

Farmers have power to lead climate action

Professor Lesley Hughes 9 Aug 2016, 4:10 p.m.

WHEN I visit towns and rural communities across Australia, I'm always struck by the ingenuity and innovation with which farmers are adapting to climate change.



Farmers are the ultimate custodians of our land and whether it's changing sowing and harvesting dates or switching to more heat-tolerant breeds of livestock or new varieties of crops, they are already adapting to the impacts of climate change.

But as the climate continues to change, adaptation will become increasingly challenging. Climate change is worsening extreme weather events such as bushfires and drought and rural and regional communities will continue to be disproportionately affected.

Many agricultural businesses surveyed have used financial reserves and or have taken on increased debt in response to extreme weather events. Australia's agricultural sector is showing signs of decreasing capacity and faltering productivity gains and the resilience of some rural industries is under threat.

Rural and regional communities have already seen a significant reduction in population that has prompted further losses in services and unemployment. Climate change will further exacerbate these stresses.

The positive news is that tackling climate change provides an unrivalled opportunity to attract jobs and investment back to regional and rural areas.

As the Climate Council's new report *On the Frontline: Climate Change and Rural Communities* outlines, the transition away from coal towards renewable energy will create many opportunities for these communities.

In Australia, rural areas receive around 30-40% of the total investment in renewables, valued at \$1-2 billion per year. Community funds and additional rate revenue for rural and regional areas from renewable energy can be used to improve public services such as schools and local infrastructure.

Renewable energy projects also bring jobs and investment into rural and regional communities. Delivering half of our electricity from renewable sources by 2050 would create more than 28,000 jobs nationally.

Farmers can also build the climate-resilience of their farms by adding additional revenue streams, such as by hosting wind turbines and other renewable energy projects. Across Australia, about \$18.7 million is paid annually in lease payments to farmers and landholders hosting wind turbines.

Renewable energy can reduce electricity costs for rural and remote communities, who traditionally pay much higher prices than their urban counterparts. It also offers independence from the grid with several towns now racing to be the first to operate on 100% renewable energy.

Rural and regional communities are living on the frontline of impacts of worsening extreme weather but they are also on the frontline of the solutions.

The new projects in renewable power provides enormous opportunities for new income streams and real prospects for energy self-sufficiency, particularly for those in the bush.

People in the bush look after themselves and each other and they're already getting on with the job in adapting practices and implementing solutions for climate change.

Now it's time for our political leaders to match their effort and take the action we need to tackle climate change.

Professor Lesley Hughes is an ecologist and councillor with the Climate Council.

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