

## Transcript

**NATIONAL  
PRESS CLUB  
OF AUSTRALIA**

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 Item: **NATIONAL PRESS CLUB ADDRESS OF FIONA SIMSON, PRESIDENT,  
 NATIONAL FARMERS' FEDERATION.**  
**INTERVIEWEES: FIONA SIMSON, PRESIDENT, NATIONAL FARMERS'  
 FEDERATION**

Audience:	Male 16+	Female 16+	All people
	3000	1000	4000

**DAVID SPEERS:**

Good afternoon and welcome to the National Press Club and today's Westpac Address. I'm David Speers, political editor at Sky News Australia, a Director here at the National Press Club. It's been quite a week in Canberra and the fall out from the Liberal leadership eruption certainly continues, but in the meantime, the new Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, is trying to get on with the job. And of course, the first visit he made this week was to Quilpie in Central Queensland to see some of the drought stricken farmers and community members there. He's also appointed of course, a drought envoy in Barnaby Joyce. But the farming sector is trying to look beyond the drought; it's trying to look to better types ahead and growth in Australia's agricultural sector. Our guest today is the President of the National Farmer's Federation, Fiona Simson, who is going to outline her plans to achieve \$100 billion in farm gate output by 2030. It's an ambitious target and to tell us more about it, please welcome Fiona Simson.



FIONA SIMSON:

Thank you very much. Ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon. Daryl Quinlivan, Secretary of the department; National Press Club Director, David Spears; a CEO, Maurice Reilly; patron, Ken Randall and representatives of the NFF membership who have all travelled here to be here today. May I begin by acknowledging Australia's first farmers, in particular the Ngunnawal people on whose lands we meet today. I pay my respects to their Elders past and present and acknowledge their historic and continuing role in what is a great story of Australia agriculture. I'd also like to acknowledge and give a shout out to the current custodians of much of Australia's land mass, our farmers, including my own family and my husband Ed, who is at home on the family here today. I am very proud to represent- and some of whom might be tuned into this address today, or have the opportunity to view it later.

What a week it's been. When I accepted invitation to speak at the Press Club some time ago now, I certainly didn't think that there'd be a change in Prime Minister in the intervening period. And I'd certainly like to take this opportunity to officially congratulate Prime Minister, Scott Morrison. We really appreciated the opportunity to spend some time with him yesterday and particularly check in on him after his tour to Quilpie as David mentioned. I also extend a heart felt thank you to former prime minister, Malcolm Turnbull, Mr Turnbull is a great friend of the farm sector. As we know, the Turnbull's are farmers themselves. Over the last few months under his leadership and that of our Ag Minister, David Littleproud, the Government has been constantly reviewing and extending additional support



to farmers and communities managing drought. I'm pleased to say that after our meeting yesterday with ScoMo, I have no doubt that will continue.

In April at the Sydney Royal Easter show, Mr Turnbull launched the start of what I am here to talk about today, that is our bold vision for agriculture's future. My address today coincides with a time when many of our farmers, particularly those on the eastern sea board, are feeling pressure. Pressure that comes from managing drought. And I use those words managing drought deliberately, because managing the drought is exactly what we're doing.

Drought is not a new phenomenon for farmers. Since farming first started under the auspices of our first Australians, drought has been a part of the landscape and a regular part of the farm business cycle. That was of course, well before the concept of climate change even entered our language. And I'll talk a bit more about climate change later on, but of course, it's the effects of climate change that we need to be aware of that make the impacts of a drought even worse.

If I look back over the history of my own farm over the last 90 years, it's easy to see that every drought is different and although our farmers are smart and prepared for the inevitability of dry times, this one has taken many experienced and savvy farmers by surprise. On our own farm, we haven't had a year like it since 1965 when the sheep left and they didn't come back. Mind you, looking at current price, maybe that's not such a good thing. But our farmers refuse to be defined



by the tough times. In fact, many farmers including me, take offence to the portrayals of the broken down, hand out, dependent farmer profile peddled by many members of the media. That's simply not us.

What I will say is that these current trying conditions have reaffirmed that the special place farming has in the hearts of all Australians; we've been absolutely overwhelmed by the generosity of the Australian community, who are showing such great support. Our Government too, is constantly re-evaluating how they support our farmer and rural and regional communities, including the appointment of our very first drought coordinator, national drought coordinator and for that we're thankful.

However, it's made all the more difficult by the fact that we actually don't have a comprehensive national framework to deal with drought. Successive Governments have had a go, but we are still without certainty that a national strategy would actually provide. In fact, agriculture in its entirety is to date without a whole of Government national strategy or plan at all. There's a plan for tourism and a plan for mineral exploration and mining, plans for the environment, plans for urban development, and we came quite close just recently to a plan for energy. But, not a whole-of-government supported strategy for an industry that's not only been the back bone of our community and a consistent contributor to the GDP throughout our history, but also one with enormous potential in front of us - if only we can get it right. It is that potential that I am talking about today.



Agriculture is not only an industry with a special place in our past, but it's also got on exciting place in our future. It is an industry whose food and fibre is increasingly sought after by consumers across the world. Where farmers lead the way in the adoption of new technologies; that year on year excels in environmental stewardship and who holds almost the world record for accepting the least Government subsidies of any other comparable nation. Australia's farm sector as a whole has continued to out perform its industrial counterparts in terms of its GDP contribution and its growth rate. Today, Australian agriculture powers 1.6 million jobs across the supply chain. One in every seven export dollars Australia earns is from farm produce; sheep producers as I said, enjoying record wool prices of \$20 plus a kilo. Lambs made a record \$312 each in Griffith just a week ago. Wheat and grains are also making a resurgence from the lows of the last few years.

