

Thursday 1 December 2016

Farm stewardship programs in Australia

The winners and runners up in the prestigious John Ralph Essay Competition feature in this edition of the *Farm Policy Journal*.

The John Ralph Essay Competition is organised annually by the Australian Farm Institute, and is named in recognition of the wonderful contribution made to the Institute by its founding chairman, John Ralph. Each year, the Institute sets a topic, in the form of a statement that refers to a contemporary agricultural policy issue, and asks respondents to mount an argument either for or against. Two prizes are awarded; one for entries in the Open category, and a second Novice category for entries submitted by authors aged 25 years and under.

The Summer 2016 edition of the *Farm Policy Journal* contains the two winning essays for the 2016 competition, plus a selection of other meritorious entries. The quality of essays submitted was high this year and the four judges had a challenging task in selecting the winners.

The topic of the essay competition this year was: 'Farm environmental stewardship programs are just subsidies in disguise and should not be adopted in Australia.'

The winning essay in the Open category was submitted by Dean Ansell. Dean has worked on natural resource management for more than 15 years and recently completed a PhD on the cost effectiveness of biodiversity conservation in agricultural landscapes.

The author initially points out that ordinary Australians are dependent on farmers for the food they eat and the clothes they wear and ultimately via their shopping preferences they decide about trade-offs between production and the environment. However, the lack of clear market signals about the environmental impacts of farming means that neither consumers nor farmers can be held accountable for these costs.

'The author then explores the policy options that are available to address this market deficiency by either restoring environmental loss, or by encouraging conservation. These include regulation, volunteerism, acquisition and protection of the land, and financial incentives. Focusing on incentives, the author analyses examples in the northern hemisphere and identifies some do's and don'ts for potential Australian agri-environment schemes including the scale of economic investment and the administration systems required,' said Mick Keogh, Executive Director of the Australian Farm Institute.

'The winning entry in the Novice category was submitted by Brendan O'Keeffe. Brendan has recently completed a bachelor's degree with honours in Natural Resource Economics from the University of Sydney and is currently the agricultural graduate at Allianz.'

'The author begins the paper by highlighting how policies over the last 25 years have focused on rectifying past agricultural practices, with some success achieved in changing attitudes and farming practices. The evolving stages of natural resource policy in Australia are then reviewed, starting from the National Landcare Program and extending to the present day. The author notes that all of these programs have had some impact on raising awareness and addressing land degradation and environmental issues.'

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Farm stewardship programs in Australia (continued)

Mick Keogh said that: 'Both of the winning authors reflected a consistent theme of support for environmental stewardship programs in Australia, however all had various qualifying factors and caveats on which their support was contingent.'

Articles included in the Summer 2016 Journal:

- 'Farm Environmental Stewardship Programs Are Not Just Subsidies in Disguise and Should Be Adopted in Australia... With Caution', by Dean Ansell - Winner, John Ralph Essay Competition, Open Category
- 'From Changing Attitudes to Changing Behaviours: Environmental Stewardship Payments to Farmers Through Market-Based Instruments', by Brendan O'Keeffe - Winner, John Ralph Essay Competition, Novice Category
- 'Farm Environmental Stewardship Programs are Just Subsidies in Disguise and Should Not be Adopted in Australia', by Heather Webb
- 'A New Farm Environmental Stewardship Program – Landscape Outcomes and Landholder Buy-In', by David Walker
- 'Farm Environmental Stewardship Programs are Just Subsidies in Disguise and Should Not be Adopted in Australia', by Alexandra Grigg

The Summer 2016 quarter *Farm Policy Journal* is available online at the Australian Farm Institute website www.farminstitute.org.au or by phoning (02) 9690 1388.

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