



Media Release

Fiona Simson | National Press Club Address | 24 October 2023

Good afternoon. Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge the Ngunnawal people – the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet here today. I'd also like to acknowledge the traditional people of the land on which I farm, the Gomeroi, and thank them for the partnership, support and guidance they've gifted my family over the years and me from the very early days of my leadership journey.

At the risk of singling out people in a room filled with people who have played a significant role in my presidency of the NFF, I'd like to acknowledge and pay special tribute to the Chief Executive of the NFF, Tony Mahar. Tony has been my right hand and sounding board for the nearly seven years that I've held this job. His level head and passion for what he does has made whatever success we've had in that time possible. Thank you, Tony for weathering my constant barrage of thought bubbles and ideas and executing so many of them so beautifully.

I also want to acknowledge our members – many of whom are represented in the room here today. It's the members who granted me this incredible opportunity to lead the NFF, and it's their collective wisdom and expertise that has determined every position we've taken during my time at NFF.

Lastly, and most importantly, I want to thank my family: Ed, Tom and Jemima. This job takes its pound of flesh, and there's no way I could have done the endless travel, phone calls, media interviews and zoom meetings... weathered the frank feedback and hard conversations... or simply had the ability to step away from the farm without your support. I'm so looking forward to spending more time on home turf with my grandkids... you'll all soon be sick of me!

My journey

I should also perhaps in a roundabout sort of way thank BHP.

After all, I had never gone looking for a career in advocacy. As many of you will know, it wasn't until BHP came knocking with a plan to dig up the



Liverpool Plains that I realised the need to speak up on behalf of food and fibre production and the people who care so deeply for their land.

I suppose that like many people going about their lives, running their businesses, caring for their families – you don't think that something as essential as feeding and clothing ourselves would require much advocacy. Who could disagree or want to limit something that satisfies the most basic of necessities? Surely keeping the voters fed and clothed into the future must be an obvious priority for any government?

Well in the seventeen years that have passed since then I've learned that that isn't always the case. Usually through sheer ignorance, ideas that are bad for food and fibre production can absolutely gain traction.

The dumb luck of these bad ideas is made all the more easy in an environment where the average voter knows increasingly little about us as farmers and the work that we do.

Connecting city and country

Connecting city and country is one of things that I've dedicated much of my time to over my advocacy career. Trying to bridge that gap between farmers and consumers, to improve the shared understanding of the challenges and opportunities we face, and to foster a more collaborative and proactive approach to policymaking.

It's so easy to curry favour in some parts of the bush by further wedging the city-country divide. By talking about 'us' and 'them'. The 'latte sippers' and how they 'don't care' or 'don't understand'.

That sort of talk isn't leadership. And it also ignores the fact you can get a bloody good latte in Werris Creek or Gunnedah these days!

The 'us and them' rhetoric pushes us as farmers further from the people we ultimately serve. The people who eat our food and use our fibre. It plays on and deepens the damaging misconception some farmers hold that what they do isn't valued by the broader community – and we know that has real repercussions.

So - I hope that I've been one of a growing number of rural leaders who have relegated that sort of rhetoric to the past.



But there's no shying away from the fact that we do face a growing disconnect in the community's understanding of agriculture. That's an enormous problem, because we need them with us. The big conversations about the future of farming impact them too, and they deserve to have an informed view on what lies ahead.

I'm incredibly proud of the work the NFF has done during my time to bridge this gap. We've invested, really for the first time, in awareness and communications campaigns that bring the story of farming to an urban audience. That work, through our Telling our Story fund, now reaches millions of Australians each year with an honest and authentic message about who we are and what we do.

We've also sought to empower others in industry to do the same. Platforms like National Agriculture Day (coming up very soon on 17 November!) provide an opportunity for the people in our industry to share their stories directly – again reaching millions and millions of people through the media, in-person events and online.

We are getting increasingly savvy in facing up to the disconnect and filling the gaps in community understanding with factual information, and in helping them feel more connected with real farming families despite the immense distances that separate them.

I see this as an ongoing challenge and one where I hope we're only seeing the start of what industry can achieve through greater transparency and storytelling with the Australian public.

The changing face of farming... how far we've come

The face of farming is certainly changing, and I'm incredibly proud of how far the farm sector has come over recent years.

What I've observed is an industry more ready to face up to the big challenges and opportunities. To read and acknowledge the prevailing wind, and to proactively adjust our sails to choose our own course.

From an NFF perspective, our vehicle for doing this has been the 2030 Roadmap - our ambitious plan to grow the farm sector to \$100 billion in farm gate output by 2030.