Ladies and gentlemen, agriculture stocks are over all on the up. We find ourselves in this position due to a number of factors, not least from hard work and ingenuity. We've also been supported greatly by the forging of a number of Free Trade Agreements, spearheaded by recent coalition Governments; China, Japan, Korea, Indonesia, to be signed this week and of course, the EU and the UK now under discussion. As an export-dependent industry sending about 70 per cent of what we produce overseas, new markets are incredibly important to Australian farmers.

The burgeoning Asian middle class can't get enough of our high-quality safe food and fibre, whether it's



Western Australian Marin, Rockhampton beef, wool grown in Walcha, cotton from Trangie, table grapes from the Riverland; people around the world love Aussie produce.

It's because of agriculture's proven credentials and contribution that it's so important that we have a national whole of Government strategy that not only plans for agriculture, but acknowledges and guides its growth. We'll continue to beat the drum until we see one. I know our Minister, David Littleproud is keen, but I think there's a few new faces in there that we might need to convince. In the meantime we're getting on with the job. We're not sitting around and waiting for someone else to determine our destiny. The NFF has a vision for farm gate output to be valued at \$100 billion by 2030. It's a goal that has earned wide-ranging support. We've welcomed the Minister Littleproud's endorsement and that of our corporate partners. What's maybe even more important is that the farmers of Australia that have been involved in this bold vision have loved it too.

Why \$100 billion you might ask? What does it actually mean? Well I'd like to tell you the story of Victorian farmer Cameron Parker. Cam Parker grew up in Melbourne. When he came to be of working age, he started like so many do with a job at his local supermarket. Cam worked his way up and was given a posting to manage the store in the farming community of Bought in Victoria's Mallee about 250 kilometres west of Melbourne. Cam was fascinated by the nearby rural industries and when he wasn't managing rosters and



reporting to head office, he took up part-time work on a nearby broad acre cropping operation. Pretty soon Cam swapped supermarket life for full-time farm work. Like he says, it was nice to be able to see further than aisle 15. To quote Cam: I found myself driving a big John Deere 9220 tractor with duals and I thought this is the life. Pretty much the same for my own son Tom, except I think the tractor would be red. Cam wasn't content with being a farm worker. He could see the benefits of running his own operation and the lifestyle it could provide for him and his and his future family. But nothing comes easy, especially not entering agriculture without established family roots and assets. Cam has invested his time, his money and more importantly, his soul into forging a career and a business in ag. He's put everything on the line to do so. Today Cam leases land and operates his own contract hay baling business while also working as a spray manager for a business with both irrigated and dry land cropping interests.

So why \$100 billion? For me, it is for people like Cam. For cam and for other young people like him that I feel a personal responsibility to do what I can through the NFF to see agriculture reach its potential, whether it's \$100 billion or even more. Ag's already on a trajectory growth. If we did nothing different we'd probably notch up \$84 billion by 2030, but to achieve \$100 billion we actually need a shake-up; a disruption to business as usual. The status quo just won't get us there. What this disruption should look like has been the subject of the talking 2030 initiative made possible through NFF's partnership with Telstra. Since April thanks to Telstra, NFF has absolutely crisscrossed the country, talking with farmers and others involved in agriculture from



Katanning in Western Australia to Alice Springs, Charters Towers, Launceston and many places in between.

Nationally, we have tapped into bold and really, really smart ideas from farmers and others in agriculture about how we actually can get to \$100 billion. And we've also harnessed the thinking of some of Australia's agriculture's best and brightest minds; graduates of the Rural Leadership Foundation, Nuffield Australia and agribusiness too. One such big idea is for the establishment of regional agriculture deals; geographic zones that are not bound by state or local government boundaries, but delineated by growing environments and pathways to markets. Deals that similar to city deals or the Western Sydney Airport initiative would see the three tiers of Government actually working together. Working together to bring strategic growth, jobs, infrastructure and investment to the regions, alleviating some of the impacts of the phenomenal growth that we've seen in our cities. Regional agriculture deals would provide a whole new strategic take on how we approach agriculture in this country. We'll plan for it.

The concept would allow us as a nation, to be bold and pinpoint hubs for focused agricultural production; infrastructure pathways to connect them and the businesses that support it. Such zones would be shaped around the national advantages and already successful businesses of a region. The growth of these industries, regions or zones would be supported by strategic investment and planning along the lines of a hub and spoke model, which would allow small towns, villages and yes whole geographical regions to focus on their

natural strengths rather than just the regional cities alone. And also supported perhaps by a national agency, such as the proposed future food system CRC. We have seen this work in a number of other countries such as the United States, Denmark and the Netherlands. As a way of a domestic possibility, consider northern Australia as a formal Mecca of irrigated production. I recently visited the ORD and the opportunities there are absolutely plain to see. There's not much that can't be grown there from beef, cotton, maize to mangoes and melons. Brokering regional agriculture deal between local state and federal authorities would facilitate investment in much needed built and environmental infrastructure. The regions proximity to Asia is an obvious advantage. Such a classification would prompt investment in the built and environmental infrastructure needed to boost production and to get the cotton, maize, mangoes and melons to our global customers. It would also serve as a blue print for other deals such as in my home region of the Liverpool Plains or maybe the Mallee in Victoria. And here's an idea, a national plan for agriculture could with the three tiers of Government working together, ensure that regional agriculture deals are actually linked by strategic, efficient infrastructure with harmonised standards, funded by innovative and novel funding arrangements. Road and rail culminating at state of the art ports and regional international airports like in Toowoomba that make it possible for produce to be on the shelf, in market within 24 hours or less.

