

CORRECTED VERSION

RURAL AND REGIONAL COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the capacity of the farming sector to attract and retain young farmers and respond to an ageing workforce

Timboon — 18 October 2011

Members

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Chair: Mr P. Weller
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Witnesses

Mr P. Brown, executive officer, Country Education Project; and
Mr A. Keir, student, and
Ms E. Inglis, student, Timboon P-12 School; and
Ms R. Mariner, student, Lavers Hill P-12 College.

**Necessary corrections to be notified to
executive officer of committee**

The CHAIR — Welcome, Phil, Alexander, Emma and Rachael, to this public hearing in the Rural and Regional Committee's inquiry into the capacity of the farming sector to attract and retain young farmers and to respond to an ageing workforce. I hereby advise that all evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided under relevant Australian law. I also advise that any comments made outside the hearing may not be afforded such privilege. For the benefit of Hansard could you each state your name and address please.

Mr BROWN — Phil Brown, CEO of Country Education Project.

Ms MARINER — Rachel Mariner from Lavers Hill P-12 College.

Mr KEIR — Alexander Keir from Timboon P-12 School.

Ms INGLIS — Emma Inglis from Timboon P-12 School.

The CHAIR — We asked for addresses — just Phil's.

Mr BROWN — [REDACTED]

The CHAIR — Would you like questions as you go or at the end of your presentation?

Mr BROWN — We asked these guys to share for a few minutes their expectations and understanding of the agriculture industry, including their perceptions of it, whether they are going to enter it, why so if they are and why not if they are not. Perhaps if we start there and then we can get into a conversation.

Ms INGLIS — I will start. Can I just ask you to reply to this: what is the first thing you think of when someone says 'agriculture' to you?

The CHAIR — Milk.

Ms INGLIS — The definition of 'agriculture' is 'farming, the occupation, business or science of cultivating the land, producing crops and raising livestock'. That is just a little background. Some reasons why young people get into farming include they may have grown up with it. I have lived on a farm my whole life, and I enjoy it. People might enjoy farming and that is okay; nothing is wrong with that. I was talking to one of my friends today. He loves farming and fencing and all that stuff. He just likes seeing what he can achieve and the success he has had on his farm. He made a new fence; he did a whole lot of fencing and he is proud of that. You can learn new things and learn your own way of doing those things. There is more independent learning. You can breed animals and stuff like that. You can produce materials like milk, crops, meat, wool — anything you can think of. Finally, you are able to be your own boss and do the things you want to do and not have people tell you how to do them.

You can also be involved in agriculture but not on the farm. You get people who sell products to farmers, like sales reps; they help you fix the farm. Then you get the agricultural accountants to help you with the financial business. Then you get the artificial insemination technicians. Do you know what they do?

The CHAIR — I have a B-grade ticket.

Ms INGLIS — Okay, that is good.

Mr TREZISE — What is a B-grade one?

The CHAIR — It means you can do it yourself.

Ms INGLIS — Then you get the mechanics who can fix tractors and harvesting equipment. You get all of those people. You go to the field days and you get all that stuff. Then you get the contractors; there are many contractors. For instance, my dad is an effluent contractor; he spreads shit for a living — I am just saying it.

The CHAIR — You could be a politician.

Ms INGLIS — Then you get agronomists who test soils and tell you what fertilisers to use on the land. Then you get the vets who help out with the farms. Since we are a dairy farm we get the field officers from the

factories to tell us what you can do to produce more milk and get better quality and stuff like that. Then you get the dairy technicians to help with the farm and with the dairies and you get the wash systems and the teat-spraying stuff.

This is my opinion, but people think that doing agriculture is a last resort and that people who are not smart can do it; it is the lower class people who have to do it. I do not think that. Anyone can do it really. A lawyer who does not like being in the courts might actually enjoy working on a farm. Anyone can do it. This is some stuff that people do not like about farming. They say it is a low-paying job if the farm is not successful and you always have to work long hours. For example, I have not seen my dad for nearly two weeks because he is working up country doing silage; that is a way of getting income. It is classified as a low job — it is iffy. People do not like animals and farms are so far away from towns; you have to travel to town. If you have a medical emergency, you have to travel and it might be urgent. People think it is a boring, dirty and yucky job.

