

Agriculture and Food Policy Reference Group - July 2005

[Name withheld on request].

While I have many concerns and could comment under many different headings in the Issues Paper, my major concerns are with:

C. COMPETITIVENESS

I believe the future of Australian farming and the natural resource base is seriously threatened by inequities faced by Australian farmers and other rural businesses (compared with those in many of our trading countries) in terms of equity (eg. wages), environmental care, and health and safety.’.

This is not a plea for ‘protection’ of our rural industries from overseas competitors for the sake only of more profitable farming here - but a rather cry for some common sense and reason from policy makers and advisors – towards developing policies that will :

- allow our farmers to compete on a fair basis in terms of reasonable payment of labour in the agriculture [do politicians have any idea of the wage rates in our competitor nations?.)
- ensure that our farmers do not have to compete with highly subsidised products (such as some from the EU) that reduce income to levels that no inputs can be made to improving farm natural resources and biodiversity
- promote the development of more equitable farming systems and labour practices in other countries (reduce slave-type labour and hence perhaps the control of land by powerful elites)
- promote environmentally sound practices of farming and other land use in countries from which we import – that will ensure the sustainability of farming land in competitor countries [Why should our farmers have to comply with safety and health regulations that do not apply to overseas competitors)
- promote much safer levels of use of pesticide and other chemicals in farming systems with which we compete (Do politicians have any idea of pesticide use in countries from which we import agricultural products?)
- apply the same sort of rigid checks on safety of food imports that are applied to some of our own imports (eg. meat) by countries to which we export products
- allow farmers to have prices for their products that would allow them to better take care of their (and Australia’s) land and other resources.,

I was astounded to see no mention of this major issue facing Australian rural industries in the Issue paper, under this (C) or other headings. This is a major issue facing Australian agriculture that people seem to be scared to even talk about, and I see little sign of action on this front by policy makers (or even farming organizations).

Some obvious requirements for actions in this area are

- (1) research on competitive disadvantages faced by our farmers in terms of payment of reasonable labour wages and conditions in competitor countries [to what extent do we compete with prison labour from some countries]
- (2) research on levels of subsidies received by farmers in production of our main products in other countries (e.g. carrots from common market countries)
- (3) research on the long term environmental sustainability of farming systems from which our main imports are produced (including chemical use and residues)
- (4) development of food (health and equity) accreditation systems to be adhered to by countries from which we import our food crops