



Raising the Farmer Voice to Influence Policy

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Raising the Farmer Voice to Influence Policy

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Executive Summary

To raise the farmer voice to shape policy outcomes, effective advocacy is crucial. In a time of rising public scrutiny, rapid media cycles and increasing regulation, the need for clear, credible and proactive advocacy has never been more urgent. However, the current advocacy landscape in Australia is increasingly fragmented and has little influence in shaping policy for strong farmer outcomes. In order to ensure long term success, structures need to be rebuilt to become more modern, more inclusive, more proactive and more representative.

Through interviews with multiple stakeholders including growers, farmers unions, agribusiness, advocacy groups and policy makers, this report identifies opportunities to future-proof advocacy by learning from international approaches and local experience.

The strongest advocacy efforts observed globally were those built on three critical foundations: strong structures, strong voices and strong networks.

While policy landscapes differ, farmer influence is strongest when voices are unified, messages are clear, and advocacy is proactive rather than reactive. To succeed, farmer-led advocacy must move beyond crisis-driven responses and instead focus on shaping policy early, building political capital, and sharing genuine, compelling stories that resonate with both policy makers and the broader public.

The most effective advocacy groups are those that leverage their collective power, despite nuances, and unite around shared goals. Cohesion, collaboration and cooperation strengthens political voice and avoids the fragmentation that can weaken influence. Strategic messaging frameworks, shared campaigns, and constructive narratives are critical to advocacy success. Policy makers also value cooperation, not just opposition. Advocacy groups should position themselves as informed, solution-oriented partners.

The modern agricultural workforce and political landscape is diverse, and leadership within farmer-led advocacy groups must reflect that. Being inclusive and diverse in leadership and investing in succession and development ensures these groups remain relatable, credible and future-ready. Advocacy groups must also remain accountable to their members, and this is driven by strong governance, clear strategic direction and transparent communication to build trust and value.

Advocacy groups also need to be financially sustainable beyond opt-in membership structures. Diversifying revenue streams and member services while maintaining focus on core advocacy is essential. There is also an opportunity for agriculture to leverage the supply chain it supports to increase political influence. From agribusinesses to retailers, many stakeholders benefit from farm success and sound farm policy, so should be lending support, resources or political connections to amplify advocacy efforts, provided the farmer voice remains independent and credible.

In short, the future of farmer advocacy depends not just on defending agriculture but also on shaping its narrative, remaining proactive, and positioning farmer leaders as constructive, credible voices in the national conversation.

Keywords: policy, farmer voice, advocacy

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Foreword

I think it would be amiss to not mention that I initially began my Nuffield journey studying a different topic to the one this paper centres on. Initially, I had identified the challenges Australian farmers were facing with changing rainfall patterns and increased climate variability, so I brought forward a topic that focused on building climate resilience in rain-fed, continuous cropping operations.

I am a remote-based grain farmer from the South Coast of Western Australia with interests in data-driven decision-making, precision agriculture, agronomy and sustainability. I found it logical to want to explore arable operations globally to uncover innovative management strategies that could make Australian farmers more climate-resilient, productive and sustainable for generations to come.

However, as I began my Nuffield travels, I discovered that there were only a handful of regions globally where growers are trying to turn 250mm of growing season rainfall into grain, let alone in ancient sandy soils. In contrast, the implications of increased regulations along with policy driven by emotion rather than science were themes that wove themselves into nearly every conversation or visit. This recurring theme made me stop and reflect on not only the impact this was having on farming systems globally, but also what I was doing as a grower to navigate and shape this locally.

After undertaking travel to both Argentina and Zimbabwe, I was equally amazed as I was concerned by what I found. These countries hold such rich agricultural potential and were full of resilient, stoic, entrepreneurial farmers, but the systems and agricultural framework were almost dystopian type examples of what can arise when there is a disconnect or misalignment between farmers, social governments and the public. These eye-opening experiences led me to understand how important it is to be visible as farmers, maintain our social licence and be involved in shaping the policies that ultimately affect our operations.

Some omissions from the above passions are words like “policy”, “advocacy”, “lobbying” or “politics”, and I will confess that this hasn’t been an area I am extensively involved in. However, I do have a passion for farming and the long-term prosperity of regional and rural communities, and as an educated grower I felt the need to be informed, connected and influential in policy discussions. However, I found myself echoing the sentiments of the growers around me who feel the current organisations and groups in Australia don’t necessarily represent them or reflect their morals, and I found it difficult to know how best to leverage my time and engage with the policy making process. My peers and I also felt there was a lack of proactive advocacy, tied with limited transparency and consultation during the policy making process.

Fuelled by the desire to find modern and effective pathways for growers to be involved in policy discussions whilst remaining involved in their own operations, I pivoted to a new topic and embarked upon what has been a very challenging but ultimately rewarding experience of research, listening, reflection and learning. The benefit of a topic focused around policy and farmer involvement is that naturally anyone involved in farming to agribusiness to government has an opinion and is openly willing to share. The key is knowing how to remain open minded and wade through varying attitudes, beliefs and views to uncover common trends and crucial learnings that are applicable in a landscape that is as vast and unique as Australia.

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I won't apologise for the thoughts I share below, and I can promise that they are opinions, facts and viewpoints formed over extensive research, conversations and lived experiences across 18 months of travel, in 14 countries across four continents. I haven't created this document to undermine the extensive work lobby groups and farmer organisations have undertaken over the past century since their inception, but rather to identify any gaps to continue building on this work so farmers can remain connected, informed and influential for decades to come.

I urge you, the reader, to be open minded, recognise the issue and rise to the challenge of change because as growers and members of the agricultural industry in Australia, it's all our problem and we need to beat this together.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my sponsor, CSBP Fertilisers, for their generous support of my scholarship and the Nuffield program. I particularly appreciated their understanding and support in allowing me to change my topic, and their openness in discussions.

I also would like to thank the Nuffield Australia organisation whose hard work does not go unnoticed. So many Australian farmers are incredibly fortunate to be given the opportunity to undertake this once-in-a-lifetime experience, and I'm appreciative for the heavy lifting the team do behind the scenes to make it run smoothly.

Thank you to the wonderful individuals who helped me with information, conversations, or a warm bed and a home cooked meal along the way – there are far too many of you to name! Particular thanks need to go to the global 2024 Nuffield Scholar cohort, many of whom I have visited, called upon for contacts or just leant on, laughed with and sometimes cried to during this process. The friendships formed are so special, and I couldn't be more grateful to Nuffield for gifting me with such an incredible network of clever, forward-thinking people who have already had a profound impact on my life.

A special shout out and thank you also has to be extended to my GFP 5 cohort. I am honestly more grateful every time I reflect on our travels to have had a group of people that were as supportive, kind, fun, strong in their views and incredibly intelligent as you all were. I grew so much as a person in those five weeks and you were all the driving force behind that.

To my friends and family who were always there for me when I needed it, who listened to my stories, supported Brad whilst I was away and generally make my life better just by being in it – thank you.

And last but certainly not least, the biggest thanks has to go to my brilliant, supportive husband, Brad Egan. There is no doubt in my mind that this experience wouldn't have been half of what it has been without your support, understanding and patience. You kept the home fires burning, joined me on my travels, challenged my opinions, listened to hours of chat about policy, and met more strangers in the past 18 months than you probably wanted to in your whole lifetime. I cannot wait to pay back the favour when you decide to open your own Nuffield chapter.



Figure 1: Laura and Brad Egan on Nuffield travel in the UK (Source: Author).

