

Thursday 13 December 2018

Should society determine the right to farm?

A standout issue for Australian agriculture in 2018 was trust. Trust, or a general lack thereof, has affected not only governments and the media but also businesses and non-government organisations alike. Surveys have shown that the general Australian population has one of the lowest average levels of trust in these institutions of any of the international markets surveyed.

“The Australian agricultural industry is certainly not immune from this lack of trust and is exposed to significant change as a result”, said Australian Farm Institute Executive Director Richard Heath.

“Social licence-driven regulatory change is already challenging farm practices and the economic viability of the industry,” Mr Heath said. “The imminent threat to live exports, changes to native vegetation and threatened species legislation and potential restrictions on the use of glyphosate for weed control are all ongoing issues which have been widely subject to societal influence.”

The Australian Farm Institute’s 2018 John Ralph Essay Competition explored the concepts of trust and social licence in agriculture by asking entrants to debate the statement: ‘*Society should determine the right to farm*’.

The summer edition of the *Farm Policy Journal* includes the winning essay, two runners-up and two other entries of note. The authors are:

- **Winner: Deanna Lush** is a strategic communications specialist and farmer from South Australia. Deanna’s essay draws on her Churchill Fellowship report which investigated right to farm issues. Her 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, says Deanna.
- **Runner-up: Matt Cawood**, 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. Matt’s argument investigates the nature of liberty, and how issues of the law, animal ethics and natural resources impact the right to farm.
- **Runner-up: Nikki Dumbrell** works on various projects at the Centre for Global Food and Resources designed to improve the productivity, profitability and sustainability of vegetable systems in Asia. Nikki’s essay defines a farmer’s choice set as being constrained by the attributes of their resources, regulations, market requirements, and social expectations.
- **Ogbe Chukwunonso Daniel** is a lawyer from Nigeria with a special interest in wildlife conservation advocacy. His essay explores the history of conflict between Nigerian farmers and herdsmen over the grazing of farmlands by cattle.
- **Marius Cuming** is a woolgrower and agribusiness professional from western Victoria. Marius asks whether a primary producer’s right to farm could be determined or even governed by farming businesses themselves, or alternatively, is it the role of government or the legal system?

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Should society determine the right to farm? (continued)

“As some of the authors noted, it is too late to ask if society should determine the right to farm, as in many areas of agriculture this is already very much the case,” Mr Heath said.

“A more constructive approach may be to understand and address the decline in trust which undermines and erodes social licence to operate within the agricultural sector.

“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 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.”

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