

Water and Soils

John Brisbin: Ideas for Mareeba Shire.



The foundation of our Shire's prosperity is the water and soils that we are entrusted with. We are a proudly agricultural region, and personally I hope that will remain the case for generations to come.

Farming is an almost miraculous balance of art and science, hard work and sheer luck, persistence and flexibility. To be a farmer is to take on an immense tradition stretching back hundreds of generations, and yet it also demands keeping a keen eye toward the future.

Perhaps because I am so keen on good food, farming has been a fascination of mine. I have read enthusiastically, planted out a garden here and there, and tried to learn about the evolution of agriculture from its early roots right through to the modern practices. It is an incredible story. Here in Mareeba Shire, the story is particularly fascinating.

Looking back to see the future

With few exceptions, the naturally-occurring soils in our region were classed as poor to marginal by early farmers. Unlike the deep, rich earths further south on the Tablelands, Mareeba's soils are shallower and less fertile. The Chinese market gardeners who cultivated produce for the miners in the late 1800's were able to make a reasonable go of it at small scale, but serious farmers aimed for land further south on the Tablelands.

Tobacco growers formed the first major agricultural sector from the early 30's. Out on good water at Granite Creek were 5-10 acres developments of Tony Plozzi, Jerry Healy, the Rogers, the Barrons, Mr and Mrs Giovanni Paliotta, and the Fiorenzo family. Likewise, stretching toward Bibohra and along Emerald Creek, the early settlers were converting from cattle and mixed produce to tobacco thanks to government promotion and the promise of a cash income.

Tobacco is an especially forgiving plant, although it is a tough crop to farm. The relatively poor, but well-drained soils around Mareeba gave pioneering families a chance to cultivate a cash crop.

Water was always the limiting factor. Unlike the coastal country which could reliably support sugar cane, or the Atherton region where rain was plentiful, the Mareeba district's marginal soils needed more water to flourish. At the end of the Second World War Mareeba saw a massive influx of Italian, Spanish, and other European refugees in search of a new life. Pushed along by the need for

economic opportunity, the Queensland Government approved the Tinaroo Irrigation Scheme in 1952 which resulted in the Tinaroo dam being built and the Mareeba-Dimbulah Irrigation Area (MDIA) receiving reliable water starting in 1958.

Tobacco cultivation skyrocketed and the local economy rode the golden leaf. By 1995, 60% of Australia's tobacco crop was grown by the small farmers of the MDIA but change was about to sweep through the industry. Deregulation meant that Australian farmers could no longer compete for large supply contracts, and health concerns led to a shift in traditional consumption.

How did Mareeba farmers respond to this fundamental challenge to their profit-making status quo? They diversified. They transitioned. They made a big leap and landed on an even better future.

The past 30 years

The transition out of tobacco also coincided with a generational change for many of the pioneering farmers. New blood took on the task of setting up properties for coffee, mango, lime, banana, papaya, and cane.

Blocks were aggregated, finance flowed in, and a new crop of farmers began to take Mareeba forward. People like John Magro, the Nastasi's, Srhoj's, Anthony Carusi, and Bruno Maloberti were instrumental in trialling, testing, and taking the hard knocks to get new crops and markets established.

There were mis-steps along the way, of course...that's the nature of exploring the unknown. Rice was a failure, peanuts have yet to hit their full stride, and pineapples remain very specialised. Ti Tree is a good example of how investment schemes and tax policy can create speculative bubbles that ruin the lives of hard-working farming families.

There have been wider changes in the world as well. More scientific understanding of the impacts of fertilisers and pesticides has led to a change in the way farmers operate. Urban consumers are demanding more focus on sustainability at the same time that global trade puts unrelenting pressure on profits and drives farmers to operate on the thinnest margins. And the region has developed up around a relatively low cost on water.

The low cost of water made it easy for agricultural development to get established, but it also meant many farmers had no incentive to spend big on water conservation arrangements, efficient irrigation, or long-term soil development aimed at water retention. With the increasing price of water now, farmers are realising they have a capital liability looming to get their aging irrigation systems up to best-practice standard.

The shift to highly-mechanised industrial agriculture has also brought mixed results. Big corporate operations are impressive when they succeed. On the one hand, there have been huge gains in the tonnage of crops produced. The value at farm gate has never been higher and is continuing to climb. However, it is also true that this approach to cultivation is very different to small family farms.

For farmers trying to get big, farm debt can be a problem. Costly inputs are required to maintain the high production levels. And many farmers are left asking the question: "Is it all really worth it? Am I really better off now than I was a decade ago?"



Where are we headed?

One thing that has held steady over this time is the commitment of local people to grow a liveable future. Agriculture in our region has grown remarkably. What will be the new opportunities that attract investment and secure opportunities for the next generations of farmers?

There are so many factors that we have little control over, including international politics, terms of trade, environmental pressures, climate change and variable weather patterns. In this sense, we are like every other agricultural district. The question is, what can we do to that might help shape our future? What can we do to take a bit of control over our destiny?

