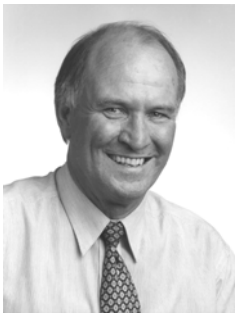

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Opinion Piece

23 March 2009

Localised impacts of global warming should not be ignored

The global emissions debate is continuing to be seen through the prism of a market mechanism such as the government's Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS) or the alternate mooted by the Coalition's Andrew Robb of a carbon tax.

The politics of Australia's role in reducing our emissions will no doubt be played out over the next year but there is much that can be achieved outside these mechanisms and in my view should be included in the public policy debate in a range of policy areas from drought, economic, water and environmental policy.

Australia is a nation of climatic variation. Climate scientists suggest that our area in the Murray Darling could suffer reductions of up to 30% in run off water. Add to this the landuse changes that are taking place such as No-till farming, surface cover pasture strategies that benefit productivity for farmers and graziers and agri-forestry for timber production or carbon sinks and further reductions in run-off will occur.

These land-use changes will potentially affect the Murray Darling system and can have consequences for country communities.

The electorate of NE has within its borders most of the water storages in the Darling catchment that underpin the irrigation industries downstream as well as provide water for our towns. We also see the development of carbon intensive mining industries on productive groundwater systems and agricultural land.

Rather than push a relatively narrow view relating to short term politics we require real initiative and research into the opportunities that may exist into the future for our region.

Last week for example, in a Science Meets Parliament meeting, Future Farming Industry CRC Scientist Graeme Sandral outlined exciting technology research advances such as

1. developing plants for farming systems to cope with climate change by providing a buffer against drought and maintain a stable food supply
2. Breeding new forage plants that reduce livestock methane output by up to 30%
3. Developing plants with increased carbon sequestration capacity to reduce atmospheric CO_2 concentrations.

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These research activities form part of the Farming for the Future Co-operative Research Centre's greater mandate to transform Australia's broadacre farming systems through adoption of Profitable Perenniels technologies to improve productivity, resilience to droughts and mitigation of climate change.

The Glen Innes Agricultural Research and Advisory Station, University of New England and Tamworth Agricultural Institute are working on soil carbon, methane and nitrous oxide emission issues all of which could have real benefits for our region particularly if the climate scientists are correct.

The renewable energy sector has until recently been ignored at Government level but could have enormous implications for carbon emissions and more than reach the 5% target that the current government is pushing. Solar, wind, water, geothermal, biofuels all have a role to play and could all have a positive employment and economic role in our region.

Some have suggested that Australia should not be a trailblazer in terms of addressing emissions. I don't agree.

Allowing the irrigation industry to collapse due to climate change and global warming by doing nothing isn't an option. The long term economic ramifications far outweigh any short term downside.

If soil and vegetation can be shown to be a reliable sequester of carbon naturally through new agricultural techniques regional Australia could be a real winner in a long term global emissions scheme and major part of the solution.

Cellulosic biofuels (fuel from plant material) could also provide renewable (non-carbon) energy and be profitable for agricultural regions.

When questioned recently, Federal Agricultural Department personnel admitted that there was no modelling at present that takes into account reduced run-off in the catchment from improved land-use strategies that reduce erosion and runoff and increase water infiltration into the soils.

Also increased CO_2 levels when combined with increased soil moisture will increase plant growth.

These issues become important when assessments are being made in terms of water use and pricing and could impact on irrigation allocations and storage capacities which will in turn impact on regional economies.

Localised impacts of global warming should not be ignored.

As one of the regions potentially most affected, we need to be on the front foot rather than waiting for others to lead.