

ADDRESS BY

MAJOR GENERAL THE HONOURABLE MICHAEL JEFFERY,
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KEYNOTE SPEAKER AT A
FARMING FOR SUSTAINABLE SOILS CONFERENCE

AT THE CAPITAL THEATRE, VIEW STREET, BENDIGO

FRIDAY, 9 MARCH 2018

- Thank you for inviting me to be involved in your important conference
- Last night's dinner and discussion provided great comfort – soil health and regenerative agriculture are, finally, on the Australian agricultural agenda

PAUSE

- I'm sure some of you are wondering – how does a career Army Officer, a former Governor and Governor-General become so deeply involved with the future of the Australian agricultural landscape?
- I certainly saw a great deal of it on the ground and from the air as Governor and Governor-General, and I've spoken to around 6000 farmers as the National Soils Advocate
- But the *real* reason I agreed to become the National Soils Advocate and founded Soils For Life is because of my family
- I have 10 grandchildren
- I want them to grow up in a world where carbon is sucked out of the atmosphere to replenish our soils, where no single drop of rain is wasted, where food insecurity is an outdated term and where everything we eat is both healthy and nutritious
- My view is global - and it's not a happy one

- The coming “day zero” when the taps will run dry in Cape Town around June is just a hint of what I call the “next big global train smash”
- Countries like India, China, sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East are facing big problems, with the rapid reduction of water from finite aquifers, loss and degradation of arable land, and an overuse of chemicals, pesticides and inorganic fertilisers - **EXPLAIN**

PAUSE

- In Australia, whilst we have many good farmers backed by some good science, we have our problems, too...
- We're losing soil carbon rapidly
- We face high evaporation rates – around 50% of all rain which falls in our country is wasted through evaporation alone
- That's 25 times the quantity of water in all of our dams
- We also face the consequences of overuse of chemicals, pesticides and insecticides and a loss of biota
- Salinity is still a major problem in parts of the country, and we face the erosion and excision of one million kilometres of our streams and rivers through rapid run off from deforested slopes
- So, yes – we have those problems, but we also have an increasing number of very good farmers, backed by some good science with the **answers**

PAUSE

- While our program is called *Soils For Life*, our focus goes beyond soils, to integrate the management of our key natural strategic assets; our soils, water and plants - **EXPLAIN**
- That's a simple definition of the enormous body of work we've undertaken, with close to 30 case studies by the middle of this year
- Through base monitoring, field days, mentoring and annual performance measurements, we are accumulating a unique long term data base of what works, and what doesn't
- Invariably our case studies tell the stories of farmers pushed to the wall, and then, of their own volition, pursuing often radical changes to their farming

practices

- Some of those farming families have just started to adopt regenerative techniques – others are a long way down the road and are showing amazing improvements in economic, social and environmental performance
- Some have foregone substantial income streams through de-stocking to let their land recover or by controlled cell grazing
- Others have spent substantial funds on fencing, slashing, natural fertilisers
- As part of our rigorous and scientific testing, we examine the social element of the changes they've wrought – a wellbeing factor - and those impressive results can be just as important as extra money in the bank - **EXPLAIN**

PAUSE

- Soils For Life aims to have 100 case studies by 2020
- We understand that farmers will look over the fence into the next door's paddock to find out what their neighbours are doing
- It's an important way to provoke change in agriculture
- One excellent example is close to Canberra, where Tony Coote has been practicing regenerative agriculture on his mixed farms for 11 years and has increased his productivity by 60 per cent - so far
- Clever use of moveable chook sheds to provide natural fertiliser, cell grazing and re-directing his watercourses has turned Mulloon Creek Natural Farms into a showcase for regenerative agriculture
- His scientifically proven successes have been noted by the other 11 farms in his catchment, and all of them have now adopted all or some of Tony's processes
- This is one of the few examples of a total catchment take-up of tried and true practices, and I see the valley becoming a benchmark for other farmers and catchments

PAUSE

- The Soils For Life philosophy is, naturally, directed to farmers, because agriculture takes up about 60 per cent of the continent, is managed by 120,000 farmers on behalf of 24 million urban Australians who don't know and because they don't know, in most cases don't care

- We aim to change that attitude; reconnecting urban Australia with its rural roots I call it
- But I'd argue that agriculture is not just a farming movement but a social movement, reaching into the backyards of our towns and cities
- Newspapers, magazines and television have discovered *food* – cooking it, growing it, experimenting with it
- There has been an explosion of interest in growing food, even in tiny inner city backyards, on apartment balconies, or in market gardens beside busy restaurants
- There is a huge emphasis on *provenance* in the popular media
- People are asking – where has my food come from and how healthy and nutritious is it?
- Urban dwellers are discovering what canny farmers have always known – that the best food comes from the best managed soils
- So our case histories and the measurement processes our case study farmers are pursuing have far reaching lessons for *all* Australians
- Increasingly, people want to know where their food (and wine) is grown, who's produced it, whether it's chemically treated, how far it's travelled, how long it's been stored and what is its nutritional value
- This represents a major shift in our definition of "good food" and a terrific marketing opportunity for regenerative farmers to specifically brand their product
- Good soil knowledge can start at a very young age, and this is why we focus firmly on the School Garden project
- Working with the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation, we want to have schools all over Australia teaching kids to an agreed syllabus about the importance of good soils in growing good food
- This is an investment in the future – from little kids, bigger kids learn. It will also be an important component of reconnecting urban Australia with its rural roots

PAUSE

- In essence, our thoughtful and innovative Australian farmers have a great deal to teach other farmers – regionally, nationally and globally – how to avoid the “next global train smash” – soil, water and food security
- But they can’t do it alone, and we are currently in discussions with the Federal Government about a “whole of government” national policy on soil health - **EXPLAIN**
- Progress is encouraging, so stay tuned for some good news from Canberra!
- Thank you for your time today ... farmers have my total support