My parents have suggested I should try something new before I go into farming — do something different. I have seen what they have gone through. There are so many highs and lows and it is never predictable — there are droughts and floods and all that stuff. People might not like doing physical work. They might just like sitting down and doing paperwork. That is my point of view.

The CHAIR — Thank you.

Mr KEIR — I am Alexander Keir. I do not live on a farm. I live in Peterborough and I have been at Timboon P-12 for my whole school life. All of my mates live on farms, so every time I go to a mate's place I am on a farm.

My opinion of what makes young people not want to work in agriculture is that it is not appetising. If you look at the agricultural business, it does not seem as though a young person is going to say, 'I am going to finish school and go to work on a farm'. No offence, but it seems as if it is an old-person thing to do — mid-30s or early 40s. Maybe you could buy a farm and start up then. I think a key point is that introducing electronics to farming would be huge — massive. We are introducing technology into schools to keep up with the education system. Technology is becoming more of a vital key every day. If we can introduce that into agricultural business, it will open up opportunities for more jobs — more computer technicians and stuff like that — plus it is exciting. Introducing new technology is always exciting, no matter where it is. Farmers will be excited about learning how to use new technologies. I think that would make it more appetising for younger kids. On an iPad you could see the set up of all of your paddocks and you could select where your cows are and where your dams are and stuff like that. You can apply those things systematically with computers. That would be a huge plus.

It is weird because decades ago we used to go through school and in year 10 there might be, say, 60 kids. In year 11, 20 or 30 of those kids would drop out and they would go into the agricultural business. In year 12 it would drop down to 20 kids because those other people would walk away. You would only do year 11 to get the mathematics or accounting knowledge or whatever you needed. The only people who finished year 12 were the one or two people who wanted to become lawyers or doctors, and you only needed one or two lawyers or doctors to look after the whole year level. Nowadays, people are going through their education and we are getting five or six doctors and five or six lawyers and no-one is finishing their education to go into farming.

The CHAIR — All right.

Ms MARINER — I am Rachel. For most of my life I have lived on a hobby farm, but I have not had a lot to do with it; it is just a hobby of my father's. The reason why I think a lot of students are not going into agriculture from school is that it is not exactly a glamorous job and it is not made out to be a glamorous job. You are working for 365 days a year and the pay depends on how your farm is going. If there is a disaster of any sort and things go wrong, you can be ruined financially. A lot of people do not imagine themselves getting down and dirty — getting out in the mud in the pouring rain. A lot of my friends definitely would not want to do that.

I find also that it is not promoted. The schools are urging us to find our paths and to go in a direction that we are comfortable in and that we are good at. I find that the idea of farms is starting to dwindle a little bit, particularly with kids. A lot of kids do not understand farming and agriculture. They are automatically going to go for something they are good at like sport or medicine because they do not understand how farms work and what sort of things they have to do on a farm. There are kids going into agriculture, farming and equine studies, but I

find that a lot of them are from a farming background. They understand it and it is something they know they are good at and that they can do.

At my school we have done a little bit to promote agriculture. We have an agricultural teacher who does that course. We did Cows Create Careers, which is a year 5 and year 6 program. It is where you have to look after two calves for two weeks, and I think that has a really good feel and I think a lot more schools should be doing it. I am not going to go into agriculture, mainly because I do not understand it that well and I do not think I would be very good at it. On the other hand, my sister is going to do equine studies. She wants to be a horse riding instructor. I suppose it really depends on the person.

Mr HOWARD — What if you fall for a good-looking farmer boy?

Mr KEIR — So long as he is rich.

Ms MARINER — Yes.

