

# We are farming in interesting times

■ By Stephen Ryan, General Manager ACFA

IT'S been a slow start to the season. The Bureau of Meteorology's prediction of a wetter than average winter for most of Australia seems to be playing out in sugar regions. Even north Queensland, which was to be the exception, with a forecast for closer to average rainfall, is experiencing a sputtering, wet start to the crushing season. More positive was the soybean harvest, where crops were generally successful and farmers received the expected high prices this autumn.

## A world gone mad

"Forget it all, I told myself, escape into your mind and your work, into the place where you are only your living, breathing self... in a world gone mad." (Stefan Zweig, *The World of Yesterday*, 1941)

While our contemporary worries are yet to rival the troubled times prior to World War Two that spawned the above quote, the current geopolitical scene is nevertheless somewhat disquietening.

What do current times, trends and global politics mean for

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agriculture? Are the ideals that began the WTO, multilateralism and globalisation dead? The proliferation of FTAs during and since the failed Dohar Round and the current 'wake up call' from an increasingly belligerent China might suggest so. The UN and WTO institutions were supposed to liberalise and democratise the earth, ending poverty but this has not happened; and all the while, the earth's population increases on the straining, creaking hulk of our planet.

But if agriculture is given its best chance, it can deliver. If farmers and agriculture are properly resourced, with affordable inputs – noting water and energy – rural communities can feed the world but not under the strain of metastasizing green and red tape and in many places political and social unrest.

Referring to 'tape' and its issuing bureaucracies, the charters of the UN and WTO, with the best of intentions, generated an enormous amount of work and ambitious programs with processes of hopeful policy – the stuff of optimists and dreamers. While Australia liberalised, removed tariffs, quotas and subsidies, others did not!

The result is that the world sugar price continues to be suppressed by overproduction due to subsidies and farmers are tired of waiting. The WTO's agreements were born out of the 1986 —1994 Uruguay Round of trade negotiations. Thirty four years later, the process has not delivered for sugar.



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## Saw us coming!

China saw the 'West' coming and in our keenness to engage and our fear of missing out, we allowed asymmetric and unequal conditions for investment. Australians were not encouraged to point this out and criticise because fellow Australians were making good money and politicians were very satisfied with the prosperity on their watch. It was easier to pretend that all would be indefinitely OK, until a tiny, microscopic virus caused everyone to take a step back and a deep breath, where possible, and realise that the situation, albeit profitable, was not wise, for the long term. The painful extrication from a disproportionate dependence on one country is a necessary lesson in spreading risk. The adage, don't place all your eggs in one basket (no matter how compelling it might seem at the time) is a moral taught to school children, which adults sometimes forget.

Various articles by informed commentators have set out a hint at a new direction for Australia. This will also relate to how Brexit plays out and the solution needs to be much more than simply swapping India for China. There are other stable countries in Asia and on the Pacific rim, for example in South America, who want jobs and technology for their people; and a brighter future. Spreading trade and counterparty risk may call for harder work and greater thinking but if carefully done, it should be worth it.

## Reef Regulations

On 19 May, the LNP moved a motion in Parliament to disallow Subordinate Legislation 233 and 234 from the Environmental Protection (Great Barrier Reef Protection Measures) and Other Legislation Amendment Regulation 2019.

LNP Shadow Minister for Agriculture Tony Perrett said that: "Labor's reef regulations don't strike a balance between

preserving the environment and protecting local jobs. They treat farmers like criminals and tie them up in unworkable red and green tape."

LNP Shadow Minister for Natural Resources Dale Last said, "... an LNP Government will work alongside farmers and communities for environmental outcomes, instead of forcing unworkable laws on them." He said that "The LNP will work with farmers and protect local jobs and provide an economic future for our cane and grazing industries."

"We will not allow our hard-working farmers to be tied up in unnecessary regulation that will cost jobs in rural and regional Queensland... the LNP have shown strong leadership by standing up for farmers in North Queensland in the fight to restore sensible and workable reef laws in Queensland."

Farmers and their communities would certainly appreciate the support and, no doubt, will be encouraging the LNP to retain those commitments.

On June 16 the motion was put to the vote and lost. Supporting the LNP's motions were KAP MPs, Dametto, Katter and Knuth; NQF MP Costigan and Independent MP Bolton.