I'm immensely proud of the work we did to engage industry broadly in the development of that plan, and how we were able to bring people along in setting bold targets on challenging issues that we're well on the way to meeting today.

The success of the Roadmap has been in setting a simple goal that anyone can buy into. It's garnered support across party lines with three Prime Ministers and four Agriculture Ministers. The widespread support for that \$100 billion vision has allowed a more positive, future-focussed discussion about the success of our industry.

It's played a small part in repositioning agriculture in the minds of many from a legacy industry, viewed with nostalgia, to a sector offering an exciting and sustainable source of growth – one that thrives on innovation and new ways of working.

But it's what's underneath the headline growth figures that gets me really excited. It's the detailed targets and ambitions where we're starting to really move the needle towards better outcomes.

Sustainability

Take our sustainability agenda as an example. Climate change has long been a vexed and divisive political issue in our sector, with farmers in various camps frustrated that their deeply held views didn't represent a consensus among the farming population.

What we've seen in recent years is a series of acknowledgments. Firstly, a widespread acknowledgment that the climate is changing – with many farmers believing they're witnessing these effects firsthand.

Second, an acceptance that the world is changing – and that regardless of what we might think or want, our governments, customers and financial institutions globally are moving towards climate action with real consequences for our sector.

And lastly, a recognition that we need to keep ahead of this change. I'm proud to say that we're doing that, having set ambitious sectoral targets for our own emissions reduction, backed economy-wide action, and backed that in a practical sense by providing the lion's share of offsets and abatement under Federal Government programs to date.



Now that doesn't mean we've simply decided to stop swimming and let the current take us. We're entering the climate transition with our eyes wide open. We're alive to the threats – such as the impact of a changing climate, or poor planning of renewables, transmission infrastructure and carbon offsets on agricultural land.

We're also alive to the opportunities – like positioning Australia as a global leader in low-emissions farming, and enabling farmers to make informed decisions about monetising their carbon resources.

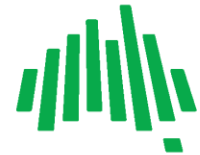
I'm also excited about the progress we've made in moving beyond simply talking about carbon, to kickstarting a more holistic discussion about the sustainability and natural capital attributes of our farms.

Informed by some incredibly clever thinkers – within of course our membership, but also including partnerships and collaboration with the Australian Government, ANU, KPMG, CSIRO and Farming for the Future – we've sought to better understand how we measure, manage, monetise and communicate our sustainability.

At a grassroots level, that's involved working with Farming for the Future to measure and baseline the natural capital assets of 1,000 farms. That's going beyond carbon to understand the health of our ecosystems: from biodiversity, to soil health, to the health of our waterways. This helps us not only get better at quantifying this natural capital, but also to start understanding the link between natural capital and farm productivity.

At an industry level, we're working with Government and all industry sub-sectors to develop the first Australian Agriculture Sustainability Framework – one of our important Roadmap goals. Now in its final stages of development, this Framework provides a translation layer between the targets and metrics used by our diverse industries around the country, all the way up to global frameworks like the UN Sustainable Development Goals, and is a global first. This ensures that when we tell our sustainability story on the world stage, we're speaking the same language as our customers, our investors and foreign governments and stands up to the rigor of any international standard.

We also remain committed to finding a pathway to reward farmers financially for their stewardship of the environment. As farmers we manage well over half of the Australian continent. We invest significant sums of our own



money to care for this country – managing introduced pests and weeds, restoring waterways and protecting habitat for native plants and animals.

There is so much more farmers could do if given the resources. That's why we've supported the idea of a Nature Repair Market now across two governments and why we still hope that we can lead the world in that proactive partnership approach to environmental stewardship.

Everything I've just described was in that Roadmap plan we developed and released in 2018. Fast forward 5 years and we're seeing all of these initiatives flourish – some led by the NFF, but many led by third parties working separately but in alignment with the industry's goals.

Our People

Our approach to sustainability is just one area where I believe we've seen a stepchange as we pursue our Roadmap agenda. And I could talk all day about other areas like digital literacy and connectivity, risk management or innovation... but instead I want to talk briefly about one other topic, and that's our evolving approach to our people.

That starts with our understanding of who 'our people' are. For far too long, we saw only the faces and heard only the voices of white, male, middle aged farmers. If you asked any urban Australian to describe a farmer to a sketch artist that's invariably the image you'd get.

And that's not to diminish the value and importance of those men who do of course make up the lion's share of our sector. But anyone who has sat around the kitchen table with a farming family will know that women have always been an equal driving force within our farm businesses. They were visible in the day-to-day operations of the farm, but they weren't visible in the boardrooms and leadership positions of our industry structures.

