OUR FOOD AND FIBRE FUTURE PLAN FOR NORTH EAST NEW SOUTH WALES

THE GREENS

INTRODUCTION

North East NSW is a place like no other. With good rainfall and fertile soils, we are positioned to lead the way in NSW as a food and fibre hub. The farming and ecosystem expertise and knowledge in our region will enable us to swiftly establish into a sustainable agriculture hub that works in harmony with the environment and boosts our economic potential.

As people who work outdoors every day, farmers know their environment - and the environment is changing. Risks posed by urbanisation, water depletion, drought and fossil fuel extraction and use threaten farming viability everywhere.

The climate has changed and will continue to change, with record-level temperatures and severe droughts affecting our region in recent years and causing distress to local farmers and communities. The government responded with a much-needed $500 million drought package for the Northern Rivers but, while welcome, it does nothing to address the root cause of the problem.

Unfortunately, the Nationals stopped looking after the farms of New South Wales a long time ago. For decades they have been all too willing to sell out family farmers, prime farmland and our precious water resources to corporate agribusiness, coal, gas and inappropriate urban growth.

Our region deserves better than band-aid solutions and desperate pork-barreling. We need to make our region future-ready so we can meet the needs of the future.

Family and small farmers are the backbone of sustainable agriculture because they are more adaptable and diverse. Successive governments have failed to invest in transitioning our essential agricultural sector to sustainable and regenerative food and fibre production. The devastating effects of bad management through over allocation and drought on the Murray-Darling-Barwon River system have also highlighted the food security risk we face as climate change progresses.

We are committed to working with farmers and communities and to push for farming across the state to adapt and innovate. Our vision is for our region to be a leader in adopting conscious agricultural practices that are sustainable economically, socially and environmentally. North East NSW is ideally positioned to expand production of high quality produce. As an indication of our cohesive whole of region planning, our Revive the Richmond River Plan demonstrates our commitment to establishing our region as a showcase of best-practice, innovative and resourced food production.

Our plan for food security, fibre production and healthy farming will:

- Ensure the ongoing prosperity of farmers, their employees and the local businesses and communities that rely on farming.
- Provide $120 million in low interest loans for agriculture.
- Establish a local food fund.
- Establish a Parliamentary Standing Committee on Food Security, Agricultural Sustainability and Healthy Lifestyles.
- Establish proper pricing for farm gate produce. Implementing the recommendations of the NSW Fresh Food Pricing Report of 2018 will require the independent conviction of Greens politicians untroubled by the intervention of corporate donors. We back the Report's recommendation of the establishment of a NSW Commissioner for Agriculture to advocate on behalf of the farming sector and help rebalance power relationships in supply chains.
- Protect Agricultural and Rural Land through State Planning Policies that cannot be overridden by future governments with mining, unsustainable development or industrial agendas.
- Create incentive mechanisms to reduce carbon emissions and improve soil fertility.
- Minimise health risks from pesticides, herbicides, antibiotics, growth hormones, food additives and food-borne diseases.
- Improve the region's biosecurity.
- Create business incentives to encourage indigenous businesses growing and selling indigenous foods.
- Introduce a local and sustainable first procurement policy for all government contacts in the north east.
- Ensure a supply and marketing mechanism to provide our public schools and hospitals with fresh, locally grown produce.

1.$120 MILLION LOW INTEREST LOANS SCHEME FOR AGRICULTURE

The sustainability of farming systems and communities is essential for future food security, and for the integrity of the natural environment. Farming communities are currently facing a number of challenges including reduced profit margins, an ageing workforce, the impact of climate change, and the degradation of some of our food producing land.

There is an important role for government to play in supporting young people to stay in, or take up farming and assist farmers to undertake conservation works that improve ecological and productivity outcomes on farms. At this time of historically unprecedented low bond rates the NSW Government could use its borrowing power to make low interest loans available to meet these goals. Low interest loans are a well-recognised mechanism for alleviating upfront financial costs and encouraging participation.

We will establish a scheme which would make $120 million worth of low interest loans available for young farmers and conservation works. This comprises:

- **$60 million in low interest loans for young farmers (under 40).** Each loan would be between $5,000 and $50,000.
- **$60 million in low interest loans for conservation works.** Each loan would be between $5,000 and $50,000.

