are for the most part clearly delineated. In advocacy organisations, targets are often less clearly defined and the lines between the roles of the board and management and between responsibility for policy and strategy are often blurred. Consideration should be given to whether a clearer definition of the roles of boards and management would contribute to better outcomes and improved efficiency.

At an operational level organisations must constantly shape their agenda and allocate scarce resources to the range of issues that confront their industry. Can more rigorous processes be applied to how organisations should individually and collectively balance their programs? For example between:

- Defence against policy or public pressure that would constrain agriculture vs redressing costly existing policy issues;
- urgent vs important;
- long term vs short term;
- localised vs national, and
- government policy vs community activist pressures.

Structure and funding

Questions around organisational structure have been deliberately placed at the end of this paper (and the review's consideration). The review is interested in structural matters only to the extent that structures may cut across purpose or objectives or achieving desired outcomes. It is a sound principle that structure should always follow strategy or function; thus the review will consider the matters around purpose, objectives, strategy and target audiences without framing that consideration around how these matters serve any organisational structure. Only after resolving the purpose-related factors that form part of this review (the **'why'**) will organisational structure (**'what'** and **'how'**) be considered.

Like structure, advocacy funding is also a matter that should be addressed only after fully resolving questions about purpose and objectives. As such, questions around how to design a secure funding base are not a prime focus of the first phase of the review, but will be addressed more specifically in later stages of the project.

However, it is relevant to note that industry advocacy faces a fundamental economic constraint arising because the principal output of advocacy is, in economic terms, a pure 'public good'. That is, the benefits are available to all, whether or not they contribute to obtaining those benefits - and the benefits realised by one person do not diminish the availability of the benefits to another person. There is little opportunity to charge for the use or consumption of 'public good', so advocacy organisations find it

difficult to reap a direct return on their investment in the benefits they deliver. This reality will always make funding of advocacy a challenge, irrespective of decisions about objectives, functions or structure.

In addition, some advocacy groups have formed around reactionary issues or pain points to defend perceived attacks on social licence. Sometimes these issues have a material impact on the sector, sometimes they do not, and sometimes the issue dissipates but the organisation lives on.

Without addressing specifics of individual organisational structures at this point, it is timely for the review to keep these questions in mind: do extant funding models and structures help achieve advocacy **purpose**, or are they in place just because they always have been? Are advocates focusing on issues farmers are passionate about, or those that deliver beneficial outcomes for the sector?

The outlook

Arguably, advocacy is of most importance in times of greatest socio-economic change. There are worrying signs that Australia and the world may be on the cusp of such an era of economic upheaval and social shift.

The consequences of shifting global hegemony, emerging of resistance to globalisation (Trump in the USA, far right groups in Europe), a breakdown of the international 'rules based order' (especially WTO trade rules), potential security threats in the Indo-Pacific, a need to secure critical supply chains and increase domestic self-sufficiency against potential supply interruption (e.g. for agriculture, fuel supplies, pesticides, herbicides and veterinary medicines, farm equipment) are all factors that are currently under consideration by governments, industry and society at large. The threat to our natural capital posed by climate change is catalysing a fundamental shift in the rules of engagement across economies; with sectors scrambling for advantage and attention in this time of disruption, effective advocates for agriculture are needed.

Is Australia's agricultural advocacy up to these challenges?