I think the first step is the hardest. We have to agree that there is benefit in working on this challenge **together**. That means putting aside some of our traditional mistrust of the farmer on the next ridge. It means re-learning the valuable lessons of cooperatives and collectives that served earlier generations so well. And it means being confident talking about our shared future.

As we cultivate a sense of connection between one another, we will find it easier and more natural to focus on how collaboration can help us all reach our individual goals. For example, dealing with pests and weeds is a difficult and expensive part of a land manager's business. But these problems are rarely contained at the fenceline. To be really effective, programs should be undertaken on a subcatchment or regional scale, and that requires trust, good will, and a lot of determination to cooperate rather than compete.

Consumers are demanding higher levels of environmental and social performance from primary producers. Again, these expectations are much more practical to address at a regional level than on a farm by farm basis. Sub-standard performers who put the industry in a bad light can bring the whole sector down and destroy significant brand value.

What I see in the MDIA is another generational change underway. Fresh faces are working hard to gain a foothold in a tough business. I see this as the perfect time to shift gears, make some bold commitments to transform our region's farming culture, and encourage the people who are going to take this region to new levels of prosperity.

Choosing our opportunities

Farmers in this Shire have never had it easy. As a result, they have become tough, resourceful, and well-prepared to take on new challenges. What if we used this capacity to advantage?

- Instead of looking for cheap, “unlimited” water security, what about accepting the natural limits of water security and building the industry around a goal of being the most water efficient farmers in the tropics?
- Instead of relying on costly external pesticides and fertilisers, what about supporting home-grown bio-nutrients and innovative strategies to reduce pest damage through crop rotations, mixed species, and bio-controls?
- Instead of focussing on monocrops, automation, and production volume, what about focussing on quality, achieving better yields through the beneficial relationships that develop in mixed crops of produce, delivering higher levels of resilience and ecosystem health?

The farmers who choose to cultivate these innovations and skills will be growing true prosperity for themselves, their families, and communities. Their new skills will be in demand across tropical Australia, and in similar localities around the world. Moving this way will open new markets and will help secure a social license to operate. It will be a slower and more tentative process, but it will build far deeper resilience than “grow fast, get big” schemes.

The alternative path is to rely on overly simplistic, mechanical models of farming have proven to be less successful over the long term, especially when buffeted by unpredictable external forces like markets, climate, and competition. Farmers who focus on patience, self-sufficiency, cooperation, and adaptability are going to be more content and more successful over the longer term.

Our region is already blessed with a fantastic range of innovators and leaders in biological farming, small-scale agritech, boutique marketing networks, and deep experience with cooperative governance. We could choose to take advantage of this talent, celebrate it, and gently nudge the whole sector toward a more clever and resilient pathway into the future.

The starting point is agreeing on a shared story. I’m putting my hand up to help craft that story and support it as other voices join in and take it forward.



Summary: My positions

Here are some indications of how I stand. This is where I start from, but it will not be where I finish. Every decision Councillors make is based on the specific situation and circumstances. This is the role of a good Councillor: to weigh up the various considerations, discuss, and reach the best possible decision in each situation. And then be accountable for that decision.

1: Water is life: respect it everywhere

Mareeba people could become famous for their deep respect and care for water. That would be such an honorable and sensible achievement.

I am in favour of initiatives that clean up our waterways, celebrate the commercial and cultural significance of water, and promote innovative ways to improve the quality and availability of water for all.

2: Protection of agricultural soils is important

Soils are a natural and a cultivated resource. They cannot be created in haste, nor can they be replaced easily. Soils are the powerhouses of agricultural and environmental abundance.

For this reason they should be treated with a great deal of respect. I do not favour suburban development on good agricultural soils. There is plenty of land with poor soils and good views. Wherever possible, I will encourage development that safeguards and supports agricultural soils.

3: Cultivating true water security will benefit everyone

We need access to sufficient water for the towns and the farms to thrive. However, I do not favour massive capital expenditure to underwrite water-hungry production.

We can learn to do so much more with so much less: and that is a lesson worth investing in. I would strongly support innovations and strategies to maximise farm profitability while reducing risks through a more disciplined and cautious attitude toward consumptive water use.

4: Local priorities will grow local communities

I favour initiatives that will encourage local producers to serve the local communities. For now, export income is the mainstay of our regional economy. While this offers significant wealth to some of our growers, it also exposes our region to external forces, and thus makes us less resilient.

The more products, services, and currency we can circulate locally, the better off we will all be over the long term.

5. Farming for the next century is a shared project

I am eager to help Mareeba become a leader in transitioning to more biological, regenerative, and sustainable farming practices.

6: Ecosystems and production systems share the same heart

My view is that we can approach all country with the same respect, gratitude, and sense of responsibility. Some country is developed for agriculture: it feeds us. Other country keeps the complex living world in balance. We can be dealing with all country on the basis of love, same as we have for all members of our families, regardless of their roles.

In this way, there is no difference between how we approach farm land, recreation reserves, or conservation parks. I believe that when we take care of country, it takes care of us.

Online version: <http://brisbin4mareeba.solutions/ideas/water-and-soils/>

To the extent that this material constitutes a political message, it is authorised by:

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