Abbreviations

| | |
|-----|---|
| CCA | Catchment Communities Aotearoa |
| EU | European Union |
| NFF | National Farmers Federation (Australia) |
| NFP | Not-for-Profit Organisation |
| NGO | Non-Government Organisation |
| SFO | State Farming Organisation |
| UK | United Kingdom |
| US | United States |

Objectives

The objectives of my research were to identify gaps and opportunities within the current advocacy framework in Australia to allow farmers to be more connected, informed and influential when it comes to shaping the policies that affect their businesses.

My aim was to:

- Understand what advocacy groups need to do to strengthen cohesion and collaboration between organisations and farmers, and to present a credible and aligned voice in policy debates.
- Understand how farmers and advocacy organisations can have more success in shaping positive policy outcomes through strategic, proactive advocacy and building relationships with policy makers.
- Determine how the agricultural industry can utilise powerful, relatable storytelling that resonates with consumers and politicians to shift public perception and ensure positive outcomes for farmers during the policy making process.
- Understand what drives successful lobbying and policy consultation, and how farmers can best place themselves to contribute to this in a meaningful and effective way.
- Determine ways that advocacy organisations can increase trust, value, and farmer participation through modernising engagement models, diversifying income streams, demonstrating a clear return on investment for members and adopting inclusive leadership and representation.

Introduction

Farming in Australia is becoming increasingly complex due to climate change, volatile global markets, geopolitical pressures, labour shortages, increased operational scale and tighter profit margins. This complexity is compounded by a growing administrative burden from stronger compliance, regulation, and reporting requirements, adding further pressure on already stretched farm businesses and owners.

While there has been a decline in grower numbers in Australia (DAFF, 2025), those who remain are some of the most innovative and resilient farmers in the world. Keeping these successful growers deeply involved in running their day-to-day operation remains paramount in ensuring efficient, profitable and sustainable production of world-class food and fibre.

However, the need for farmer representation, leadership and political involvement has never been higher, and new policies that have detrimental effects on the triple bottom line of Australian farmers are rapidly being introduced. The live sheep export ban, the lifting of the ban on importing US beef into Australia, and the 2021 Western Australia Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Act are all examples of policies that were politically driven rather than being driven by science, data and thorough stakeholder consultation. The implications of these policies are not only detrimental to the profitability of Australian farmers, but also contribute to industry decline and reduced rural populations and prosperity.

For time-constrained growers, it is reasonable that they focus their energy on the factors driving their business's success, such as adapting to evolving market demands or adopting new innovations, rather than engaging in an increasingly fragmented advocacy space, shaped by differing perspectives and interpersonal dynamics. Not only has the decline in farmer numbers been difficult for advocacy organisations, but the ongoing battle to demonstrate value has also led to a decrease in membership and revenue, placing further strain on their resources (Wilson, 2025).

Current industry conditions, challenges and opportunities

Australia is a unique, extensive and diverse landscape for agriculture, and our distinct challenges are seen in few other areas in the world. Some of the unique challenges that shape how our industry behaves and why successful lobbying and advocacy are difficult include:

- Low population density,
- Export focused trade,
- Increasing climate variability amongst thousands of unique agro-ecosystems,
- A subsidy-free system,
- A highly urbanised population,
- Small workforce numbers (2.2% of national employment) and contribution to GDP (2.4%) (DAFF, 2025), and
- Extensive physical distances to policy makers.

However, the industry also possesses unique strengths that enable us to play an influential and strategic role in shaping policy outcomes in meaningful ways. These opportunities include:

- An island location with a strong biosecurity focus and success,
- A well-respected brand internationally,
- Home to some of the most efficient farmers in the world (Hobson, 2025),
- Hold a high (90%) level of trust within the general population (Voconiq, 2021),
- Is the lifeblood of rural and regional communities, and contributes to other industries along the supply chain including transport, logistics, and retail, and
- Plays a critical role in environmental management, land stewardship, and Australia's climate response.

Why is advocacy and lobbying important for agriculture?

Australia's unique challenges including vast physical distances from policy makers and a subsidy-free system result in farmers tending to be less active in policy consultation. This is a serious issue as the agricultural industry is deeply affected by government decisions, particularly those regarding trade, land use, biosecurity and environmental policy.

Despite facing increasingly complex issues, Australian farmers have limited representation at decision-making tables compared to other better-resourced, urban-centric industries. Not only are growers time poor, but they represent a small portion of voters with minimal visibility at the government level when compared to sectors such as mining, finance or tech who invest heavily in lobbying and political donations and therefore have a greater influence (Wood & Griffiths, 2018).

Decisions made beyond the farm gate, both political and commercial, can profoundly impact farmers. Whilst many growers themselves are constrained by time, resources, and geographic isolation, without effective representation or coordinated support to engage in advocacy themselves, the viability of farm businesses is at risk.

The impact of farmer personalities on advocacy

Several Australian-based research studies have examined the personality traits of Australian farmers, providing important contextual insight into additional factors beyond those previously mentioned that influence the success of farmer-led lobbying and advocacy.

A study conducted by the University of Queensland in 2000 found that only five of the 14 personality styles commonly observed in the general population were present among the farmers surveyed. Some of the common, key traits within those five personality styles were:

- A capacity for hard work and perseverance,
- Decisiveness,
- Stoic with great capacity to cope with adversity, and

- Comfort with solitude or a small circle of friends.

While the above traits are advantageous for responding strategically to risk, adapting to isolation and undertaking decision-making (all essential traits for successful farming), they identify some issues for farmer-led advocacy.

From these results, it is inferred that most farmers would prefer one-on-one meetings rather than in large groups, and would prefer direct engagement with policy makers to feel their message is heard. For the introverted types, especially, they will quietly withdraw from initiatives they don't believe in and naturally prefer roles as contributors or members rather than spokespeople. Their stoic nature results in the ability to "get on with it" rather than reaching out for help, which is a challenge when it comes to advocacy. This was observed amongst successful farmers globally, whose proactive mindset resulted in them tending to accept forthcoming legislation, anticipate its impact and adapt accordingly, rather than spending valuable time and resources resisting or changing legislation.

Another similar survey performed by agronomist Cam Nicholson and psychologist Rod Strachan in 2019 discovered that farmers fell into four personality types based on Myer-Briggs Type Indicators. Of these four, 80% of farmers fell into just two types: "Sensing-Judging" or "Sensing-Perceiving". In essence, these are "practical types who like detail" (Glover, 2019). They tend to focus on the present and what is real and concrete, rather than the future or speculative theories and possibilities. They solve problems in a logical way, and while they value facts, they tend to trust their intuition, past experiences and local examples of success when learning. The "Sensing-Judging" types (55% of farmer population) value reliability and consistency, so tend not to rock the boat and protest, and if they don't like something then they are likely to not participate (Glover, 2019).

In essence, these inherent personality traits are what drive most growers to be hard working, adept at managing complex systems and able to respond to issues that are real, tangible and immediate. While this is important for practical problems and solutions, it can result in growers being less inclined to focus on future, theoretical long-term trends and projections. Issues that drive policy such as climate change, global markets, international trade or long-term sustainability, may not be met with the same enthusiasm because they are somewhat hypothetical and too disconnected from reality.

Advocacy groups and organisations need to make long-term trends relevant in the here and now to gain support from farmers. While most advocacy is focused on the future and how industries change, to gather more buy in from farmers, groups need to demonstrate how these changes will affect farming operations in the short term.

Nicholson & Strachan also discovered that while 80% of farmers fell into the two "Sensing" personality brackets (practical types), when compared to the general Australian population, these personality types only represent 55% of the broader population. This highlights the need to tailor advocacy initiatives for farmers separately from what may be successful for our urban-based counterparts.

The need for disruption

While there are challenges within the agricultural industry that are contributing to a decline in farmer presence in policy discussions, the industry also needs to navigate a rapidly changing social and political landscape externally.