In fact, harmonisation of road rules for agricultural vehicles would create enormous productivity benefits; even on its own, if we could just get on and do it. There's

opportunity for educational institutions to set up bases with learning opportunities targeted to that region's industries. Think tertiary and vocational training in horticulture and irrigation and consider ag tech and innovation hubs focused on new technologies for specific industries, as well as fertile conditions for the success of secondary businesses that support agriculture. What about tax incentives to attract these businesses, individuals and families servicing the region's industries? Regional agriculture deals would provide our regional communities a new identity for the future; a focus and catalyst for investment. All this would serve to enhance the vibrancy and social fabric of our regional towns. The fortunes of agriculture and rural Australia are intrinsically linked; we know that. Of course, many of the current constraints on agriculture's growth would still need to be solved in pursuit of that \$100 billion target. Currently, our industry is hampered by a lack of workers. In some cases, farmers are forced to leave fruit on the vine to rot because they can't get the people that they need to pick it. Sheep producers continue to struggle to get shearers and roustabouts. Working holiday visas and programs such as the Seasonal Worker Program work well for many but they simply just can't fill all the gaps.

The NFF has developed the idea of a regional visa; a visa designed specifically for agriculture to address some of our labour shortages. So far it's received some traction with Government and other stakeholders. Of course, the backbone of agriculture is our home-grown workforce. There are so many career opportunities for our young in agriculture; on farm and along the supply chain. In farm management, in research, in science,



marketing and finance, even advocacy. We need to better articulate a compelling rationale for a career in ag starting in primary school and expand on the work that people such as PIEFA are doing in our schools. The NFF is leading an initiative to encourage more female representation in ag leadership but this is only the first step towards increased diversity. Of course, we also support strategic immigration. The agriculture we know today was built on migration. Today, Australian agriculture is currently being curtailed with \$160 billion capital gap. We need to pursue new, novel capital sources and business structures that provide the cash we need to fund our future growth.

Then there's technology. The Australian Farm Institute predicts that the adoption of dead digital technologies will be the next step change in productivity, akin to the mechanical and industrial revolutions. In fact, the AFI found that realising the full potential of digital agriculture in Australia could boost the value of production by \$20.3 billion; connectivity pending, of course. To this end, I've spoken to Telstra CEO Andy Penn, just this morning, about the switching on of a new 5G tower in Toowoomba today. This is just the sort of digital infrastructure that we need. Think how the modern day farm has changed over the past 25 years with the adoption of precision agriculture, GPS guided machinery and advanced plant science to name just a few examples. With \$100 billion in our sights, we must commit to the maintenance and modernising of our tried and true Farmer-Government R&D investment partnerships. We must complement the levy system by incentivising increased private sector investment and developing tools that encourage greater adoption.



Farmers also need to have trust in technologies and the security in application of the data that they are collecting. That's why the NFF is working with farmers, government and corporate partners on the development of clear rules for the use of farm data. And, technology shouldn't be constrained to farm. Many agri-businesses are already opening up new markets and new opportunities with platforms such as block chain. By 2030, it's my prediction there will be any number of global trading and information sharing platforms that bring Australian farmers close to their global customers; I think Alibaba made an announcement about that just today.

In relation to new markets, the importance of continuing to focus on new trade agreements can't be over stated. We must focus on tariffs but also on breaking down those non-tariff barriers. Trade is a crucial example of why we need stability in our political leadership. Without committed diplomacy, we'll never fully realise the opportunities of liberalised markets. We know that by and large farmers are held in high esteem by Australians; the NFF itself, for example, was recently rated as the third Most Ethical Member Association in the 2018 Governance Institute Ethics Index. But we must continue to work on the trust between our consumers, be they global or domestic. Whether it is ag-vet chemical, animal welfare, genetically modified technology, water, or the treatment of worker; we must get better at telling our story. We have a great story to tell and where found lacking, we have to act to improve our practices to meet the community standards. There's too much to lose if we don't. To this end, NFF is working with our member, the R&D Fraternity and Agribusiness



and Government on establishing a body to educate the public about farm practices and to dismiss the mistruths. Part of our social licence to operate is demonstrating farmer's credentials as the great environmentalists that we are. Our farmers manage 48% of our land mass. Our cotton and grain industries lead the world in water use efficiency. Farmers have significantly reduced their reliance on fertilisers and chemicals. We're at the front line of climate change, of increasingly erratic seasons, out of season rainfall or no rainfall at all, and hotter longer summers. Climate change exacerbates the already unpredictable impacts of drought. As a sector, we recognise our role in combating climate change and we're well advanced in doing our bit as an industry to cut agriculture's emissions. The red meat sector has set a goal to be carbon neutral by 2030.

It's critical that we be enabled to continue to do that by coupling lower emissions and carbon storage in abatement with the production of high quality food a fibre. We recognise agriculture's role in sequestering and storing carbon but there's certainly much more work to do. More of our projects that minimise and reuse waste, including food waste, as fertiliser or energy and more via strategies to sustainably diversify land use. We need to remove much of the red tape applied to land management. There are market-based options that will deliver better outcomes for biodiversity by valuing public good conservation on private land and rewarding farmers for protecting threatened species. There needs to be a continued focus on water utilisation; balancing the needs of production and environment together with transparent rules and comprehensive trading markets.



It's critical that we find the right balance between environmental outcomes and the production of food and fibre underpinned by evidence-based science and sound and sensible policy. And we need support for growing population. The management of farmers' finance assets shouldn't be devoid from that of their natural assets and that's why we'd support a capital system that rewards farmers for sustainable practices.

So, what would a farm sector worth \$100 billion in farm gate output look like? At the moment, we're working on the modelling that will quantify this. But to give you an idea, it's best viewed through the lens of Cam Parker. For Cam and his family, \$100 billion farm sector means new international markets for fodder and grain, means Australia's enhanced global profile as a producer of quality safe food and fibre will have increased demand for Cam's produce. Fast, affordable connectivity will see Cam deploying state-of-the-art technology, on both farm and in the marketing of his produce. Cam will be accessing the capital he needs to grow through new novel business structure and diversify capital sources. In 2030 an increased appetite to pursue a career in ag means that Cam has no problem sourcing farm workers to power his business. Cam and his family will also be benefitting from the improved economic conditions in Boort. The improvements in farm profitability will have brought new families to the town, small businesses will be thriving and social and cultural opportunities will have expanded. Health education services will also have been bolstered. And all in all in 2030, the Parker family will be more productive, more profitable, and enjoying a higher quality of life than ever before. It's with people like Cam that I feel we have a responsibility to see that



agriculture reaches its potential. So communities like Premer, where I've raised my family and where my family continues to farm after four generations. Ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much for letting me share with you my vision, and that of the NFF for agriculture. We look forward to sharing our finalised Road Map for \$100 billion in farm gate output by 2030 in the very near future. It's a great time to be in agriculture: not only a proud and heritage industry of our past but also an exciting and innovative industry of our future. Thank you very much.

