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SO, what would you do if, next Monday, you succeeded Tony Burke as the Federal Minister for Agriculture?

The Australian Farm Institute earlier this year threw out that question in an essay competition that was judged, among others, by Mr Burke.

The finalists included three professors and a freelance economist with a doctorate, but the joint winners were farmers from Queensland – Peter Mahony from Theodore and Bruce Currie from Jericho.

Farm Institute executive director Mick Keogh said that three issues were recurrent across the essays: the need for enhanced research and development; the need for a better funded and more comprehensive approach to natural resource management; and a focus on the 'people' issues.

"None of these are easy areas in which to bring about change, but all are issues about which there is strong agreement that change is needed," he said.

With Mr Burke, the competition was judged by Richard Bolt, secretary, Victorian Department of Primary Industries; Dr Linda Botterill, director, National Institute for Rural and Regional Australia; and Dr Julianne Schultz, professor at the Centre for Public Culture and Ideas, Griffith University.

The winning essays, and essays by finalists Professor David Pannell, University of Western Australia; Professor Margaret Alston, Monash University; Dr Alastair Watson, freelance economist; and Professor Paul Martin, University of New England, are available in the May quarter edition of the *AFI Farm Policy Journal*.

For more information visit www.farminstitute.org.au

BRUCE CURRIE

OUR future standard of living hinges on the productivity and sustainability of our agriculture – but too many Australians believe agriculture is a destructive process, not a creative one.

So begins the essay by Bruce Currie, who began his career in agriculture on the family's mixed farm near Capella, and who has migrated to Speculation, a beef cattle property at Jericho, with his wife and five children.

Mr Currie proposes that one solution to the rural-urban "perception gap" might be to give financial incentives to students to spend their 'gap' year working in the agricultural sector.

But agriculture must also be at the cutting edge of society's needs and environmental stewardship in order to conquer adverse perceptions.

Mr Currie suggests that natural resource management (NRM) bodies, which he regards as wasteful and inefficient, and redirected into rebuilding agriculture research and

extension capabilities that employ not only vets and agronomists, but biologists and conservationists.

Productive land needs to be identified, quickly, and a halt put on its destruction through development.

Some of the nation's most highly productive land is now lost forever under urban sprawl, Mr Currie notes.

To aid productivity, the best practice in all areas of production and stewardship need to be identified and highlighted.

Benchmarks should be set by the highest standards, not the most achievable. "The live exporter with the lowest shipping mortalities would be the industry standard," Mr Currie wrote.

Best practice could be linked to drought support: in order to qualify for support, a property would need to show how it is implementing best practice over the long term.

This quest for excellence should also permeate industry training and food standards, in Mr Currie's view.

Industry and academia need to work side by side to ensure that education is addressing the needs of the future, not just the present. At the same time, there needs to be greater flexibility in the labour force.

"If agriculture has to operate in a deregulated environment, to have a regulated labour force either keeps people out of work, or the business closes," he wrote.

On food standards, he said: "I would

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endeavour to make the standard of Australia's produce something that the rest of the world needs to meet, and not have Australia lowering our standards to permit imports."

Mr Currie is also passionate about overseas aid, questioning the statistic that a person dies of starvation every 3.6 seconds while Australian farmers struggle with profitability.

Aid should be in the form of goods and services to help impoverished countries build a strong agricultural sector, Mr Currie concluded, "not funds to purchase unknown supplies".

PETER MAHONY

CAPITAL and its ownership drive production", wrote Peter Mahony in his winning essay.

Mr Mahony's Australian address is Woolshed, a beef property near Theodore, Queensland, but he and his family are currently spending a year in France, partly to further explore his ideas.

Mr Mahony argues that we must better harness the skills already embedded in the nation's agricultural sector, and create a fertile ground for incubating innovation and best practice.

He proposes that change in three areas could drive powerful change across the sector.

Mr Mahony starts with a radical plan to virtually abolish separate natural resource management funding, and instead develop commercial cooperatives of landholders that have a specific charter to "develop farming methods which enrich our landscape".

"In essence, we are to combine the two previously separate streams of agricultural production and land stewardship," Mr Mahony wrote.

Landholders would pay an annual subscription, matched 2:1 by government (with funds taken from current NRM programs) for the first three years, and 1:1 for another three years, before government support is withdrawn and the cooperative must stand alone as a commercial entity.

Landholders gain productivity benefits from their efforts, with the additional possibility of carbon credits and intellectual property adding to their income stream.

"It is an opportunity for the best and brightest young minds – ex-NRMs – to truly engage with landholders and financially benefit from their efforts."

Mr Mahony's next radical idea is aimed at generational change.

It is an opportunity for the best young minds to truly engage with landholders.

He suggests that farmers younger than 40 should be given incentives to get into agriculture.

One route would be to abolish capital gains tax to the seller on farm sales where the oldest investor is younger than 35 years.

That tax break would be decreased by 20 percent for those aged 36, and so on until there were no breaks for those over 40.

Mr Mahony also argues that special consideration in drought policy should be made for young farmers, "when they have usually borrowed to the hilt and have had no time to prepare for an occurrence that can easily spell disaster".

Lastly, he proposes that the cooperatives be used to identify and reward environmentally aware farmers.

He suggests that the French system of a small 'eco' surcharge on food purchases could be channelled back to these farmers to put an additional profit motive behind environmental stewardship.

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