Public perceptions of agriculture, along with other narratives and information, are increasingly shaped and conveyed via social media platforms. Recent research by the University of Canberra shows that 49% of Australians rely on social media as a source of news, with nearly 60% of Gen Z citing it as their primary news source (White, 2024). This is a staggering statistic given the high risk of misinformation, false narratives, and sensationalised coverage, underscoring the substantial influence social media has on consumer perceptions and industry visibility. Consequently, owning the narrative, engaging in genuine storytelling, and effectively connecting through social media have become critical, and are a challenge for both farmers and advocacy groups.

Australia's parliament has continued the trend of becoming more youthful, gender-balanced and culturally diverse, with historic milestones from the 2025 election including the election of the country's youngest-ever senator (aged 21 on election day), and more women being elected than ever before, representing 49.6% in the House of Representatives and Senate combined (Dhanji, Manfield & McGuirk, 2025). This move towards younger and more gender balanced leadership reflects broader demographic shifts in political representation, however, the governance of the State Farming Organisations (SFO) does not reflect this trend. The current gender split as an average across the governing boards of the seven organisations is 79% male, 21% female, with minimal age and cultural diversity observed (sourced from SFO official websites).

These changing social dynamics and growing disconnect urge the need for reflection on how the agricultural industry advocates for itself, and whose voices are heard in the process. To remain relevant and influential, there needs to be disruption to current management and approach of groups, with outcomes focused on connecting with an evolving and more diverse political and public landscape. There is both a need and an opportunity for advocacy organisations to be better positioned to respond to future advocacy and policy challenges, but to do this, we need structures to be rebuilt to become more modern, more inclusive, more proactive and more representative.

Chapter 1: What we need from our advocacy groups

Collaboration and cohesion

There is a need for stronger collaboration and more cohesive advocacy across farming sectors. The national agricultural advocacy space is fragmented due to the vast landscape and subsects within industries (regenerative, biodynamic, traditional organic, etc.), along with different climatic zones and conditions, soil types and societal pressures, making national-level advocacy difficult. While it is challenging to represent all interests, there needs to be active efforts to work collaboratively to increase collective influence and power.

Globally, it was a common sentiment amongst farmers that advocacy groups needed to adopt a more collaborative approach to effectively influence policy outcomes. As one New Zealand farmer noted, “groups should be working together on the 95% of issues they agree upon rather than dividing on the 5% they will never align on” (Chrystall, 2025). This need for unity is especially clear when public disagreements between groups arise, as such divisions significantly undermine their credibility and reputation, ultimately detracting from their shared goal of shaping policy. To achieve favourable outcomes, groups should be resolving these differences behind closed doors, working collaboratively to reach an agreement and presenting a united voice or a clear, consistent message at the political level.

Differences in personalities, beliefs and views are driving fragmentation of groups within an already diverse advocacy landscape, further exacerbating problems for time poor growers. There are around 270 organisations in the agricultural advocacy space (McRobert et al., 2022), and this can be overwhelming for farmers, making it difficult to determine which group to be involved with, where their interests are best represented or which group offers the most value, creating more barriers to meaningful farmer participation. When asked about fragmentation and the impulse to break away when feeling unheard or misunderstood, an Irish farmer responded succinctly:

“You will always gain more traction when you utilise existing systems and resources rather than attempting to create something entirely new” (Garvey, 2025).

By utilising the traditional structure of SFOs at the state level, supported by an overarching collective umbrella organisation representing grower interests at a national level (currently National Farmers Federation (NFF)), farmers across multiple industries should, in theory, be adequately represented. While industry specific groups play a critical role in advocating on sector-specific issues, the existence of multiple groups is contributing to fragmentation in the advocacy space and detracting from their shared mission of securing better outcomes for farmers in policy decisions.

Where consolidation is not feasible, given the scale and diversity of Australian agriculture, these groups must prioritise collaboration, align where possible, and leverage shared resources to strengthen the collective voice of farmers. Not only is there collective power in numbers, but when multiple groups are involved, policy makers or politicians may claim they have consulted farmers when they may have only consulted one organisation. Alternatively, with multiple groups they may encounter

conflicting views that either introduce complexity or neutrality to the issue, further complicating the consultation process.

While it may be unrealistic to reduce advocacy to a single voice or organisation in Australia's vast landscape, collaboration between groups must be prioritised wherever possible. Advocacy and lobbying will be far more effective when aligned organisations deliver a unified, clear and consistent message in policy consultations, ultimately simplifying the process and strengthening credibility over the long term.

Inclusive leadership and representation

The current leadership and operational structure of SFOs does not adequately reflect the full spectrum of grower perspectives, often disincentivising membership of innovative, progressive growers whose participation is critical to the industry's future. This disconnect is largely driven by two things: the reactive nature of SFO advocacy and a lack of diverse, inclusive leadership.

The predominantly reactive nature of SFO advocacy results in proactive farmers struggling to see their interests reflected, leading to reduced engagement from these forward-thinking members of the industry. Typically, these growers have previously identified future challenges and either adapted their management strategies or moved away from certain practices to reduce the impact of impending legislation or evolving market demands. In many cases, it is only when legislation is imminent, or market pressures are firmly at play that SFOs intensify their lobbying efforts. Current examples of this include opposition to the mulesing ban, the introduction of sustainability frameworks and mandatory biodiversity reporting, as outlined on various SFO websites. While it isn't the case for every business, many progressive farmers have already addressed and moved beyond these issues. As a result, the priorities being addressed by SFOs often no longer align with those of these progressive farmers, discouraging their participation.

As the CEO of an Australian state government agency stated,

“We need brave, intelligent and educated farmers to be involved, maturely, in the debate. Unfortunately, the current structure does not truly allow for this.”

A shift to more forward-thinking, proactive advocacy would increase the relevance of farmer-led advocacy organisations and would entice greater involvement of industry-leading farmers in policy discussions.

There also needs to be a shift to more inclusive and collaborative leadership within these organisations, with a focus on ensuring there is diversity in age and gender at senior levels. Representation is important because people are more likely to connect and engage with leaders who reflect their own identity, or share similar backgrounds and experiences. For advocacy organisations to succeed, leadership diversity is essential not only for relevance and relatability, but also to ensure a broad range of perspectives that enrich decision-making and drive innovation.

Currently, the seven SFOs and the NFF all have male presidents, and the average gender split across these eight boards is 77% male and 23% female. In contrast,

women comprise 33% of the Australian agricultural workforce (DAFF, 2025), a figure that likely underrepresents the true composition as many contribute through unpaid roles and do not identify themselves as farm workers in official data collection. Therefore, not only is the leadership of farmer-led advocacy organisations not truly representative of the broader agricultural workforce, but a lack of diversity risks limiting influence in a political landscape where women are more present than ever before, and may discourage women from being involved in these organisations.

Diversity in gender is not the only way to make leadership more inclusive and representative of the industry. When observing successful examples of policy being shaped by the farmer voice in the European Union (EU), it was echoed in many countries that the youth farming unions seemed to be consistently gaining more traction in parliament than other unions. When asked what drove this, one Dutch farmer said:

“Young farmers are bringing solutions to the table, not just problems. They are gaining traction with government and as a result their membership numbers are increasing, while the adult farmers association is decreasing in membership and political power”. (van Dueren den Hollander, 2025).

This was echoed in Denmark, Belgium and Ireland, where many agreed that the younger farming demographic were bringing solutions to the table and were willing to compromise when they spoke to government, rather than the older demographic that seemed to be more resistant to change, opposed the majority of policy proposals and did not come equipped with solutions. They were more likely to want the policy to meet them where they were, and as such were not as successful in gaining traction with policy makers and members of parliament.

