

# FDI Feature Interview

5 September 2019

## **Major General The Honourable Michael Jeffery, AC, AO (Mil), CVO, MC (Retd): National Soils Advocate**

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### **Key Points**

- The National Soils Advocate role is to progress the national objective to protect, restore and maintain the health of the Australian agricultural landscape in order to guarantee food security and sustainable farming communities.
- The role requires wide engagement and communication with Federal and State Governments, the scientific, research and technical communities, land managers and farmers as well as the broader Australian community at all levels.
- Scientific research and development, followed by education and training for farmers, land managers and food producers will be key to future food security.
- Research conducted and published by independent and not-for-profit organisations will be important to enabling wide understanding issues.

### **Introduction**

On 18 July 2019, Major General Michael Jeffery, former Governor of Western Australia and Governor General of Australia, was re-appointed National Soils Advocate by the Prime Minister of Australia. On his first appointment to the role in 2012, he focussed his attention on understanding the roles, responsibilities and interconnectivity of groups involved in natural resource management and advocating the importance of prioritising [soil health](#) in the broader context of landscape management.

Subsequently re-appointed in 2014, General Jeffery continued to raise public awareness of the critical role that soil, water, vegetation and animal management plays in sustainable food production in responding to the global challenges of food security and climate change.

### Interview

**FDI - This is the third time you have held this appointment. How will this differ from your previous appointments?**

**Major General Jeffery** - Prime Minister Scott Morrison has formally agreed to the issue of a comprehensive *Terms of Reference* for the first time. This includes the outcome of progressing national objectives to protect, restore and maintain the health of the Australian agricultural landscape, to guarantee a food secure nation and sustainable farming communities.

This aim recognises the important role agricultural soils and landscapes play in underpinning sustainable productivity and improving the resilience of Australia's farms.

**FDI - In general terms, what do you see as the most important outcomes of this role?**

**Major General Jeffery** - As the Soils Advocate, I have been tasked by the Prime Minister to increase awareness of and advocate the critical importance of conserving and improving agricultural soil and landscape conditions to:

- Benefit the environment;
- Enhance agricultural productivity and realise continuing economic benefits; and
- Secure sustainable food production systems.

**FDI - How do you see yourself accomplishing these outcomes?**

**Major General Jeffery** - I see this being done through a number of processes. Firstly, I will engage with the agricultural sector, through clear objectives and visible communications, when advocating the improvement and maintenance of the health of the Australian agricultural landscape.

Secondly, there will be a need to increase the knowledge, expertise and resources of farmers and the agricultural sectors, based on emerging relevant soil science, to integrate the management of their landscapes, including their soil, water, vegetation and animal assets.

Thirdly, I will need to undertake a global advocacy function, to bring together and share knowledge, expertise and resources on the critical role soils play to underpin sustainable productivity and meet global challenges, including food security and adapting to a changing climate.

Fourthly, I will work with and coordinate across the whole-of-Australian Government to contribute to the fulfilment of the national objective of restoring and maintaining the health of the agricultural landscape. This will include:

- Education and training for farmers, agricultural college and university graduates, school students and the wider Australian public.
- Science, research and development, using data collected through national soil monitoring and research programs, to increase carbon levels, organic nitrogen and water in soils to ensure maximum microbial health and function.
- Improving food nutrition through soil health enhancement.
- Improving soil moisture management.

### **FDI - Who will be involved and how do you see this happening?**

**Major General Jeffery** – The Prime Minister’s *Terms of Reference* directs me to contribute expertise and advice to relevant ministers, including the Deputy Prime Minister, and State and Federal Ministers for Agriculture; Water Resources, Drought, Rural Finance, Natural Disaster and Emergency Management; Environment; Education; Health, Energy and Emissions Reduction; Foreign Affairs; Defence; Indigenous Australians; Industry, Science and Technology; and Education, in meeting the Government’s objective to restore and maintain the health of the agricultural landscape.

I will provide quarterly written updates to the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister and undertake other activities as needed and agreed with the Commonwealth Government.

I will ensure that the above is carried out in line with normal Commonwealth Government decision making and accountability principles, including those that Cabinet and Ministers will develop, implement and set policy and programs in accordance with their portfolio responsibilities.

I should also make the point that although I am appointed to this role by the Australian Government, as the National Soils Advocate, I do not speak on behalf of the Government.

### **FDI - What assistance will you have as the National Soils Advocate?**

**Major General Jeffery** - I will have an office with five key staff within PM&C. I am also Chairman of two independent, not-for-profit research institutes. These organisations will assist me in providing advice and other support.

Canberra-based [Soils for Life](#) will expand its case studies Australia wide that identify the means by which innovative farmers use the principles of regenerative farming to restore and sustain the effective use of their soils and landscapes, in order to receive a productive, financially rewarding and socially beneficial outcome. These outcomes on economic, environmental, social and productivity criteria will be scientifically proven and be widely accepted. The *Soils for Life* now has Federal Government support.

The second research institute is Perth-based [Future Directions International](#) (FDI). Among other roles, FDI seeks to regularly examine the global food and water situation between now

and 2050, to determine whether a global crisis is likely and, if so, how this might impact on Australia and what should we, as a nation do about it?

FDI also identifies scientists, farmers and policy makers whose work would be of benefit to the farming community generally in northern and regional Australia.

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**About the Interviewee:**

Major General Michael Jeffery is a retired senior Australian Army officer and was the 24th Governor-General of Australia, serving from 2003 to 2008, and the 28th Governor of Western Australia, serving from 1993 to 2000.

Graduating from the Royal Military College, Duntroon he saw Active Service in the Malayan Emergency and the Vietnam War and was awarded the Military Cross and the South Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry during the latter conflict. He was at various stages commander of the Army's Special Air Service Regiment and the 1st Division, and subsequently Deputy Chief of General Staff, before retiring from military service in 1993.

*Any opinions or views expressed in this paper are those of the individual interviewee, unless stated to be those of Future Directions International.*

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