The converging insecurities of food, water, energy and climate, and their implications for 21st Century farming systems

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IFSA Berlin, 2 April 2014
Personal declarations

- **Farming background south-eastern Australia**
  - Family farming in the district since 1860s, own farm managed since 1987
  - 450ha: 30% farm forestry, 10% environmental reserves, 60% leased for sheep

- **Studied forestry and rural sociology (Melbourne)**

- **Extension Officer/Project Manager 1982-88**

- **National Landcare Facilitator ‘89-92**

- **Studied Agricultural Knowledge Systems (Wageningen) 92-3**

- **Environment Policy Executive 1995-2000**

- **CEO, Research funding authority 2000-06**

- **Private Consultancy (strategy & policy) 2007-10**

- **Academic, Charles Darwin University 2011—**
Key Points

- Food, water, land and energy are intricately interconnected
- Long-term security concerns, amplified by climate change, affect all
- These ‘converging insecurities’ interact and compound each other
- The world needs to improve food production, distribution & consumption, but not by enlarging the agricultural footprint
- Farming systems will be key determinants of human quality of life
- There is no ‘magic bullet’, but some key elements of farming system design
- Farming systems must be nested within much better integrated approaches to food, water and energy than we’ve ever tried before
- This poses major challenges for farming systems policy, research, extension, education and human resources
The climate is changing...

Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability

IN JUST 90 DAYS: 123 RECORDS BROKEN THROUGHOUT AUSTRALIA

HERE ARE JUST 24 OF THE 123 RECORDS FROM SUMMER 2012/2013

HOTTEST DAY ON RECORD FOR AUSTRALIA AS A WHOLE

7 DAYS IN A ROW OVER 39°C FOR AUSTRALIA AS A WHOLE

The Mary River, Northern Australia
floodplains affected by rising sea levels

Extensive melaleuca dieback as the system gets saltier
18cm sea level rise over last 20 years
Water availability per capita is declining

- Each calorie takes one litre of water to produce, on average
- In terms of water resources, all the world’s major irrigated food producing basins are effectively ‘closed’ or already over-committed

IWMI Comprehensive Assessment of Water Management In Agriculture
http://www.iwmi.cgiar.org/assessment/
• FAO assessed trends in land condition (measured by Net Primary Productivity) from 1981-2004

• Land degradation is increasing in severity and extent:
  – >20 percent of all cultivated areas
  – >30 percent of forests
  – >10 percent of grasslands

• 1.5 billion people depend directly on land that is degrading

• Land degradation is cumulative.
  – Limited overlap between 24% of the land surface identified as degraded now and the 15% classified in 1991, because NPP has flatlined near zero in degraded areas

The world needs more food

• The world needs to increase food production by up to 70% by 2050, & improve distribution — diet is the key driver

• We have done this in the past, mainly through clearing, cultivating and irrigating more land, + intensification and better varieties

• Climate change and oil depletion is narrowing those options, with limits to water, land, energy & nutrients. We need to grow food:
  — Using less land, water & energy and emitting less carbon
  — Using nutrients more efficiently
  — Improving nutrition, distribution, animal welfare
  — Looking after rural landscapes, biodiversity, amenity & communities

• We also need to look at demand-side solutions
Converging Insecurities

- **Climate change**
  - Direct impacts
  - Impacts of climate change policies – e.g. carbon markets

- **Energy**
  - the era of cheap, easily extracted fossil fuels is ending

- **Water**
  - Every calorie we consume uses one litre in its production
  - Every litre weighs one kilogram
  - Per capita freshwater availability declining steeply

- **Food** — increase world production up to 70% by 2050
  - Using less land, water, fossil energy and nutrients
Profound technical challenges

1. To decouple economic growth from carbon emissions
2. To adapt to an increasingly difficult climate
3. To increase water productivity
   — decoupling the 1 litre per calorie relationship
4. To increase energy productivity
   — more food energy out per unit of energy in
   — while shifting from fossil fuels to renewable energy
5. To develop more sustainable food systems
   — in competition for land and water with the resources & energy sectors
   — while conserving biodiversity and
   — improving landscape amenity, soil health, animal welfare & human health
6. TO DO ALL OF THE ABOVE SIMULTANEOUSLY!
   — improving sustainability and resilience
Scales for response to climate change

• Many of the main drivers of biodiversity loss operate at the landscape-scale, e.g., habitat fragmentation, invasive species, and changed fire regimes.

Adaptation options change from autonomous and incremental to planned and transformational.

Today’s decisions must account for how long their effects will be felt.