The CHAIR — I hear from Alexander and Rachel in particular that the industry has probably got a job to do in promoting itself better. I listened to your comments about the technology. With satellite navigation tractors, you just sit there and they drive themselves. They put on the sprays and put the seed in with precision. When it comes to the dairy industry there are actually some robots that milk cows these days. In the rotary dairies they have computer programs to deal with the cows and that sort of the thing. There is a lot of the latest technology being used, and obviously the industry has a job to do to get it out there.

Mr KEIR — From a young person's point of view — a person who does not live on a farm — we do not know any of this. We do not get any information whatsoever about farming. I know that agriculture needs to be brought up through school a lot more if you want more kids to go into the agricultural business, because there is not a large option there. The kids who may want to end up on that path are not getting the option to do it.

Mr HOWARD — But when you have visited your mates' places, haven't any of them got rotary dairies or fancy tractors and that that you have seen?

Mr KEIR — They do not have any of the whiz-bang technology and all that. They have just got the average stuff as I see it.

Ms MARINER — It is the really big dairy farms and beef farms that have all the high tech stuff I find. It is the smaller ones that are not doing as well financially that do not have that stuff.

Mr BROWN — Just a couple of things from my perspective. I spent my first 17 years on a dairy farm, and I can recall very vividly when Dad called the five kids in and sat us down at the table and said, 'Who wants the dairy farm?'. We all looked at each other and walked out the door. I think that raises an interesting point, because if I was asked that question today, I would properly rethink it. But the perception that we had at that time was the conversation around the table at dinner times and in a whole range of other ways was a negative perception of the dairy industry. We whinged about the milk cheque not being good enough or, 'It's always wet', or, 'I have to go and do the irrigating, and I have 30 poddy calves I have to look after'. It was presented in a very negative way by the industry. I think that is an area we need to look at.

Mr TREZISE — I suppose that as an 18 or 19-year-old, or whatever, you are also looking to spread your wings.

Mr BROWN — Spread my wings, yes. That was going to be the third point I was going to make. The second point is, I think, the perception that we actually present to young people around the agricultural industry needs to be rethought and done with a much more holistic approach. While Alex talks about technology et cetera, it is into the industry but the interface between the industry and young people, either through schools or whatever, does not seem to happen. I remember a farmer in the Mallee asking the question of the school, 'I have the latest satellite technology. I can give you broadband. Why don't we develop a partnership together, and I will give you the technology and we can work together?'. It is that silo approach of mindsets that stops that interface between the industry and the young people and their learning.

The third area is that whole area of lifting the profile to a young person that lifestyle and expectations are different to when my father was a dairy farmer. That rotation life, that fact of 'I'm going to be here for three

years, and then I am going to flit off overseas; I'm going to find something different', is a real challenge for the agricultural industry that maps itself out in a much longer term process. For me to enter the dairy industry I am in a sense locking myself in for a certain number of years to get my return. Young people's mindset does not work that way today. I think there is a lot of conversation that we have to have about how we engage young people in the agricultural industry and embrace them, and how do we structure the industry to then attract them to becoming part of it. They were the three points I would make.

I think the lower down the school system we get, the better. We did some research in the Goulburn Valley about when young people start locking agricultural industries out of their career path planning, and it is down as low as grade 5 and grade 6, because of that perception that it is not a whiz-bang industry to be in or it is in a difficult time, so the parents say, 'Spread your wings. Go and find something else, and come back if you want to' — those sorts of conversations. If we talk about linking education to the agricultural industry, we have to go right back down to an experiential base and get young people exposed, whether that is putting farms in schools or whether that is building relationships between schools and the farming industry or agricultural industry. I do not know what it is, but I think that is a critical element that we need to put in place.

The sad thing, I think, from an agricultural point of view is that we are seeing a decline of agricultural programs in our school system. I think we need to broaden that out and look at it from a total learning perspective, as a learning environment as opposed to a program that is set in concrete.

The CHAIR — Emma, you spoke positively about the industry.

Ms INGLIS — Yes.

The CHAIR — Are those more your views than the end views you gave us?