Attracting young people to farming

It is well known that farmers in Australia are aging and there are fewer young people who are following their parents onto the land or taking up a career in agriculture. The high cost of purchasing and setting up a farm, combined with the lure of higher salaried jobs in the city is driving many young people away. This has led to a median age of farmers of approximately 56, compared to 39 for all employed persons. In fact, only 2% of farmers are under 24, in comparison to 17% of all employed persons, and over 70% of farmers are over 45. This presents a significant challenge for the agricultural sector.

In order to assist with the upfront costs of setting up a farm and encourage more young people to take up agriculture, we would make available low interest loans available to eligible young people, under our Young Farmers Finance Scheme. Low interest loans, of between $5000 and $50,000, could then be used to pay for the operating expenses of the enterprise.

Young Farmers Finance Scheme

- $15 million available per year for 4 years ($60 million total).
- Loans available between $5,000 and $50,000.
- Eligible young farmers would:
  - Be under 40 years of age.
  - Have suitable experience and training in the type of farming operation to be pursued.
  - Have the ability to manage financial affairs and accumulate savings.
  - Complete a business and financial plan with the assistance of Rural Financial Counsellors.
  - Be personally involved in the day-to-day operation of the enterprise.
- Loan funds may be used to:
  - Buy livestock, seed, equipment and supplies.
  - Buy, rent or repair needed tools and equipment.
  - Pay operating expenses for the project.
  - Fund essential capital works.
- Loan funds cannot be used to:
  - Pay labour costs.
  - Pay for rent or mortgage repayments.

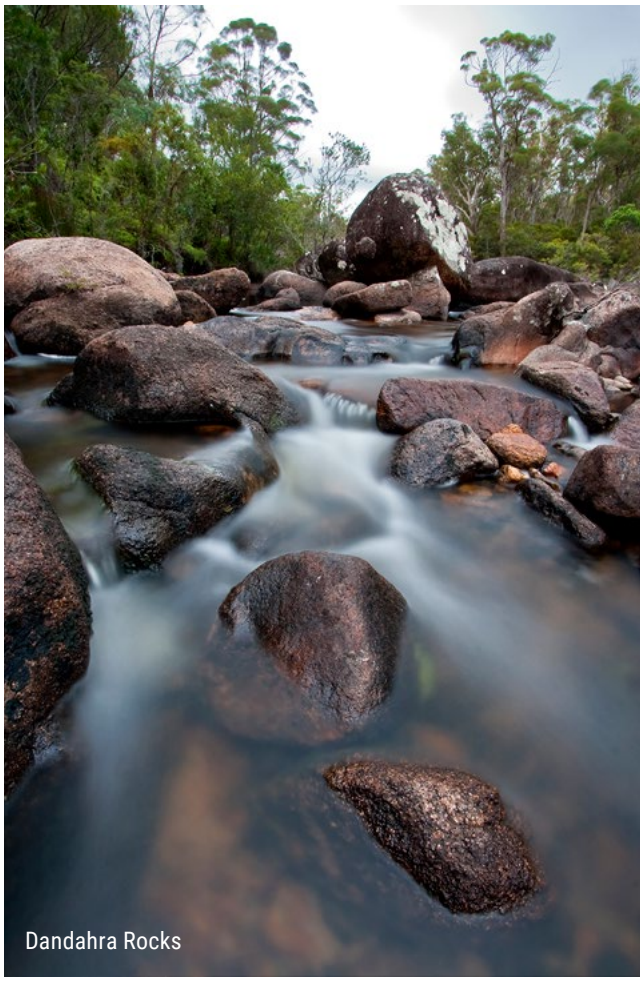
Conservation work on private land supported

Private landholders, under either freehold or Crown leasehold, manage over 85% of the land in NSW, making conservation on private land one of the most important elements of biodiversity protection. Farmers also recognise the significant benefits that conservation works, such as planting vegetation corridors and fencing off waterways, can have for the sustainability of their farm. Benefits include preventing erosion and salinity, maintaining an ecosystem that provides resilience to pests, and providing shelter for stock.

We will make available low interest loans of between $5,000 and $50,000, which farmers can use to fund their conservation works, including the purchase of planting stock, seed, or equipment and fencing materials.

Conservation works low-interest loan scheme:

- $15 million available per year for 4 years ($60 million total).
- Loans available for between $5,000 and $50,000.
- For projects directly related to conservation, loan funds may be used to:
  - Buy planting stock, seed, or equipment including fencing materials.
  - Buy, rent or repair needed tools and equipment.
  - Fund earth works.
- Loan funds cannot be used to:
  - Fund work unrelated to conservation.
  - Pay labour costs for the project.
  - Pay for rent or mortgage repayments.



