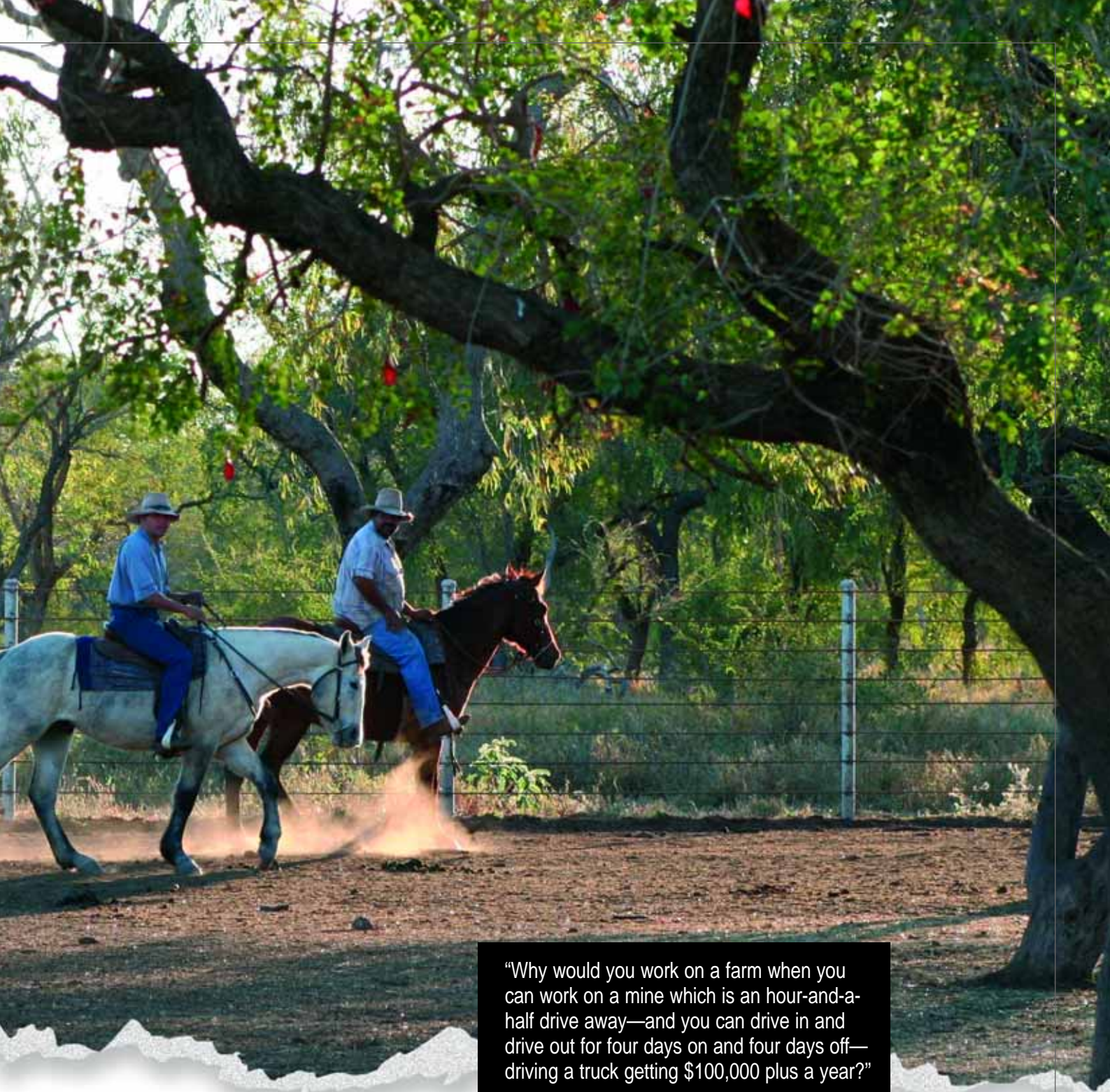




# THE TALENT DROUGHT

YOUNG PEOPLE ARE LEAVING THE LAND IN DROVES AND A PARLIAMENTARY REPORT HAS FOUND IT IS NOT JUST THE DROUGHT DETERRING THEM FROM A FUTURE IN AGRICULTURE.

STORY: GEORGIE OAKESHOTT



“Why would you work on a farm when you can work on a mine which is an hour-and-a-half drive away—and you can drive in and drive out for four days on and four days off—driving a truck getting \$100,000 plus a year?”