In Germany, the farmers’ union noted that when youth and women were well represented, advocacy groups achieved greater success in having their voices heard at the parliamentary level and garnered stronger community support. The President of the Lower Saxony Farmers Union (Niedersächsisches Landvolk – Kreisverband Rotenburg-Verden e.V.) said:

“Nobody wants to get yelled at. When limited to two formal opportunities a year to speak with politicians, it’s easy to upset people, and then no one wants to meet with you. For a long time, we had loud people at the top - then we realised no one wanted to deal with us. Once we changed, began engaging with the youth and women and brought everyone along, we were far more successful.” (Ehlers, 2025).

Without bold steps toward more inclusive, forward-thinking leadership and governance, farmer-led advocacy groups risk becoming increasingly disconnected from both the political landscape they operate within and the farmers they aim to represent. These organisations need to evolve, not only in age or gender but also in mindset and vision to engage the industry’s most progressive farmers.

Prioritise what matters

As previously outlined, reactive lobbying and advocacy have limited success and are often not representative of the issues faced by all growers. A common theme that consistently emerged in Europe and New Zealand was that being “against everything” is neither strategic nor effective, and weakens both influence and credibility over the long term.

Advocacy groups need to be selective and strategic when it comes to setting priorities and influencing policy. They need to focus their efforts where it matters most and allow policies that have less impact on farmers to proceed where appropriate. Where advocacy groups engaged constructively with government and were open to understanding alternate perspectives and collaborating, they were far more successful in securing positive outcomes on their key priorities. In Denmark, the farmers union reinforced the importance of fostering a culture of collaboration and cooperation with the government. Because of this, new policy around transforming land use, agriculture and climate response created by the Danish government in 2024 (the Green Tripartite Agreement) was one of the few climate frameworks globally where farmers felt they were thoroughly consulted and had their issues and concerns both understood and addressed. This success stems from a long history of cooperation between farmer-led advocacy groups and government, and this culture was summed up by a Danish grower who said:

“Times have changed. New policy and regulation has to be a compromise now, it can’t go the farmers’ way every time. We have to cooperate.” (Millenaar, 2025).

Not only is fighting every issue neither realistic nor productive, but it was also widely acknowledged by farmers globally that, to some extent, compliance is simply “part of farming businesses now” (Chrystall, 2025). However, when an issue arises that significantly impacts the majority of farmers, advocacy groups need to deliver a strong, aligned response and be ready to act when the government demands it. Kathryn Stack, a policy advisor within the EU Parliament, said that for organisations to have success, they needed to “pick their battles” and come prepared with strong arguments and solutions that policy advisors or members of government can take back to their cabinets or workplaces. Policy advisors also expected timely responses supported by experience or data when they were seeking input, and remarked that this does not always happen (Stack, 2025).

Along with strategically choosing battles, strong and successful lobbying relies on “people knowing when to be robust when appropriate, but also knowing when to be quiet” (Ware, 2014). Many Australian growers involved in advocacy agree that a lot of relationship damage has been caused by people “yelling and demanding”, leading to the government becoming reluctant to engage. This reinforces the need for groups to be strategic in determining priorities, tactful and clear with their desired outcomes prior to engaging with government, and committed to leaving conflict at the door.

Modern problems require modern solutions

In a rapidly changing world that is more interconnected, fast-paced, scrutinised and regulated than ever before, farmer-led advocacy continues to become more urgent and challenging. The policy environment has become exponentially more complex due to a multitude of factors involving trade, climate, technology, geopolitical tensions and rising sustainability expectations. Since these pressures rarely move in sync, getting ahead of the policy around them requires anticipation of what will happen, when, and how it will affect farmers.

Technology, along with the profound impact of social media, also means narratives move faster than ever before, and people are more accessible than ever. This rapid shift in how we communicate, combined with the widespread adoption of digital tools and remote collaboration fuelled by the COVID-19 pandemic, means there is an opportunity to shorten the communication chain between farmers and policy makers. While many involved in the advocacy space reinforce that “advocacy is presence,” the question remains – how do we achieve this as farmers with an ever-increasing operational and administrative workload, and how can the current network of advocacy groups help with this?

As an Australian grower previously involved in advocacy said:

“As farmers, we need to be accessible. The days are gone where you go to your local farming group’s branch, put your hand up to be elected or get told to wait your turn. We need to build relationships now in whatever capacity we can and be available when we are needed.”

To shorten the distance and strengthen the connection between farmers and policy makers, modern technologies and practices are needed. It is paramount to ensure the valuable time given by farmers is utilised effectively for growers to feel they are adequately contributing to and informing policy, whilst remaining actively involved in their operations.

It is important to note that strong relationships, built through presence and visibility, underpin successful advocacy and lobbying (Ware, 2014). However, by modernising the traditional and successful approach of “turning up and being present”, whether that be virtually in online conferencing, or through emails, phone calls, short videos or social media in a coordinated effort with paid lobbyists, we can ensure grower voices are heard in an increasingly high-tech and immediate world.

While it will still be up to farmers to carve out time dedicated to proactively engaging and building relationships with policy makers, it will be the job of advocacy organisations to identify these growers and connect them with the right people in government. Advocacy organisations also need to develop their avenues to mobilise farmer experience, data or anecdotes when needed. They must be creative and modern in their thinking of how to capture this science, data or opinion – is it through regular email or phone surveys, short videos or social media? Or is it through actively identifying growers who should be involved in the conversation, capturing their thoughts and connecting them directly, either in person or online, with the right people

in government? The impact lies not just in numbers, but in the quality and authenticity of those representing farmers.

With policy increasingly being driven by emotions over science, advocacy groups must harness the innate, deep passion farmers have for their industry in the same way environmentalists and animal rights activists do. This is why it is essential to involve passionate growers who may be limited by their location or workload and are typically focused on their day-to-day operational needs and business productivity. Rather than relying solely on those who can regularly attend meetings or events, advocacy groups need to identify, support and connect inspiring growers in modern ways so their insights, passion and energy can be leveraged to influence discussions and shape policy.

Case Study 1: New Zealand catchment groups & national collective

New Zealand's catchment groups present a compelling model of farmer-led advocacy that balances local autonomy with a unified national voice. These grassroots groups are structured around catchment areas and give farmers a platform to lead environmental action, share knowledge, and coordinate practical responses to local issues such as predation, erosion and management of biodiversity.

These groups actively test creeks and rivers for nutrients and farming impacts in their regions and share this data publicly to shape the narrative and maintain control of their story. This work is not only about connecting with consumers and reinforcing farmers' roles as environmental stewards, but also a strategic response to negative press during previous government terms (Chrystall, 2025).

While the local work is significant, there was still collective energy to harness at the national level. In response, an umbrella-type organisation called Catchment Communities Aotearoa (CCA) was formed, and this now represents over 200 catchment groups across New Zealand. The aim of this group is to facilitate, not prescribe. They secure long-term, stable funding for grassroots groups while protecting their independence, support local groups in telling their stories in ways that resonate with consumers and the public, and help build networks for peer learning and knowledge sharing between groups.

Where needed, CCA utilise their own national network to connect these groups with expertise such as service providers, scientists or government agencies. The CCA helps to bring farmers directly into conversations with politicians, using its relationships at the federal level to open doors that individual farmers may not have previously had access to. CCA also coordinates collective submissions into national policy discussions and works to reflect the diverse views of its member groups while still presenting a unified, clear message.

This collective model allows local autonomy and a bottom-up approach to coexist with national coherence. By retaining local independence within a single, overarching structure, it has achieved strong farmer engagement and participation, while also reducing fragmentation, unifying messaging and strengthening the overall influence of the farmer voice in policy debates.