CSIRO 2010
We need a third agricultural revolution — policy elements

**Set high level goals for agriculture by 2030:** e.g.

- doubling water, energy and nutrient productivity
- becoming a net carbon sink
- becoming a net energy producer (from renewables)

**Reposition** agriculture as integral to the food, health, energy and water systems

**Re-engage** urban populations with ag and food systems

**Rebrand** agriculture as sexy, ‘new economy’

All of the above will require a new breed of professionals
Policy
- time for new alliances & perspectives

- Healthy farms, healthy landscapes, healthy food, healthy people & healthy communities are interconnected

- We are not used to seeing farming systems connected to health systems

- This needs to change
  - in research, in assembling the evidence base, in policy and in leadership

Source: Tyrchniewicz and McDonald (2007)
We need a third agricultural revolution — technical elements

- Closed loop farming systems (water, energy, nutrients, carbon)
- Smart metering, sensing, telemetry, robotics, guidance
- Better understanding of soil carbon & microbial activity
- Radically reducing waste in all parts of the food chain
- Integrated production of food, fibre, energy and carbon offsets
- Farming systems producing renewable bioenergy (2nd generation)
2\textsuperscript{nd} Generation lignocellulosic biofuels

Developing an efficient supply chain for woody energy crops via mallee eucalypts integrated into wheatbelt farming systems. Trees harvested on a 5 year rotation, coppice regeneration, integrated processing plant can produce electricity, transport fuels, activated charcoal and essential oils (natural solvents).
Biocarbon/energy integrated into farming systems vs replacing them

- Mallees occupy 8-10% of farm area
- Minimal food production trade-off
- 48 x more energetically efficient than corn ethanol
- 300-550mm rainfall zone
  — minimal water yield loss and low opportunity cost
- Co-benefits for salinity, erosion control and biodiversity
We need a third agricultural revolution — technical elements

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  — IDEA: a ‘beyond oil’ tractor drivetrain?
• Urban food production, recycling urban waste water & nutrients
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- Detailed product specification and labelling
- **More accountable agriculture** generating better returns to farmers
Sustainable Intensification

- A valid objective, but we can’t intensify everywhere
- We can manage some landscapes more intensively, but others need to be managed more extensively, and/or for other goods and services
- Need clear criteria on where to intensify:
  - e.g. soils, water, infrastructure, proximity to markets
- Within the context of regional land use and watershed management plans
• How can this all ‘fit’ at a landscape and regional scale?

• The landscape needs to be re-plumbed, re-wired and re-clothed

• We need new planning approaches that:
  – are robust under various climate change & demographic scenarios
  – improve resilience (e.g. flood performance & recovery, ensure habitat connectivity & buffering, protect refugia, don’t crowd coastlines)
  – reduce greenhouse gas emissions (energy, transport, food)
  – rethink transport networks (greener, tougher, smarter)
  – safeguard productive soil and allow for intensification where appropriate
  – facilitate recycling of water, nutrients and energy

* Leading, educating and bringing the community on board
Regions around cities are fertile ground for farming systems innovation

- Cities suck in water, energy and nutrients from their hinterland
- Much of which becomes waste
- Replumbing, rewiring and recladding is required on a massive scale
- Cities also attract people, and are part of the sustainability solution, not the problem
- Agriculture should see cities as allies and opportunities
Sustainability and Resilience

• Complementary concepts
• Sustainability remains relevant and desirable
  – Living within our means
  – Thinking long term (inter-generational equity)
  – Distinguishing between depletable and renewable resources
  – Avoiding or limiting actions that degrade, pollute, over-use or compromise ecosystem function

• **BUT:** Sustainability is less instructive around:
  – Social and cultural dimensions
  – Operating in contexts with inherent variability
The capacity of a system to absorb shocks, reorganise and retain the same functions
- As resilience declines, it takes a progressively smaller shock to push a system across a threshold

Adds value in explicitly embracing change and variability

Introduces the useful concept of thresholds or tipping points

Explicitly embraces scale
- Resilience at a given scale requires an understanding of at least one scale up & one scale down
Factors affecting resilience*

- Diversity: biological, economic (e.g. energy sources), social
- Modularity (connectedness, engagement)
- Tightness of feedbacks
- Openness – immigration, inflows, outflows
- Reserves and other reservoirs (e.g. seedbanks, nutrient pools, soil moisture, memory, knowledge, young people)
- Overlapping institutions
- Polycentric governance & leadership
- **Useful diagnostics for farming systems analysis?**

The integration imperative

• Managing whole landscapes
  – “where nature meets culture” (Simon Schama)
  – beyond ‘ecological apartheid’
  – landscapes are socially constructed
  – Improving farming systems = people management
  – engage values, perceptions, aspirations, behaviour