[Applause]

DAVID SPEERS:

Fiona Simson, thank you very much for that and I note what's a very good idea you've put forward there for a comprehensive national framework or strategy to deal with the drought. While we await that, can I just ask your thoughts on a couple of the ideas that have been balled up in recent days. One from the new Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, floating the idea that drought assistance may extend to covering the private school fees of farmers' kids; what do you think of that? And one by Barnaby Joyce, amongst others, that environmental water flows from the Murray-Darling be released to help drought-stricken farmers.

FIONA SIMSON:

So certainly, I think education and looking after our next generation is one of the most important things that we can do in any time of crisis, and if we're talking about drought at the moment and we are talking about a drought that is affecting large swathes of the eastern seaboard, with some areas in Queensland and western



New South Wales in particular, being drought-declared now for five to seven years. Now we're talking on serious financial impacts for some of these families and certainly I think some of these families really live a long way out of town, some of them live in remote locations. My own farm, for example, even though we're only in the Liverpool Plains, is an hour from town. So for many of these people, they don't have many options when it comes to educating their kids, particularly when they get to high school, and we're talking about the need to send their children away to boarding school and quite boarding school fees. Now, I'd hope that some of these independent schools that into the party as well in terms of making special allowance for some of the children and the circumstances they might find themselves in. But certainly also for people who might receive the Isolated Children's Allowance, for example, where you do get some support if you're travelling - and I can't remember the exact kilometrage, but if you are a certain distance out of town, then whether you have primary schoolchildren or high schoolchildren, then you can receive the Isolated Children's Allowance which helps with some of those expenses. And I think education is a worthwhile thing for everyone and I would hope that in actual fact, that people would support that. We certainly support keeping kids in school, we certainly support giving parents- giving kids every opportunity that they can in the bush. We certainly are a big believer in education. So, a tick from us, I think, for that one.

DAVID SPEERS:

And the Murray-Darling?

FIONA SIMSON:

The Murray-Darling Basin; again, we need to look innovatively right now but also, I think, as a future-proofing thing in terms of resilience and sustainability about water in this land and we need to have some discussions about that. What we're not in favour of is distorting markets and getting involved in markets that are already operating. So, some of the arrangements that have already been put in place where the water holders are actually auctioning water off in the market - they don't cause us concern - but certainly I think in terms of distorting markets, getting involved in markets that are already operating, we might end up on the very top of a very slippery slope and I think we would want to be very cautious about that. But certainly there are some great examples of water projects. David Jochinke, my own Vice President in National Farmers talks about a water scheme in the Grampians that is delivering water right now to many farmers in Victoria that otherwise would not have water during in this drought. So, I think those sorts of forward-looking schemes, what we can do in the water space is a conversation most certainly that agriculture needs to have, and the community needs to have, can I say, David.

DAVID SPEERS:

Alright, we need to get to our questions. I'll just reminder everyone: tell us who you are, where you are from. Our first question from Matt Coughlan.

QUESTION:

Hi Fiona, Matt Coughlan from *Australian Associated Press*. Thanks very much for your speech. I've just got a question on live export. Sussan Ley and Sarah Henderson have been promoted to the front bench. She's effectively ended- they've confirmed it's ended



their push on the Private Member's Bill to phase out live export. I just want to get your reaction to that; do you think it is a win for farmers, and can you see that's taken a bit of momentum out of their campaign to end the trade altogether?

FIONA SIMSON:

Look, I hadn't heard that, but I'm really- that's good to hear. The National Farmers Federation have always been supportive of a live export industry and the live export industry but operating under the most stringent conditions of animal welfare, as it should. So we've been very supportive of that and if those two members of Parliament have changed their views, then I certainly think that will be helpful in terms of continuing that discussion and debate. So, we remain supportive of it. Obviously, we need to have and the community need to have confidence in the supply chain. We need to make sure that the higher standards are upheld. We need to make sure that the Regulator is doing his job and all of those things are actually working and then we can pursue the industry that is very important to Western Australia, very important to some of our rural and regional communities there, very important to other parts of Australia, if we are talking other aspects of live trade.

And also, I think you have to remember that it's very important to the markets to whom we supply. So, people in other countries aren't as lucky as we are in Australia. They don't have refrigerated supply chains, they don't have the growing conditions that we have for food and fibre, and for some of these people we are actually supplying their food. So, I think we really need

to make sure that we can do that in a way that satisfies our community and I'm comfortable that we can do that with the conditions that we've now got.

DAVID SPEERS:

Kate Legge.

QUESTION:

Fiona, Kate Legge from the *Weekend Australian* magazine. I was just wondering whether or not you're disappointed by the Morrison Government's decision to break up energy and environment policy given that weather and power supplies are increasingly, inextricably inclined and will be in the future, and how can you possibly maintain the optimism in the idea of a national roadmap in agriculture when our plans for a national energy have gone so horribly awry?