**A**s if coping with the drought wasn't tough enough, rural Australia's talent pool is also evaporating.

According to a new parliamentary report, life on the land is full of hurdles—poor training and educational opportunities, inadequate research and development, an ageing population, difficulties accessing the latest technologies and a widespread negative perception of farming as a career.

The report notes earlier findings by the Productivity Commission which found technological advances, changes in consumer demand, the impact of government policies, emerging environmental concerns and trends in the terms of trade were all having a significant impact on the agricultural sector.

Farms are fewer but larger, there's less land in agricultural production, the rural workforce is older than the Australian workforce in

general and young people are leaving in droves—especially young women.

The drought alone is estimated to have cost agriculture 70,000 jobs between 2002 and 2003, a decline of 15 per cent, which the Productivity Commission identified as the largest employment shock since reliable statistics became available.

Chair of the House of Representatives Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry Committee, Alby Schultz (Member for Hume, NSW)

*Photo: Andrew Dawson Continued page 40 ►*



Photo: Newspix

**“A skilled rural workforce is critical to our economic future.”**

said the report, *Skills: Rural Australia's Need*, is one of the most important reports affecting rural and regional Australia the federal parliament has produced for a long time.

“Rural Australia is bleeding talent,” he said. “The evidence we took over a significant period of time indicated there are some significant short falls in the current system, which are depriving rural and regional Australia of its training needs.”

Mr Schultz said the committee itself had learnt a great deal during the inquiry.

“While most of us knew there were problems, we didn't realise the extent of the problems.”

Committee member, Gavan O'Connor (Member for Corio, Vic) said the challenges facing rural Australia cannot be underestimated.

“It's a battle for survival in the bush and it is going to get more difficult,” he said.

“For farming to survive in Australia, we need to farm smarter and, to do that, we need smart farmers. To get more smart farmers on the land and to improve skill levels, we really need to invest in education, training and research in this sector.

“We must attract some of the brightest people in Australia to make careers in this diverse sector which offers much in the way of career opportunities.”

But how do you attract anyone, let alone the brightest people, to a sector which is so down on itself?

“I have to say that industry works very hard on not portraying a very attractive profile,” chair of Rural Skills Australia Wayne Cornish told the committee.

“It is somewhat understandable that careers advisers perhaps are not breaking their necks to recommend careers in agriculture and horticulture to young people when the industry itself says the things about itself that it does. That needs to be corrected, and some of us are working on that at the moment,” he said.

His concerns were echoed by the Western Australian Farmers Federation, which said agriculture “is seen as a sunset career”, and Agricultural Research Western Australia, which said “agriculture is seen as a second-class career rather than a first choice career”.

CEO of Rural Industries Skill Training Bill Hamill told the committee he'd asked a group of 150 Year 9 students at a country school in Victoria how many would pursue agriculture as a career, and only one raised their hand.

“I said, ‘c'mon, joke, joke’ this is not right. One hand stayed up. Then we had them in smaller groups. That one hand was still the only hand, because they all wanted to get away, they did not want to live the lives their mothers and fathers lived,” he said.

The big problem, he told the committee, is the perception of agriculture as a blue-collar, non-skilled industry.

“I find consistently that, when children are not doing well at school, teachers and other people say ‘you're not doing well at school, go back on the farm,’” Mr Hamill said.

For the decreasing numbers of people choosing careers in agriculture, there's also the temptation to take a sideways step to a job in the booming mining industry, with its promise of better pay and conditions.

“Why would you work on a farm when you can work on a mine which is an hour-and-a-half drive away—and you can drive in and drive out for four days on and four days off—driving a truck getting \$100,000 plus a year?” Ralph Leutton from Cotton Australia asked the committee.

“You get all your accommodation, food and keep given to you for \$70 a

week. Why would you work on a farm?” he said.

The report makes 29 recommendations, which deputy chair of the committee Dick Adams (Member for Lyons, Tas) describes as “broad in their range but concise in their focus”. They cover rural skills, education and training; the regulatory framework for vocational education and training; the availability and adequacy of research; the provision of extension and advisory services; the promotion of careers in agriculture and forestry; and better use of existing human resources.

“A skilled rural workforce is critical to our economic future,” Mr Adams told the House of Representatives.

“It is also important for the survival of rural industries and rural communities in the face of increasing international competition. I think it is evident that the level of education in our agricultural workforce in the past has a low incidence of post-school qualifications, particularly at the tertiary level. Rural workers need to be skilled and there are significant gaps in our capacity to address those shortages,” he said.

