

FEBRUARY 2021

**RE
GEN
ER
AT
ION**

**GROWING
NEW
FARMERS**

Executive Summary



BACKGROUND

In mid -2019 Farmer Incubator, in partnership with Young Farmers Connect, received funding to conduct feasibility research into expanding our work in growing future farmers.

The intent of our research was threefold:



1. To develop an understanding of the Australian context re supporting a next generation of regenerative farmers: existing activity, challenges, needs



2. To learn from international initiatives: What works, what are the challenges, learnings & key enabling mechanisms?



3. To use this learning to inform our future pathways & share with others working with/in the position to support new growers

KEY FINDINGS

AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT

Limited research has been done into new regenerative and agro-ecological farmers in Australia, with most of the literature we have been able to find on new entrants into agriculture generally focused on conventional, broad-acre farming.

While our findings largely draw on the primary research we conducted through interviews (25 new, aspiring and established farmers and educators) and surveys (226 new and aspiring farmers), we ground and cross reference this, where possible, with wider research and literature from Australia and beyond.

Our research identified 6 key themes under which to group the challenges facing our new small-scale regenerative farming generation.

These key themes are set out below, and are explored in detail in the full report:

- **Access to capital:** for farm start up, establishment and equity
- **Access to land:** Sky high land prices, successional challenges & lack of alternate models
- **Accessing hands-on learning pathways:** Limited & piecemeal, accessibility & cost
- **Social challenges:** Isolation, entering farming as an 'outsider', social pressure
- **Lack of dedicated funding and support:** Compared to other OECD nations
- **Ecological & climatic challenges:** Degraded resource base & increasing risk and uncertainty.

AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT: KEY FINDINGS

Our research also profiled a range of grassroots initiative that have been developed to address some of these challenges head on including:

- **Harcourt Organic Farming Cooperative:** A farmer-led initiative making land available for next generation farmers.
- **SAGE Stepping Stones Program:** A community focused on growing and training next generation farmers
- **Farmer Incubator Pop Up Garlic Farming Program:** Growing new farmers with community and co-farming models
- **Wilunga Farmers Market Farmer Scholarship:** A community response to addressing the capital challenge facing new farmers.

Underpinning our research, and the work of all we spoke to is the impetus to grow a new agricultural future, one that regenerates our ecosystems, not destroys, and that threads resilience, vitality and community across rural, regional and urban areas.

This work to grow something other than what we have known before risks perpetuating colonial oppression, marginalisation and untruths if we fail to face up to our ongoing settler colonial history.

So part of our research into the Australian context involved starting to build an understanding of work being done to support Indigenous farmers and land managers, what the key needs are and how we, as organisations and individual farmers, can be active allies for indigenous food and land justice.

From Bruce Pascoe of Black Duck Foods, Nathan Wong of the Dja Dja Wurrung Aboriginal Clans Corporation, and Clare O'Kelly, Leanne Miller and Neville Atkinson of Outback Australia we learnt that land justice is the number one issue that needs to be tackled in order to both enable and re-thread Indigenous farming across our nation.

INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT: KEY FINDINGS

Phase 2 of our research turned our attention to the international context, to build our understanding of how other parts of the world are addressing the challenges facing new and aspiring farmers, and the lessons gained from these endeavours.

Our focus here was on learning from farm incubator models which have rapidly proliferated in recent years, particularly in the USA.



INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT: KEY FINDINGS

Similar to the traditional business incubation model, farm incubators work to 'help new and beginning farm entrepreneurs establish their own successful businesses by providing specific resources and services that are difficult for startup entrepreneurs to access on their own' (NIFTI 2013: 7).

We learnt that here's a vast range of farm incubator models operating across the globe in a variety of forms, and were able to directly interview those involved in this work in various parts of the USA, the United Kingdom and France.

Key findings from our primary and desktop research include:

- Most beginner farmer training programs have evolved to **meet a specific need in the local community**, and were, and continue to be, very much **shaped by local context**
- The financial model of incubator programs is very much **influenced by the broader funding and resourcing context** (i.e. in the USA the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has a Beginning Farmer and Rancher Program which constitutes a significant funding source)
- **The majority of farm incubator programs rely on funding for at least 50% of their operating costs.** Making land, equipment and education accessible for new and beginning farmers is not a profitable enterprise!
- There is a range of work being undertaken alongside training program to **address challenges facing new farmers on a systemic level through mechanisms like community farmland trusts and farm start credit and grant/finance mechanisms.**
- A shared theme with Australia is that across the USA, the UK and France, **regenerative and small-scale agriculture is dominated by white, privileged, middle class folk and existing internship and education programs can, and do, perpetuate that truth** so a focus on equity, diversity and land and food justice is paramount.

CONCLUSION

There's a lot we can learn from what is happening overseas with innovative models, funding, widespread public and community support for new and aspiring farmers.