FIONA SIMSON:

Yeah. Look, it's a tricky one. I'm hoping that maybe supporting food and fibre is not quite as tricky as supporting a national energy plan, but I think- look, we were very disappointed that the National Energy Guarantee has fallen apart and has fallen apart in the Party level. It hasn't even fallen apart in COEG, it hasn't even fallen apart in Parliament; it actually feel apart in the government space. So, we were very disappointed. We joined other business groups in supporting that certainty that policy would provide. So, we've been ten years without any certainty. And the cost of energy in agriculture is extraordinary. We are a heavy energy user. Whether you're a grain grower, whether you're a horticulturist, whether you're a dairy producer; whatever you do we use a lot of energy and we've seen spiralling energy costs, which is a huge impost on our producers, sometimes triple what they've been paying.

And so we really wanted some certainty in this space. National Farmers Federation, too, is very market-focused, as I said earlier. We export 70 per cent of what we produce. We depend on free markets, we understand free markets. And so, that's deliberately why we also supported the technology-neutral part of the NEG. So for us, we don't want to pick winners. It's up to the market to decide. We think that's the market's job, and once we have the framework in place and the certainty in policy, then the market will deliver the technology that we need for the future.

So, we actually thought it was pretty simple, to be honest, and we had faith in some of the independent advice that was given by the Australian Energy Board, by people like Kerry Schott, and we really were very comfortable in our position. So, we are disappointed that it hasn't gone anywhere and we are not sure now, before the next election, how much inroads we're going to be making on that but certainly it's early days in terms of the break-up of the portfolios and we'll just have to see how they all work together, Kate.

DAVID SPEERS:

Are we back to the same uncertainty that Industry's complained about for years?

FIONA SIMSON:

At the moment, I think we're almost back to square one, maybe square one and a half because we now have a- the ACCC has made some really, you now, put some good advice on the table and we've had a significant body of work done by that whole thing called National Energy Guarantee process; a significant amount of independent work done. And I think, really, what I'm

hearing is that the community values independent work, it values the independent work that the government gets and relies on. And it probably values that more than the advice of politicians in this space sometimes about what they think. So, in actually fact, from the agricultural community: we're disappointed. We certainly want certainty in the energy space. It's a huge issue for us and every day that goes by without it - it's not resolved.

DAVID SPEERS:

Next question from Tim Shaw.

QUESTION:

Thanks David. Tim Shaw, Fiona, from *Radio 2CC* here in Canberra, a member of the Press Club Board.

I think Australia really needs to recognise through you the contribution of Australian women in agriculture. Not only are they out there at 4 am feeding the stock but they're trying to get the children off to school, trying to balance the books, trying to fill in page after page of government green tap and red tape. So through you, a big shout out to all of the women in Australian agriculture.

In 2015, the white paper from the federal government; how did they get it so wrong? Is Minister Littleproud on track, and ahead of billions flowing into rural communities, what would you like to say to the local government areas who are at the absolute coal-face of knowing what's going on in their community? Can local government play an even more active role about how to direct those emergency funds and also encourage more



and more Australians to consider a tree(\*) change?  
Thank you.

FIONA SIMSON:

Yeah, thanks Tim very much for those questions, which were sort of multifaceted. So, I'll try and give it a crack. So, first of all I think - white paper - so the white paper was a paper of the time. It was a paper of the minister and it was a paper of the department and that was a paper for then. What we're talking about here is a whole of government strategy. So, we believe that food and fibre production is so important to Australians that the whole of government should get behind it. So, it's great to have it as a pillar. So I think the incoming government, a couple of prime ministers ago mentioned it as one of the pillars, but in actual fact; where is the strategy? Where is the overlying thing that we see in a tourism plan or a mineral exploration plan that some other industries have that get all of government behind it, and start doing some of the critical analysis and work that we need to grow.

So, certainly that is our vision for the ag strategy; about getting whole of government. We really appreciate the work that Daryl and his department do but they need the support of other parts of the government to really get our industry going, and that's I guess what we're calling for in our wider strategy than just the white paper.

Minster Littleproud we're working with incredibly well and we were very pleased to see him return to his portfolio. We would have been incredibly disappointed if he hadn't been because we feel that he's got his feet

under the table on a wide range of issues and certainly, you know, we've already talked about live export, water, energy, there's- all of these things are big-ticket items for agriculture and for farmers and so, really, he's done an awful lot in a short space of time. We work very well together and we really welcome his open door policy and that of his staff - and I see Alison Penfold, his Chief of Staff, sitting down there so I'll just acknowledge her as well - but certainly we think that he's on the right track. We have talked to him about strategies and agriculture strategies and maybe even some of this regional stuff, which is an interesting time when the cities are so congested and the cities are feeling such pressures. You know, really I think having- focusing on a regional strategy when our cities are feeling such impact is a great time because it's a win/win. And I think that's one of the important things; that we're talking about growing the regions but not at the expense of the cities. Growing the services, growing the connections, putting in place some planning that can actually strategically guide some of that growth.

DAVID SPEERS:

Just on that, you also mentioned in the speech the idea of pinpointing hubs for production - the hub and spoke model - and I'm sure this happens in some parts of regional Australia at the moment, but can you just give us a bit of an example of what that might mean, maybe from your own area. Would it mean some farmers would have to change what they're farming to fit in with that sort of approach?

FIONA SIMSON:

So, I'll give you an example in my own area. So, the Liverpool Plains on which I live is actually not delineated



by any particular major city. So Tamworth probably would like to own us as much as they can because we're probably closer to them than Dubbo, but we almost sit halfway between. But the little towns of Quirindi and Gunnedah, Werris Creek and Willow Tree are our little local [indistinct] centres. Now, they are sort of - in the Evocities campaign - which focused on Tamworth, Dubbo, Wagga Wagga - the cities - that was the New South Wales plan, but across Australia there has been different plans; in Western Australia, Queensland, et cetera. This plan, so in the Liverpool Plains we grow - there could be a focus - so we already grow cereals and grains and cattle and we also have a vibrant intensive livestock industry in terms of chickens around Tamworth.

