

We run a vertically integrated farm and cheese making business that directly employs about 30 people, besides being a significant client of several independent regional contractors. On our farm we grow crops and livestock, produce milk- albeit from sheep and goats- and manufacture this into dairy products that are sold domestically and exported. We have no irrigation, but lack surface water for stock and domestic consumption. We are at the end of a power line that is providing electricity at the upper limit of its design capacity. Our business thus functions as something of a microcosm for Australia, in terms of its agricultural and manufacturing industries, and from this background I hope to share some perspectives on climate change.

First, energy is cheap. Marrying statement and commitment, we opted to buy 100% green power for our business (much to the derision of our hard headed friends). This increased our electricity bill from a negligible 0.7% to a hardly noticeable 1% of our total expenses. Our primary heat source, LPG, costs about 60 cents per litre and is many times the cost suburban businesses pay for natural gas, but this still accounts for less than 1% of our running costs. On the farm, rising diesel prices last year were dwarfed by rises in fertiliser prices. From the standpoint of our experience, I suspect that any business sector arguing energy costs as a make or break issue are complicit in a scare campaign, unless they are extraordinarily large energy users in, for example, the aluminium or coal industries.

Climate change has already added large, direct increases in our costs in the past 10 years, with obvious such costs including an increased weight and price of purchased feed. Almost as critically, capital expenditure has been forced away from production, to be spent instead on water related infrastructure; our once reliable surface water catchments have failed. Whether the receding decade's climate changes are part of a long term trend or not, these immediate cost increases contrast with those arguing foremost against carbon emission reduction schemes- and the future, potential loss can only be guessed.

I am angered at how voiceless I am as a small business person. Yesterday a coal mining company made headlines with a threat to close mines with a resultant 400 0 jobs lost, and I read of the miners having a dinner for Martin Ferguson. The decisions of hundreds of thousands of small businesses such as ours make a far greater impact on employment, but we have no access to decision makers, or the media. I am a member of both the Victorian Farmers Federation and the Victorian Economic Chamber and Industry which share a sceptical attitude to the significance of climate change. To have a significant voice in the former I would have to dedicate several years in a bid to win a senior elected position, and the latter seems apparently unequipped for purposes of gathering and debating members' views.

The possibility of win-win solutions to climate change is exciting. Our business, for example, which is growing rapidly despite a cap on the energy it can draw from the grid, is planning to install a solar/biomass fired boiler to provide hot water for cleaning and processing, and via a chiller will rather paradoxically power our air-conditioning, and some of our refrigeration. Further, New Holland (a leading European farm machinery marque) has a prototype hydrogen powered tractor, which it intends to release, along with an on farm hydrogen generation plant, by 2015. If (when) methogenic bacteria in ruminants can be suppressed, energy currently wasted as methane will be available for animal production.

When debating Australia's climate change policy, I hope for politicians to actively seek the experiences and views of the many, largely voiceless Australians, rather than just those with the best funded lobby groups.