Back here in Oz there is great stuff happening on the ground but also some serious challenges facing our next farming generation - increased support and collaboration is urgently needed.

An overarching finding is that many of the challenges facing us next generation farmers are structural and systemic and can't be comprehensively addressed by single pronged initiatives. To tackle challenges such as access to land, capital and hands-on regenerative farming training is going to take collaboration across a wide range of stakeholders.

We, as next generation farmers, can't tackle this on our own.



RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR THOSE LOOKING TO START INITIATIVES & TRAINING PROGRAMS TO SUPPORT NEW FARMERS:

Do it! We desperately need them, but move forward with a deep awareness of history, equity, inclusion and privilege and be up for open collaboration, not competition.

- Overseas experience shows that networks, and sharing of resourcing and knowledge across actors in this space strengthens the broader movement.
- We have compiled a range of resources, toolkits and references as part of our research to help inform your work and thinking. Refer to the full report and the resource library at the back for further information.

TO LOCAL, STATE AND FEDERAL GOVERNMENT:

Where are you?

A range of prominent international research points to the centrality of supporting, funding and resourcing new farmers for the sake of our food security, planet and rural and regional economies (FOLU 2019, IPES-Food 2016). We put forward plenty of examples and ideas in the full report for what you can do to provide leadership in growing a next generation of regenerative farmers including:

- Developing a national funding scheme to support and seed incubator and training programs for new growers
- Protecting our precious viable farmland for agriculture & assisting with the development of new models of land protection and access
- Funding subsidies and scholarships to support new farmers to access training and education in regenerative & agroecological farming

- Dedicated support for navigating red tape and regulations and easing prohibitive regulatory burdens (refer to this submission by the Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance for further information)

TO PHILANTHROPY, INVESTMENT AND FINANCE

We need support and we need to work in collaboration with you. There is so much potential for what could happen in this space but we need the funding and resourcing to do it. Analysis from the Food and Land Use Coalition in 2019 found that a global investment in training young farmer entrepreneurs over the next decade of \$95-110 billion would deliver a three-fold economic return of \$300 billion (FOLU 2019). Many of you have access to not only significant funds, but points of influence across the food system, and areas of land.

Work with us to:

- Support and amplify existing initiatives we point to in the report that are making big impact on a shoestring budget
- Develop community farmland trust and finance mechanisms in the Australian setting to address head-on the top two barriers facing our next farming generation
- Engage with Indigenous communities to support land justice for our First Nations people, and strengthen their work to develop self determination through Indigenous farming enterprises
- Develop educational programs that equip us 'next gen' farmers to not only heal degraded ecosystems but build resilient businesses that can survive the increasingly challenging climate we are farming into.

RECOMMENDATIONS

TO CONCERNED AND PASSIONATE COMMUNITY MEMBERS:

Don't underestimate what you can do to support and enable the next farming generation. Read over some of the case studies provided in our full report where community led initiatives are providing resourcing, land, training to next generation farmers for the benefit of the broader community.

- Do you own or have access to/awareness of vacant or under utilised land that could be made available to new farmers? Even 1/4 acre of land can be a viable beginning for new growers!
- Do you have a direct line or relationship with local government, funders and philanthropists or the media? Help amplify our cause and get us on the map.
- Are you supporting local growers in your region and helping to foster a community that values its farmers and fresh local food?
- Are you aware of any efforts to restore land justice to local Indigenous peoples in your region?

TO ESTABLISHED AND RETIRING FARMERS:

We know you are busy and flat out and tired, but to us you are an invaluable resource in terms of your hard won knowledge and skills. If it is within your capacity:

- Explore ways you can act as a mentor or adviser to new growers in your region, or
- Have a think about ways you might share your land to a next generation farmer.
- We have provided some great examples in our full report - take a look!

SOME FINAL WORDS

We know that our ecological foundations here in Australia are at breaking point, and our land urgently needs defenders, lovers, stewards and students of every kind, given both our history and the future we are facing.

Climate change is coming at us hard and fast, and many of the beginner farmers we spoke to in this research are scared about what it means for us as farmers, as people, as communities. We know the risks are increasing and the state of play is transforming overhead and underfoot. Hence we are choosing and learning to farm in a way that regenerates the land in order to build resilience to shocks, be they ecological, economic or social.

Many of us are seeking to stand in a place of honesty and recognition of the ongoing colonial story of dispossession and injustice that brings our feet to our particular patch of earth.

We have a window of time to turn things around, and we are independent folk, our growing movement of small scale regenerative farmers, so there's a lot we can, and are, achieving on our own. But we are also interdependent - for the work we do, and the challenges we face, are bigger than us.

The future is uncertain, and probably a bit rocky.

But we got soil underfoot, sun overhead and eventually, however long it takes, the rains still come.

So lets get growing.