At the time I took on this role, a lot was made of the fact that I was the first female to hold the position. And while I might have grimaced to see my gender lead the headlines rather than my agenda, I also understood the significance of the opportunity I had as a female leader.

That's why through the Roadmap we set ourselves the target of levelling up representation in industry leadership. I'm immensely proud of the work we've done through the NFF's Diversity in Agriculture Leadership Program to mentor and elevate female leaders. That program, now in its 6th year, has



supported more than 60 female leaders – many of whom have gone on to sit on boards, take on executive positions, and become incredible leaders in their communities.

That program is just the NFF’s small contribution to a growing number of initiatives, networks and organisations that are out there elevating the voices of rural women. And while we still have some way to go before we see equality in representation, it makes me incredibly happy as I finish my time with the NFF to see those networks flourishing, to see a new generation of female advocates entering the limelight, and to know with confidence that as I step back there is no shortage of capable women ready to take my place.

We’ve also worked hard to give young farmers and aspiring farmers a greater voice, and to attract a new generation of Australians to consider a career in ag regardless of their background or where they grew up.

Initiatives like our Emerging Leaders Program and Young Farmers Council have helped give that new generation a greater voice around our table. And of course a program I’m incredibly passionate about – AgCAREERSTART – is giving hundreds of young Australians the chance to try agriculture for the first time. That program, which we run in partnership with the Commonwealth Government, is now selecting its third cohort of 100 young Australians to take part in a structured gap year program on farms in every state and territory.

Those of us in the industry know just how rewarding a career in agriculture can be. Through AgCAREERSTART we’re able to share those rewards with a broader cross section of school leavers who might not have that existing connection to the sector.

Once again, this idea for an Ag Gap Year came from our 2030 Roadmap and is just one more great example of how things that were just thought bubbles 5 years ago have now become successful initiatives that are significantly changing the face of our industry.

The latest ABS Census data shows a 30% increase in people aged 25-29 in the industry since 2006 with a 42% increase in young females in the 25-34 year age bracket. Half of our workers aged 25-39 have one or more parents born overseas compared to only 20% for 60-69 year old workers. We have a great story to tell!!



But I can't talk about our people without reflecting on the challenges and tough conversations we've had in recent years.

We continue to struggle to attract workers in sufficient numbers to keep pace with our growth. We've faced the frustration of watching a dedicated Ag Visa – something we initially designed and fought long and hard for – be taken away before it could deliver even a single worker, followed by a slashing of visa programs with nothing to take their place.

We've also unfortunately seen continued reports of farmers failing to uphold workplace standards. I've been categorical in calling out where farmers have engaged in exploitative practices which have no place in our sector. We've led the call for tougher penalties for deliberate wage theft, and supported the establishment of visa pathways with worker protections baked in.

I'm incredibly proud to have led an industry that has faced up to these challenges with such courage and conviction. You don't hear industry leaders defending our worst players, you hear them talking about solutions. And we've engaged on these issues directly and constructively with the unions, through the tripartite process convened by Minister Watt.

Our approach to these issues is very much reflective of our industry today – one which confronts its challenges, brings forward solutions, and is prepared to engage with whoever can help us get where we need to go – unencumbered by historical assumptions about who we can and should collaborate with to get the job done for farmers.

The farmer's perspective

But while, as I've outlined, we've come an incredible distance as an industry on so many fronts – some things never change, nor would we want them to.

One of those things is the need for the farmers' voice – the farmers' perspective – to be heard in the national dialogue.

I've always been incredibly proud to represent the farmers' perspective. I've always found that farmers bring an incredibly grounded view to discussions – no matter the topic. Always incredibly thoughtful and grounded in a deep practicality. I can't help but think that the farmers' perspective is informed by our daily connection to nature, having our fortunes dictated by its forces, and the reality check that brings.



In a world where people are so insulated and disconnected from forces beyond their control, farmers are able to keep things in perspective. To understand that most things are cyclical in the long run.

It's that moderating voice in an increasingly polarised world that I think farmers bring to the political debate in Australia. While traditionally viewed as conservative, I've never thought that label sat well. Any successful farmer embraces change and embraces new ideas. They have to.

But they don't suffer nonsense, and they're not easily swayed by ideas that might be fashionable but lack merit.

That's why I hope that despite numbering fewer than we might have a generation ago, we will always hear the farmers' voice in our discourse.

That's why I'm so passionate about the success of the NFF as a vehicle to make that voice heard on the national stage. I'm proud of what we've been able to achieve in my time to give the NFF the resources and sustainable footing it needs to do what is going to be demanded of it in the coming years, as we continue to ensure farmers are heard and understood in our ever-expanding capital cities.