Ms INGLIS — I do not know. These are my points of view. My mum and I were talking about them. Some people have different points of view. I just find that I enjoy working on the farm, and I balance my life between school, work and the farm. Sometimes it is hard for me. I have not seen my dad for a couple of weeks. You get over it. I know he will come back. I just think these positive things should be more positive. Everyone else should think of them as more positive and not think of them as negative.

Mr TREZISE — Emma, do you see your future on a farm?

Ms INGLIS — It is more like I will do something else first. I might have a small farm or have a couple of animals in the backyard and keep the farm with me, kind of thing, because I would not be able to handle the city. I need some kind of space. I like my spaces, and you just cannot be trapped in a box. You need a big, wide area, and you need some animals.

Mr TREZISE — You talk about the agricultural industry for what it is. It is obviously wider than just a farm; there is agronomy and all those types of things. Have you looked at that type of career path?

Ms INGLIS — No, not really; I only found out what an agronomist was yesterday, but that was okay.

Mr HOWARD — So what is each of you looking at post-year 12? I presume you are planning to finish year 12 and then go on.

Ms INGLIS — I am thinking of doing some kind of sports coaching or physical education teacher training. Mix all that together, and that will be me. I do not know what to do. I am just winging it, really.

Mr TREZISE — Are you in year 12?

Ms INGLIS — No, year 11.

Mr KEIR — I am in year 11 as well, and, as for what I am going to do at the end of next year, I do not know. I am possibly looking at going into the defence forces or something like that, but I am definitely planning to further educate myself.

The CHAIR — I suppose it does not matter what you are going to go and do. We need to know what the things are that influence your decision.

Ms MARINER — School is a big factor, as are parents. I reckon school is a huge factor in influencing where we want to go. At my school, at least, they say to us, ‘Do what you’re good at. Do what you want to do’. What we are good at is where we head. If I am good at English, journalism might be for me, because it is something I am good at. I think school is definitely a huge factor in influencing us.

Mr KEIR — On the same topic, at school you do not think to yourself, ‘Oh, I’m good at farming. I’m going to head that way. I’m good in the agricultural business’. You tend to think more of a specific occupation other than the agricultural business, because it is not a class at school or anything like that. You might think, ‘I’m good at maths; I’ll become an accountant’, or whatever it is, but there are no specific agricultural classes or agricultural studies, that I know of anyway.

Ms INGLIS — The community, school, parents and basically everyone around you influences you. If there is no farming or industry or anything like that, say in Melbourne, no-one really talks about it. They talk about other work, trains, trams and accidents. But if you are in a community like this, there are surrounding farms, so farmer talks to farmer, and then people start talking. The community is quite close, and they just talk about work and farming and all that. Your parents influence you for your whole life, so you take on their points of view as well and their roles. They want you to succeed, but not that way. But you can always go back.

Mr BROWN — I think that is really relevant. You can always go back to the farm. I reckon that is a really interesting comment.

The CHAIR — We have actually heard that in other places there is a trend for young adults to go away to pursue another career, and then when they are 30 they want the lifestyle and a quieter area to bring their kids up, so they come back to the farm.

Mr KEIR — The problem there is that of the kids that are going away there is only a certain percentage coming back. They are not all going to come back. People from urban areas need to come to the rural areas, witness this agriculture and see the prospects it has.

The CHAIR — We had a tour over in Western Australia. We looked at some agricultural high schools and their year 11 and 12 programs. Would that be a thing that would interest students here in Victoria?

Mr KEIR — Yes.

Ms MARINER — You could get some interest in it.

The CHAIR — Interestingly when we went there we learnt that 30 per cent of the kids were from Perth, and they were out at an agricultural high school.

Mr BROWN — Paul, I think there are multiple levels when we talk about engaging young people. One is an awareness process that Alex talks about, which means getting country kids to experience what it is like to be on a rural farm. There is a program that has been operating for about 15 years called Teaching Farms that links with LandLearn and FarmDay, a host program, and that engaged a hell of a lot of young people in primary schools by enhancing their understanding of what farms were about and all those sorts of things. I think we really need to explore the ability to link a country school with a rural school, or a rural community with a city community, and get that interface with those young people. If we are going to have an impact on young people’s perceptions, that is how young we have got to get to. We have got to start talking about giving 10, 11 and 12-year-olds an understanding of the industry, what is out there and all those sorts of things.

