

FDI Feature Interview

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Rick Wilson Federal Member for O'Connor and Chairman of the House of Representative Standing Committee for Agriculture and Water Resources

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Key Points

- A report on the opportunities and impediments to the primary production sectors, realising their ambition to achieve a combined \$100 billion value of production by 2030, is being prepared for government.
- It is of concern that young Australians are not being attracted to farming as a profession.
- The Australian agricultural sector must be profitable and sustainable, including environmental sustainability.
- Aspects of regenerative agriculture, such as no-till farming have made a very significant contribution both profitably and sustainably in the Australian agricultural industry.
- Regenerative agriculture, however, has yet to demonstrate a capacity for profitability for broadacre farming.
- The parliamentary friends of soil provides a non-partisan forum for members of parliament to meet and interact on matters relating to soil.

Introduction

Mr Rick Wilson is the Federal member for the electorate of O'Connor, an electorate that covers a large area of Western Australia. It extends from the [Shire of Ngaanyatjaraku](#) in the north to the Shire of Dundas in the south following the coast west to Manjimup. The Division includes the cities of Albany and Kalgoorlie-Boulder, and the Shires of Boyup Brook, Bridgetown-Greenbushes, Brookton, Collie, Coolgardie, Corrigin, Denmark, Dundas, Esperance, Kondinin, Laverton, Manjimup, Ngaanyatjaraku, Wandering and Williams.

Rick is currently the Chairman of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Agriculture and Water Resources. He is also a member of the Parliamentary Friends of Soil. Recently, FDI took the opportunity to interview Rick about these organisations and Australian agriculture and water resources generally.

Interview

FDI – As Chairman of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Agriculture and Water Resources, what do you hope to achieve and who else is on your committee?

Rick Wilson – The role of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Agriculture and Water Resources is to inquire into, and report on, any matter referred to it by either the House or a Minister. We currently have two matters referred to us for inquiry. The most recent is an inquiry into the timber supply chain restraints in the Australian plantation sector. The other, which may be of greater interest to you, is a report into growing Australian agriculture to \$100 billion by 2030. This matter was referred to the Committee last year by the then Minister for Agriculture, Senator the Honourable Bridget McKenzie. The Terms of Reference for the inquiry require the Committee to report to the Minister, now the Hon. Michael McCormack, the opportunities and impediments to the primary production sectors, realising their ambition to achieve a combined \$100 billion value of production by 2030. To date the Committee has received over 100 submissions from a broad cross section of the community. We have also held 15 public hearings at centres in Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, Tasmania and the ACT.

Without pre-empting the content of the report, we believe this is achievable as the Minister stated in a recent Webinar to the Regional Australia Council. Of note, we do see opportunities to increase production by taking advantage of our changing climatic conditions. Certainly, recent rainfall trends indicate less rain in the south of the continent, but it is increasing in the north. We believe this can be used to increase production in northern Australia by taking advantage of such changes.

FDI – How would you describe the ideal state of Australia’s agriculture and water resources, what are the present shortfalls and what needs to be done to overcome these shortfalls?

Rick Wilson – I believe that we are in reasonable shape. I am unable, however, to speak for the Murray-Darling region as that is covered by the Murray-Darling Basin Authority, an independent expertise-based statutory agency created under the Water Act of 2007. The problems of the Murray-Darling are widely reported, and it is an issue of national importance. Nevertheless, the industry has a very good record for improving production and managing scarce resources such as water.

FDI – Do you see a link between agricultural science, innovative farmers and agricultural education? Do you believe that as a nation we understand these linkages and, if not, what do we need to do to address this issue?

Rick Wilson – I do have concerns in this area. As farmers and agriculturalists, we are better at communicating the negative aspects of industry over the positive. It is true that farmers can be at the mercy of inconsistent weather conditions and this perception has been emphasised in recent years by the concerns over climate change. Market value for produce can be strongly influenced by large companies such as supermarket chains, and pricing arrangements far beyond the farmer’s control can significantly influence financial returns. These and other pressures on farmers notwithstanding, agriculture can still be a very rewarding profession both financially and as a way of life, but we don’t tell that side of the story well.

The issue of education is alarming for the industry and beyond. Across the nation, young people are not being attracted to a life on the land. Tertiary institutions have been, for some years now, discontinuing agricultural courses because of the lack of student participation or interest. This may also have a flow-on effect to our research bodies such as the CSIRO and the Grains Research and Development Corporation. These organisations need scientists to conduct research to improve the industry. Young soil scientists are getting difficult to find.

Addressing this problem is not easy. It may require a fundamental shift in community attitudes to the industry. The city-country divide is almost a global problem without easy answers.

FDI – What role do you see regenerative agriculture having in the future of Australian agriculture and water management?

