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Professional reputation key to industry influence

Australian farmers need to be more active in lobbying and policy development in order to retain some measure of control over the destiny of Australian agriculture, says 2006 Nuffield Scholar David Jochinke.

Mr Jochinke has recently returned from four months of travel where, as part of his \$25,000 international scholarship supported by the Grains Research and Development Corporation, he visited peak farm lobby groups in several countries to study how farmers influence their industry. He says his visits to groups in the United Kingdom, Europe, North and South America and the Ukraine made it clear that Australian farmers need to promote themselves as skilled professionals, with expertise in production and natural resource management.

Returning to the family mixed farming enterprise at Murra Warra, 30km north of Horsham, Mr Jochinke says wherever he went around the world, successful influence always came down to two factors.

"Reputations and relationships drive the agricultural sector and its ability to influence policy," he says. "If you don't have a good reputation, you don't get a seat at the negotiating table. And if you don't have good relationships with the people at that table they won't listen to what you have to say."

"The perception that people have of you and your industry is very important. If they think that as a farmer you're living in the past, they won't trust you and they won't listen to you."

"I think Australian farmers are actually skilled professionals. We are world-class producers of food and fibre – and possibly fuel, into the future. But I don't think the Australian public recognises that. Farmers are doing something important, producing food and fundamentals for life, but this doesn't mean that others hold them in high regard. We seem to be lowly ranked in public social status."

Mr Jochinke says different countries had different views of farmers. The Japanese and Swiss appeared to hold farming in quite high regard, and Canadians also viewed farming more positively than Australians.

"Here, if you tell someone at a party you're a farmer it's almost the end of the conversation," he says.

Mr Jochinke says it is important farmers address this issue, and find the right steps to take in their lobbying efforts; identifying clearly who they are trying to influence, and what the real issues are.

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“You have to be professional, you have to put the emotion aside. You also have to recognise that what works in one situation won’t necessarily work in another situation.”

He says his tour helped him recognise that farmers in other countries were struggling with many of the same issues as Australian farmers. Legislation was a huge issue everywhere, and access to, and management of, water was also a significant issue in many countries.

In developed countries the influence of non-farming groups on the farming community was a major issue, particularly the influence of environmental groups, he says. Developing countries were more concerned with legislation and structural issues – both the physical and administrative structures underpinning the operation of agriculture.

“In some countries, farming is a very heavily legislated and restricted industry. In the UK, farmers consider themselves gardeners rather than farmers, their systems are so heavily subsidised and legislated.

“As soon as farmers take subsidies, they hand over control. It’s taxpayers’ money so they are able to control what you do and how you do it. I think we currently have a good balance in Australia, between legislation and farmer independence, which still allows us a lot of room for innovation.

“But farmers in the developed world, including Australia, are generally facing much greater social scrutiny now. The days of being left to get on with the business of doing what needs to be done in order to produce a crop are gone.”

MAINTAINING CONTROL

Mr Jochinke says in order for farmers to maintain some control over the development of policy and legislation that will affect farming in the future it is essential they get involved and support their lobby and industry groups.

“We have to make sure we have excellent farming policy and a good perception of farmers in the community so we can combat threats to the viability of our operations. We need to make sure we are involved in the development of policy on issues like genetically modified crops and biofuels.

“Once legislation is in place over one aspect of your business, or outside groups gain influence in one sphere, that can quickly spread to other aspects of farming. We don’t want people telling us how to farm, we want to be in the box seat,” he says.

“I am a firm believer in codes of practice that producers develop and control, with individual responsibility for compliance, although I recognise there does need to be some form of penalty for those who don’t participate.”

Mr Jochinke is a member of the Victorian Farmers Federation and occasionally represents his local branch as a delegate. He is also a deputy grains councillor. At this stage he considers himself “just another foot soldier, another farmer on the ground”. However he recognises the importance of becoming more active in industry groups as an essential part of building a long-term future for his farm business.

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GET INVOLVED

“It’s not enough to just pay your membership dues and hope that somebody else will do the work, or not contribute at all. I expect I will be getting more involved, and trying to get others more involved, in industry groups,” he says.

Since returning from his overseas tour in September, Mr Jochinke has already been invited to participate in a working party for the grains industry looking at ‘Bridging the Value Chain’.

He is also passionate about no-till precision farming, which he has been introducing to the family’s dryland farming enterprise over the past decade. He runs the 1400 hectare property assisted by his parents Trevor and Elaine, (who have officially retired, but who still lend a hand) and one employee. They cropped 200 hectares of oats, 800 hectares of barley and 180 hectares of lentils this winter, but have reduced their sheep numbers from 1000 ewes with lambs in 2005, to 500 ewes with lambs this year, in response to the drought.

Mr Jochinke says he expects his farm business will benefit indirectly from his Nuffield Scholarship through his greater involvement in industry groups.

“I will be encouraging others to play a greater role too, and to take advantage of opportunities like the Nuffield Scholarships. Anything that allows farmers to gather more information, to develop their skills and to implement better practices is a good thing for the industry. The best thing you can ever do is get off your own dung hill and see what else is out there.”

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