With this in mind, the committee makes several recommendations to promote agriculture and forestry in schools, and calls for a reinvigoration of agricultural colleges which provide essential rural skills training and education that other institutions cannot.

The report outlines the mixed fortunes of agricultural colleges in Australia, commending the efforts of Western Australia, and taking evidence criticising changes in New South Wales and Victoria.

In its submission, the NSW Farmers Association argued that the closure of residential courses at Yanco removed options for students in the southern and much of the western regions of the state to undertake agricultural related courses.

South Australian representative for the Australian Agriculture Training Providers Network, Colin Cook told the committee agriculture colleges played an important role in encouraging careers in the sector.

“I would have to say that the five agricultural colleges in WA, together with Tocal in NSW, are excellent models of how secondary age students

are immersed in a training program that is totally about agriculture," Mr Cook said.

"It leaves the majority of the school-based curriculum typical of most secondary schools alone and focuses on agriculture. The kids work, breathe and live a farming environment with exposure to many enterprises and they come away from those organisations really capable and enthused about agriculture as a career," he said.

The committee has also called for a reinvigoration of forestry and agricultural science in universities, saying the government must "pick winners" and fund them regardless of fluctuations in student numbers.

"This will no doubt cause substantial pain during the period of adjustment, as institutions lose funding and courses are closed," the report says.

"The result will be a small number of highly effective institutions, capable of attracting students from around the world."

Other recommendations include: making the regulatory framework surrounding vocational education and training more flexible and responsive to industry needs; rationalising training providers; providing agriculture and forestry courses at Australian Technical Colleges; developing a national extension framework to revitalise extension services; extending the FarmBis program beyond 2008; providing funding security for cooperative research centres; and developing a 'skills passport' for the transfer of skills within rural industries.

"The single most compelling point to come out of our recommendations is the message to government that we really have to focus on rural skills training if we expect rural and regional Australia to continue to contribute to the very strong economic well-being of this country," committee chair Alby Schultz said. ■

*The 'Skills: Rural Australia's Need' report is at [www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/primind/ruralskills/report.htm](http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/primind/ruralskills/report.htm) or for more information email [aff.reps@aph.gov.au](mailto:aff.reps@aph.gov.au) or phone (02) 6277 4500.*

## HELP AT HAND FOR AGRICULTURE'S UNSUNG HEROES

ONE of the most significant developments from the House of Representatives inquiry into the rural skills crisis is the announcement of a new inquiry focusing on Australia's honeybee industry.

This relatively small industry is in the front line of the skills crisis, with a rapidly ageing population of beekeepers, limited education and training opportunities, and very few newcomers to the sector.

Added to this, beekeepers are losing access to national parks, the industry is having difficulty competing with cheap imports, and honeybees are vulnerable to a number of disease threats including the imminent invasion of a bee killing mite called varroa destructor.

This fast moving mite has already wiped out honeybee populations around the world and Australian beekeepers believe it's only a matter of time before it causes the same speedy destruction here.

Beekeepers told the committee that if or when it happens, Australian agriculture will suffer losses of around \$2 billion per annum, and 11,000 jobs.

"Bees are the prime pollinator for our agricultural system. Without bees, you do not have food, it is as basic as that," one beekeeper said.

Biosecurity threats to honeybees will be examined as part of the new inquiry, along with current and future prospects for the honeybee industry, its role in agriculture and forestry, trade issues, the impact of land management and bushfires, and the industry's research and development needs.

"While the honeybee industry directly contributes \$60 million to the economy annually, the pollination services provided by



honeybees are worth billions of dollars per annum to the agriculture and horticulture sectors," committee chair Alby Schultz said.

"Without those pollination services, billions of dollars worth of production and thousands of jobs would be put at risk."

He said the committee, as part of the rural skills inquiry, has already recommended the establishment of a Cooperative Research Centre style entity for beekeeping and pollination. It has also called for permanent quarantine facilities, as a matter of urgency.

"The new inquiry will allow the committee to examine other issues affecting the honeybee industry and give voice to a range of industry concerns," Mr Schultz said.

The inquiry will also examine areas for potential growth of the honeybee industry including bee exports, paid pollination services and the development of medicinal honey products.

For more information on the inquiry visit [www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/primind](http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/primind) or email [aff.reps@aph.gov.au](mailto:aff.reps@aph.gov.au) or phone 02 6277 4500.