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Trust, or more accurately a general lack of trust, in government, business, media and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) continues to be a significant issue in 2018. The Edelman Trust Barometer,¹ an online survey of 28 global markets, has found that the Australian general population has one of the lowest average levels of trust in these institutions of any of the markets surveyed.

Agriculture is not immune from this lack of trust and is exposed to significant change as a result. A Grattan Institute report – *A crisis of trust: The rise of protest politics in Australia*² – details how falling trust in institutions loosely correlates with an increase in support for minor political parties. The influence of those minor parties, and the way that major parties react to threats to their support, results in reactive, unpredictable and often disruptive policy change.

The sum of these two trends combined is a non-trusting general population enabling a political environment in which

society is determining the right to farm. Farm practice and economic viability are already being challenged by social licence-driven regulatory change, as demonstrated by the imminent threat to live exports, changes to native vegetation and threatened species legislation and the focus on discontinuing the use of glyphosate for weed control.

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As some of the authors included in this journal have noted, it is too late to ask if society *should* determine the right to farm, because in many areas of agriculture this is already the case. A more constructive approach may be to understand and address the decline in trust which undermines and erodes social licence to operate in the sector.

The 2018 John Ralph Essay Competition explored these concepts of trust and social licence in agriculture by asking authors to debate the statement: ‘Society should determine the right to farm’.

In the winning entry – ‘The right to farm versus the right to choose’ – Deanna Lush put forward the argument that with an increasing gap between city and country and increasing scrutiny of farming, society is already determining the right to farm.

The essay contends that the debate over the right to farm will continue to take place on the ‘should we’ questions: what are the values, what are the ethics, should farmers and the food system be doing what they are doing? An openness to the genuine questioning of practices will require a “huge mind shift” for farmers, she writes.

Deanna’s essay draws on her Churchill Fellowship report on this topic and discusses in some detail the Centre for Food Integrity (CFI) model which has found success in the US and Canada. Farmers may believe they have a right to farm, but equally the market has a right not to buy their products. Learnings from the CFI experience indicate that transparency is the key to building trust and overcoming right-to-farm issues, and thus the sector must consider whether it is prepared for transparency and the changes to industry or farm practices which might be required as a consequence.

1 https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2018-10/2018_Edelman_Trust_Barometer_Global_Report_FEB.pdf

2 <https://grattan.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/902-a-crisis-of-trust.pdf>

Deanna concludes that it is time to look at a new approach for agriculture and a new way of engaging. The agriculture sector must upskill producers in “leading with shared values” to build trust rather than providing more information and science which, while important, will not win hearts and minds. Deanna, a strategic communication specialist, farms a diverse operation in South Australia.

The second essay in this edition of the *Farm Policy Journal*, and a finalist in the essay competition, is ‘Society giveth, and society taketh away: that’s how it should be’ by Matt Cawood.

Matt, a former journalist now working in communications, writes evocatively about growing up on a beef cattle farm in Western Australia and childhood visits to north-western NSW. His essay argues that the answer to the question of whether society should determine the right to farm is “a robust yes”, because agriculture is nothing if not a part of society. The argument investigates the nature of liberty, and how issues of the law, animal ethics and natural resources impact the right to farm.

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Matt concludes that society provides the political, legal and market systems that shape the terms of agriculture’s engagement with the world. Agriculture cannot pretend that it is somehow separate from society, and the sector’s freedom to operate as desired depends on engaging with society as a vital, central, responsible pillar.

The third finalist, research associate Nikki Dumbrell, tackled the question ‘To what extent should society determine the right to farm?’.

In her research at the Centre for Global Food and Resources Nikki works on projects designed to improve the productivity, profitability and sustainability of vegetable systems in Asia, and her essay defines a farmer’s choice set as being constrained by the attributes of their resources, regulations, market requirements, and social expectations. Regulations stipulate conditions on resource access and use; however, society expects more of farmers (and others) than compliance. Simply complying with regulations is insufficient to ensure the right to farm. Instead, a combination of regulations and society’s expectations must form the boundary of the choice set within which farmers have a right to farm.

Nikki expands on a common theme running through many of the essay entries: that is, as Australian society has become more urbanised, educated and wealthier, expectations of agriculture have changed and social pressures on farming have increased.

Nikki uses the Australian egg industry as a useful case study with which to illustrate dimensions in the debate about the extent to which society should determine the right to farm.

An interesting alternative context is put forward by Ogbe Chukwunonso Daniel (a lawyer from Nigeria with a special interest in wildlife conservation advocacy) in his essay ‘Delimiting the right to farm’.

This essay explores the history of conflict between Nigerian farmers and herdsmen over the grazing of farmlands by cattle. The point is made that farming in Nigeria does not exist in isolation, and that farming will be adversely affected unless there is dispassionate regulation of farmers’ activities by unbiased third parties. On the other hand, farmers must assert

their place in the law-making process to ensure that the unique challenges of farming (of which policy-makers may be unaware) are addressed in regulation.

The final essay in this journal is by Marius Cuming, a woolgrower and agribusiness professional from western Victoria. In his submission, ‘Right to farm and its determination: the farming community’s responsibility’, Marius agrees with the proposition that Australian society must determine the right to farm, and states that “any deviation from this is not sustainable in any healthy working democracy”.

This essay postulates that society is willing to reward responsible farmers with powerful advocates for their cause, and that by declaring their love for the Australian landscape and the farmer’s role in its stewardship, these advocates (such as politicians, business leaders and sporting champions) can shore up the special place farmers hold within Australian society.

That same society must determine the right to farm, Marius writes, but farmers must equally be determined to stay genuinely engaged with key decision-makers and influencers within society.

In a functioning democracy, societal expectations of acceptable behaviour should form the basis for the legal rights that we all enjoy. Compared to previous generations however, today’s trust deficit environment (fuelled by social media and citizen science) means that the gradual evolution of societal norms has been turbo-charged into a frenzy of outrage-driven, virtue-signalling policy reaction. The agriculture sector faces disruptive uncertainty around currently enjoyed legal rights unless it moves to intimately understand and participate in this new operating environment.

