

SUBMISSION TO THE SENATE ENQUIRY INTO THE ARDB BILL

My name is Rob Atkinson. I am a 52 year old beef producer from north west Queensland. My family own and operate two cattle properties which in an average season carry about 6000 head. Our children are 6th generation beef producers. At the moment we are trying to survive a severe drought.

This is going to be a brief submission to the senate enquiry, but one that is from the heart and I hope whoever reads this submission has some idea of the difficulty running a business in today's environment, when we have to depend on the weather to be favourable and the price we receive for our produce is decided by the purchaser. Imagine if this were the case in the rest of the business world. Primary producers have fixed costs, just like all other businesses, but very few businesses are at the mercy of Mother Nature and are price takers. Imagine if you pull up at a service station and only paid a price for fuel based on what you thought it was worth. Or imagine that when you went to Woolies or Coles, you could name your price for food. Well that is how it is for primary producers. Without an immediate change in this system, I do not believe Australia will have a healthy agricultural sector into the future.

What really saddens me is the next generation of young producers who would dearly love to be the future farmers in this nation. There is no incentive to go down the same road their parents are travelling at the moment. I am convinced there is going to be a large number of producers leave the industry in the short to medium term, either forced off financially or leaving of their own will, while they still have some equity. Many of these farmers are the innovative operators in our industry. Farmers who made a decision to grow their business, update their machinery and property improvements.

From a beef producers point of view, farm gate returns have not increased for decades. This is the case for most agricultural pursuits. There is a limit to how much we can cut costs and rationalise our businesses. We have reached those limits. Due to the lack of profitability, most producers severely cut their staff numbers years ago. This has had negative effects in our local communities where rural schools have been forced to close and populations and businesses in our towns are dwindling.

This country has the ability to produce vast amounts of food and fibre, under the cleanest farming practises in the world. But this will not be realised if this enquiry is not given full and deepest consideration.

The level of frustration in rural communities is growing every day.

I attended a meeting in my local town, Hughenden, Qld. in December. There I heard Rowell Walton and Ben Rees put their case for the establishment of the ARDB. I urge this enquiry to consider the ARDB Bill. A solution has to be found to break this terrible trend of Agricultural decline. In fact, that decline relates to all industry. Manufacturing and processing businesses in Australia are in decline, Holden and SPC are two recent examples.

Australian industry is trying to compete on a playing field that is anything but fair or level. Whether it is tariffs, cheap labour, subsidies, exchange rates, illegal chemical practises in competitor countries, poor quality, truth in labelling, the story is the same. Australia loses. Industry in this country needs some policy changes that favour and support growth and sustainability. The ARDB gives Australians that chance.