

Opening address, 14 December 2021

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Welcome delegates to the Crawford Fund conference on food and nutrition security: the biosecurity, health and trade nexus.

I would like to thank the Honourable John Anderson AO, Chair of the Crawford Fund, and the Board for inviting me to speak this morning. I would also like to acknowledge and thank everyone for attending here today in person and those joining us online and especially our international participants. I am absolutely honoured to be asked to provide opening remarks to the conference in my capacity as the newly appointed Special Representative for Australian Agriculture.

At today's conference we will be hearing about biosecurity, health and trade, all within the context of global food security and nutrition. And it is important to consider the interplay of these three factors as we look to agriculture to feed a growing world, particularly given the impact that COVID-19, floods, fire and drought have had on the world, our economies and individuals.

Critical to this is how do agriculture and health systems work together more closely to manage the threat of zoonoses? How do countries work together more closely to ensure free and open trade? How can industry, government and research organisations collaborate more effectively to create the right conditions for sustainable agricultural production?

You will hear today from Rob Kaan, Managing Director of Corteva Agriscience, that the influences on trade flow are diverse – and collaboration and transparency between key stakeholders are essential in managing future emerging trends that will impact trade flow.

Dr Rob Horsch, Adviser to the Global Commission on Adaptation at the World Resources Institute, will talk about how innovative tools and technologies are essential to future-proofing agriculture against biosecurity threats.

And you will hear some wonderful case studies about technologies and tools employed to meet the challenges of fall armyworm, African swine fever, foot-and-mouth disease, and cereal rusts.

I feel I am in good company today, in this, my first official presentation as the Special Representative for Australian Agriculture.

The headline statement about my role is that I am here to promote the importance of the global rules-based trading system, and the importance of

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international standard-setting bodies in supporting safe, sustainably produced, affordable food and fibre.

But today I would like to provide you with some context for the creation of the role, and then some thoughts on what I think I can bring to it. And I am interested in exploring how I may support you in your work in trade, biosecurity policy, regulation and technology, and building connections across health and agricultural systems.

First, to some context.

Australia exports over 70 per cent of our agricultural produce, and the global rules-based system for trade is key to agricultural exports.

Trade is not just important to Australian farmers but to everyone. Global food security depends on it.

As you might be aware, there is this beast called the agricultural multilateral system – it is complex in its structure, its rules and its procedures, but it underpins trade in food and fibre and all the inputs required to produce it.

This system has been operating, both at the policy and leaders level and at the highly technical level for some 75 years. It has been credited as the system that has smoothed the volatility that keeps nations vulnerable to poverty and food insecurity and has helped lift the economic standing of many countries.

It is the system that Australia, as a mid-sized economy, has benefited from economically, underpinning our access to safe food and creating opportunities for our farmers to export their produce.

And it is the system that has allowed Australia to say no to imports that might introduce exotic pests and diseases.

My role is to promote our ongoing commitment to the multilateral system and to the rules-based order as a sound basis to meet the global challenges.

Australia, and particularly the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment (DAWE), puts a lot of effort into supporting the institutions that underpin Australian farmers' access to trade. We do this through Agriculture counsellors based in 16 countries and through the technical experts that live and breathe the rules, the procedures and the principles of standard setting.

You will hear later today from Nicola Hinder, First Assistant Secretary of the Exports and Veterinary Services Division within DAWE, how the standards set by these bodies are integral to maintaining a transparent, rules-based trading environment and reducing risk for those operating in the increasingly connected global value chain.

But the multilateral system and its institutions and principles – including the highly technical institutions – are under challenge. And this matters.

It matters if the role of global trade in supporting global food security is dismissed, and that national self-sufficiency and slogans of buy local are being promoted as the only way to ensure cleaner, greener and affordable food.

It matters that Australia acknowledges that some countries are better off with a hazard-based approach for chemical use rather than Australia's risk-based approach. Context matters. Differing national capabilities matter. Just as it matters that no one trading bloc or country should seek to have its standards of sustainable agricultural production accepted as the global standard.

Our eyes and our agreements should be on the outcome – sustainable economic, social and environmental production and trade in food and fibre. There is something quite perverse in being prescriptive, at a global scale, on how that outcome is achieved. But the outcome being sought is vital, not just for one country, but for the world.

What works on the average 80 ha wheat farm in northern France will not work for the 800 ha wheat farm in Western Australia. But that is the sort of challenge the multilateral system and institutions are under.

