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T R A N S C R I P T

TRANSCRIPT OF SENATOR RICHARD COLBECK
ADDRESS TO CROPLIFE NATIONAL MEMBERS FORUM, CANBERRA
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E&OE.....

I'm very proud to be part of a government that has worked very hard to put into place some sensible legislation and regulations around agvet reform over the last 12 months - I think it's been a huge achievement for the government. In opposition, we saw through ideological influence the regulatory regime around agvet chemicals go too far. It wasn't a regulatory regime that was going to provide for sensible and easy access, in fact it was a regime that probably put us towards the back end of receiving a lot new actives in the market. We have to be at the leading edge.

We worked very hard over the last twelve months as a government to put our agricultural sector into a strong and positive place. Free trade agreements with South Korea, Japan and recently China really do open up enormous opportunity for agriculture in this country. So we need to have all the tools that we possibly can to be able to meet the agricultural challenges that are before us. Matthew [Matthew Cossey, Chief Executive Officer Croplife Australia] talked about some of those in his presentation about the demands on the globe's food supply chain - we really need to be at the leading edge.

Over recent years we've seen a bit of a falloff in productivity. We need to turn that around and we need to grow our productivity. We need to have access to all the tools that we possibly can to make that achievable. So, reforming the agvet chemicals to remove the unnecessary regulatory process is one of the key commitments we took to the last federal election. We think that's saved the industry about \$1.3 million a year. We do have a significant deregulation framework and are working very hard to achieve that.

I think we do need to undertake further reform and industry will play a very important role in that process. I have to say it's been a pleasure to work with Matthew - he's factually based and provides good information. That's very important when you've got someone representing your industry up on the hill. Good clean information is the most valuable commodity for a person in my position and after a few years in the place you get to see through when it's not. So having your information is really valuable for us and we genuinely want to be able to make available the actives that will work for industry at the best possible price.

I put a challenge on the table for industry a couple of years ago around the registration process and I'd be interested to see where you're at with that at some point Matthew. There's obviously some further work that we can do and that's been mentioned in our deregulation process - we'll continue to do that.

Matthew mentioned the funds that we've put on the table for minor use and that has been an issue as long as I've been in Parliament and probably longer, I've got some good friends who are in the ag chemical sector who continue to talk to me about it. The agricultural industry spends a significant amount of money themselves on getting registration for minor use permits. I think the budget from AusVeg for example is somewhere around three quarters of a million dollars a year that they invest from their R&D money into the registration of chemicals for minor use permits – it's a significant amount of money.

So we've put up \$8 million over four years to work towards that. We're not unfortunately going to be able to replicate what happens in the United States, but we continue to work on the regulatory process to try and reduce costs so that actives can become available to industry more readily and reduce costs – I think that's a really important part of what we do.

The cost of the government to business is something that many of us have talked about for a long time and we continue to apply that pressure through our departments. We have a very ambitious goal for cost reduction through the department of agriculture, I'm not sure whether it's actually achievable but the target is there and we've got a lot of work to do to work towards it.

The interaction of organics with particularly GM is something that this country really is going to have to grasp very soon. We've obviously been through processes and continue to go through processes in Western Australia, but the capacity of farmers to work side by side using different farming techniques is one that will continue to create some frictions. However it's not as if an organic farmer is the only one who has something coming over his or her fence. I know of examples where farming techniques of an organic farmer can have an impact on the traditional farmer, where the effect can come back the other way. This is not a one way street and it shouldn't be seen as that, although the organic sector quite often put themselves up as the victim. It can work both ways and it needs to be recognised as such. There needs to be an understanding of how the two can work together and the work that's been done around the organic standard I think is one that is very important.

In respect of GM, I'm now on the public record at estimates earlier this year saying that I don't know a scientific institute in the world that doesn't support the concept of GM. I'm not being challenged on it by anyone in the Opposition or from the Greens. If we're going to meet that food task that we talk about, if we're going to provide product into the market, then we're going to have to embrace that technology. One of the classic examples would be that of Golden Rice, where an ideological opposition to GM is seeing millions of children lose their eyesight from vitamin A deficiency. Millions of children lose their eyesight and some are dying. I don't see how we can sit by and allow that to happen.

It's going to require significant leadership to actually start to put that message around because what we're talking about is science versus emotion. I think we've all seen plenty of examples of how powerful emotion is in the argument between science and the emotional argument. I can think of plenty of situations that I've been involved in myself in the last couple of years that have had nothing to do specifically with agriculture but there are plenty of examples of that. It's going to take some real leadership, not just at a national or a local level, but international to turn that around.

I was talking to a significant scientist recently about it, who's working very hard on particularly the Golden Rice campaign, and it's a real challenge. Some of the complete voodoo that is put out there around GM to try and frighten people out of taking it up and utilising it is very concerning, but the reality is that we're going to have to. You only need to look at the crop of cotton here in Australia to see the significant improvement that's been able to be achieved in the use of agvet chemicals by the take-up of that technology; the benefits for the environment, the benefits for the crop, and the benefits for the farming community by utilising that.

We don't seem to hear anything too much about cotton as a GM crop in Australia, it tends to more focus on food products. But I wonder how many people really understand that when they're utilising cotton seed in Australia where it is derived from. It think it's really important.

There have been a number of reports conducted through the Senate, particularly the Senate Rural and Regional Affairs committee, over the last few years around the role of bees in the food task. I think it's something like 65 per cent of Australia's horticulture is pollinated by wild bees. So to see the wild bee population drop off would be an absolute disaster for horticulture here in Australia, so the concerns around protection from things like varroa mite, but also the recent concerns that have been raised around neonics particularly out of Europe.

To be proactive and working with the Australian honeybee industry council, you should be congratulated for that initiative. They have raised concerns with us as members as parliament, both in opposition and in government, and to be proactive and out there getting some good work with industry

should be recognised. Understanding the relationships between crops and honey collection, that's really important piece of work I think, so that you don't have that conflict working between your sector and the honey industry. Not only is it important as a production industry, but it provides a significant service to the agriculture sector in this county. Maintaining that relationship is very important.

As I mentioned, we're working extremely hard to ensure that we can build and maintain agriculture as one of the five pillars of the economy. That's one of the commitments that has been made to the sector at the last election. I mentioned the free trade agreements with South Korea, Japan, and now China – it was very pleasing to hear the Prime Minister of Australia and Prime Minister of India last week talking about a potential free trade agreement. That provides enormous opportunity also. As well as the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom talking about the potential for a free trade agreement with the EU.

I think we're in a situation where we really can be providing high quality product, based on a sensible regulatory process, into some of the biggest growing markets in the world. To do that we need to ensure that we have all the tools available, agvet chemicals, access to science, and innovation.

CropLife and its members play a significant role in that, so I look forward to working with you all and my colleague Barnaby who has a huge passion for this sector, a huge passion to ensure that farmers make a decent profit beyond the farm gate. We look forward to working with you in the future, and it's a pleasure to be here today to officially open the conference, thanks very much.