So, we could look at what we grow. We can look at coordinating that, we could look at coordinating some markets, we could look at coordinating some branding, we could look at the infrastructure that actually gets it to take it, and maybe, you know, is Tamworth the best place to base a new national airport? Maybe, maybe not. Maybe one of the other towns and I could quote Parkes, for example. Parkes has already got a great airport. It's already the centre, but yet Dubbo attracts a lot of the attention because it's the region city. So maybe by looking broadly at the region, at looking at the connectivity and planning of some of those things then you actually have a much broader focus, and the little towns and the villages in the region don't feel that they're losing out to the region cities.

DAVID SPEERS:

Interesting. Nic Stuart, our next question.

QUESTION:

Thank you very much indeed. Nic Stuart from the *Canberra Times*.

Okay, at a [indistinct] conference a couple of years ago someone told me that basically a quarter of our farmers are doing really well, half are doing okay and there's a quarter who are broke but can't find a way off the land. They don't know how to actually admit it yet. Nevertheless, particularly as you can see with the coming drought we're going to focus on that quarter - the people who really need to be helped off the land. You've talked about the need for a strategy - urgent need for a strategy - to actually address this, to look at the entire agricultural sector. How is it that with the National Party that is so, allegedly, your representatives; how is it that they haven't actually managed to do that when we've had a port strategy, for example, for decades - and all these other things - why is it that this hasn't actually been achieved?

And secondly, with the coming drought, what's going to support the [indistinct] workers, like the people who are in the regional towns and other areas like that and who are desperate? You know, the first thing a farmer will do is cut the amount of money that they're spending on water resourcing and other things like that - they're going to narrow it down - what's going to support them?

FIONA SIMSON:

Yeah, thanks Nic very much, some great questions in there. First and foremost, NFF is apolitical. There's no party that's our party. We're everybody's party. Everybody- we like to talk to all sides. Tash(\*), from Joel's office is somewhere around here. We have great



discussions with him and with other ministers, or shadow ministers around- in the Labor Government, and we've talked to the crossbenchers as well. So, we need to talk to everybody. We are about everybody. We are about the whole community. We're a very broad church ourselves. And so, whilst we welcome the support of any Member of Parliament, I'd say that we are broadly appealing to everybody. We think that we've got a compelling reason why food and fibre should be bipartisan and we should be supporting that. So that's the first thing.

In terms of the 25 per cent of farmers; so I think that the old 80/20 rule does actually probably apply in agriculture as much as anywhere else, and one of the things in the drought that is so critical is that we look after human welfare and animal welfare. They are the two most critical things that first and foremost we think government has a duty to help us with, just as they do in the cities. So, if people are out of work, looking for work or are disadvantaged then they can access support mechanisms. Now, our support mechanism in agriculture is the Farm Household Allowance, which provides much the same sort of money as Newstart does with much the same sort of conditions. So, under Newstart you can live in your own house and you don't have to declare that as an asset - no matter what its value - and you can get this sort of small amount of money to live on and for your family to live on. Farm Household Allowance works much the same way. So you can live on your farm up to a certain level of money and you can claim the allowance and, again, small allowance keeping food on the table; some of those basic human needs filled.



What we have seen is a reduction in farmer numbers since the millennium drought. We did have round about 130,000 farmers. We're now closer to 90,000 farmers. But I guess one of the important factors for me is that the number of employees has not gone down at all; it's actually gone up. And as I said earlier, 1.6 million people employed in our supply chain and now a huge variety of people employed in our industry. If I look out now on farms we see technology, for example, you know, all the advice we're getting around that. On our own farm we have sensors that go into our soil, on our plant leaves. We have digital recording equipment all over the place. So, there's a whole lot of different careers and different opportunities now in agriculture and even though there's some accumulation and change going on in the numbers of farmers and what our farms look like, overwhelmingly we're still family farmed. Well over 90 per cent of farms are family farms and family farm-owned; we're just changing the way we look. We're much more business-oriented, we have growth margin to our eyeballs, we actively look at all the different aspects of running a business and we treat it that way. And I guess part of the support also that government is helping us with during the drought is making sure that people can access some of that critical business support that they need to make some of those really tough decisions about whether farming is the right thing for them and whether now is a good time to buckle down and keep going or whether it's a time to exit. Now, those decisions are hard. They're always hard, they're always difficult. And they're difficult in rural and regional communities where we hate people leaving the areas. You know, the good thing about knowing your neighbours is that you're a little bit bigger and your

scale's better. The bad thing is, it's usually a family leaving. So, they're the sorts of things that you have to balance and I think it's a really interesting discussion.

We did raise- you asked me about- I've written here the Prime Minister, for some reason. I'm trying to think why I wrote his name down.

DAVID SPEERS: [Indistinct]

[Laughter]

FIONA SIMSON: Anyway, I can't remember. It was to raise whatever you asked the Prime Minister yesterday. I can't remember what it was. Anyway, it was all good.

DAVID SPEERS: Okay.

FIONA SIMSON: He ticked it off. It was all good.

[Laughter]

DAVID SPEERS: We will move to our next question in Michael Keating.

QUESTION: Michael Keating from Keating Media, Fiona. In regards to Mr Joyce's new role, do you think one of his first action items might be to compile a list of policies that are inhibiting responses to the drought and which could be eliminated under a national drought action plan?

FIONA SIMSON:

Thanks Michael for the question. Look, I'm still getting my head around the envoy role but I think from what I understand, it's not so much a policy role. And I think we definitely need to look - and I'm sure that David Littleproud's office is looking - at some of the things, the tools that are out there, what's worked in the past; and as we're moving towards- and I know the Minister is quite keen to keep looking at the drought framework; he has endorsed the NFF's drought framework as a matter of fact, but we need to put some flesh around some of the bones in there, and that is basically looking at agriculture as a business cycle.

AgForce in Queensland has done an amazing amount of work on this, it's fantastic, and we've incorporated a lot of that into our thinking our cycle. So I'm sure that the Minister's office is looking at that.