Dandahra Rocks

2. ESTABLISH A LOCAL FOOD FUND

Grants for infrastructure and initiatives that connect farmers and local communities, such as:

- Establishing farmer's markets, mobile markets and community food box schemes.
- Creating and supporting producer cooperatives.
- Fitting out local food hubs for packaging and value-adding local food, including for larger bulk supply. Investment must be made in supporting existing agricultural industries such as our dairy and macadamia farmers and the wide variety of berry producers. Marketing our local food hubs to the broader domestic market will celebrate and market our region's unique flavours and encourage other regions to adopt our sustainable ethos.
- Creating and marketing a regional food brand that leverages our clean green natural environment – we have world class forests and farming country that should be recognised in our branding.
- Indigenous heritage and culture in our region is rich and diverse and will be recognised in our branding identity. Make funds and support available to local Aboriginal people, for cultural food enterprise.
- We will adopt and encourage a local and sustainable procurement policy for our schools, hospital and public service industries. Schools and hospitals will be encouraged to include food gardens and orchards in their grounds. Growing and harvesting food plants could become part of ongoing educational projects in schools and therapeutic treatment for patients.

Local Food

- To ensure the sustainability and viability of local food production.
- To ensure access to fresh, healthy, affordable local produce for consumers.
- To reduce food miles.
- To educate consumers about food production and connect food consumers with food producers and strengthen communities.
- To facilitate the conservation of areas of high ecological value in farming systems.
- To encourage new and young people to start farming.

3. ESTABLISH A PARLIAMENTARY STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOOD SECURITY, AGRICULTURAL SUSTAINABILITY AND HEALTHY LIFESTYLES

Political momentum must support legislation that mitigates against all impacts of climate change affecting food production and distribution. The increased likelihood of drought, storms, flood, fire and disease present dramatic challenges to food producers. Food security in the 21st century will require rapid governmental responses to intense and fast-moving events. Our commitment to encouraging environment-appropriate farming for agricultural sustainability is consistent with our support for broad acre hemp cropping and farm conversions. Food production in an arid landscape increasingly subject to drought must reflect the exigencies of increasingly erratic rainfall and river flow profiles.

Only 6,054 workers, which is 5.6% of a total employed population of 107,411 work in agriculture, forestry or fishing in the Northern Rivers. In order to broaden this employment base and grow our local food industry, support is needed for small scale farming enterprises which provide local food security and employment, create strong local community networks and reduce food miles. While we live in an increasingly urbanised and sedentary working environment, our programs will support healthy diets and lifestyles to ensure our populations are more resistant to heart disease, diabetes and other health issues related to lack of exercise and unhealthy diets.

We would particularly support programs such as MyFood Northern Rivers, which provides directories to a huge variety of local food producers, retailers, markets, restaurants and food-related events in the Northern Rivers. Encouraging local outlets that grow, produce, sell and serve local food products will enhance our local economy and have flow on effects to agri-tourism development.

4. PROTECT AGRICULTURAL LAND THAT IS OF STATE OR REGIONAL AGRICULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE FROM INCOMPATIBLE DEVELOPMENTS SUCH AS MINING, COAL SEAM GAS AND URBAN EXPANSION

- The Northern Rivers community famously defeated attempts by the speculative mining company Metgasco to drill for coal seam gas in the Northern Rivers. However water mining and urban expansion remain as direct threats to the environment and tourism of this unique region.
- Horticulturists and small scale food producers must be assured of water rights over those of commercial water extraction operations. A new Water Sharing Plan should be submitted to fairly allocate the aquifers and surface waters of the Northern Rivers and ensure that environmental flows and cultural flows for First Nations people are counted alongside those of recreational rights, irrigators and horticulturists.
- Prime agricultural land in North East NSW is under threat. In our region the NSW Government has started construction of a new hospital on some of the most productive agricultural land in the region. This land has been compulsorily acquired from successful farmers. Another threat comes from water mining. This is the extraction of ground water for bottling and selling back to the community and out of the region. The Tweed Shire has become a target for water mining, which unchecked will reduce water supply to local agriculture. Legislating for permanent, comprehensive protection of prime agricultural land and water from extractive industries and unsuitable urban developments will be essential for the continued investment of social and financial capital in our region.

