



# fact 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.  
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### Background

In recent decades of catchment management and natural resource protection there has been a mismatch in the priorities of the policies and the various disciplines involved. Assessment of salinity risk and priorities has been increasingly based on the capacity to model the behaviour of groundwater systems 20, 50 or 100 years ahead. We need to question how the social and environmental value placed on the assets in these catchments may change over the same time. What communities might be living in these catchments and what will they value? Will the agricultural production be as important as it is now 100 years from now?

### Objectives

This project examined the entry and exit patterns of Australian farmers to build a model of the farm sector in order to project potential farming population structures. The nature of social sustainability in the Australian farm sector is explored and recommendations made to improve current national data collections from the farm sector.

### Approach to the project

This project was an attempt to understand how the social structure of farming communities might change over the period covered by implementation of catchment plans. The project aimed to:

- Improve understanding of how the demographic structure of Australian agriculture has changed over the past 30 years;
- Create scenarios of the future demographic structure of Australian agriculture;
- Suggest how the current rural statistical collections might be improved to enhance capacity to understand how the social structure of agricultural communities is changing.

The methodology involved using census data on farmers derived from the 1976, 1981, 1986, 1991, 1996 and 2001 Australian Bureau of Statistics censuses. This was used to calculate the numbers of farmers entering and leaving agriculture in five year age groups over the past 30 years. These estimates formed a demographic model of the farm



sector, which was used to project potential farming population structures for various agricultural regions. Farmer population data was compared with farm establishment data from the Australian Agricultural Census to see the potential to create synthetic indicators of the changing structure of farm communities.

## Key findings

- There have been significant changes in the rate and types of people choosing farming since 1976. In the 1970s and 1980s there was a rapid decline in young people choosing farming and in the 1990s these figures stabilised at the low level.
- The typical new farmer is older than the 1976 farmer. Entry is increasingly made in the mid-career years.
- People are farming longer into their later years as younger ones 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.
- These trends are more pronounced in the beef and sheep areas than in dairy and cropping areas of farming.
- Projections using the farm population model suggest the ageing of the farm population will peak in the next ten years.
- Current rural demographic data could be improved by taking into consideration the increasing number of people with multiple occupations and by developing more links between the population and agricultural censuses.

## Implications

To simplify a complex situation, two divergent landscape trajectories are emerging and implications for policy makers will be evident:

- 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.

## Contact

### Principal researcher

Dr Neil Barr  
Department of Primary Industries Victoria

Phone: 61-3-5430 4439  
Fax: 61-3-5430 4304  
Email: [neil.barr@dpi.vic.gov.au](mailto:neil.barr@dpi.vic.gov.au)

## Contact the SIRP team

Social and Institutional Research Program  
Land & Water Australia  
GPO Box 2182  
Canberra ACT 2601

Phone: 02 6263 6069  
Website: [www.sirp.gov.au](http://www.sirp.gov.au)