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Water issues need unified approach says Nuffield scholar

By Catherine Norwood

Australia needs a unified approach to water under a federal system of management says Nuffield Scholar Jarrod Ryan who has spent three months investigating water policy issues as part of his scholarship.

Mr Ryan says tension over access to water was such a common theme during his six-week Nuffield Global Focus Program, which visited the US, Canada, the UK, Mexico and Brazil, that he decided to make it the topic of his further six weeks of individual study.

It was also an issue with which he has first-hand experience, trying to expand production on his property at Douglas-Daly in the Northern Territory by irrigating with groundwater. Mr Ryan's Nuffield Scholarship was sponsored by the Northern Territory Department of Primary Industry, Fisheries and Mines.

"Water is such a valuable commodity, and we all want first dibs on it," he says. "But after looking at what's happening in the US, as well as in Australia, I'm convinced that we need a federal management system. Our attitudes to water management are full of contradictions and we need to find a common approach."

Mr Ryan says a recent newspaper report that Queensland is planning to expand irrigation on the Murray Darling system when millions of dollars are being spent to buy back allocations for the Murray Darling environment illustrate what appears to be a total contradiction between state and federal water management policy.

Mr Ryan focused his individual study tour on the US, because of similarities in culture and farming systems between the US and Australia, looking at its water allocation policy, current issues and how water disputes are settled.

He found high-level conflict between different states and different user groups, and says there is currently a six-year backlog of water-related cases to be heard before US federal courts – everything from neighbourhood disputes to states fighting over access to rivers and aquifers.

The expansion of urban communities into traditional farming areas has also heightened tension in the US, Mr Ryan says. There are many instances where communities established as service centres for agriculture have grown to the point where they are no longer reliant on agriculture.

He says, in general, it appears market forces are used to allocate resources and as a result, well-funded urban expansion is buying water licences from existing holders, and consuming the water and productive farmland surrounding towns.

Although the level of conflict in the US is not yet apparent in Australia, Mr Ryan says he believes local tensions will get worse before they get better – “until we can develop a much stronger, common direction on water”.

In the Northern Territory Mr Ryan’s plans to expand irrigated fodder production were stymied by a moratorium on land-clearing and delays in the development of management plans for aquifers in the Douglas-Daly region. He says he was frustrated by the time taken to prepare the plans – more than three years – but now realises that a longer-term, holistic management approach is better than the situation his parents are facing on their South Australian dairy farm where they also irrigate with groundwater. They are facing a 25 per cent cut in their groundwater allocation, while their neighbour, who is in a different water district but drawing water from the same aquifer, is not facing cuts.

“There’s a lot of mistrust even between different water districts and irrigator groups. In the country our views are clouded by our emotions because our livelihoods often depend on water. I think there is also a lot of misinformation in urban communities about water use in rural areas, and that urban communities with no direct relationship to the land or water involved have undue influence over policy, and that is also causing tension.

“It’s an area I’m looking to be come more involved in, starting first with my local irrigator group, because we desperately need a united approach if we’re going to manage our water resources most effectively.”

On a farm level, Mr Ryan is looking to ‘get back to basics’ as a result of visiting a number of large-scale irrigation operations overseas, including one in Oregon, which had 20,000 hectares under centre pivots.

“We do a lot of things because we’re familiar with them, but that doesn’t mean it’s the best way of doing something. We need to get back to the basics of the soils we have to work with and the most appropriate crops for those soils.

“We need to better understand the capacity of our country and how to use our water to get the most from it. For instance, there’s no point putting 10 millimetres of irrigation water on soils that only have a water holding capacity for five millimetres,” he says.

One of the farming techniques he is adopting from the US is a “cut and carry” approach to pasture. This involves cutting pasture to provide daily feed for the stock, rather than allowing them to graze. It gives greater control over the extent of the cut whereas stock grazing produces a much more irregular impact. It also means Mr Ryan doesn’t have to stop watering or fertiliser programs to accommodate stock, and can maintain higher levels of production from his pasture.

Mr Ryan will present the findings of his research in Cairns during Nuffield Australia’s four-day Autumn Tour from April 16 to 19, as will eight other Nuffield Scholars. Study topics include regional branding, the export beef marketing chain, cooperative marketing, product distribution chains, organic farming, reducing farm inputs, biofuel opportunities and managing stock to improve rangeland environments.

The Nuffield Autumn Tour is open to anyone interested in attending and more information is available from the Nuffield Australia website, www.nuffield.com.au or contact Nuffield Australia chief executive officer Jim Geltch on (03) 5480 0755.

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A high resolution photograph of Mr Ryan can be downloaded from the photo gallery link at the Nuffield Australia website, www.nuffield.com.au

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