It matters that we continue to allow nuance and context to be part of decision-making, be it around measures to reduce greenhouse gases, to promote biodiversity conservation or to increase the productivity of our farm operations.

Our international standard-setting bodies allow for that nuance. Simplistic headlines and scare campaigns do not.

For instance, with respect to climate change and emission reductions, we need to address the impact of fossil fuel subsidies on the production of greenhouse gases. But we also need to address the impact of the support for domestic agriculture provided by so many of our trade competitors, which also contributes to the production of greenhouse gases and undermines environmental sustainability.

So, what will I be doing in this clearly complicated space?

Part of my role will be to promote outcomes-based approaches, not prescriptive approaches, and to counter simplifications with reference to scientific decisions.

I will support a more prominent public leadership role, emphasising the importance of trade for global food security and the critical role that standard-setting bodies play in setting science-based and risk-based rules for trade.

I will highlight the importance of countries investing in and abiding by the rules and standards that govern agricultural trade.

An important part of this will be to recognise differences in country circumstances, and that a one-size-fits-all approach to issues such as chemical use or animal welfare just does not work.

I will highlight the fantastic Australian practices to help to counter misperceptions about Australian agriculture.

And I will be particularly focused on supporting Australia's commitment to science-based and risk-based decision making within that multilateral system.

So why me in this new role?



Well, I come with a very strong background in risk-based and rules-based systems, as well as coming with an agricultural background. And being the first in a role is not new to me. I was the inaugural head of the Office of Best Practice Regulation and the inaugural CEO of the Regional Australia Institute. I have been a policy director at the National Farmers' Federation and CEO of the Council of RDCs. I am also a Director on the Boards of LiveCorp, the NSW Rice Marketing Board and the Australasian Pork Research Institute. And I am an ACIAR Commissioner.

When I am not doing all that, I am a beef cattle farmer not far from here.

I am really excited about this role and look forward to highlighting the importance of science and risk in the engagements I will have.

At the moment, I am doing a lot of listening. I am meeting with government, industry and research organisations that are engaged in this multilateral space.

And given my role straddles industry and government, I want to work closely with industry to encourage their involvement in the multilateral system.

I want to discuss with industry why it is important that we engage in the big policy debates on the various world stages, as well as in the highly technical standard-setting bodies.

Through my work with them, I expect to better understand the issues faced by agricultural producers and exporters as well as building up a bank of case studies to support my international representation.

I will be an additional resource for international engagement and will work with the many government efforts already underway, including speaking one on one with officers based around the world supporting Australian agricultural trade.

In all this, I am looking for the connections; looking for the gaps that I might help to fill; and seeing how I can help to support the great efforts already being undertaken. Which is a good note to finish on.

With biosecurity, health and trade being the focus of today's discussion, and with a fantastic line up of speakers, I am sure that all of us will leave with a stronger appreciation of the complexity of this space, and the importance of staying engaged in the big policy debates as well as the highly technical decision-making.

It is a great privilege to open this conference in my first official role as the Special Representative for Australian Agriculture.

There is a huge opportunity to really make a difference here and my biggest challenge will be identifying where I can get the best bang for the buck.

I look forward to working with you in meeting the challenges that you will be discussing today and I wish you every success in your deliberations.

Ms McCluskey is the first Special Representative for Australian Agriculture. She is an experienced senior business executive and company director with a strong background in agricultural policy, production and research. Currently her roles include directorships at Australian Unity, LiveCorp, Foundation for Young Australians, Australasian Pork Research Institute, NSW Rice Marketing Board and Energy Renaissance and she is a Commissioner for International Agricultural Research.

Ms McCluskey was a Commissioner on the National COVID-19 Advisory Board, a member of the Deregulation Taskforce Advisory Panel, the Charities Review and the Small Business Digital Taskforce. She was also a member of the Independent Review Panel for CPA Australia, the Harper Review of Competition Policy and the NSW Review of the Regulatory Framework.

Previously, Ms McCluskey has been the CEO of the Regional Australia Institute and the Council of Rural Research and Development Corporations (RDCs) and the Executive Director of the Office of Best Practice Regulation. She has also held senior positions with the Business Council of Australia, the National Farmers' Federation and the Australian Taxation Office.

Ms McCluskey is a beef cattle farmer at Yass, NSW, and was named the Westpac/Australian Financial Review Regional Woman of Influence in 2013 and received the Women in Agribusiness award in 2014 for outstanding contribution to policy development.