



# Food security in Australia in an era of neoliberalism, productivism and climate change

Geoffrey Lawrence<sup>a,b,\*</sup>, Carol Richards<sup>a</sup>, Kristen Lyons<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> School of Social Science, The University of Queensland, Brisbane 4072, Australia

<sup>b</sup> Global Change Institute, The University of Queensland, Brisbane 4072, Australia

## A B S T R A C T

### Keywords:

Australia  
Food security  
Productivism  
Neoliberalism  
Climate change  
Environmental degradation

For over 150 years Australia has exported bulk, undifferentiated, commodities such as wool, wheat, meat and sugar to the UK and more recently to Japan, Korea, and the Middle East. It is estimated that, each year, Australia's farming system feeds a domestic population of some 22 million people, while exporting enough food to feed another 40 million. With the Australian population expected to double in the next 40 years, and with the anticipated growth in the world's population to reach a level of some 9 billion (from its present level of 7 billion) in the same period, there are strong incentives for an expansion of food production in Australia. Neoliberal settings are encouraging this expansion at the same time as they are facilitating importation of foods, higher levels of foreign direct investment and the commoditisation of resources (such as water). Yet, expansion in food production – and in an era of climate change – will continue to compromise the environment.

After discussing Australia's neoliberal framework and its relation to farming, this paper outlines how Australia is attempting to address the issue of food security. It argues that productivist farming approaches that are favoured by both industry and government are proving incapable of bringing about long-term production outcomes that will guarantee national food security.

© 2012 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

Food security is achieved when, according to the [Food and Agriculture Organisation \(2009\)](#), all people at all times have access to the sorts of foods that allow them to lead active and healthy lives. Where food is not supplied in sufficient quantity or is of poor quality or is lacking in nutrition, there is the strong likelihood that people will be malnourished, with their health and general well-being compromised ([McDonald, 2010](#)).

Although Australia is a wealthy, developed nation, there remain pockets of people in poverty who, as a consequence, can be described as food insecure ([VicHealth, 2005](#)). This paper provides a brief overview of food insecurity among Australians, but its main purpose is to examine the unsustainable farm production system that has developed since the Second World War and has been strongly shaped, in the last three decades, by neoliberalism. There are signs that the neoliberal-based market solutions to food production and trade are leading, in a period of climate change, to increasing pressures on the

environment and to the destruction of some sections of farming, both of which have the capacity to undermine future food production, and food security, in Australia. They will also place limitations on Australia's capacity to export food.

Australian agriculture is largely unsubsidised, and is strongly export-oriented, with some 60 percent of total production sold abroad, equating to some 76 percent of the total gross value of farming ([DAFF, 2010](#)). Farming operates within a system of 'competitive productivism' ([Dibden et al., 2009](#)), one shaped by neoliberalism. Producing for an international market – but receiving very little government financial support and direction – Australian farmers have adopted the latest technologies and management systems to increase output and improve efficiency ([Argent, 2002](#); [Dibden and Cocklin, 2005](#)). They have embraced self-help strategies to improve their business operations and, through the peak organisation, the National Farmers' Federation (NFF), have supported federal government initiatives to pursue greater global competition, the reduction of tariffs and the elimination of other 'distortions' such as import restrictions and farm subsidies ([Dibden et al., 2009](#); [Gray and Lawrence, 2001](#)).

Accompanying deregulation in Australia has been the flow of capital – along with products such as food and beverages – from

\* Corresponding author. School of Social Science, The University of Queensland, Brisbane 4072, Australia. Tel.: +61 7 3365 3160; fax: +61 7 3365 1544.

E-mail address: [g.lawrence@uq.edu.au](mailto:g.lawrence@uq.edu.au) (G. Lawrence).

abroad. While the movement, to and from Australia, of capital and goods is consistent with principles of free trade and comparative advantage, there are local-level consequences. One is the restructuring of farming as supermarkets employ various tactics to reshape the supply chain. The consequence is that local suppliers are expected to adhere to the increasingly rigid standards of the supermarkets. Many are unable to do so and leave the industry. The 'free market' is also affecting horticultural producers. The importation of vegetables is placing pressures on horticulturalists, resulting in the economic demise of parts of that industry – with questions raised about the consequences for future food security in Australia (PMSEIC, 2010). There are also concerns about foreign direct investment in Australian farmlands. Finance capital is purchasing properties with the apparent aims of profiting via capital gains and, where sovereign wealth funds have been employed, the production of foods and biofuels for repatriation to investor nations. Mining capital is investing in coal, and coal seam gas, production, which – in a largely unregulated market – is likely to reduce the amount of high quality land available for farming. The attenuation of quarantine rules and regulations is yet another concern (see O'Neill and Fagan, 2006).

