

Making food bowl a reality



**COMMENT by
SIMON LIVINGSTONE**

THERE has been a lot of excitement among politicians and bureaucrats over recent months on the possible future for agriculture, and food production in particular.

Much of this excitement is realistically driven by an increasing world population, concerns for food security and the supply chain reliability from paddock to plate.

Some of the local excitement from politicians is possibly about looking for something to ginger us all up if the mining boom recedes any time soon, such that some of that political interest may dissipate as commodity prices improve.

A global food forum is being held in Melbourne in April.

The landmark conference will explore the potential for agriculture to become Australia's next great economic boom.

A long list of high profile speakers will comment on the opportunities and challenges Australia faces to meet the growing Asian demand for food and become the food bowl of the region.

Promoters of the forum claim that more than \$1 trillion in capital is needed in Australia's agricultural sector in the years ahead - for farms, infrastructure and facilities such as food processing centres - if we are to capture our share of this enormous and growing market.

It is imperative that our national interest and resolve does maintain an important focus on agriculture in general and food production in particular.

I've written many times before about the need to increase the participation of young people in agricultural education

and training if we are to deliver manpower and skills levels to a degree necessary to realise on the food bowl economic possibilities.

While there have been a couple of inquiries into these matters, one at Federal level and one at Victorian State level, so far little seems to have been achieved although, admittedly, it is fairly early days yet.

Now we are starting to see in the press significant comment on the gap between the hype for agriculture and what is happening on the ground.

The steady reduction in prices that producers can get for their product, and their feelings of powerlessness in changing that, has contributed to a strong interest on the land in the development of a new Farmer Power political party.

Further adding to concern about the future of Australia as a food bowl derived from a healthy and vigorous agriculture sector are reports that declining funding commitments to agricultural research have resulted in a stagnation in the productivity growth of the sector.

As our principal research associate at the Centre for the Study of Rural Australia, Dr Peter Smith says "Encouraging farmers to make more productive use of land with less water will only be achieved through the development and deployment of new knowledge - and research is a fundamental important contributor to new knowledge development. But when I look around at the myopic treatment of funding for research in other important fields in Australia, I am not filled with hope."

In summary, if the food bowl hype is to become reality, we have a great deal of work to do in developing the national and political resolve to support agriculture, and we have a great deal of work to do in developing new knowledge and skills and the people to deploy them.

We need to get on with it.

■ Dr Simon Livingstone is principal of Marcus Oldham College in Geelong.