**Factors Determining Public Good and National Interest Policy in the Australian Agricultural Sector**

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***Abstract***

*The Australian agricultural sector is considered one of the most productive and disease free industries in the world today. Undertaking research, production and allowing new agricultural industries into Australia requires a robust process of defining what is in Australia’s ‘National Interest’ and which aspects of agriculture are, or should be assisted and defined as being, a ‘Public Good’.*

*Defining what is in the ‘National Interest” can be influenced by political pressures and other public policy. It can be argued that, within agriculture, the imposition of levies and taxes, expenditure on research and development and the quarantine measures needed to protect farmers from imports or new industries, changes with the political views over time and the pressure placed on political parties.*

*This paper will establish that a series of clearly defined criteria should be used to determine what is in the National Interest and whether an industry or part of an industry can be classed as being a public good asset.*

**Introduction**

In 2009 the Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Sciences (ABARES) was asked to provide criteria, to the then Australian Agricultural Minister, that would assist in the definition of whether a specific animal and plant incursion could be classified as being in the national interest to eradicate. This agency of the former Australian Government Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF) was unable to provide specific guidelines in respect of whether a specific animal or plant disease incursion could be defined as being eradicable in the national interest, which could lead to elements of the agricultural sector being identified as a public good.

Australia has imposed severe restrictions on commodities entering Australia in fear that new diseases could devastate the Australian agricultural sector. Identifying the need to respond to an incursion in the national interest is vital.

This paper will argue that agricultural industries must define criteria that can be used by governments to identify those agricultural activities that are an essential part of the economy and food supply in order to access funds to eradicate the threats of disease and loss of production.

**Cost sharing Arrangements in Australia**

A national cost sharing partnership arrangement was launched in Australia in 2002 to deal with animal disease incursions. An agreement to deal with plant diseases was launched in 2005.

Existing cost sharing arrangements between Australian governments and commercial livestock industries are helpful in times of disease incursions. Clear compensation polices and guidelines are included in the Government and Livestock Industry Cost sharing Deed (Emergency Animal Disease Response Agreement – EADRA) when livestock is slaughtered for eradication purposes. Slaughter activities impacting on supply chain businesses or farming related business, such as abattoirs, can in some cases cause business breakdown.

**Economic Imperatives**

Australia’s agriculture sector comprises a diverse range of industries. Australia has a comparative advantage in extensive broadacre agriculture (essentially non-irrigated crops, cattle and sheep) because of a relative abundance of land. Much of this comprises vast arid and semi-arid regions mostly suited to livestock grazing on native vegetation. Broadacre farms contribute 54 per cent of the gross value of agricultural production and make up around 53 per cent of agricultural businesses (ABARES data). High value horticultural industries also contribute significantly to the gross value of agricultural production, accounting for 16 per cent in 2011–12 (figure 2) (ABS 2012d; ABARES data). Australian farms and their closely related sector generate around $155 billion-a-year in production. This represents approximately 12.1 percent of Australia’s total gross domestic product. There are over 120,000 farms in Australia solely dedicated to agricultural production. Australia’s farm exports earned the country $32.5 billion in 2010-11. This represents 11.9 percent of total exports and 12.7 percent of all Australian merchandise exports. For the year ending 30 June 2010, the gross value of agricultural production, in current prices, was $39.6 billion (table 16.10). On a commodity basis, cattle and calf slaughterings contributed most to the gross value of production ($7.3b), followed by wheat ($4.8b), milk ($3.4b), vegetables ($3.0b), fruit and nuts ($3.0b) and, sheep and lamb slaughterings ($2.6b). As a sector in Australia’s industrial production agriculture forms a fundamental basis for the Australian economy. The economic imperatives are therefore obvious and Australian agriculture requires a system of identifying whether there should be protection in the national interest.

Australian agriculture has a strong export focus. Around 60 per cent of the gross value of farm production is typically exported, although the share was closer to 75 per cent in 2011–12 (ABARES 2012). In recent decades, Asia has increased in importance as a destination for Australia’s agricultural production. Asian markets accounted for over 60 per cent of the value of agricultural exports in 2011–12 (ABARES 2012). The main destinations were Japan, China, Indonesia and the Republic of Korea. At the same time, exports to Europe have generally declined and exports to the United States have increased—each accounting for around 10 per cent of the value of Australia’s agricultural exports. Across the sector, industries differ in the extent to which they depend on export or domestic markets. Some high value industries primarily supply the domestic market. For example, in 2010–11 the horticulture industry exported only 15 per cent of the value of production. In contrast, the broadacre industries are strongly export focused. For example, wheat exports accounted for 67 per cent of the value of production in 2010–11 and almost all of wool production is exported (ABS 2012d). Australian agricultural productivity growth ABARES 7 Australia’s agricultural imports are increasing. While Australia remains a significant net exporter of agricultural and food products, over the last 25 years imports have grown at nearly twice the rate of Australia’s exports (ABARES 2012). In 2010–11, the value of imported food products was over $11 billion, mostly semi-processed and manufactured products, including seafood, fruit and vegetables, and beverage and malt products. Australia imports more food products from New Zealand than any other country (nearly 20 per cent of all food imports in 2011–12), followed by the United States (around 10 per cent in the same year) (ABARES 2012; ABARES data).