Barra Nulla Pano

5. BIOSECURITY POLICY

The cost of failure in biosecurity can be devastating. Pest animals such as foxes, deer, wild dogs and pigs cost our agriculture sector about $720 million per year and are contributing to the decline of many native animals (in particular, bird and reptile species), including approximately 40% of NSW's threatened species.

Environmental weeds are having a devastating impact on NSW's biodiversity. According to a 2006 study, weeds threaten at least 341 vulnerable and endangered species (40% of those listed in NSW in 2006) and 64 endangered ecological communities (89% of the total). It is estimated that pests and weeds cost Australia at least $7 billion a year and that as much as twenty five percent of costs to consumers associated with food products are due to invasive weeds, pests and diseases.

We support a tenure-neutral, well-resourced and scientifically based approach to biosecurity which focuses on prevention and eradication. Our comprehensive Biosecurity policy includes:

- The establishment of a $5 million High Risk Incursion Response Fund.
- The introduction of 3 yearly State of Biosecurity reporting.
- The adoption of a 'permitted list' approach to the sale of plants.
- The establishment of an Independent, statutory State Biosecurity Committee.
- Joint responsibility for biosecurity to be given to both the Agriculture and Environment Ministers.

5.1 Establish a $5 million High Risk Incursion Response Fund

The most effective way to stop new biosecurity incursions, including weeds, invasive animals or diseases is through early detection and rapid response. While there are currently well established arrangements for rapidly responding to disease such as foot and mouth disease, there are no such arrangements for responding to diseases such as Myrtle Rust, which is devastating our horticultural industries and eucalyptus and tea tree forests. The establishment of such a fund was supported by the Natural Resources Commission in its recent review of weed management in NSW and has broad support from environmental and industry stakeholders.

5.2 Introduce 3 yearly State of Biosecurity reporting

In order to have a modern, responsive biosecurity system in NSW it is imperative that we have relevant and up to date information about the status and condition of existing biosecurity risks, trends and future threats. Currently in NSW a State of the Environment report is produced every 3 years and this is a vital part of ensuring the Government is accountable and their performance can be assessed. The report on the state of biosecurity would look at the following matters:

- An assessment of the status and conditions of biosecurity risk in the State.
- An examination of biosecurity trends and future threats, including the implications for the environment, industry and human health.
- A review of the programs and activities related to biosecurity, including those related to government, industry and communities.
- An examination of economic trends and of the costs and benefits (including economic evaluation) of biosecurity.
- Any general recommendations for future legislative or other action appropriate to ensure the State's biosecurity.
- A statement on the performance and suitability of biosecurity education programs in the State.

5.3 Adopt a 'permitted list' approach to the sale of plants

State-wide management of weeds is directed by the NSW Invasive Species Plan. Under the *Biosecurity Act 2015*, local control authorities can inspect private land and issue orders for owners or occupiers to control noxious weeds.

In NSW nurseries can legally sell and plant hundreds of plant species that are, or have the potential to become, significant environmental or agricultural weeds. Climatic variations can affect different weed species, so weeds that may not flower or be a problem further south might become a danger in the north east. About three quarters of the exotic weedy species found in Australia started out as cultivated plants and gardens comprise the major pool of future weeds. Western Australia has developed a Permitted List of all plants that can be legally sold, and any plants which are not on this list will not be sold. NSW would benefit from the adoption of this approach to prevent the unrestricted movement of thousands of weeds or potential weeds within the state.

5.4 Establish an Independent, statutory State Biosecurity Committee

Central to a modern, responsive biosecurity system is independent scientific decision making and accountability. Biosecurity should not be subject to the whims of politics and this position is supported by environmental and agricultural stakeholders, including the Invasive Species Council and NSW Farmers Association. We will establish an independent, statutory State Biosecurity Committee, composed of scientific experts, a representative of the state's peak farmers association and the state's peak conservation council and government representatives.

It would have the following functions:

- To audit and report on compliance by government agencies with their biosecurity obligations.
- To produce the 3 yearly state of biosecurity report.
- To make recommendations to the Minister about plants for the permitted list.
- To make decisions regarding the use of the High Risk Incursion Response Fund.
- To promote a coordinated strategic approach to biosecurity issues.
- To review the biosecurity aspects of any local strategic plans prepared by Local Land Services boards and provide feedback to the Minister as to whether they are consistent with State policy and the principles of this Act.
- To provide policy advice on biosecurity issues.