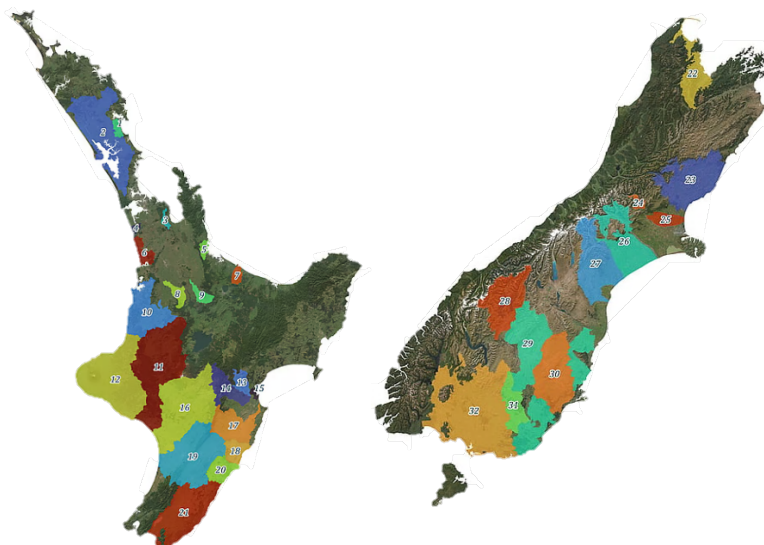


Figure 2: The network of Catchment Collectives in New Zealand (Source: CCA).

Chapter 2: Successful policy engagement

Strategic, proactive advocacy

As previously discussed, the world is changing rapidly. The growing influence of public sentiment, combined with real-time media and rapid policy development demands that farmer voices not only need to keep pace, but also stay ahead. This requires early identification of emerging challenges, proactive advocacy and strategic narrative sharing to counter misinformation, lift the industry's profile and foster public image. Farmer-led advocacy groups must actively build their credibility and political capital and know how to use it effectively.

Whilst lobbying will always have its place, the goal of advocacy needs to be to tell compelling stories and clearly explain what is important and why, before legislation is finalised. Advocacy groups must focus on influencing policy early rather than resisting it, and as outlined previously, farmers and the broader agricultural industry cannot afford to be seen as consistent opponents of progress. Strategic battles should be chosen when impacts are significant, but collaboration and compromise with the government is equally important to build capital, earn respect and maintain credibility.

While some view proactive advocacy as impractical, as it ties up resources to address issues that haven't yet materialised, reactive lobbying often fails to represent the interests of progressive farmers who have already identified risks and adapted their businesses. The challenge remains in ensuring these innovative, forward-thinking farmers are brought to the table. Proactive advocacy requires the ability to anticipate what may happen in policy development, when it will occur, and how it will affect farmers, making it essential to engage these growers to ensure success. A strategic, forward-thinking approach to advocacy not only increases the likelihood for these farmers to engage and participate but also leads to more powerful and effective outcomes.

Another key challenge for advocacy is timing. Proactive advocacy positions groups favourably from the beginning, which is important as earlier lobbying efforts are generally more successful (Ware, 2014). Shifting focus from crisis-driven responses to proactive measures allows farmers and advocacy groups to negotiate change rather than resist it, ultimately developing outcomes that benefit all stakeholders. This act of accepting some progression whilst still advocating for farmers' needs was described in Europe as "simplifying regulations rather than de-regulation," and helped both farmers and policy makers meet shared goals more effectively.

There is also a need for consistent storytelling and strategic advocacy to remain ongoing regardless of the political landscape. It was observed in many countries that when policy settings are favourable due to strong alignment between farmers and the political party in office, there's often a sense that engagement is no longer urgent. However, as growers in New Zealand pointed out, this is precisely when advocacy should be most active to gain traction. These growers described their experience where the previous government was less aligned with farmers and policies were driven by emotion over science, resulting in regulations that were almost unworkable. When the opposing party was chosen at the next election and began rolling back those policies, the farmers noted that industry engagement fell sharply as many no longer

felt the same pressure to lobby for themselves, and farmer participation in advocacy declined.

The problem with this is that when strong alignment and established relationships exist between government and agriculture, the opportunity is there to build robust, effective and workable rules and regulations, rather than leaving them to be written after a change in leadership when influence may not be as strong. Building relationships, shaping narratives, and positioning policy ideas during favourable political conditions gives farmer-led advocacy organisations greater influence when change inevitably comes.

It is also worth noting that regardless of the political party in power, bipartisan relationships need to be built to ensure effective advocacy transcends political lines. Policy influence is strongest when built on shared goals, trust, and long-term engagement, not short-term alignment with political colours. Advocacy groups must find areas of common ground and continually refer to that to build relationships and achieve common goals.

Strategic advocacy can also be in the form of supporting policy makers in doing their jobs. Policy advisors in Brussels, Belgium, reinforced that:

“Policy makers want information that makes their job easier and more informed, so don’t underestimate the weight of evidence and data” (Surman, 2025), and

“Policy makers just want to do their job by easily accessing good data, information and alignment. Farmers need to be accessible, make their jobs easier and build a relationship, not detract from it.” (Stack, 2025).

These comments reflect the core need for advocacy to be constructive, collaborative and assist with policy creation rather than oppose it. By providing critical information when it is needed, offering solutions and speaking the policy maker’s language, advocacy groups can help shape the future, not just react to it.

The power of relationships and storytelling

Effective engagement is no longer just about showing up, but also about building meaningful relationships with decision-makers, earning trust and credibility and understanding the people behind the politics. It is not only essential to establish and foster relationships with the political figures and ministers making the final decision, but also with their key staff and advisors. These strong relationships, built on trust, consistency and a lack of conflict, improve the success of lobbying. This was frequently reinforced by growers with an advocacy background, where many emphasised that the most effective advocacy often happens behind closed doors, and negotiations rely heavily on personal, behind-the-scenes conversations.

Effective advocacy happens quietly and consistently, and just as quickly as relationships can be built, they can be broken. Mutual understanding, respect and trust must be carefully and intentionally established, and any damage can take significant

time and effort to repair, both for individual relationships and an organisation's reputation. In the past, some farmer-led advocacy organisations have been perceived as loud, aggressive or demanding, and the fallout from this can have a lasting ripple effect. One policy adviser remarked:

“If you are banging your fists on the table demanding a seat at it, you aren't mature enough to be there.”

While blunt, this statement highlights a crucial point: influence stems from trust and credibility, not volume. To successfully shape policy, there needs to be alignment that extends all the way to ministerial levels, which takes strategy, patience and professionalism.

Relationships are also more important than ever before as the demographics of politics continue to shift. As previously discussed, the current parliament is more female, younger and more cosmopolitan than ever before, and policy is increasingly driven by emotion and social values over data, science or economics. Farmers and advocacy groups must recognise this changing audience and tailor their messaging accordingly. Where understanding of agriculture is limited, it's essential to connect issues within farming with concepts people understand and relate to, like food security or small business.

This, combined with authentic, genuine farmers no longer just “telling” their story, but “sharing” it in a way that resonates with the audience, will enhance connection and increase engagement. With Australia's highly urbanised population and a declining number of farmers, agriculture risks being overlooked in favour of issues perceived as more urgent by larger voting bases. To counter this, farmers need to be involved in the conversation and share stories and data that highlight the good work they are doing and the improvements being made. This is critical not only to combat misinformation, but also to educate and stay ahead of the narrative. When farmers and advocacy groups fail to proactively share evidence of progress in areas such as sustainability, climate action or animal welfare, policy makers are left to form views and develop legislation based on potentially inaccurate or one-sided information.

