

Community engagement the key to future food choices



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Rapidly changing consumer preferences are changing the way food is produced and widespread community engagement to gauge attitudes towards farming practices will become commonplace in Australia.

That was the scenario painted by Rowan McMonnies, Managing Director at Australian Eggs, at the Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics (ABARES) Outlook conference today.

With the agricultural sector booming, Mr McMonnies said most Australians would agree farmers feed the nation high quality and affordable fresh food and make a significant contribution to the economy. But all industries have impacts and engaging with the full gamut of community attitudes needs to become the new normal.

"The egg industry was given a reminder on the importance of community engagement during the recent public consultation period on the new animal welfare standards and guidelines for poultry," Mr McMonnies said.

"In response to this dynamic, Australian Eggs recently committed to the Sustainable Agriculture Initiative Platform and is now exploring a number of new community engagement activities, including the development of a Sustainability Framework. We're playing catch-up on this and learning fast.

"The pure marketing questions about what consumers want on the supermarket shelf will still be highly relevant but without exploring why consumers value product attributes, farmers are at risk of being left behind.

"We've spoken to the CSIRO about leveraging their social and economic research program and we are testing how some of their models could work in an egg industry context.

"As a research and development corporation, Australian Eggs has an important role to play in both ensuring that consumers enjoy eating eggs

and that the industry has the support of the broader community.

"We are not pioneers but the case for exploring these dynamics is now crystal clear. Five years ago, most farmers thought anyone talking about community engagement in ag was a bit of a hippy. It's catching on now with some key supply chains taking the plunge and I really think in five years it'll be mandatory."

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