Finally, neoliberal settings have encouraged the growth of productivist farming, marked by specialisation, intensification and economic concentration (Argent, 2002). Deemed to be the most appropriate means of generating increased production from farming, it is a system which creates significant environmental damage (Gray and Lawrence, 2001). Despite Australia's past success in providing most of the nation's food and assisting in feeding the world's population through exports, there are quite severe limitations to the future expansion of agricultural output in Australia. The emergent challenges facing Australia in increasing its volume of food production are many. First is the issue of available arable land. The continent does not have an overabundance of good soils and many of the currently-farmed areas are undergoing salinisation, acidification and other forms of soil degradation as part of the productivist (intensive, chemically-based) farming practices that have been in place since the 1960s. Second, there is the problem of water availability. Rivers diverted to irrigated agriculture have been exploited to such an extent that the environment has been compromised. Wetlands have been degraded and bird, reptilian and fish species have declined. To counter this, water is now being purchased by government and returned to the environment, leaving less available for farming. Third, it is predicted that climate change will bring other, major, declines in overall output. Australia's primary agricultural regions will become drier. Fourth, agricultural productivity is not increasing at a level which will guarantee food production increases that have occurred in earlier decades.

Drawing from current research into supermarkets and agri-food supply chains and into foreign direct investment in Australian farmlands, from government documents, and from materials produced by independent research bodies, this paper provides a case study of emerging food security issues facing Australia. The paper highlights the role of global neoliberalism in fostering productivist responses to the climate-change challenge, and to other challenges, faced by agriculture.

## 2. Australian Agriculture and global neoliberalism

For three decades from the end of the Second World War protectionism was the key feature of Australian agricultural policy. Farmers had won support from a federal Liberal-Country Party coalition for the implementation of a variety of policies, including import restrictions, output subsidies, home consumption price schemes, fertilizer subsidies, monopoly boards, stabilisation funds,

flat rate subsidies, income averaging, deficiency payments and emergency assistance (Lawrence, 1987). In combination these, and other, measures sought to provide a stable economic platform for farming while providing incentives for expansion of output and of exports. Much farm output was destined for Britain but when Britain joined the European Union in 1973 export markets collapsed. This was a time which saw the demise of the Bretton Woods agreement in 1971 and a surge in oil prices in 1973, placing pressures on the economies of western nations. Falling prices of commodities, rising unemployment and growing levels of public and private debt affected all sections of the Australian economy (Tonts, 2000). The 1970s was a period of major restructuring in Australia, with a variety of 'adjustment' schemes helping to remove the least efficient farmers from agriculture and encouraging others to become larger and more efficient (Lawrence, 1987). The election of a federal Labor government in Australia in the mid 1980s coincided with the rise of Thatcher/Reagan-style neoliberalism. From that time until now, Australian governments of various political persuasions have embarked upon the most profound changes in public policy since Federation in 1901 (Western et al., 2007). These changes have included floating the dollar, deregulating the finance and banking system, and exposing the economy to international competition through tariff reductions. Governments adopted market-based policy instruments while reducing their involvement in the provision of public goods such as electricity, public housing and infrastructure (Chester, 2010). It has been assumed that deregulation would increase competition and that minimalist government intervention would stimulate growth, enhance productivity improvements and foster 'mutual obligation' – particularly from those receiving welfare payments (Chester, 2010, p.317; Western et al., 2007).

Neoliberalism comprises a series of pro-market values, ideas and policy settings that are designed to improve national and international competitiveness via a reorientation of the roles of government and private enterprise (Glassman, 2007; Heynen et al., 2007). Peck and Tickell (2002) have distinguished between what they term 'roll back' and 'roll-out' neoliberalism. 'Roll back' neoliberalism commenced in countries such as the US, UK and Australia in the 1980s and was associated with the dismantling of institutions, and the removal of public benefits, associated with the Keynesian welfare state (Holifield, 2007; Peck and Tickell, 2002). In contrast, since the 1990s there has been a rolling out of neoliberalism via the creation of new institutions and policies aimed at consolidating the market as the arbiter of economic decision-making and seeking to limit government intervention to that of stimulating market forces.

As suggested, in line with 'roll-out' neoliberalism there is not a complete withdrawal from state-based activities. Rather, the state actively intervenes (re-regulates) where it considers it can more directly serve the interests of business, improve competition and foster community responsibility (Chester, 2010; Stilwell, 2002; Western et al., 2007).

The neoliberal ideology that has emerged for Australian agriculture has placed emphasis on individual and rural-community self-help. Rather than having the state provide economic benefits to farmers, farmers are encouraged to manage risk for themselves (Lockie, 2000, 2010). While it remains contentious among grassroots farmers, the progressive withdrawal of state support for farming has been consistent with a strongly argued view in government, in the agricultural bureaucracy, and by peak farmer groups, that free trade is fundamental to Australian agriculture's future competitiveness (Pritchard, 2000; pp.91–92). The National Farmers' Federation (NFF) has been one of the leading advocates of free trade, as has the Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Sciences (ABARES) and its predecessors ABARE and

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/92512>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/92512>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)