• Integration
  - across issues — e.g climate, energy, water, food, biodiversity
  - across scales — industries, agencies, governments, timeframes
  - across the triple helix — landscapes, lifestyles & livelihoods
Farm Sustainability dashboard
Murrumbidgee Irrigation System

- MI is a farmer-owned bulk water distributor and seller
  - $1B GVAP, and $7B value-add of food, wine and fibre production
- 100 year old irrigation & drainage network being modernised
  - Replacing ‘leaky’, gravity-fed open earthen channels
  - Piping and pressurisation will treble energy consumption
  - And hence greenhouse gas emissions
- Options:
  - Biomass energy plant - 0.5m tonnes p.a. of ag & food process waste
  - Solar thermal power plant on linear easements (C price-dependent)
  - Conversion to biodiesel
  - Carbon offsets through large scale tree planting
- **Turning a water company into a water, energy & carbon company**
  - Liberating opportunities through a more integrated approach
Irrigation System sustainability dashboard
Governance

“How society shares power, benefit and risk”

• Vertical and horizontal distribution of benefits, costs and risks, in space and time
• Need to honour the past and respect local values, without being tied by them
• Lowest common denominator consensus rarely makes big advances
• Local institutions are essential, but not sufficient
• As everything becomes more interconnected, better governance becomes more vital, and more difficult
Our agricultural innovation system is so last Century...

- **Big challenges for agriculture:** climate, water, food, energy, land use planning, biosecurity, social license

- **All cross-sectoral, with strong public-good dimensions**

- Yet our innovation architecture is overwhelmingly commodity-based, production-focused, farm-based, agri-centric, with at best modest incentives for public-good, system-level innovation

- Innovation system architecture for the 21st Century needs a more integrated approach to research, technology development, extension, education, marketing and governance
Implications for knowledge needs
(through the Cynefin* lens)

- Climate change spans all of these domains
- If temp increase > 2°C, then disorder & chaos will dominate
- The challenge is to handle the necessary range of responses
  - to work across these domains
  - to develop system-wide perspectives
  - & the associated knowledge systems and learning strategies to enable and support systemic analysis and response

* David Snowden & Mary Boone (2007)
“Leader's Framework for Decision Making” Harvard Business Review
# Farming Systems Research Priorities

We need a bigger share of Research spend on:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>blue sky</th>
<th>Metrics</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• e.g. energy, closing waste loops, ICT, public good GM, web-based societal learning systems</td>
<td>• e.g. C, H2O, energy, nutrients for accountable agriculture</td>
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<th>Farming system risk and resilience</th>
<th>cross-sectoral</th>
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<tr>
<td>• biosecurity</td>
<td>• agriculture/health system links</td>
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<td>• extreme events</td>
<td>• urban and peri-urban agriculture (shorter supply chains)</td>
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<td>• energy shocks</td>
<td>• regional planning (spatial optimisation food, water, carbon, energy)</td>
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<td>• mass migration of people</td>
<td>• social acceptance of agriculture</td>
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Extension needs a fundamental rethink

- The quickest way to double productivity is to narrow the gap between the average & the best farmers
  - and to shorten the long tail in most sectors

- Traditionally we’ve done this through extension and education
  - But many governments have cut extension

- Private sector can sell products, but not set up for cross-industry, regional scale or public good extension (or newcomers to farming)

- **Web 2.0 and 3.0 a major opportunity** complementing face to face

- Extension (non-coercive, information-based intervention) is rarely used in an integrated way with other policy instruments (e.g. planning, regulatory, pricing, taxing, financing, property rights)
Rebranding Agriculture and Farming

• Agriculture and Farming are tired and faded brands
  – negative connotations in terms of profitability, lifestyle, ‘old economy’, environmental damage and animal welfare
  – often judged by worst practice

• We have to re-think, re-tool, re-skill and re-brand

• Agriculture must be seen as core to the food system, the health system and the energy system
  – with a new story around human health, nutrition, carbon, water, energy, biodiversity and human survival

• Make farming systems sexy & relevant
Food, water, land, energy and health are interconnected
Climate change intensifies interactions, trade-offs and risks
Farming systems are central to the future of humanity
Farming systems need to be nested within more integrated approaches to food, water, energy and human health
Innovation is required across a broader canvas than the current institutional architecture is delivering
Smarter Planning, R&D, Extension and Education are needed
This presents extraordinary challenges and opportunities for farming systems professionals, & professional bodies like IFSA
GO FOR IT!
For more information

e.g. Paddock to Plate
Managing Australian Soils
Managing Australian Landscapes in a Changing Climate
Powerful Choices
The Getting of Knowledge