Agriculture represents a small but important part of Australia’s economy. The real value of agricultural production was nearly $30 billion in 2011–12, up from around $14 billion at the start of the 1980s (ABARES 2012), and the sector makes a contribution to export revenue around five times its share of gross domestic product (GDP). Farm exports made up over 10 per cent of all goods and services trade in 2011–12 (ABARES 2012). The sector also contributes to employment in related industries—the food product manufacturing industry employed 200 000 people in 2010–11, more than any other manufacturing industry in Australia (ABS 2012d). The importance of agriculture can also be seen in the direct and indirect effects of drought on the economy. As noted above, the effects of drought on agricultural production can be significant, but the secondary and tertiary effects on the economy can also be important. Widespread drought in 2006–07 is estimated to have decreased economic growth across Australia by around 0.75 percentage points (Penm & Glyde 2007).

**Public Good and National Interest Considerations**

An extensive foot and mouth disease outbreak can be devastating to the livestock industry in any country.

Recently, however, the Australian Government wrestled with whether to classify the discovery of the Asian Honey Bee in Australia’s north Queensland as a pest to be dealt with in the ‘National Interest’.

Asian Honey Bees carry a mite which, if they attach themselves to European bee species, suck their blood, causing diseases and viruses such as the deformed wing virus. In May 2015 a container travelling from Malaysia to Brisbane, Queensland, was found to have had an infestation of the Asian Honey bee with the mite varroa jacobsoni; it is considered among the most deadly honey bee disease or parasites.

Australian lead authorities believe Australia is free of the varroa mite. The Australian Honey Bee Industry Council (AHBIC) has found that varroa mites have decimated bee colonies in Canada, Hawaii and Papua New Guinea. An outbreak in Australia could destroy the honey industry and it was fortunate the May 2015 detection of the Asian Honey Bee colony had been found and destroyed by Australian quarantine (biosecurity) field staff.

The Australian honey industry needs to protect its strong honey producing reputation. According to the honey industry in Australia, Varroa mite is in every continent apart from Australia. As such Australia has a great competitive advantage because Australian hives do not require pesticide treatments, which ensures that Australia's honey products remain some of the best pesticide free honey in the world.

Government policy must match the risk to Australian agriculture. In the case of the bee industry in Australia the government must quickly match the ideals of the cost sharing arrangements with the importance of the agricultural sectors it purports to protect.

There is a case for governments to support, as a ‘public good’ consideration, the impact on businesses of a major livestock eradication (slaughter) campaign and the consequences of that campaign on farm and farm related businesses.

There is also a national interest consideration arising from the protection of borders and the responsibility to ensure that onshore biosecurity is dealt with under the provisions of the state and Commonwealth quarantine laws. Unfortunately, Australian agricultural government authorities are often unable to define what is in the national interest either because they fear being criticised by their Minister or because incumbent governments change the criteria based on their political opportunities or the proximity to an election. Such populist policy making does not help agricultural industries or the farmers that operate within those parameters. Agricultural policy made in the national interest should cross political divides and remain in place for the benefit of the sectors involved.

**Division of Powers**

Currently in Australia the responsibility for animal health lies with the individual state and territory jurisdiction and not with the central government.

This separation of powers acts to increase the policy tension between the decision makers and the policy makers. Stock Feed Acts, Animal Welfare Acts and an array of other livestock feeding and protection Acts within the jurisdiction of the state and territories of Australia are used to determine whether livestock is cared for by farmers. This very division of powers works against the notion of what is in the national interest particularly if the national criteria for animal welfare is split among the seven states and territories of Australia. This also works in contradiction to a national eradication agreement which is facilitated and operated by the national government.

**Political Imperatives**

Policy made for political purposes cannot be considered good policy if it can be changed by incoming governments of the same or different persuasions.

In order to maintain a competitive advantage in its agriculture industries, consensus must be achieved on the criteria to determine what is in the national interest and those agricultural activities that will be considered as being in the national interest.