Ultimately, effective advocacy through storytelling not only relies on the sharing of facts and data, but also on shaping perceptions through positive, engaging messaging. Stories of resilience resonate better than those of despair. People care about their food and who produces it, and farmers need to maintain their image by authentically sharing information, consistently building trust and having a voice in the conversation.

Unlikely allies – the power of alignment

Another advocacy strategy that may have been overlooked in the past is the opportunity to collaborate with groups traditionally seen as “opponents”, particularly Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) and Not-for-Profit Organisations (NFPs), where shared goals exist. These groups often have access to significant funding, strong public support and considerable influence in shaping policy narratives. In many cases, the agricultural sector and these organisations want the same outcome but differ in their approach to get there, particularly around issues like long-term sustainability and food safety.

It is well understood that NGOs rely on campaigning to demonstrate their value, and without visible lobbying and advocacy, many struggle to gain public support as readily. As a result, they are often highly active in the lobbying space and open to engagement if approached with respect and a willingness to collaborate. Rather than working against them, agricultural advocacy groups should instead seek opportunities to align, negotiate and compromise where appropriate to achieve shared objectives. One policy advisor endorsed the power and impact this has when shaping policy by stating:

“Policy makers don’t want to have to continually check with two sides, and you will gain momentum if you work together with competitors, compromise first, and then come to parliament with one agreement or solution” (Stack, 2025)

To be more effective, advocacy groups must recognise potential areas of alignment and engage constructively across political lines and with unexpected allies. By building relationships behind closed doors and finding common ground, it may be possible for agriculture to leverage the influence of NGOs and NFPs to support better, more balanced policy outcomes for all stakeholders.

Case Study 2: The Greens and farmers working together in the EU

Since its inception, the proposed free trade agreement between the European Union and the Mercosur bloc has been divisive for a number of industry groups across the EU. While it aims to boost economic performance through reduced tariff trade of goods like cars, machinery and beef, it has faced strong opposition over concerns for potential deforestation, double standards in food production and threats to rural livelihoods due to unfair competition for farmers in the EU (Alghamdi, 2024).

As public opposition to the agreement grew, it became clear that there was alignment in both the views and concerns of The Greens-European Free Alliance and the agricultural and farmer unions. In 2024, Greens activists joined farmer protests in Brussels; aligning themselves with grassroots movements and producing shared messaging to demand that EU policy makers halt negotiations and prioritise sustainable food systems above all else (Bourgin, 2024).

While the trade deal was formally concluded in December 2024, the alignment between The Greens-European Free Alliance and farmer unions remains a successful example of unexpected political collaboration. Despite differences in beliefs, shared goals can be achieved if groups work together and present a united front and practical solutions to policy makers. This case highlights the power of cross-sector alliances and serves as a reminder that the agricultural industry needs to avoid viewing alternative political groups or NGOs solely as opponents. If common ground and collaboration can be found, cross-sector alliances can help shape effective policy outcomes for all stakeholders.



Figure 3: Protestors gather outside the European Parliament while EU leaders meet for an EU summit in Brussels, February 2024 (Source: Padilla)

Chapter 3: Structure, funding and future of Advocacy

Strong Governance, Strategic Communication, Clear Value

Recently, agricultural advocacy organisations have faced growing challenges in demonstrating clear, tangible value to their members, contributing to a decline in grower engagement and membership. This trend has been further exacerbated by the overall reduction in the number of farmers in the industry, creating additional pressure on revenue from memberships and further limiting the reach and impact of these groups. To address this compounding issue, there is an urgent need to strategically review internal structures and processes to ensure advocacy organisations are delivering measurable, visible value to the members who support them.

Most advocacy groups operate under a voluntary, opt-in funding model, rather than levy-based or compulsory schemes, which is generally preferred by farmers. However, to maintain this model successfully, value must be evidently demonstrated, not assumed, and communicated clearly and consistently to members. In areas where this is working well, such as New Zealand's catchment groups, the philosophy is clear:

"If the groups don't add value, then they probably shouldn't exist" (Ensor, 2025).

These groups remain agile, pivoting their activities in response to farmer feedback and operating on the principle that "opt-in is the way it should be; if we're doing good work, farmers will stay engaged" (Ensor, 2025).

While there is a fundamental need for farmers to proactively engage with advocacy groups, as highlighted by a young Irish grower who said "if I don't get involved then I won't be represented, then the value won't be there and outcomes won't be shaped for my preferences," (Garvey, 2025), accountability must also sit with the organisations themselves to prove value through action, not obligation, and communicate that clearly and consistently to members.

As previously outlined, strong relationships and regular communication are imperative to successful advocacy and lobbying. However, the challenge is that the nature of this work, often conducted in confidential discussions behind closed doors, makes it difficult to quantify or visibly demonstrate progress to members. This lack of visibility can lead to the misconception that "nothing is happening," so advocacy organisations must actively counter this by communicating the value of these conversations to members in creative and transparent ways.

When small wins are achieved, this needs to be communicated clearly. Time spent on relationship building must be acknowledged as a core strategic activity of the organisation, and members need to be educated on its role in influencing outcomes. Where confidentiality allows, groups can reference meetings with key political stakeholders, publish anonymised updates, or invite key personnel to contribute to newsletters or other media. Involving members directly in conversations or indirectly via forums, conferences, or regional visits can also help make the invisible visible, reinforcing the real and ongoing work being done on their behalf.

Strong governance is also essential for ongoing organisational success. While formal term limits aren't always mandated, many governance frameworks recommend them. Typically, a three-year term with a maximum of three terms (nine years total) is effective in maintaining corporate knowledge while still encouraging fresh perspectives and avoiding burnout (GIA, 2024). It is increasingly seen as best practice to set these limits and even consider enforcing a break prior to the third re-appointment. By setting clear terms, encouraging turnover and bringing in new views and leaders, organisations can stay at the forefront, maintain relevance, and continue delivering effective value to both members and the broader industry.

Where identifying future board members is challenging, organisations need to proactively source good people and develop them for the role. One practical way to do this is by genuinely empowering youth arms of advocacy organisations and ensuring they have real influence, feel heard and aren't just tokenistic. This approach not only aligns with political interest in engaging with younger generations but also strengthens future leadership pipelines and fosters fresh perspectives. In Brussels, the youth contingent was highly regarded by politicians who wanted to be visibly connected with emerging voices. Simply by showing up, young people were seen as "the future," and political leaders were keen to associate themselves with a progressive, forward-looking industry. Advocacy organisations need to harness this energy and passion in young people, and be cautious not to lose it.

Along with good governance is the need for clear, published operating and business strategies. These are essential for building trust, transparency, and long-term success, and when members can see where an organisation is heading and understand the goals, priorities, and rationale behind decisions, they are far more likely to engage and support. Strategic plans not only help organisations stay focused and measure progress more effectively but also enhance accountability and help members to see the long-term outcomes of everyday decisions. Strategic clarity is not just good governance, it's essential for continued relevance and impact.

Strategic communication must remain a core focus for advocacy organisations, not only to inform but also to engage. It plays a critical role in keeping members connected with current activities, demonstrating value, and reinforcing the organisation's relevance to both members and the broader industry. To reach and resonate with all audiences, advocacy groups need to utilise a diverse range of media platforms and formats.

Social media is important for concise updates or broad messaging, but more traditional formats such as magazines, newspapers, emails, or online bulletins remain essential for engaging farmers. Conferences and forums should continue to feature prominently, but these must be made as accessible as possible, offered both in-person and online, and hosted across a mix of regional and metropolitan areas. There is also opportunity and scope to strengthen engagement with production and research bodies, or to leverage Australia's extensive grower group network to normalise and elevate policy conversations closer to the farm gate. A clearer understanding of the policy implications associated with current research or emerging management practices and innovations will foster stronger farmer engagement, normalise policy discussions, and ensure the topic remains front of mind.