5.5 Give joint responsibility for biosecurity to both the Agriculture and Environment Ministers

Too often in biosecurity funding and decision making, environmental protection is not given equal consideration with agricultural protection. A modern, responsive biosecurity system must pay stronger consideration to the importance of preventing and eradicating potentially devastating environmental biosecurity threats. Currently Ministerial responsibility for biosecurity rests solely with the Minister for Agriculture. The Minister for Agriculture ought to have responsibility for decision making where biosecurity decisions relate solely to agricultural threats, and the Minister for Environment ought to have responsibility for decision making where it relates solely to environmental threats. Joint decisions to be required where issues affect both agriculture and the environment.

5.6.Future proofing farms with conversion assistance for sustainable low input farming

Under our plan farmers will be assisted to diversify and future proof their businesses with a diverse range of crops best suited to emerging conditions in a climate changing environment. Dry-land rice farming, hemp, bamboo and legumes such as chick peas are relatively low input emergent agricultural options in the north east. Such emerging agricultural industries should be supported. Research and development projects and representative scale trialling should be instituted as a matter of urgency, to find which crops are best suited to our region.

Education programs will be developed and available on the urgency of transitioning under climate change and the best cropping options available to farmers being forced to confront the realities of climate change and how it will affect their agricultural activities.

As we have seen in the assisted demise of the Murray Darling, irrigation cropping is not suited to arid Australian conditions and a transition from irrigation cotton and rice is essential. Dryland rice cropping is a promising transition crop and could indeed make for a viable alternative in relatively rain-rich areas such as the Northern Rivers.

An important area that should be given particular attention is broadacre hemp cropping and farm conversions. As a food, hemp seed is one of the healthiest sources of protein available, requires no chemicals and little water to grow. This is the most promising vector for hemp cropping in the North East, however hemp is also a superb fibre product and a medicinal source. While these products require specialised harvesting and processing equipment, there are innumerable uses for hemp. Before industries based on fossil fuels, it was a staple crop for food, fuel and fibre throughout the world. Hemp was grown in Australia up until the 1937, when the Australia government agreed to follow the US by prohibiting the cultivation of hemp. The Hemp Industry Regulation of 2016 must be updated and licensing conditions eased to ensure the rapid adoption of hemp crops as a mainstay of the Northern Rivers agricultural fibre production.

With a timely investment in processing infrastructure the NE could be positioned as a leader in growing and processing hemp fibre, harvesting seed and in the production of medicinal cannabis oil.

In spite of some cynical analysis of the prospects for an Australian hemp industry this fledgling industry is on track to reach $10 million in farm-gate production in the near future. It has been compared with the truffle industry, which had just reached the $10m benchmark, while the tea tree industry was valued at about $30m.

The Australian Hemp Industrial Alliance contends that 'Industrial hemp is emerging as a promising industry for rural Australia, as it is a high yielding and hardy, fast growing annual crop, fibre crops growing 4-5 metres in as many months. As fibre crops rapidly outgrow weeds, they require minimal (if any) herbicides and pesticides, reducing input and environmental costs. Food crops provide similar advantages although as these crops are not as dense, some herbicides that are approved for organic cultivation are used pre-emergence for weed control.

Industrial hemp can be grown and harvested using conventional farming equipment, with minimal capital entry barriers for farmers. It can be grown in rotation with other cereal crops, with some studies showing increased yield in wheat crops that follow a hemp crop. Its strong root system improves soil structure and adds soil carbon at around 1 tonne per hectare. Seed crops have provided a similar return to canola at around $1,300/hectare. There are an estimated 25,000 products that can use hemp as a feedstock providing a great source of diversification for Australian farmers.

The Greens recently supported and celebrated National Regenerative Agriculture Day. This important movement led by Australian farmers aims to regenerate topsoil, increase biodiversity, improve water cycles, enhance ecosystem services, support biosequestration, increase resilience to climate fluctuation, and strengthen the health and vitality of farm soil, by recycling as much farm waste as possible, as well as adding compost material from outside the farm. We will invest in supporting this movement at the farm and regional level, through trials, eduction and incentives.

The Greens Food, Fibre and Sustainability plan will help make the North East Future-Ready and will contribute to the State's food and fibre security. By investing in our farmers, we can transition from farming which damages our environment, generates emissions and pollutes our waters to farming that sustains and enhances nature and our communities. These investments will ensure that our region is future ready – not only to fend off the threat of climate change, but to embrace the opportunities offered in clean, green and sustainable agriculture for the whole of NSW.

Cangi Stones

All photography by Tony Grant