Farm businesses by themselves are unable to deal with a devastating biosecurity incident. This is commonly referred to as market failure, or the failure of the market to provide the means to deal with a biosecurity risk. Where the effect of an incursion impacts on an entire sector or community, governments are called upon to assist with recovery and in many instances pay compensation.

The establishment of the cost sharing agreements for animal and plant disease incursions is confirmation that government are ready to assist in the event of an industry wide catastrophe.

In the case of slaughter for welfare purposes or slaughter undertaken to ensure the welfare of the industry, it is important to note that governments have several options to assist businesses that are affected by actions undertaken in the national interest.

**Policy and Responsibility**

*Biosecurity*

Australia’s biosecurity system is responsible for managing biosecurity risks associated with the international movement of people and goods. Australia’s biosecurity policies and risk management measures aim to prevent or control the entry, establishment or spread of pests and diseases that could cause significant harm to people, animals, plants and other aspects of the environment (DAFF 2011). The Australian Government’s biosecurity policy approach is to allow imports if the expected biosecurity risk is assessed to be within Australia’s appropriate level of protection. The Australian Government, with the agreement of all state and territory governments, has expressed Australia’s appropriate level of protection as ‘providing a high level of sanitary and phytosanitary protection aimed at reducing risk to a very low level, but not to zero’ (DAFF 2012b, p.5). Over the years, Australia’s biosecurity system has been the subject of a number of reviews which have identified a range of strengths and weaknesses (for example, Beale et al. 2008; Nairn et al. 1996). In February 2008 the Australian Government appointed an independent panel to review Australia’s quarantine and biosecurity arrangements. The Beale review, One biosecurity: a working partnership (Beale et al. 2008), concluded that Australia operates a good biosecurity system that has protected the Australian people, economy and environment from significant damage in the past but there was significant scope for improvement. It proposed significant reforms to strengthen the system by revising legislation and improving governance arrangements, transparency, timeliness and operations across the biosecurity continuum. Key concerns identified by the Beale review, as given in DAFF (2012b, pp. 7–8), include:

* the use of mandatory intervention targets, which led to resources being allocated to lower risk areas rather than where they could achieve a better biosecurity outcome
* outdated information technology capability, leading to inefficient operations and higher costs to business
* complicated and dated legislation, leading to complex administration and compliance costs
* a need for comprehensive onshore monitoring and surveillance to support Australia’s exports, which are classed as having a low pest and disease risk, and a need to support onshore pest management
* a need for an improved partnership approach to biosecurity in which all stakeholders play a role
* inadequate resources for the task, particularly for offshore and onshore activities. The review recommended an increase in funding of about $260 million a year, subject to budgetary processes. It also identified the need for an investment in the order of $225 million to improve information and technology systems
* suboptimal organisational structures and governance arrangements that did not support a clear role for the Australian Government or Parliament, encouraged the perception of political interference and detracted from the sharing of information and a common mission.

In December 2008 the Australian Government agreed in principle to the recommendations outlined in the report and commenced Australia’s biosecurity reform process. The reform process is wide-ranging and is based on five key principles:

* implementing a risk-based biosecurity management
* managing biosecurity risk across the continuum (offshore, at the border and onshore)
* strengthening partnerships with stakeholders
* Intelligence-led and evidence-based decision-making
* supported by modern legislation, technology, funding and business systems.

**National Interest Criteria**

All Australian Governments must agree on a set of principles that will endure in the identification of the agricultural sector as a sector that needs to be protected in the national interest. The following could be used to do this:

1. Is the industry important;
2. Does everyone benefit from the output of the agricultural sector;
3. If agriculture fails who does this affect;
4. If agriculture succeeds who does this affect;
5. What level of risk is affordable before agriculture can be classified in a category as being a public good;
6. How would a failure of agriculture be funded – publicly or privately;
7. What is market failure when applied to agriculture.

Testing this criteria against the implications of a future disease outbreak is an important part of keeping the agricultural sector sustainable.

**Glossary**

**COAG** Council of Australian Governments

**CSIRO** Commonwealth Science and Industrial Research Organisation

**DAFF** Department of Agriculture Fisheries and Forestry – Australian Government

**EC** Exceptional circumstances

**FDI** Foreign direct investment

**FIRB** Foreign Investment Review Board

**GBE** Government business enterprise

**GDP** Gross domestic product

**GM** Genetically modified

**GVP** Gross value of production

**NCP** National Competition Policy

**NDP** National Drought Policy

**OECD** Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

**PSE** Producer support estimate

**R&D** Research and development

**RDC**  Research and Development Corporation

**RD&E** Research, Development and Extension

**SMA**  Statutory Marketing Authority

**WTO**  World Trade Organization

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