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Agribusiness leader warns of challenges ahead for Australian farmers

New advancements in technology and science will be needed to meet the challenge of feeding a larger global population, with estimates that – over the next 50 years – we will need to produce as much food as has already been consumed over the history of mankind.

This was the sobering assessment of Australian agribusiness leader, Doug Rathbone, when he presented the second annual George Wilson Oration at the Nuffield Australia conference in Melbourne recently.

Doug Rathbone is CEO of Nufarm Limited, a Melbourne based manufacturer and supplier of crop protection products and seeds. Nufarm products are sold in some 100 countries around the world.

The George Wilson Oration is named after the founding chairman of Nuffield Australia, an organisation which provides an opportunity to Australian farmers to travel overseas on an agricultural research scholarship. It is a 16-week program consisting of both group and individual travel. The next group will be travelling through New Zealand, North America, Brazil, Mexico and France in March-April 2011.

Mr Rathbone told conference attendees that Australia's future farmers have a challenging and exciting opportunity to be significant participants in new advances in agriculture.

"Australians are resourceful and innovative and have great access to science. We have the opportunity to produce a greater proportion of the world's requirements so far as agricultural production is concerned and this makes it a very exciting time to be part of agriculture."

Mr Rathbone said the production of food for future populations is the biggest challenge that can be imagined. "And that is not even taking into account the increasing demands in relation to fibre and fuels."

But he pointed to past leaps in agricultural technology – with global food production having doubled in the 40-year period from 1960 to 2000 – as an encouraging sign that the challenge will be met.

"The development of synthetic fertilisers; tremendous advancements in the sophistication of crop protection chemistry; advanced seed breeding; and – more recently – the increased efficiencies and yields brought about by genetic engineering, have all been major contributors to lifting the productivity of our farms."

Mr Rathbone said organisations such as Nuffield help ensure that young Australian farmers have the opportunity to experience world's best practice in agricultural technologies and bring that knowledge back to Australia where it is adapted to meet local needs and opportunities.

"These sorts of programs are essential if Australia is going to realise its potential to play a much more significant role in global agriculture."

Mr Rathbone is available for interviews on the George Wilson Oration.

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