

Keep our farmers in mind

JENNE BRAMMER



The door has slammed shut for Australia to supply barley to China, its most important and lucrative market, following a major diplomatic spat, but it's our farmers who will pay the price.

Co-operative Bulk Handling estimates reduced barley prices or switching to other crops will cost Australian farmers about \$500 million this year, while in WA that cost will be \$200 million.

In WA there are about 3000 farm businesses that plant barley as part of their cropping program, so the hit to individual farms across the State averages out at almost \$70,000 each for the coming year — a fair whack off a family's expected income.

The farmers do have other markets for their barley, but these don't pay as much as China. Farmers have started their 2020 seeding plans and when they heard the news, some started planting other crops such as wheat, which don't ordinarily offer returns as high as barley.

Despite taking the brunt of the spat, farmers are taking it in their stride. When The West Australian interviewed Miling farmer Tony White this week, he revealed the farm business he shares with brother Paul was expecting a \$100,000 hit on the value of their 700ha of freshly sown barley. While obviously disappointed, Mr White was quick to say he didn't want to whinge, given the chaos caused by COVID-19 to all sorts of businesses and communities, and pointing out that like the weather, the issue is out of his control.

It would be fair for Mr White and fellow farmers to be angry about paying the price for tensions between the Australian and Chinese governments.



Illustration: Don Lindsay

Although Chinese authorities have had an investigation into dumping under way for 18 months, their decision to impose the crippling 80.5 per cent tariffs coincides with a spat triggered after the Morrison Government called for an inquiry into the origins of coronavirus.

Australians are probably keen to know how they can help our farmers, should there be a way to help soak up some of the barley normally exported to China, which in 2019 across Australia was 2.3 million tonnes worth more than \$950 million. For starters, we could choose beer made by our local craft brewers. While this could help shift some Australian barley, our population would have to be much bigger for this

to make a dent in the lost demand from China, and compensate for the big price falls caused by the loss of the Chinese market.

Australian barley is also used in China for stockfeed (typically the lower grade barley), and short of keeping a herd of pigs in our backyards, it would be difficult for Australians to help out there either.

What we ultimately need to do is stop giving farmers a hard time, and in fact spare a minute to appreciate the work they do — such as providing the food on our table.

This issue came to the fore recently during the panic buying at the height of the pandemic, when there were fears that we may run short of

food. Empty shelves prompted Agriculture Minister David Littleproud to reassure Australians our food security was among the best in the world, producing enough to feed 75 million people when our population is a third of that amount.

The National Farmers' Federation launched a campaign involving newspaper advertising and billboards reassuring Australians that farmers had their backs. The Australian Bureau of Resource Economics and Science issued a report affirming Australia's credentials as one of the world's most food secure nations — almost 89 per cent of food Australians eat is sourced locally. These reassurances were made with confidence

because farmers continued to produce high volumes of milk, red meat, poultry, pork, grain, fruit, vegetables, eggs and other staples.

Despite this, farmers cop a lot of flack. For example, vegan activists say livestock production is cruel, cattle producers are criticised for contributing to climate change, and there are allegations that glyphosate, which is used to control weeds, is linked to cancer.

There are also many who have rightly appreciated farmers, even before the pandemic, as shown by the overwhelming success of the "Thank a Farmer Wall," which has been present at the Perth Royal Show for the past two years. The wall exceeded all expectations, attracting thousands of handwritten notes of appreciation.

If the Show goes ahead this year — and signs are very positive — that wall will reappear.

In the meantime the Royal Agricultural Society of WA has launched its "Thank a Farmer" campaign on social media, enabling West Australians to show their appreciation right now.

This campaign calls on the public to acknowledge farmers they know, or farmers in general, by posting a story, picture or message of thanks on its social media platforms, including the Perth Royal Show Facebook site. Comments are starting to flow.

RASWA says it's launching the campaign now to acknowledge farmers for their hard work, particularly when having a quality, reliable fresh food source is critical to sustaining consumer confidence and given the fallout from the row with China.

We can't as consumers replace farmers' lost barley markets, but we can spare a thought for what they do and show some appreciation. Thanking them won't pay the bills, but it does show that we care.

Suddenly, getting to the office has become complicated

GARY MARTIN

As the COVID-19 lockdown eases and workers begin to make their way back into the office, a dilemma looms for many commuters: how to get safely to and from work.

For decades, thousands upon thousands of us have used public transport — trains, buses and ferries — to make our way into the office.

But given it is fiendishly complicated for public transit authorities to comply with social-distancing regimes, particularly during peak periods, nervous commuters are likely to abandon public transport faster than a runaway train.

It is not just the thought of navigating crowds on the station platform or in the bus queue that has commuters running for cover.

Staggered daily start and finishing times . . . hold some promise.

Once aboard, there is the prospect of being squeezed shoulder to shoulder into a crowded train carriage, holding on to handrails that have been touched by others, or sitting on seats that others' body parts have come into contact with.

Sure, limiting the number of passengers is a possibility.

But half-filled trains or buses will only slow the overall movement of passengers from point A to B and aggravate commuters as their 30-minute journey becomes a 60-minute ordeal.

Yes, we can take trains and buses offline for regular deep cleaning between trips but that is not practical and fewer trains and buses in service means delays, too.

With the problems of using public transport during peak times threatening a safe return to work, many in the community, including bosses, are being challenged to find solutions that ensure workers can travel to their jobs without putting themselves or others at risk. The alternatives emerging are many and varied and include easing passenger loads during peak periods along with options not involving public transport at all.

Within the foreseeable future — or until a vaccine for COVID-19 is discovered — public transport can continue to be a viable option but only if we reimagine the working day

and week. Staggered daily start and finishing times and splitting teams into Sunday-to-Wednesday or Tuesday-to-Saturday shifts hold some promise when it comes to stretching passenger loads over longer periods of time.

There is also the very real possibility that many will stop using trains, buses and ferries and make greater use of their cars, motorbikes and scooters to get to the office.

Of course, the more vehicles on the road during peak times, the greater the congestion and the greater the commute time.

Many experts go as far as to suggest that sales of used cars and cheaper new and smaller vehicles will rebound as many workers increasingly worry about travelling on public transport and instead choose private vehicles as their safest travel option.

Some believe carpooling with a small number of colleagues represents a safer alternative to catching a crowded bus. It might even spark a recovery for the ride-sharing sector.

You could always get on your bike — particularly if local and State governments reallocate road space and establish "pop-up" bike lanes to encourage more cyclists to ride to work.

Some, though, will solve the problem by continuing to embrace their "corona commute", which consists of a journey from the breakfast table to the makeshift home office bunker to arrive on time for their first videoconference of every working day.

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