

Opinion

Agriculture's future depends on attracting the next generation

Put youth in the picture



Farming must capture the imagination of young people if it is to survive and prosper, writes **SIMON LIVINGSTONE**

A **BRIGHT** future for agriculture relies on attracting sufficient numbers of young people to work in the industry.

But there are dark clouds on the horizon, with a recent study showing production in the agriculture sector is at risk of being severely inhibited by an under-supply of appropriately skilled labour.

Over the next 10 years this will become a crisis if no concerted measures are undertaken to attract young people to the industry and, most particularly, into farming.

The 2010 Australian Farm Institute report into human resource needs for agriculture warns 30 per cent of the existing labour supply is likely to quit the industry by 2018.

This loss in skilled labour means there would be a requirement for increased entry of skilled labour directly from the education and training sectors.

However, enrolments in agricultural courses at universities have been declining for several years.

This situation is likely to continue well into the future.

Although agriculture offers a wide range of occupation and career opportunities it is arguable these opportunities are not being showcased adequately for young people.

At the Centre for the Study of Rural Australia we are planning a research project specifically focused on the ways agriculture



Looming crisis: Agriculture in Australia is likely to suffer from a lack of skilled labour unless the industry can better promote itself to young people.

is imaged to young people, and how it may be better positioned to capture their imaginations as a viable career.

There are plenty of employment opportunities and career paths in the agribusiness and service sectors to agriculture, which are attracting healthy numbers of rural students, probably due to the more urbanised lifestyle they afford, and a perception of higher salaries.

The real concern is the declining number of youngsters seeking on-farm occupations.

We need to address this issue at an industry level, a political level and at the level of

educational planners, policy-makers and providers.

One area that needs to be investigated urgently is the disconnect between agriculture as an area of study, and professional recognition and status in the wider community.

Young people searching for a future career have a clear idea what lawyers, nurses, teachers and engineers do.

They are also aware of the education and training required to enter those professions.

But when it comes to agriculture, there is less understanding what a farmer is and does, and what education and training is necessary to become one.

Positioning farming as a profession and building an image for it that reflects its professionalism will be important.

There is widespread understanding a leading farmer requires competence in a broad range of manual skills.

But there is probably less understanding that successful farming also requires a vast array of sophisticated theoretical knowledge as well as advanced cognitive capabilities to handle the complexities of changing business and technological environments.

It is anticipated there will be fewer farm managers in the

future, but they will be highly skilled and qualified to degree level.

In other words, the "professionalisation" of farming is happening whether or not we plan for it and educate for it.

Clearly, it is better if we do. The shift towards corporate farming also means young people can enter the industry without having to either inherit a farm or have a significant amount of money to purchase one.

It brings with it the possibility of a broader range of young people who can participate.

We need to be making these trends and opportunities clear to

young people if we are to interest them in our industry.

If we are to maintain a position as an important food producer and contribute in a meaningful way to the productivity increases required to feed a growing population, we need to make the skills, knowledge, occupations and people who make up the food supply chain a national priority.

We need to rethink how we attract, educate and retain agricultural staff to avoid the predicted exodus of valuable human resources.

• **Dr Simon Livingstone is the principal of Marcus Oldham College at Geelong**