

9 April 2013

Making ag's voice heard



Former NFF president Jock Laurie would welcome more funding to bolster the federation's firepower in Canberra.

Fairfax Agricultural Media's Big Issues feature covers 10 big challenges facing rural Australia. This issue: FARM VOICE.

AGRICULTURE'S voice in Canberra desperately needs more money to have any chance of matching the decibel levels of other peak industry lobbies and noisy special interest groups.

Canberra is where most of the key decisions affecting industry are now made by a parliament whose members are, by and large, out of touch with agriculture.

The National Farmers' Federation was formed in 1979 by State farming organisations across the nation who were then led by people deeply committed to national farmer unity.

Their vision has faded in the past decade for a number of reasons, including heavy financial pressures on most of the State member organisations, which has left the NFF short of senior staff and resources at a time when the whole rural sector is being hammered by a raft of complex issues and problems and constant attacks by media-savvy activists who are increasingly poking their pinocchio-length noses into practices in the livestock industries, in particular.

In recent years the NFF has widened its membership base to corporates with the likes of GrainCorp, Ridley, Ruralco and Beechworth Honey now on board. But the federation is still seeking new members to help fund the expensive work of protecting the interests of the farm sector in Australia's seat of political power.

Senator Bill Heffernan, one of the few politicians in federal parliament with any practical farming knowledge, said the NFF "is not what it used to be".

"It's time we (farmers) marched or had a fair dinkum inquiry (into the future of Australian agriculture)," he said.



AWGA - News Update

Mick Keogh, CEO of rural think-tank the Australian Farm Institute, agreed the NFF needed an injection of resources to put it on a more equal footing with the likes of the Business Council of Australia and the Minerals Council of Australia.

"The NFF is down to almost single figures in the number of staff. I think the whole thing (representation of farmers) needs a good rethink."

Mr Keogh said the drift of power from the States to the national capital was neatly illustrated by the decision-making process around the future of the Murray-Darling Basin, Australia's biggest food bowl.

Canberra had taken charge of the issue which had left irrigation farmers scrambling because their representative organisations were State-based and parochial.

The National Irrigators Council was created in 2008 to give farmers a unified voice during the tortuous development of a new Murray-Darling Basin Plan where the debate has been frequently dominated by environmental groups and activists.

[Former NFF president, Jock Laurie](#), (who spoke to Fairfax Media while still NFF president) would like to double or treble the current staff of 11 to give the farm sector much higher visibility and clout in Canberra's halls of power.

He was also aware the NFF had plenty of critics among rank and file farmers who thought the federation "are bloody hopeless of bastards".

Mr Laurie said the NFF was focused on "big picture" issues such as trade, biosecurity, water, the carbon tax and foreign investment because that's what its member organisations wanted.

"I have been a farmer all my life, I know as much as anybody about losing money. But I've got to talk the industry up as president of the NFF. There are great opportunities out there. My role is to make government understand those opportunities," he said.

"It's (agriculture) taken for granted. I keep saying to them (politicians), just get out of the road and let us get on with our job. Stop getting in the way...."

John Cobb, the Coalition's agriculture spokesman and a former president of the NSW Farmers Association, was not convinced about confining NFF's role to a few "big picture" issues.

"You need a leader to speak on all issues. The more you let others speak on your behalf, you allow others to be powerful to the government of the day."

Judging by recent events, notably how close animal activists recently came to shutting down live cattle exports, the present system of representation and communication isn't working properly.

The starting point is surely a better resourced peak rural lobby with more money and talent to defend agriculture against unfair attacks and to strongly influence political and public debate when the need arises.

<http://www.theland.com.au/news/agriculture/agribusiness/general-news/making-ags-voice-heard/2653498.aspx?storypage=0>



AWGA - News Update