



policy sheet

knowledge for managing Australian landscapes

Australia's farmers: Past present and future

Research project number DAV41 of the Social and Institutional Research Program of Land & Water Australia. Completed: 2004.

A research outcome that you can use

Most of Australia's private land is managed by farmers. There have been significant changes in the rate and types of people choosing farming since 1976. Policy makers seeking to facilitate the sustainable use of this land need information on the demographics of Australia's farming population. The findings of this project can inform future policy by answering two important questions:

- Who is managing Australia's farms?
- Who will be managing them in 2025?

This project answered these questions as follows:

- People are farming longer into their later years as young people become less interested in taking over.
- The median farmer age has increased from 44 in 1981 to 50 in 2001. Since 1976 the number of farmers in their 20s has declined by over 60 per cent.

- The ageing of the farm population will peak in the next ten years.
- These trends are more pronounced in the beef and sheep areas than in dairy and cropping areas of farming.
- A quarter of Australia's rural land dwellers are moving towards fragmentation of land holding, towards many subcultures, not just the dominant farming culture, and most farmers will live in the landscape not off it.
- Incomes will be diverse, with the farm producing only a small proportion of earnings. In this landscape, programs to encourage land management change based on profitable farming will become less relevant. New communities may redefine environmental priorities within the region towards landscape amenity, with less emphasis on production.
- In the remainder of the landscape the pressure to maintain competitiveness in spite of continuing commercial decline will mean an increase in farming size and a decrease in population. So the available labour per hectare



of farm land will continue to decline. Farm business will increasingly emphasise labour efficiency. Best management practices in order to be profitable will continue and the capacity to undertake environmental works using surplus labour will diminish.

How can you use this research?

This information is vital for understanding the capacity of communities to change current land use and management. Current areas of national significance where the project is relevant include:

- Water policy
- Vegetation management
- Salinity management

Policy makers can use information from this project to:

- Understand who will be the future land managers of many different areas of rural Australia and which areas of the rural landscape are likely to remain farm dependent and which are likely to follow new trajectories;
- Improve rural demographic data collections taking into consideration the increasing number of people with multiple occupations and by developing more links between the population and agricultural censuses.

How was the knowledge/product developed?

The project set out to understand:

- The demographic characteristics of Australia's farm population;
- How these had changed over the past 25 years;
- What this change might mean for the farming landscape;
- How might our national statistical collections be improved to allow future researchers to better understand the farm community?

The project used data about Australia's farm population derived from the 1976, 1981, 1986, 1991, 1996 and 2001 Australian censuses of Population and Housing. These data sets were used to better understand who is in farming, who has been entering and who has been leaving farming as an occupation. From this a demographic model of Australia's farm population was built in order to develop scenarios for the next 25 years.

Can I rely on it?

The project was completed in 2004 and was based on data in the 2001 and previous population censuses. The Census of Population and Housing provides the only available longitudinal data set of the Australian farm population. The work was undertaken in close consultation with the Australian Bureau of Statistics as part of their Australian census analytic program to ensure the data was used within the limitations of changing census definitions.

Further information

To arrange a more detailed policy briefing contact:

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