I think probably Barnaby's strengths are in his empathy with rural and regional areas and rural and regional people. He loves going out bush; he loves talking to people; and I think in the drought, we really need people out there talking to others about that sort of stuff and feeling supported. So, I'm not sure - I don't technically know, I haven't technically seen what his role is, but I think that would be a good role for him.

DAVID SPEERS:

Is there any danger for stakeholders such as yourselves that it does get a little confusing who you should talk to about what?

FIONA SIMSON:

It is a little confusing but we want to make sure that we can work our way through that. We talk to the Minister's



office regularly about his responsibilities and I think it's important that we circle back. We have not been told that there's any difference about that. We've been certainly told that the special envoy befits a special person. Ex-party leader is a special person, has a special role. And I think in terms of communities, I would be hopeful he would convey any policy advice or any policy ideas that he probably has to the Minister's office, who's probably in the position, or the department, who's in a position to actually action some of them. So we certainly- drought, as I've said many times, is a really difficult issue. We've tried, many, many governments have tried in terms of a framework. There have been many things tried before and I think one of the disappointing things for us is that we don't always- we're not always very good with collating information about what's worked and what hasn't worked. And people are still out there asking for things but we know that for different reasons they haven't worked.

So, I think it's important when we're looking at frameworks that it does give people certainty. We don't have always this scurrying around, trying to bring out the next thing; and people know where they're at in their businesses. They know that if it gets to here, then this happens. If it gets to here, then this happens. When there are good times, which a lot of the time it is, we can do these things to put away and get ready for bad. So, I think it's just a matter of having that cyclic approach for us.

DAVID SPEERS:

Our next question from Brett Worthington.

QUESTION:

Brett Worthington from the ABC, Fiona. Contrary to the stereotype, regional Australia is an incredibly diverse place and yet the National Party here in Canberra has just two women and a pack of white blokes, who all have a similar background. What do you think that party should be doing to ensure that its party room makes up the gender and the racial diversity of the constituents that they represent?

FIONA SIMSON:

Look, what the National Party does is a matter for the National Party, to be honest. But I'm sure that they, like us, are looking really intently at diversity and NFF launched its Diversity in Ag Leadership Program just this last year and our first graduates graduate in October.

So I'm really- I was really excited about the opportunity because agriculture is one of those industries where there are lots of women out there and they're actually- probably 50-50 women, to be honest. Lots of farming partnerships are women and men, so there's lots of women out there. We want to get them involved in our industry. They've got amazing skills. And so, look, I think for any political party, it's good to have diversity; any board, it's good to have diversity. And I'm pretty sure that the National Party, like any modern organisation, would be looking at what they can do in this space to make sure that they can be very truly representative.

DAVID SPEERS:

Our next question from John Millard.

QUESTION:

Thank you, David. John Millard, freelance. Thank you, Fiona, for your very wide-ranging address. Many roles in Australia these days that are considered blokey and



filled by men are increasingly being filled by women. I refer to, instance, the deputy leadership of both major national parties -ne of them, sadly, former; both major roles in the ACTU; and of course the president of the NFF. Now, women do think differently from men and I should know, I'm married- women think differently, I'm married to one. And to what extent do you think that your being a woman has enhanced your role as president of the NFF?

FIONA SIMSON:

Look, I think it's been great- first woman, I was really excited to be in this position and for me it's about working together. It's not so much about delineating women and men. It's about building strong and diverse organisations, strong and diverse decision-making bodies, strong and diverse boards. And so at NFF we're also focused on the other parts of diversity. I mean, the gender program is our first one but we want to make sure that we can be diverse in every way - whether it's commodity groups, whether it's age, whether it's ethnicity, whatever it is. And I think that's really important.

Has it particularly enhanced what I do? Well, some of the blokes that I deal with find it difficult to swear in front of me, so that's probably really quite a good thing; but it has meant that I've had a few relationships blow up with different people because they weren't sure how to handle me. So, I think it's quite- you know, some of the men in agriculture treat agricultural advocacy as a bit of a football game and there's got to be a bit of biff and a bit of blood and then you go out of the room. And so I think in actual fact they don't- because I'm a woman,



then they have that nice gentleman streak that underlies a lot of rural and regional people and they can't do that so we get on with the job.

So, I haven't found any difference at all, I don't think, and I haven't noticed any difference at all in any of the boards that I've been on and the ones that I've chaired for being a woman. But I do like to and I have brought other women into the NFF Board, particularly, and tried to make sure - through our independent appointments and others - that we've got that mix in our board because I think it's a truly diverse board that makes the best decisions. And I think that's one of the things that it's more representative of the community. McKenzie and others have done lots of work on that and it's just a matter of getting on. I've always been very passionate about what I've done and I've just always put my hand up, I haven't really thought a bit much about it, and been supported by a lot of blokes.

So I think when we're looking at our diversity program, we're looking at cultural change and being champions of change in the men as well; and I think that's a really important place to be.

QUESTION: Thank you.

DAVID SPEERS: Simon Grose.

QUESTION: Simon Grose from Canberra IQ. Noting that we're sponsored here by one of our major financial institutions, I just want to refer back to something you said in your speech. You called for a capital system that



supports sustainable practices. This sounds to me like you're talking about some kind of discounted rates or dispensation, and it also sounds to me like if you set up some kind of definition of sustainable practices that it could be a system that could be easily gamed. So, I wonder if you could just flesh out what you're looking at there?

