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Will Australia have enough farmland left to become the ‘food bowl of Asia’?

There has recently been a lot of discussion about Australian farmland. It seems everyone from miners to environmentalists, overseas investors and urban developers feel their particular interest in land should have priority, and that farmers should make do with the land that is left. But at the same time, there is discussion about the need for a 70% increase in food production to feed an increasing world population, the need to create large areas of carbon sink forests to reduce atmospheric greenhouse gas levels, and claims that with climate change will mean Australia cannot feed itself in fifty years time.

In combination, these pressures suggest that it is time Australian policy-makers had a good hard think about future farmland management policies. Perhaps it is even time to consider whether ‘the market’ is the best way to make land use decisions that will have an impact for many generations into the future.

The research report *Does Australia need a national policy to preserve agricultural land?* released today by the Australian Farm Institute provides a comprehensive review of what is currently known about the amount and location of Australian agricultural land, the rate of land use change occurring, and how governments make decisions both in Australia and internationally.

Executive Director of the Institute, Mick Keogh, explains that *‘Australia has the sixth largest land area and the lowest population density of almost any nation on earth, so the question of whether or not there will be sufficient good quality land available for agriculture in the future has not been a high priority issue for most of the past two hundred years.’*

‘However, an increasing number of people are starting to express concerns that Australia is being too reckless with its best agricultural land, and future generations might regret decisions that are currently being made about the future use of that land.’

‘With urban, mining, CSG and environmental demands taking more and more land, and foreign investors also purchasing significant areas, it is legitimate to ask whether Australia can realistically plan to become the future “food bowl of Asia”.’

‘Agriculture productivity is directly related to the quality of a soil and prevailing climatic conditions, and while Australia appears to have plenty of land, in reality only about 3% is actually suitable for cropping, and even less of this is considered to be prime agricultural land. Many of the current disputes about future land use are actually concentrated in specific areas considered to be some of the best agricultural land.’

‘This research finds that Australia currently lacks a consistent and comprehensive understanding of where this land is located, or how much of it is being diverted from agriculture each year.’ Mr Keogh explained.

‘This report is a valuable review and analysis of the current extent of agricultural land use, and land use change. It also provides a benchmark for understanding how land use and land use change is currently monitored at the state and national level, and how these levels of government could better work together to clarify these questions.’ Mick Keogh concludes.

This research was carried out by a team of researchers from La Trobe University and RMIT University, lead by Associate Professor Trevor Budge. The report *Does Australia need a national policy to preserve agricultural land?* is available from the Australian Farm Institute. The results of this report will be discussed during the introductory session of the Managing the Future of Australian Farm Land Conference, to be held in Sydney on Tuesday 29 May 2012.

Ends

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