

## MINISTERIAL ADDRESS

### Senator the Hon. Murray Watt

Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry



It is a privilege to be able to speak to you all today. The Crawford Fund does some amazing work in support of international agricultural research and development. Even more amazing is that you have been doing it for 35 years now! And I congratulate you on reaching that milestone.

On the topic of milestones I want to give a special 'shoutout' as well to the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research on their 40th anniversary of providing world-leading solutions in agricultural research.

I want to start by giving you a quick snapshot of where Australia's agriculture sector is at, right now.

#### **State of the sector**

It is fair to say that Australia's farmers are in a favourable position at the moment. With a third year of above average rainfall expected, conditions are currently generating significant financial returns after many years of hardship. The value of agricultural production is forecast to be \$80.4 billion, the second highest on record, while the value of agricultural exports is forecast to be the highest on record, at \$64.9 billion.

However, what I have seen and heard, since taking on this role, is that farmers know the good times don't last. There are some serious challenges ahead of us, and we need to work collaboratively to ensure this industry is resilient and innovative enough to see them through.

#### **Biosecurity**

We have all seen the headlines about Indonesia's foot-and-mouth disease (FMD) outbreak, while they also try to manage an incursion of lumpy skin disease (LSD). The Albanese Government has been working closely with the Government of Indonesia in response to the outbreak.

We have been addressing the outbreak with a three-pronged approach. We have committed funding, resources, training and support to Indonesia to help them as they combat these serious diseases. This includes \$14 million in immediate funding to manage the increased threat of foot-and-mouth disease and lumpy skin disease. An additional \$10 million for FMD vaccination and further support has also just been announced. ABARES have estimated an outbreak of FMD could cost Australia up to \$80 billion over ten years.

These outbreaks have 'brought home', to many people, biosecurity risks and what they could mean for our own agricultural sector if we were to have such an incursion here. One of the

reasons we have acted so strongly is to protect food security and the impact an outbreak would have on our exports.

I couldn't be prouder of the response from our biosecurity teams and the Australian public. Sanitation mats, shoe cleaning and declaring goods at the border are not easy things to navigate, especially after a long flight, but Australians have wholeheartedly supported these measures to protect our farmers.

Of course, FMD is not the only biosecurity challenge we face. Our work there is never finished, and we need to remain vigilant to the threats of pests and disease to our food production.

### **Global factors**

Russia's invasion of Ukraine is putting enormous pressure on grain prices around the world. While our farmers in our export-focused market are currently seeing strong prices for their goods, the reasons for these prices are tragic.

Although Russia and Ukraine are not major trading partners for Australia, flow-on effects from the war are raising prices of fertiliser, fuel, freight and commodities to impact producers and consumers alike. World fertiliser prices are at their highest level since 2008, which will lead to reduced use on all farm types.

This squeeze on fertiliser will drop production across the globe, impacting on food security and keeping food prices high in the short to medium term.

### **Workforce**

Access to farm labour and imported machinery will also continue to present challenges for many businesses and consumers.

The inability of many farmers to attract and retain the workforce they need over a number of years has a direct impact on food security and prices. We are prioritising workforce shortages to ensure producers have the on-farm support they need, through strengthening the Pacific Labour Scheme. There is also much more that we can do to attract and retain Australian workers in regional areas.

I'll be working closely with my Cabinet colleagues to ensure that regions benefit from greatly increased emphasis on local jobs and skills. This begins with the Jobs and Skills Summit being held here next month and the industry roundtables we are conducting in the lead-up.

Each of these issues is contributing to a growing concern across the world – the Crawford Fund is very focused on food security.

### **Food security**

Australia is deeply concerned at the alarming levels of hunger globally, including in our region.

Around the world, the mounting pressures are hitting the poorest and most vulnerable people the hardest – women, children, people with disability and those that are displaced – impacting on livelihoods, income and food security.

Countries need equitable, sustainable, and resilient agri-food systems that can withstand and recover from external shocks. But it is important to do that in a socially inclusive and gender-responsive manner – otherwise the risks of destabilisation and conflict will increase.

Delivering food security also requires us to take serious action on what is arguably the biggest challenge we face – climate change. ABARES latest modelling, from 2021, estimates that changes in seasonal conditions over the last 20 years have reduced annual average farm profits by 23%, or around \$29,200 per farm. Agriculture is disproportionately exposed and vulnerable to adverse natural hazards, so investment in climate-smart agriculture is important to drive long-term sustainable growth and build climate resilience.

This will also increase the appeal of Australian produce in global markets.

That is why we are supporting our growers to overcome climate impacts and become more resilient to external shocks while innovating, adapting, and sharing our nation's expertise in sustainable production.

In the meantime, through our international development program, we are helping communities in our region to meet the growing food security challenge. This includes through our long-standing partnership with the World Food Programme (WFP). In 2021–22, we provided over \$157 million to that specific programme. Most recently, this included \$22 million for emergency food assistance to help the WFP meet the daily nutritional needs of three million people in Sri Lanka.

All countries need to maintain open, transparent and predictable trade in agricultural products in the face of the current food security crisis. Australia is promoting this through our leadership in international standard-setting bodies such as the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE), the Codex Alimentarius Commission (Codex) and the International Plant Protection Convention (IPPC), where we are advocating for policies and standards that facilitate international trade in safe food.

We are encouraging countries to align their requirements with these policies and standards to better harmonise requirements, which in turn facilitates trade and mitigates against unnecessary barriers that impede food security and are not based on principles of sound science and risk.

In addition, we are funding important research through ACIAR, to sustainably increase agricultural productivity and enhance livelihoods in our region.

## **Conclusion**

We are conscious of the leading role we play in ensuring food security in our region. Australia must lift our efforts to support countries as they navigate the environmental and economic challenges of the day. Not only is this a humanitarian issue, it is also a diplomatic and economic one as well.

We can improve relations with our neighbours in the Pacific and help nations throughout Asia deal with rising threats of pest and disease which are largely being borne by climate change.

It is imperative we all work together to achieve our common goals – including governments, industry and business.

Murray Watt was elected as a Senator for Queensland in 2016. He is the Albanese Government's Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry and Minister for Emergency Management. Murray is Brisbane born and bred, and has strong family ties to regional Queensland, with both sides of his family having a long history in farming and teaching. For over 20 years, Murray's working life has been spent as an advocate for others, as a lawyer, a public servant and as Chief of Staff to former Premier Anna Bligh. Murray also served one term as a Queensland State MP and Assistant Minister in health and economic portfolios. Since his election in 2016, Murray has played a key role in Senate Estimates and a range of Senate Committees including the Rural and Regional Affairs Committee. As a Senator and Shadow Minister, he led a number of Senate inquiries into issues including regional development, energy and resources, emergency management and health care.