We know full well that the NFF and the organisations that make up our membership will need to continue to evolve. We have to remain relevant to a new generation of farmers, and we need to ensure our structures remain the best way to bring people together and to meet our advocacy needs into the future.

Global headwinds

As I see it there has never been a more important moment for strong and sustained advocacy on behalf of our sector.

I don't want to dwell here too much on current policy pressures on the sector. I'd direct you to our recent media statements and you'll hear plenty more from our new President on this in the coming days...

But suffice to say history will not judge this government kindly if it continues to prosecute an agenda focussed more on satisfying factions than facts on issues like live sheep exports – a disaster for animal welfare, our ties in the Middle East, and farmers across Australia. Or water buybacks – tearing up



some of the critical socio-economic community protections in the Basin plan agreed on by scientists and communities so many years ago.

No, as much as I might like to unburden myself on some of those issues, that'll soon be someone else's job. As for me, I'll be focussing more on the global picture wearing my new hat as a director of the World Farmers' Organisation

And it's through the prism of that global perspective that I look at the areas where governments are failing farmers here at home, and I can't help but think its just a local outbreak of harmful agricultural policies that is just part of a broader epidemic that is raging worldwide.

Whether its restrictions on fertiliser use in the Netherlands, Sweden or Canada; methane taxes in New Zealand; anti-science scare campaigns against modern farming practices; or the 32 countries which have imposed export restrictions on food products or inputs since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine... the result of these policies is the same. They will all contribute to pushing food and fibre production lower, and the cost for consumers higher – at a time when we've never needed to grow more.

Globally this year there are 345 million people facing acute levels of food insecurity. That number has more than doubled since 2020. As we look towards a future of climate change, and an extra 2 billion mouths to feed – the need to feed and clothe that population should be on an equal footing with any other challenge we face.

Unfortunately, all too often it's the poor cousin - an afterthought which is frequently the collateral damage of the climate agenda, or the latest activist scare campaign, or a knee-jerk reaction to local price spikes.

That's not to say that the climate agenda isn't important, but simply to say that we have to be able to do two things at once. Policies which lower farm output should never be taken lightly.

We need to constantly look forward 20-30 years into the future and remember the challenge we face to *grow* production. Policies which shave a percent here and a percent there from farm output are just widening a future food supply gap that we ought to be narrowing.

So as I see it, that's my new job: inserting the farmers' perspective into the big global discussions that impact our future. Reminding global decision



makers that we can walk and chew gum at the same time. That growing food and fibre isn't a luxury, it's a necessity.

I've had the privilege of taking part in some of these forums during my time with the NFF, and I can tell you that it's been an eye-opening experience.

If I think about my trip to Sharm el Sheikh for COP27 last year, me and other members of the Australian delegation managed to have some really important discussions with the people influencing the agenda in that forum. But if I zoom out, even if I include every other farming and aligned group from around the world, we were just a barnacle clinging to the hull of the climate change supertanker.

If I think about all the other barnacles sharing that albeit very important hull – selling the next planet-saving technology or brandishing a copy of their latest sustainability report – agriculture was a long way from the front of people's minds.

And NFF isn't going to fix that, and Fiona Simson certainly can't. But we can make a difference by working collectively with likeminded organisations around the world, to elevate the agricultural agenda and ensure that other worthy issues and causes can complement, rather than compete with the cause of food and fibre production.

Closing

So that's one of the things that you'll now find me doing. I'm sorry to those who thought this would be the last you'd hear from me, but my term at the NFF may have expired but my passion certainly hasn't, and along with my other roles such as the Chair of ACIAR (I also acknowledge my new CEO Wendy Umberger in the room), and my other Board roles I'll still be out and about chewing someone's ear about our fabulous sector and helping where I can.

Before I stop talking and take some questions I just want to say thank you Kath and your committee at the National Rural Press Club of which I'm a very proud patron and of course the National Press Club for giving me the chance to share some final thoughts here today.

Lastly, I just want to sincerely thank our NFF member bodies and farmers right across Australia – many of whom have taken the time in the last couple



of weeks to reach out and thank me personally - for trusting me to represent their interests for the past nearly seven years.

They have granted me what will surely be the defining privilege of my professional life. I'd be lying if I said I enjoyed every single minute of it, but I can assure you I have valued every minute. I've always tried to remember what an important privilege this role is.

Australian agriculture is the best industry on the planet. Its people are the best you could ever hope to meet. And our farming communities are the best places a person could wish to call home.

I am so very grateful to have had the chance to share their story and support their future.

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