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## Primed to adapt – Australia’s agricultural advantage

By Catherine Norwood

*A Nuffield Scholarship unveils a global perspective on agriculture and climate change for NSW farmer Jennie Hawkins.*

NSW Nuffield Scholar Jennie Hawkins says the adaptability of Australian farmers will be a key attribute in reaping rewards from new climate change policies being developed nationally and internationally.

The Finley-based mixed farmer has spent almost four months investigating climate change policy as part of her Nuffield Scholarship, sponsored by the Lady Southey Scholarship Program for Natural Resource Management through the Sidney Myer Fund.

Ms Hawkins says what began as an investigation into carbon accounting for farmers rapidly evolved into a journey through the complexities of international environmental politics that has changed her views on a number of fundamental issues.

As part of her Nuffield Scholarship she was able to visit major climate change policy centres in London, Rome, New York, Washington DC, Brussels and she was in Copenhagen at the same time the United Nations Convention on Climate Change was being held.

She also visited farming systems around the world that ranged from the smallest half-acre landholdings in China to massive corporate concerns in the US and Canada. Compared with many of the smaller farms in developing countries, Australian farmers have considerable capacity to respond to climate variability, she says.

“If the climate science is right, developing nations will be among those most affected by climate change. They are the least able to cope with change, and these countries will also be the major centres of population growth, with the global population expected to increase from 6.1 billion currently to 9 billion in 2070.

The likely outcome is starvation, desperate communities, political instability at a national and international level, and even terrorism, “although that may seem like a long stretch,” she says. “But that’s why agriculture is so important, because beyond anything else, we feed people.

“I think there is evidence that the climate is changing. I also think GM crops are not just inevitable, but fundamental to the future of food security and that sharing our agricultural knowledge, particularly with developing countries, is vital,” she says.

She admits there’s a balancing act between recognising “big picture” implications for the future of agriculture, sharing information and technology, and trying to make a living from farming when commodity markets are so competitive.

While farming has been difficult in Australia during the past decade, with widespread drought in some regions and extensive flooding in others, many farmers including the Hawkins, have been able to adapt. Ms Hawkins and husband John run a 960ha mixed cropping and livestock irrigation property, which includes rice, canola, winter cereals, feedlot beef cattle and prime lamb production.

“Drought has meant that every year we have to do something different, but we have been able to change our practices and continued farming successfully.” This has included two consecutive years of failed crops.

The Hawkins have been able to lease a property at Peshurst, near Hamilton, Victoria, for their stock, returning lambs to Finley to finish in a feedlot. They have also been able to carry-over water allocations from one year to the next and in 2009-10 grew 30ha of rice – their first rice crop in four years.

Ms Hawkins believes changing the language in the climate debate to include both climate change and climate variability would encompass a wider range of views, and allow the debate to move forward beyond “blame”. On an international level moving forward means developing policies that don’t unfairly penalise developing nations trying to achieve the same standard of living that developed nations enjoy – a standard of living that has been founded on the consumption of dwindling supplies of fossil fuels.

On a national level Ms Hawkins says farmers need to get involved in the climate debate and help develop Australian policy with a long-term outlook, rather than criticising from the sidelines. In the past Australian farmers have been slow to catch up with the direction of policy changes, such as water and native vegetation.

“Twenty years ago we could never have imagined receiving less than 100 per cent of our water allocation, or that the government would be buying water rights – at the time they were practically giving water away,” she says. But in 2007 and 2008 the water allocation for the Hawkins’ property was zero, and water was \$500 megalitre on the annual water market.

“Water and vegetation policies have had a huge impact on our business. Farmers need to have a bigger vision and we need to be in the mix at the end of the race this time. We need to position ourselves as best we can, even if we don’t understand, or even agree with the details of the science.”

While agriculture is effectively only a small part of the “climate change problem” it is potentially a significant part of the solution through opportunities to sequester carbon. Carbon markets may prove the mechanism to reward growers who are farming sustainably, “because currently there’s no reward in commodity prices”.

Ms Hawkins says markets and policy initiatives must be underpinned by reliable measurement for Australian conditions. This will be crucial in the economics of carbon, whether a tax system or a cap and trade system on emissions is used, and whether agriculture is regulated, or enters the market voluntarily.

But this is still a long way off. When she began investigating carbon accounting she quickly realised that the science and practical application of carbon measurement in agriculture was still in its infancy – far from robust enough to build a contract on.

“There are so many countries looking at carbon trading and climate change, trying to formulate policy and calculate emissions to develop carbon as a tradable commodity; many of them are way ahead of Australia,” she says. “We need to invest in research to develop measurement and accounting systems based on Australian data. Systems developed overseas are based on totally different soil types and Australian soils may well respond to carbon sequestration in different ways,” Ms Hawkins says.

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A high-resolution photograph of Ms Hawkins can be downloaded from [www.coretext.com.au/communications\\_images.php](http://www.coretext.com.au/communications_images.php). Please contact Catherine Norwood at Coretext Communications (03) 9670 1168, [cnorwood@coretext.com.au](mailto:cnorwood@coretext.com.au) if you have any problems accessing images.