

# Managing the Future of Australian Farm Land



Radisson Blu Plaza Hotel, Sydney

28, 29 & 30 May 2012



## Monday, 28 May 2012

**11.00 am – 5.15 pm** Field trip to visit an area where urban, mining and energy pressures are presenting challenges for farmers and policy-makers.

## Tuesday, 29 May 2012

**9.00 am – 10.35 am** **The broad context:** Is Australia in danger of allowing much of its most productive farm land to be permanently removed from productive farm use? Will the expansion of cities, the ever-growing demand for environmental outcomes and the diversion of farm land to carbon offset production threaten the future ability of Australia to feed its population and export food to the world? Should productive farm land be permanently protected from mining and urban encroachment in order to guarantee future food supplies?

**10.55 am – 12.15 pm** **The urban challenge:** Affordable housing is a key issue for the Australian economy with a vast majority of Australians living in major cities. Cities like Sydney and Melbourne have historically had intensive agricultural activities in their hinterlands, with horticulture, poultry, vegetable and dairy production in close proximity. These agricultural activities are now subject to increasing pressure from urban expansion, and state and local government planning authorities are facing difficult decisions about future land development policies that would remove agriculture. With land for housing being many times more valuable than agricultural land, is it inevitable that agricultural activities will be pushed aside? How should governments make decisions about future land for urban use and what part does any consideration of the future needs of agriculture play in those decisions?

**12.15 pm – 1.15 pm** **Workshop and reporting**

**2.00 pm – 3.20 pm** **The mining and energy challenge:** The rapid expansion of the mining and energy industries over the past decade has resulted in major mining developments in prime agricultural areas in NSW and Queensland, and the expansion of the coal seam gas extraction industry in Queensland and more recently in NSW. This has resulted in the conversion of areas of farm land to mining, the purchase of large areas of farm land by mining companies, and growing concerns about the potential impact of coal seam gas extraction on land and water resources in key agricultural areas. How should governments make decisions about the expansion of mining and gas extraction in agricultural areas? Are current land and water information sources sufficiently robust and transparent? What, if anything, is missing from current planning and development approval processes?

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3.40 pm – 4.30 pm

## Workshop and reporting

4.30 pm – 5.30 pm

### **How do new pressures influence land values and farm economics?**

Developers, mining industries, environmental managers and foreign investors are becoming more interested in investing in Australian land. In some cases, the land will almost definitely be removed from its current agricultural use. Faced with buyers offering high prices, do farmers have any real options other than to sell out? In some other cases, the question is more complex, and non-farm purchasers may invest and maintain the agricultural use of the land but modify its organisation and structure. Is the agricultural land market being influenced by these new interests? Are all agricultural activities and regions facing the same impacts? What lessons are available from the past about likely impacts on land values?

6.30 pm – 9.00 pm

## Conference dinner: An international perspective

## Wednesday, 30 May 2012

9.00 am – 10.40 am

**The environmental challenge:** The area of conservation land in Australia has expanded significantly since the 1970s, and now exceeds 100 million hectares, with Australia having one of the highest proportions of land dedicated to conservation. While conservation areas have traditionally been in less productive areas, this appears to be changing with large areas of productive farm land now being included in the conservation estate. More recently, there is increasing interest in utilising farm land for carbon sequestration purposes, which will also potentially limit agricultural production and future productivity growth. What are the future plans of governments for the conservation estate? Will carbon sequestration projects have significant landscape impacts that affect other agricultural activities and how will planning decisions be made about such projects? Do governments have well-resourced plans for the future management of the conservation estate?

11.00 am – 12.20 pm

## Workshop and reporting

1.10 pm – 2.45 pm

**Emerging interests in farm land:** Foreign investment in Australian farm land has a long history and, given the reluctance of the domestic financial sector to invest in agriculture, is essential to the future of the sector. However, data about the extent of overseas investment in Australian farm land is very limited, and the emergence of sovereign wealth funds as buyers has introduced increased complexity. What are the motivations of overseas investors in Australian farm land? Is there a risk of Australian farm production being 'annexed' by overseas governments? Is the overseas dominance of Australian agribusiness likely to impact on the future profitability of Australian farms?

2.45 pm – 4.00 pm

## Concluding workshop and reporting

4.00 pm – 4.30 pm

## Closing panel session

A number of speakers will be invited to participate in a facilitated panel session which will attempt to answer a critical question – 'Does Australia need to develop better policies to protect its agricultural land?'