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AUSTRALIA'S AGRICULTURAL FUTURE: REPORT LAUNCH

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Entering the unknown Australia

CSIRO Discovery Centre
CANBERRA

When the First Fleet set sail for Australia in 1787 it carried:[1]

- 700 iron shovels
- 50 pick-axes
- 300 gallons of rum
- 18 turkeys
- 5 rabbits
- A piano
- And a small cask of raisins.

When it arrived in Botany Bay it carried fewer turkeys, a lot less rum, and a good handful of exotic diseases.

The colonists soon realised they had three basic problems:

- They didn't know where to farm.
- There were a lot of trees in the way.
- It is hard to clear a tree-stump with a pick-axe – or indeed, a piano.

They called it New South Wales, but it didn't look a lot like Britain.

If they had farming knowledge – which many did not – they had no idea how that knowledge could be helpfully applied, in a country with no draught animals, an unknown climate, not a lot of labour and nothing like the green pastures of home.

But of course they had a small cask of raisins.

And rabbits – a gift which keeps on giving to this day.

Thus our great agricultural nation was founded: on raisins, rum, rabbits - and a prayer.

But over time we progressed from survival to security, and from security to prosperity. And our expectations likewise grew.

Today we have ambitions to:

- Develop agriculture in Northern Australia
- Expand our capacity in biofuels

[1] http://firstfleetfellowship.org.au/library/first-fleetlist-livestock-provisions-plants-seeds/

- Benefit from free trade agreements
- Secure jobs in food processing
- Support communities in regional Australia
- Safeguard threatened species
- Protect the Great Barrier Reef
- And of course the perennial favourite – feed the world.

The Agriculture White Paper brought many of these ambitions together – but still begs the question.

How many of our ideas are straws in the wind?

And how many can we realise, in ways that allow us to live comfortably with the consequences for centuries to come?

The only answer to that question is: *it depends*.

It depends to some measure on things beyond our control.

But more importantly, it depends on our capacity to look at the world we've got, and accept that the way we do things has got to change.

In that respect, we are no different from those early settlers – who came expecting England, and got Australia.

We too are pioneers – because we have never lived in the Australia we are going to enter, and it won't be like the Australia we know today.

What *do* we know about it?

- The global market will be different: there will be more people, and those people will demand different things from Australia and Australian farms.
- The way the world farms will be different: technology will advance, and we will have to adapt if we intend to stay competitive.
- The politics will be different: mining, tourism, transport, and energy will all make their case for the use of resources; and communities will have to decide where the precedence lies.
- The country will be different: made up of different people, with different skills, seeking different things from farming.

- And the climate itself will be different: changed not wholly, but in large measure, as a result of human activities.

No-one else is going to teach us what works in that unknown Australia. We will draw on the ideas of others – but we will have to apply whatever we learn to the challenges that are ours alone.

We *all* have to do this – everyone who votes in elections, works in the economy or lives in the environment. All of us have choices to make and consequences to bear.

And there will be no turning back if we've packed a piano and realised too late that a pick-axe might be more in line with what we require.

- It takes time to build physical infrastructure, as well as the human infrastructure of knowledge and skills.
- It takes time to develop capability in research, and the relationships through which capabilities might combine.
- It takes time to prepare industries – and communities – to act on new ideas and adjust to the changes that follow.
- It takes time to reverse poor decisions that squander resources and leave scars on the land.
- And it takes time to establish the sort of position we would want to hold in the world: to be a good global citizen as well as a capable partner in trade and research.

If we are wise, we will match the culture and capabilities we develop to the sort of challenges we are likely to face.

We will plan, so we can coordinate our actions, sustain them over time, and achieve something worth the effort we all invest.

And we will be prepared for the opportunities we can't foresee: by coming to them with the habit of innovation.

Hence this latest report from ACOLA.

It is many things - a history of our agriculture, an analysis of our performance, and a window to the future of farming technology.

It will be read and valued for all those purposes by people in a position to act on the evidence put forward.

But the clear message that emerges in every chapter is that science and innovation are the key: to understanding our history, as well as preparing for our future.

And it would be wrong to think that we can have a line in the budget for Agricultural Research, and consider the future of farming secure.

We need research in many disciplines, as well as cross-disciplinary teams combining knowledge in entirely new ways.

We also need the capacity to apply what we discover, or create, in practical ways.

It calls for people. It calls for educated people. It calls for science-trained people, but not exclusively science-trained people. It calls for all of our skills and talents across all of the disciplines to be able to deal with these complicated and complex issues.

And it relies on an informed community: able to have an intelligent conversation, with the benefit of evidence that we interpret with understanding.

Food – you might say – for thought.

I congratulate the report authors on an important and timely publication, and I look forward to the conversations to come.

Thank you.