Ultimately, farmers are busy, practical individuals. Advocacy organisations must actively seek their input, listen with intent, and respond through meaningful, improved actions.

Commercialisation and diversification

In an increasingly challenging financial landscape fuelled by declining memberships, agricultural advocacy organisations must explore ways to diversify their revenue streams beyond traditional fee structures. To remain financially sustainable, employ resources and undertake activities that clearly demonstrate value to growers, groups require consistent funding. To secure this over the long term, organisations may need to broaden their scope to offer additional services such as consultation, advisory support, or financial products.

Expanding into these areas not only generates additional revenue but also allows advocacy organisations to demonstrate quantifiable value beyond advocacy, further enticing growers to engage. Offering advisory services such as accounting or legal support can reduce the administrative and regulatory burden farmers face, strengthening the value proposition for members. This approach aligns with examples from Europe, where the farmers' unions were not only advocating on behalf of growers to shape policy outcomes, but also assisting them in navigating new, complex regulations and taxation laws through legal and accounting support.

Another revenue stream that would diversify income is the provision of insurance. Offering insurance not only has the potential to strengthen the organisation's financial position but also presents a tangible benefit to farmers by providing access to affordable and tailored premiums. Over the past five years, Australian farmers have faced significant challenges due to multiple extreme weather events nationally, including droughts, floods and bushfires. These recurrent events have driven annual insurance premiums higher across the agricultural sector, often failing to reflect the specific risks and mitigation strategies of individual farming operations. Insurance premium increases have instead been influenced by broader national risk factors rather than localised or sector-specific realities, leading many farmers to reconsider insuring their crops.

By understanding the unique risks farmers face and what they are doing to manage them, advocacy organisations could negotiate fairer insurance solutions tailored to their members' needs. This strategy has been successfully employed by farmers' unions globally, where groups such as the National Farmers Union (UK) or the American Farm Bureau (US) have either developed or partnered with insurance providers to offer competitive products. In many cases, customers do not have to be members to access these products, but a portion of their premiums will go towards supporting advocacy efforts.

While these ventures can generate valuable income, they also carry risks. Effective governance, clear operational separation, and strong management are essential to ensure enterprises can succeed without compromising or detracting from the organisation's core mission of representation and advocacy for farmers.

Mobilising the supply chain

While agriculture accounts for just over 2% of the GDP and workforce of Australia, there is a large supply chain associated with it that encompasses major agribusinesses, processors and retailers, many of whom benefit directly from farmer success. Upstream of the farm gate are fertiliser companies, chemical suppliers,

machinery manufacturers and other input providers, many of which rely almost entirely on a thriving agricultural sector for their financial success. Downstream are processors and retailers who equally depend on the quality, consistency, and reputation of Australian agricultural products for their business.

Due to the scale of their operations, these businesses often have substantial financial resources, strong political access and significant influence that farmer-led advocacy organisations lack. While these companies may not always be directly involved in shaping agricultural policy, they clearly benefit from policy outcomes that support farm-level productivity, profitability and sustainability. This raises an interesting question: if these businesses depend so heavily on the success of farmers, should they also be investing in agricultural advocacy to help shape the policies that underpin that success?

Companies along the supply chain often have balance sheets far exceeding those of agricultural advocacy groups, and they possess connections to parliament that could be strategically leveraged by advocacy groups. Greater involvement from these businesses, whether it be through financial support, shared messaging, or political access, could significantly enhance advocacy outcomes across the entire sector. Even just by working collaboratively to align on shared goals, such as maintaining access to agricultural inputs like synthetic fertilisers or particular chemicals, has mutual benefit.

There have been missed opportunities in recent times where agribusinesses have not used their influence or resources to support farmers during policy crises such as the live sheep export ban in 2024. One Australian farmer asked pointedly:

“Where were the agribusiness’s last year when the live sheep export was being banned? Where were the ones who rely on the income from farmers to support their own businesses? We didn’t see them using those balance sheets to lobby for better outcomes for us.”

The live sheep export ban is a clear example of a policy that was not only driven by single-issue activism that lacked an understanding of long-term ripple effects, but also one driven by emotion from a vocal minority rather than science or data. Had commercial businesses publicly or privately supported farmers and advocacy groups by lending their reach, resources or political relationships, the advocacy effort could have been amplified and the outcome possibly altered.

While the potential benefits of engaging large businesses within the supply chain are clear, it is also important to recognise the risks and complexities associated with this. Commercial players, at times, have interests or objectives that do not always align with those of farmers. For example, in Brazil, trucking lobbies are actively resisting the development of railway and other logistical infrastructure that would have reduced freight costs for farmers, fearing it would threaten their industry. Similarly, in the EU, a proposed policy to block the import of Russian fertilisers was strongly supported by local fertiliser lobbyists seeking to protect their market share, despite the Russian product being more affordable for European farmers.

There is also a valid concern that increased reliance on corporate support could dilute the independence or credibility of farmer-led advocacy groups. Navigating these complexities requires strong governance, clear strategy and a firm understanding of purpose. Any collaboration must be transparent and non-exclusive to protect neutrality

and maximise reach. Values must also align to ensure the farmer voice is being amplified, not replaced. If approached correctly and with integrity, there is significant potential to utilise relationships, capital and influence to ensure the long-term success of farmer-led advocacy organisations.

Support and development of farmer leaders

This paper has explored how to raise the farmer voice to influence policy, particularly through effective farmer-led advocacy organisations and direct engagement with political leaders and policy makers. However, even with strong structures in place, the success of these efforts ultimately relies on farmers themselves. It is crucial to have progressive, intelligent and genuine farmers at the table as their lived experience and data bring a unique and invaluable credibility to policy conversations.

While many farmers are already passionate and effective communicators, few have received formal training on how the political system functions. Without this knowledge, it can be difficult to direct advocacy efforts effectively, especially if there is a lack of understanding around the division between state and federal responsibilities, or how to navigate the structures and processes of parliament.

To build greater confidence and capacity in this area, there needs to be targeted investment from advocacy groups or commercial partners to facilitate training in political literacy and advocacy. This could include:

- Formal training on political and legislative systems, including how the Upper and Lower Houses interact, where and how decisions are made, and the division between state and federal jurisdictions.
- Accessible lobbying tools and resources to help farmers advocate effectively and professionally.
- Training on how to engage across political lines in a respectful, apolitical way, and education on the importance of building relationships with parties across the political spectrum.
- Leadership development programs to strengthen individual and collective capacity.

Beyond training, there must also be strong support systems and frameworks in place to reduce the personal and professional burden on those who step forward. This could involve direct facilitation of connections with politicians or policy makers, providing financial support or subsidies for growers' time, or developing networks of peers for collaboration and mentorship.

Investing in these efforts is not solely about skill-building, but also about enhancing the influence of the farmer voice within the political landscape. By ensuring farmer leaders are both empowered and supported, grower advocacy and the policy outcomes it shapes will be more effective and successful over the long term.