Rick Wilson – While some of the agricultural practices of regenerative agriculture have been very successfully adopted by mainstream farming, regenerative agriculture as a complete concept has not yet demonstrated sustainable profitability for broadacre farming. The best farms are run on sound business principles, they are both profitable and sustainable. I fully acknowledge that some regenerative agricultural practices, such as no-till farming, have made a very significant contribution to both profitability and sustainability of Australian farms but regen-ag still has a way to go.

Organic farmers and I understand that organic and regenerative farming practices are different, struggle to remain financially viable in Australia when employed on a large scale, and the market is still limited. I remain open minded and positive about innovative practises but, as a farmer myself, I know that there are no “silver bullets” to successful agriculture; it takes a holistic knowledge of the landscape, discipline and long-term planning.

I commend to you Mr Ray Harrington OAM of Darkan, as an outstanding innovative farmer. Ray is an inductee of the Royal Agricultural Society of Western Australia Hall of Fame for pioneer farming and as an inventor. Ray was one of the pioneers of no-till farming in Western Australia with the aim, not to make money but to improve productivity and sustainability on farms.

I feel the current enthusiasm for regenerative agriculture is perhaps detracting from an appreciation of the improvements to environmental sustainability being made by land managers in mainstream, commercial agriculture. Certainly, in the first half of the twentieth century, mistakes were made, mistakes largely because of a lack of understanding of our unique Australian landscape. Since the 1980s, however, many commercially profitable, broadacre properties have significantly improved the quality of their soil and landscape while consistently increasing production. This has been achieved at a time of reduced average rainfall, particularly in southern Australia.

One concern I do have is the effect on agricultural profitability that would be caused if glyphosate became unavailable to farmers as a weed controlling herbicide. Glyphosate is the active ingredient in the important weed killer [RoundUp](#) and about 500 other herbicide products. It is widely used by farmers and other land managers and has been for over 45 years. When applied, glyphosate prevents weeds from making the proteins they need to grow. Glyphosate allows farmers to control weeds from above the ground – doing away with the need to plough or till the soil. Reducing tillage maintains soil nutrients and improves water use efficiency.

Concerns have been raised about human exposure to the common herbicide glyphosate, after a 2015 International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) assessment. This has classified glyphosate in a group of chemicals that are “probably carcinogenic to humans” and is based on a strength-of-evidence assessment.

The Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority (APVMA) is aware of these international decisions concerning glyphosate. Products containing glyphosate are registered for use in Australia. APVMA approved products containing glyphosate can continue to be used safely according to label directions. Australian law requires appropriate warnings on product labels, which include relevant poisons scheduling, first aid, and safety directions detailing personal protective equipment when handling and using products containing glyphosate. The APVMA reminds users of the importance of following all label instructions.

As the national regulator for agricultural chemicals, the APVMA continues to track and consider any new scientific information associated with safety and effectiveness of glyphosate, including information from other regulators.

In 2016, following the IARC assessment, the APVMA considered glyphosate and found no grounds to place it under formal reconsideration again. The APVMA completed a review of glyphosate in 1997, which set Australia's health-based guidance values at a level that remains protective. Different labels have different purposes.

FDI – As a member of the Parliamentary Friends of the Soil, what role do you see yourself playing?

Rick Wilson – Once a Parliamentary Friendship Group such as ours is recognised by the Parliament facilities and resources are provided for the Group to promote an understanding of the importance of soil. It was intended that this group be launched at the start of this year and bring together a bi-partisan forum for parliamentarians to interact with farmers, scientists, industry groups and policy makers on issues relating to health and maintenance of Australia's soils.

Unfortunately, Covid 19 and the subsequent restrictions on group gatherings and travel have affected us all. To the best of my knowledge, to date the Friendship Group has not been active. I am confident the Chairman, Hon Michael McCormack and the deputy chairman, Hon Linda Burney, will change that as soon as it becomes possible.

About the Interviewee:

Rick Wilson is the Federal Liberal Member for O'Connor after he was elected in September 2013.

He was one of six children raised on the family's farm in Katanning which was cleared by his great-grandfather in 1867. Rick worked on the farm with his brother for 25 years, and that was where he began to understand the challenges of running a dynamic business in regional Western Australia.

Rick has had a long association with agri-politics and was a former Chairman of Western Grain Growers. He has served on numerous industry and government advisory panels.

He was inspired to run for Parliament following his involvement in a decade-long campaign to deregulate the wheat industry, which brought about the end of the Australia Wheat Board's monopoly. Small government and reduced bureaucracy, a higher standard of health, aged care and education services in the regions, and improving our communications network are some of the key areas Rick has focused on since entering Parliament.

Rick and wife Tanya moved from Katanning to Albany in 2015, where they now raise their four children.

Any opinions or views expressed in this paper are those of the individual interviewee, unless stated to be those of Future Directions International. The views of the interviewee are his personal view as author of the book and are not of his current and past employers.

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