

National Water Week reveals a policy drought

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This is National Water Week. Its theme is “Reimagining our Water Future”. Proclaiming water to be one of the seven priority areas for agriculture, Minister David Littleproud says, part “In agriculture it’s a case of just add water”. In fact, water and infrastructure is the seventh priority behind “stewardship”, a euphemism for climate change. Stewardship “reforms will empower farmers to diversify their income and earn credits under the \$2 billion Climate Solution Fund”. In other words, it offers farmers a chance to earn income by avoiding farming.

In an apparent consensus, both the actual and shadow minister for agriculture have endorsed a National Farmers Federation “[Roadmap](#)” to almost double agricultural output by 2030. Unfortunately, their mutual path forward is pure fantasy and rests upon virtue signals, many of which, far from advancing towards greater productivity, would actually impede progress. Among the beacons said to be lighting the path to future prosperity of agriculture are carbon neutrality, 50 per cent renewables, maintaining (not expanding) agricultural land, business plans and succession plans, gender parity, capped off by “Australia becomes a Top 20 nation for innovation efficiency”. There is nothing other than platitudes about how to increase inputs —

certainly nothing on new water supplies, the essentiality of which is demonstrated by the fact that the one per cent of irrigated land in Australia produces one-third of the value of agricultural output.

In times gone by, farmer associations and even agriculture departments were focussed on how to help farmers. Much departmental activity was lobbying for superphosphate bounties and expanded water supplies (satirised as a pre-election signal “I feel a dam coming on” by the [“Modest Member”](#), [Bert Kelly](#), a then as now rare breed of politician who fought against all handouts). In the past two decades, these departments have morphed into agencies that impede commercial farming by dreaming up ever-more comprehensive regulations on land use.

A recent example of the institutional dereliction of support for farming was the convulsions in the New South Wales Coalition over measures that place an additional layer of regulations over real or imagined koala habitats. And in Queensland, we have increasing restrictions on sugar cane and other farmers to reduce agricultural run-off, spuriously said to be having an effect on that El Dorado of government grant funding, the Great Barrier Reef.

These and other measures have now brought about a tradition of restraint on agricultural practices that was evident 20 years ago in the Howard Government. The environment department under Minister David Kemp, conspired with NSW and Queensland governments to prevent land clearing, so that the government could comply with its goals under the Kyoto convention on climate change. The Agriculture Minister, the Nationals’ Peter McGauran, acquiesced. The farmers, whose property was

effectively expropriated in this process, were denied compensation.

The plea in the NFF roadmap is to see the agricultural land area maintained. Unlike in some parts of the world, the threat is not urbanisation but national parks and other restricted areas which have grown tenfold over the past 40 years. Native title now covers 40 per cent of the land area much of which overlaps with conservation land and in many cases sterilises it from productive use. Even so, all material from the Commonwealth department is preceded by “We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of country throughout Australia and recognise their continuing connection to land, waters and culture. We pay our respects to their Elders past, present and emerging.” Aboriginals as “land custodians” are now officially central to agriculture, alongside climate change and other environmental matters.

This prominence is illustrated in other official work. Thus, for example, the Australian State of the Environment Report 2021 Scoping paper for Inland Water is almost entirely about indigenous water, environmental flows and climate change issues. There is no information on how existing water sources can be tapped more effectively to expand agricultural output. The work on land similarly over-emphasised climate change and indigenous agriculture. Dark Emu myths about Aboriginals living in prosperous farming communities are part of a narrative of unique insights into land use are held by some people with distant ties to those who lived on this continent prior to 1788. The fact is that aboriginal hunting and collecting could barely sustain in abject poverty a population less than one per cent of that of today.

And although Water Minister Keith Pitt has halted further diversions of water from farmers to the environment in the Murray Darling, rolling back the unproductive takings is a distant mirage. Understandably, some farmer groups are cynical about the Government's "reimagining".

Shelly Scouller of the Speak Up Campaign asks:

- Can you imagine what our rural communities would be like if governments worked collaboratively with local communities to effectively share water between the environment and growing food and fibre?
- Can you imagine what farmers could do if governments stopped unnaturally flooding forests as they try to pour so much water down to the end of the system, turning the Murray River into a drainage channel, and instead prioritised that wasted water for food and fibre production?
- Can you imagine the jobs that would be created in agriculture and its value-add manufacturing sector if governments were serious about their claims of growing the agricultural industry to \$100 billion by 2030?
- Can you imagine the ecological benefits if governments accepted that a farm is a unique ecosystem in its own right, and supported flora and fauna on-farm?