Case Study 3: Lessons from the successful German Farmers Unions

In western Germany, nearly 90% of farmers are members of the German Farmers Union (Deutscher Bauernverband). This extraordinary membership reach speaks volumes about the organisation's influence and the trust it commands amongst German farmers. Several key features underpin this success and maintain the union's relevance and value to its members, including:

- **Practical support beyond advocacy:** Membership includes more than just political representation. Farmers receive access to practical services including accountants, lawyers, and advisory support that ease the administrative and regulatory burden of farming.
- **Strategic public relations:** The union employs marketing professionals to actively shape public narratives around agriculture. This includes running targeted campaigns in traditional and social media and organising initiatives like open farm days to educate urban populations about food production.
- **Legal representation with real wins:** The union's lawyers not only interpret policy changes and help farmers comply with complex legislation, they also fight on behalf of members against the introduction of detrimental regulation. For example, in Lower Saxony, when the local government attempted to impose regulation that restricted fertiliser use by 20% on one-third of farmland, the union's legal team challenged the decision in court and successfully overturned it. Such action would be out of reach for individual farmers due to legal costs and complexity.
- **Accountancy and financial services:** In house accountants assist members with taxation and financial planning, reducing the need for external services and helping to keep operations compliant and financially sustainable.
- **Lifelong membership and community:** Retired or former farmers often remain members at a reduced fee and continue to receive regular updates via the union's weekly paper, maintaining their connection to agriculture.
- **Organised, united protest:** When farmer protests are necessary, the union ensures they are well-coordinated, focused on a clear message, and communicated through a single, united voice, amplifying impact and credibility.
- **Insurance advocacy:** While the union does not provide insurance directly, it plays a critical role in advocating for government-backed mechanisms to help farmers access affordable and effective insurance products.
- **Broad rural representation:** The union also engages with non-farming, rurally based professionals such as teachers and doctors, harnessing their support and voting power to strengthen lobbying efforts for better living conditions for rural people.

Raising the Farmer Voice to Influence Policy



Figure 4 (left): Author meeting with Jörn Ehlers, Vice President of the Lower Saxony German Farmers Union. Figure 5 (right): Proactive farmer-led advocacy in action in Eastern Germany. (Source: Author)

Conclusions

The future of farming in Australia hinges not only on productivity and innovation, but also on the strength and involvement of the farmer voice in the policy space. Grower-led advocacy in Australia can be improved through better structures, clearer communication, stronger governance, and a sharper focus on delivering value. While advocacy styles vary internationally, the most effective approaches share a few common elements: genuine farmer involvement, strategic direction, strong communication and a willingness to evolve.

Australian farmers are operating in increasingly complex environments. They are navigating more regulation, faster political cycles, rising public scrutiny and significant climate and economic pressures. At the same time, the organisations that represent them are under pressure themselves, grappling with reduced engagement, tightening budgets and growing expectations to deliver more with less. This makes it more important than ever for advocacy groups to be fit for purpose, transparent in their operations and focused on amplifying the voice of growers with clarity and credibility.

Farmers want to be represented, but only truly engage with organisations that clearly add value. That value must be seen and felt, not just claimed. Groups can no longer rely on assumed loyalty, they must actively prove their relevance through action, outcomes and consistent communication. Strategic wins, particularly those behind closed doors, need to be shared with members. Effective communication is paramount to building trust.

Good governance also underpins successful advocacy groups. Clear strategic plans, transparent processes, strong leadership pipelines, and term limits help ensure advocacy groups stay relevant and accountable to members. Creating space for fresh voices, especially through empowered youth arms or leadership development pathways, is key to long-term influence and continuity.

There is also clear potential for advocacy organisations to think differently about securing long-term funding and relevancy. By branching out and offering practical services such as legal or accounting advice, or exploring new income streams like insurance, groups not only ensure financial viability but also strengthen their value proposition for members.

Advocacy partnerships beyond the farm gate are another area of opportunity. Large agribusinesses and retailers benefit directly from farm-level productivity and therefore, strong agricultural policy, yet are often absent from advocacy discussions. If they are transparent with their support, these commercial players could offer financial backing or stronger political connections to help amplify farmer-led efforts. However, any engagement must ultimately maintain the independence and credibility of the farmer voice.

Finally, the success of advocacy depends on people. It is farmers themselves who bring the insight, credibility and grounded experience that policy makers respond to. But they need training, support from groups and their peers, and clear pathways to engage confidently and effectively. In short, farmer-led advocacy must be just that: farmer-led. But for that to be effective, it must also be well-governed, clearly communicated, inclusive of new voices, and open to new ways of adding value. If those conditions are met, there is real opportunity for stronger influence, better policy outcomes and a more sustainable future for Australian agriculture.

Recommendations

Farmer-led advocacy remains one of the most powerful tools available to influence agricultural policy, but to remain effective in the fast-moving, fragmented and politically sensitive environment we operate in today, organisations must evolve.

This report proposes seven strategic recommendations to strengthen the capability, relevance and long-term sustainability of grower representation in Australia.

- 1. Communicate value clearly and creatively** - if farmers don't see the impact of their fees and voices, membership and interest will keep falling.
 - Share progress with members regularly, even when outcomes are pending, through newsletters, conference updates, social media or in-person, regional visits.
 - Highlight small wins and relationship-building as valid advocacy outcomes.
 - Close the loop with members by showing how feedback has shaped advocacy positions and outcomes.
 - Tailor messaging by audience, using a mix of formats to suit different engagement styles.
- 2. Strengthen governance and strategic clarity** – strong governance builds trust, credibility and ensures innovation.
 - Introduce director term limits, such as a maximum of three, three-year terms.
 - Ensure all boards have clear succession plans and leadership pipelines, with a focus on fostering young or less experienced early-career leaders, particularly from youth arms of the organisation.
 - Publish and promote strategic plans and annual priorities to build trust and signal direction to members.
 - Conduct performance reviews of boards and leaders to ensure accountability.
 - Hold internal structures to account by measuring success by value delivered.
- 3. Invest in inclusive and future-focused leadership** - without leaders who reflect the diversity in agriculture, advocacy groups will become irrelevant.
 - Encourage diverse leadership that reflects the reality of the modern agricultural workforce.
 - Empower young and emerging leaders to shape decisions, be involved in the conversation and have their opinions heard.
 - Provide structured pathways into leadership through mentoring, peer networks and targeted training and support.
 - Deliver political literacy training to build understanding of how policy systems work and how to influence them with confidence and respect.
- 4. Shift from reactive lobbying to strategic, proactive advocacy** - waiting for a crisis to act means the narrative is already lost.
 - Bring progressive farmers to the table to anticipate emerging issues and shape forward-thinking, solution-based advocacy.
 - Build narrative strength by proactively telling the industry's story to the public, media and policy makers, not just in response to crisis.

Raising the Farmer Voice to Influence Policy

- Choose policy battles wisely. Oppose only where impact is significant and widespread, and build political capital through compromise and collaboration on less significant policies.
 - Develop and maintain bipartisan relationships that transcend political cycles, ensuring long-term access and influence regardless of who holds office.
 - Support policy makers with solutions, not just opposition. Provide clear, evidence-based input in the form of accessible data, aligned language, and constructive ideas that make their job easier.
- 5. Unify farmer voices while respecting complexities** - fragmentation dilutes influence and confuses policy makers.
- Develop shared, clear messaging between groups with differing philosophies where common goals exist.
 - Implement more coordinated lobbying between state and federal levels.
 - Where possible, create a more united industry voice and merge representative bodies with shared common values, but utilise an umbrella-style structure to enable both local independence and national coherence.
- 6. Diversify revenue and member services without diluting purpose** - financial instability limits advocacy power.
- Explore practical services such as legal, regulatory or accounting advice that meet members' day-to-day needs, while maintaining strong, ethical separation between service delivery and advocacy.
 - Partner with trusted providers or lobby harder to offer tailored insurance to farmer members.
 - Ensure all commercial ventures are transparently separated from core advocacy work to maintain trust and neutrality.
 - Use revenue raised from other activities to reinvest in member value through proactive advocacy, communication, and leadership development.
- 7. Expand strategic alliances, particularly the unlikely ones**
- Mobilise the supply chain, from retailers to input providers, to support shared policy goals.
 - Establish formal, transparent relationships with groups previously seen as opponents where interests intersect.
 - Engage urban and non-farming audiences through powerful, genuine storytelling to increase legitimacy and urban-rural connection.

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