The second level is your model around the agricultural colleges. Whether we call them agricultural colleges or whether we support schools to develop a stream that talks about agriculture, I think what we need to do in that process is broaden it out so it encompasses all those attractive careers like accounting, IT and a whole range of other things within that agricultural process. It is not just the traditional farming and horticulture-type project; it is much broader and says, ‘Look, this is the 21st century farming environment, so you are going to play with technology and you are going to play with accounting’. Put that in your secondary school system, and I think you might get a lot more interest from young people around it.

Ms MARINER — Definitely starting younger would help, I think.

The CHAIR — That is part of it, and you have all said that the industry needs to do better promotion. What would a successful promotion look like? What would attract you to make a decision to go into agriculture?

Mr KEIR — Successful promotion is different to different people. I think you need more information that is actually getting to us about it. Use technology, because we are all about technology these days: Facebook, internet, texting and all that. Use that as a promotion. Focus on how you can utilise technology in farming. That is just my opinion.

Ms MARINER — I suppose now, at my age, promotion of agriculture would not change my mind about my career path. But successful promotion aimed at younger kids might get more interest from them, and more primary school kids might go into high school saying, 'I want to be a farmer or an agronomist'. The older we are the less likely it is that we are going to suddenly change our minds and go towards agriculture if that was not our original career path. But the younger they are the more likely it is you will be able to influence kids to find enjoyment in it.

Ms INGLIS — Down near Princetown there is Macka's Farm.

The CHAIR — I have seen the sign.

Ms INGLIS — It is a little farm, and tourists come down and actually go there and have a live-on-the-farm experience. They can milk cows and see everything that happens. I reckon they should have more of those around so everyone can have a look and see what everything really is — not workshops but more information getting out to other areas than farming industries. You know how you hear about the doctors saving everyone and lawyers getting people out of jail and all that stuff; farmers are not getting noticed that much, so they should get more notice, like, say, a farmer a grew a massive crop and it was the best crop he could ever get.

Mr TREZISE — You are talking about promoting the industry, the good things?

Ms INGLIS — Yes, actually promoting different farms. You get the Macca's and see where the beef comes from, in South Australia. You see on little boxes where the beef comes from. It should be more like that, but not in an unhealthy way. Do you know what I mean?

Mr TREZISE — Absolutely; I agree.

Ms INGLIS — You try to promote it and everyone goes to see it.

Mr BROWN — I am just thinking straight off the top of my head here, Paul, but there is the concept in the science area of education where we have things that we have called science specialist schools, that we put some expertise into them and we bring people in to experience. Maybe that is an option for agriculture, that we look at partnering with a school that can set up a comprehensive agricultural learning environment that has farming and all those sorts of things and, as a feature, a visitation-type concept. It is about developing that notion of specialisation within a school environment that goes down as low as year 6 or year 7 right through to, as in the Western Australian model, the senior end of the school process. Maybe that is worth exploring in terms of re-engaging some of the young people in the agriculture industry.

The CHAIR — Any concluding remarks? Would you like to have a final say, Emma?

Ms INGLIS — I will pass and come back.

Ms MARINER — I do not have one.

The CHAIR — You do not have to; I am just giving you the opportunity if you want to.

Ms MARINER — I do not think we do.

The CHAIR — You have done very well. Phil, do you want to give a final comment?

Mr BROWN — No.

The CHAIR — Thanks very much for giving up your time to come along today to give us an insight into how you see what helps people make decisions when they are looking at careers. It has been very useful for us.

In about 14 days time a copy of the Hansard transcript will go to Phil. You will be able to make corrections to obvious errors, but other than it will be as it was put there. Thank you very much for your time, and all the best in your endeavours in whichever careers you pursue.

Witnesses withdrew.