Leeanne Enoch, Minister for Environment and the Great Barrier Reef, Minister for Science and Minister for the Arts said that 'The Great Barrier Reef is a World Heritage listed icon. It contributes \$6 billion to the Australian economy every year and supports 60,000 jobs. Our government is committed to its ongoing protection, and that is what these regulations are all about.'

While not disputing the importance of tourism, the sugar industry chugs along, year in, year out, delivering a constant underpinning of regional economies. It is not the sugar industry that causes the volatility that the tourism industry suffers and our



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politicians know that. The tourism card is used as an ‘ostinato’ (Musically inept Editor’s note: A continually repeated musical phrase or rhythm) but it is not one that should be played in this debate.

The best way to demonstrate environmental stewardship is to facilitate industry-owned best management practice (BMP) systems that are based on proven science and which are profitable to practice. This is how to build engagement, buy-in, trust and industry pride.

### What’s next?

The Senate inquiry into ‘reef science’ is now the next beacon that farmers and rural communities will look to, in order to establish a baseline of fact. Otherwise, the wearying game of reef tennis will continue, unabated and without clarification.

The inquiry was referred to the Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee for inquiry on September 17, 2019 and is to report by October 1, 2020.

The terms of reference are the identification of leading practices in ensuring evidence-based regulation of farm practices that impact water quality outcomes in the Great Barrier Reef, with particular reference to:

- The existing evidence-base on the impact of farm water runoff on the health of the Great Barrier Reef and catchment areas;
- The connectivity of farm practices throughout the Great Barrier Reef catchment areas to water quality outcomes in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park;
- Relevant legislation and regulation, including in relation to impacts of water quality, farm management and soil runoff;

- Proposed changes to regulations that would impact on farm productivity and the potential benefits and costs of such proposed regulation;
- The wider economic and social impact of proposed regulations to restrict farm practices; and,
- Any related matters.

### Promoting an Imidacloprid stewardship program

Public and private organisations have collaborated to develop and promote a new best-practice training program for sugarcane growers that targets the safe and sustainable use of liquid imidacloprid products such as Confidor Guard Soil Insecticide and Nuprid 350SC.

The program aims to encourage the correct placement of imidacloprid in the field to ensure maximum performance against cane grubs, and the strategic use of the product to ensure longevity of the product. By getting these use aspects right, research trial data indicates that benefits may also flow to nearby waterways and the Great Barrier Reef.

With the support of Sugar Research Australia (SRA) and the Queensland Government’s Department of Agriculture and Fisheries (DAF), Bayer and Nufarm have worked together to create an instructional video, training package and an application slot depth measurement gauge for use in ratoon cane applications. Initially, the group will train 750 growers in the Mackay Whitsunday and Wet Tropics regions with the eventual aim of the materials reaching all Australian sugarcane growers.

The program is based on several years of research work conducted by SRA and DAF. Emilie Fillols, Senior Researcher with SRA based at their Meringa Station said, “Growers should first consider if they need to treat their blocks for cane grubs, which is a decision based on a risk assessment. If treatment is necessary, achieving an application depth of 100 mm or more is essential to reduce imidacloprid loss via runoff. Three years of field trials in the Wet Tropics and the Burdekin have confirmed the critical importance of application depth in preventing loss of imidacloprid.”

Nick Matthews, Market Development Agronomist with Bayer stated that Confidor Guard and Nuprid 350SC liquid imidacloprid are critical tools to control cane grubs, but they need to be used correctly.

“Bayer has worked hard to prepare a relevant and easily accessible training video and presentation. Our first goal is to train all retail agronomists, and then work with the relevant productivity services organisations and other organisations to train their agronomists. While the minimum depth message is simple, achieving this in field in all areas poses many challenges. Our training video and materials cover a wide variety of machine types and situations.”

For Dave Rumbold, Regulatory Lead ANZ with Nufarm, a practical contribution to the success of the program has been the Confidor Guard and Nuprid 350SC Depth Gauge. One thousand of these will be made available, free of charge, to growers, agronomists and contract applicators. “These tools will allow growers to easily measure slot depth across several locations in their blocks to ensure they are achieving the minimum depths for efficient treatment,” he said.

### New online version of farm economic analysis tool

DAF economists have developed a new online version of the Farm Economic Analysis Tool (FEAT) which has assisted sugarcane growers to make informed decisions for over 15 years.

FEAT is free for the Australian Sugarcane Industry – visit [www.featonline.com.au](http://www.featonline.com.au)

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