FIONA SIMSON:

Yeah. So I guess for us, it's all about matching up and finding that balance between environmental outcomes and agricultural food and fibre produce outcomes. That's what it is. And farmers operate on their farms and they've- they manage their environment and actually ever since our first farmers, farmers have been managing their environment to grow food and fibre. The first farmers, our Indigenous people, obviously did it differently to how we're doing it now. We think that the community is now moving on and they're actually putting some obligations on farmers. Now, some of those are right and true and some of them are not, but if farmers are actually being asked to take areas out of production; if they're actually being asked to lock up land because the community thinks that trees, for example, are more important than grasslands or more important than grazing stock; then it's a little bit like if you're a supermarket and you're asked to take out aisles four to six. Okay? It's suddenly having an impact on what we do as farmers and if that's the case, then maybe we need to start valuing. If the community values those things really highly then we need to start putting a price on that and the farmers may need to be starting to be compensated for that in some way. But we think there's market-based mechanisms when we're looking at all of



those things that can actually also provide some return on that space.

DAVID SPEERS:

Just to follow up on that - you've mentioned a few times there how farmers manage the environment, have always managed the environment, and you spoke about the red meat industry, in particular, aiming for carbon neutral by 2030. Does it frustrate you that we do see some politicians - and Scott Morrison was the latest example of this in Quilpie during the week - clearly reluctant to talk about the issue of climate change and whether it's got anything to do with what's happening at the moment. Does that frustrate you?

FIONA SIMSON:

Yeah. Look, I think we need to talk about it. As a community, we want to talk about it and the more discussions we have about it and the more open people are talking about it, then the less uncomfortable it will become. But I think we absolutely have to talk about it and some of these issues that people tiptoe around because they're worried about offending people or having a discussion about it, then it doesn't do us any good as a community. And in agriculture, we're really diverse; we have lots of different things that we can't agree on from time to time but if we focus on the things that we can - and those things around trade and markets and access and sustainable practices, all those different things that we focus on - then we end up coming to a good place.

What really frustrates me too is sometimes when we saw a big call for the culling of some huge percentage of our nation's livestock because that was the only way to

deal with emissions. Now, that was just totally histrionic, totally not based in fact. It got coverage in some of our major newspapers. I'm sure that there are people out there reading that thinking that's true. When you have the peak read meat body in Australia, the MLA, forecasting zero by 2030 - and there's actually a huge drop between 2005 and '15 in current modelling. So, I think for me it's about having the conversation as a community, not being scared to have the conversation but also trying to make sure we can put facts on the table around it to counter some of that nervousness.

DAVID SPEERS:

This might be our final question from- back to Matt Coghlan.

QUESTION:

Hi again. Just wanted to take you to some comments from the outgoing chair of the Productivity Commission who said that billions of dollars of taxpayer-funded drought packages had been wasted over the years and he warned the new Prime Minister of going down a similar path and making those mistakes again. What mistakes do you think have been made in drought funding packages over the years? And what specifically do you think the Prime Minister should do next?

FIONA SIMSON:

I think, Matt, he was probably referring to some of the subsidy schemes that have been in place in the past. So, we have seen fodder subsidies, freight subsidies, we've seen interest rate subsidies by previous governments and they have certainly cost the government a lot of money. Many of those are not in place now. There is- I think New South Wales certainly has a fodder freight- a small fodder freight subsidy but largely, the

Government is not focusing on subsidies at the moment. And as I said, Australian agriculture is one of the least-subsidised agricultural industries in the world. We saw what subsidies did to our car industry. We are a strong and vibrant industry in Australia as agriculture and we need to make sure that the support that is going out from government is actually making its mark and hitting its mark and keeping sustainable people sustainable, helping rural and regional communities. And that government is backing us, not necessarily making handouts.

So I'm imagining those were the sorts of things that the Productivity Commission was referring to. And we don't support subsidies either; we do support government backing us and we do support ways in which they look - as they do in the cities - at helping communities and people, but certainly we don't support that.

DAVID SPEERS: Well, just a final question if I can. Just to pick back up on what you were mentioning earlier about zero emissions in red meat by 2030. How will that be done? If we're not talking about the mass slaughter of herds around the country ...

FIONA SIMSON: [Talks over] Yeah.

DAVID SPEERS: ... just explain, because a lot of people haven't heard this.

FIONA SIMSON: Yeah, no, there's a number of different ways that you can do it. So you can look at the feed that they're eating, for example. So, whether animals are eating grass or



whether they're eating in feedlots and they eat grains, for example - we know that there's different sorts of emissions that come out from those different sorts of food stuffs. What you eat, what cows eat- I'll just make sure I phrase this in the right way.

[Laughter]

National television, nothing like it. Whatever cows eat has an effect on how much methane is created. So, by changing their food stocks, for example, you can have- and some of the- they're trialling algae and all sorts of amazing things that drastically reduce what sort of- how much emissions that is.

The other thing is this - by looking at- we know that there's been lots of discussions about trees, for example, in environments, but grasslands also. And there's a beef sustainability framework, which is really doing some interesting work on the value of grasslands, because the other thing is - yes, cows emit methane, but on farms we store carbon. We're almost carbon sinks because it's stored under grasses, it's stored under crops, it's stored under trees. And so, in actual fact, when you look at some of those things - how can you actually generate beef with low emissions, it's not too hard to see how they can be trending that way.

And the CSIRO has been involved in those studies from 2015 to- 2005 to 2015, where there's some really interesting data on that that's indicating that they're trending in the right way. So, we need to make sure we get the facts from those people. We can't- everybody is



an author these days, we can't always believe what we read, but by looking critically at that industry and how they produce- how we produce our animals, what they eat, how they live, how do we store carbon on our farms, we can have a huge effect.

DAVID SPEERS:

Would you please thank Fiona Simson?

[Applause]



Fiona, thank you very much for such a timely address today given all of our focus on the drought. Despite what's been going on in politics, it remains a really pressing issue. I was really fascinated by a lot of your answers. I'm not sure how happy the cows will be about eating algae, but I guess a lot better than the alternative of the herd slaughter that some have suggested. We'd like to thank you with a membership card and a book of some of our great speeches here over the first 50 years of the National Press Club. Fiona, thank you.

FIONA SIMSON:

Thank you.

[Applause]

\* \* END \* \*

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