



Alpine Valleys

agribusiness forum

'Australian Alpine Valleys - Where the Best Grows to Perfection'

North East Farmer June 2009

Global Change

For those unable to attend the presentations made by Mr Andrew Campbell and Mr David Ch'ng at the Future Food and Farming Forum in Beechworth in May, both were confronting, challenging and futuristic in their content.

An audience of over 100 people were treated to a number of themes that have the potential to greatly change the way we grow, sell and market food in the future, whilst reflecting on the changing dynamics of population, petroleum and global wealth.

Both speakers were far reaching in their economic, environmental and demographic predictions, and interestingly there was strong common theme despite the fact the speakers had never met.

People

With the global population is predicted to be at 9 billion by 2050 the world agricultural food system needs to double by then in order to meet the growing affluence of Asia and compete against biofuel, land urbanisation and a decline in soil health.

As a farming community we have heard all this before, however there where many calculations presented to indicate that the food has to come from some where. Some examples used were staple foods such as palm oil for cooking which has risen 300% since 2005 and soybean is up 200% with a 20% rise in the last 6 months.

A term 'Agflation' was used to describe the rise in price's , an example used was that if the collective Chinese population consumed an extra 1 and a half eggs a week, Australia would not grow enough grain to feed all the chooks. Currently biofuel consumes 1/3 of all maize grown in America and it takes 8kg of grain to produce 1kg of beef, all meaning meat prices should rise and more of the population will have to become vegetarians.

Water

The other factor effecting food production is climate change with rising populations using more resources and producing more carbon. With continual dry seasons in most of the worlds food bowls, there is ongoing pressure on the amount of food that will be available and at what cost.

It takes roughly one litre of water to produce one calorie of energy, have a look at the labelling on foods and you start to understand that every food product on the shelves has had considerable water used in its production. It was discussed that by the year 2050 the amount of water used for food production will need to increase from 6400km³ to 12000km³ - where will this come from we all wonder.

Energy

An important development in the food equation is the link of food to energy with biofuel and fertiliser needed to produce crops either being channelled into food or energy. Petroleum is predicted to run out in 40yrs. What developments do you think the farm sector needs to make to produce more food with a new untried energy system that will not involve petroleum products, this gets you thinking.

In closing it was discussed what regional food centres will need to look like in 20 – 40yrs. New investment will need to happen in the sector, for too long it has been run down with an erosion of the best and brightest to other sectors and a general degradation of our soils.

New food systems, post oil research and development coupled with an increasing actual farm gate profitability to reward risk and entrepreneurship.

We need to explore closed loop farming, use of robotics, mechanics and telemetry, understand the power of healthy soil and microbial activity, adopt GM, utilise urban waste streams water and hard biodegradable waste, improve product specifications to meet consumer demand for assurance in the food chain and provide paid environmental services for the broader consumer. A lot to consider.