

Socialist Alliance policy

<http://www.socialist-alliance.org>



Agriculture

The problem

Since the introduction of modern agriculture, the quality of Australia's soils has dropped dramatically. Inappropriate agricultural practices and methods have led to ongoing soil loss, salinity and soil structure collapse across the country, threatening the viability of many rural communities, and endanger Australia's future food security.

In many areas, irrigation water is dangerously over-allocated, frequently wasteful and used on inappropriate crops, and is becoming more and more scarce, threatening the viability of agriculture in many parts of Australia. Access to water has been turned into a tradeable commodity, allowing speculative trading in "water rights" that has led to over-allocation, severe financial pressure on family farms, and serious damage to ecosystems as vital ground water and river systems are depleted.

At the same time, agricultural profits have increasingly gone to non-productive commercial sectors. In 1900, 40% of the food dollar went to farmers; now it is less than 15%, as farmers are forced to receive lower and lower prices under threat of cheap imports. Farm workers, many of them casual labourers, are amongst the worst paid and suffer some of the worst working conditions of Australian workers, and unemployment and poverty in rural Australia continue to rise. As a result, the average farming age continues to rise because young people are put off by the economic and environmental challenges of farming.

Australian agriculture is also threatened in the most fundamental way by climate change. The present global trend of greenhouse emissions will, if continued, make most agricultural production in this country impossible by the final decades of the century. Emissions from the rural sector, primarily of enteric methane from cattle and sheep but including nitrous oxide from synthetic nitrogen fertilisers, are meanwhile the second-largest element in Australia's greenhouse accounting.

The Socialist Alliance believes that the long-term sustainability of agriculture is an essential component of the well-being of Australia's economy, society and environment, and must be reformed in order to save it, and the environment, from the catastrophic effects of current practices.

Sustainable Agriculture

The term "sustainable agriculture" is profoundly misused by governments and corporate agribusiness, while current agricultural research and education is overwhelmingly geared – not to developing truly sustainable agriculture – but to increasing farm outputs and corporate profits at the expense of the environment and farming communities.

The sustainable agriculture that the Socialist Alliance stands for means farming based on natural processes, requiring the development of well functioning agro-ecosystems both above and below ground, and providing nutritious for people's needs while causing no degradation to the natural environment, and adequate income and working conditions for farmers and farm workers.

The Socialist Alliance will:

- Phase out corporate agribusiness farming in the Murray-Darling basin and regulate for sustainable water use in irrigation, including changing land-use practices and water efficiency practices in line with long-term water sustainability.
- Review the allocation of free irrigation water licences to wool, lamb and beef farming enterprises, and review irrigated rice and cotton growing licences.

- Reverse the process of water privatisation and put all water allocations under public control. Private ownership of water resources is inimical to sustainable agriculture and the public good and cannot be allowed to continue.
- Reduce reliance on synthetic pesticides and fertilisers by harnessing biological capture of carbon and nitrogen, and reprocessing urban waste, including sewage, into organic fertilisers.
- Encourage mulching, composting, and no-till and reduced-tillage farming through development grants and incentives.
- Ensure effective management and removal of invasive species.
- Encourage pest and disease minimisation by reliance on factors such as enhanced natural immune systems of plants, integrated management and related ecological principles.
- Prevent use of genetically modified organisms until exhaustive, independent, testing can definitively prove they do not have potential to cause harm to people, livestock or the environment, and introduce strict laws and fines against contamination.
- Increase and maintain crop diversity
- Extend public funding of agricultural research and education to ensure the further development of sustainable agriculture.

Sustainable Farming Communities

Unsustainable farming practices, environmental degradation, economic pressures and the effects of drought and climate change are seriously threatening the viability of our rural and agricultural communities.

The Socialist Alliance believes that most existing farming communities can be made economically and socially viable again, but only through a drastic overhaul of the agricultural sector and its practices. We will consult and work alongside communities in finding solutions to the problems they face, encouraging public participation in both creating and implementing specific the measures needed.

The Socialist Alliance will:

- Provide funding, resources and training to farming communities to make the transition to sustainable agriculture.
- Launch a massive, publicly-funded, sustainable agriculture conversion program in combination with sustainable agriculture organisations and farming communities.
- Rewrite farm employees' industrial awards to ensure that farm employees, including casuals, receive comparable pay and conditions to other workers.
- Prevent the forced sale of indebted farms and provide alternative funding on the basis of ongoing agricultural viability.
- Encourage national agricultural self-sufficiency, minimising the need for food imports and strengthening the Australian farming sector.
- Encourage farming cooperatives, local farmers markets, and state or cooperative marketing authorities.
- Encourage producer cooperatives to ensure all farmers receive a fair price from processors and retailers.
- Increase Landcare funding assistance for farmers to increase the sustainability of local farms and farming communities.
- Food processing and trading practices that reduce transport, packaging and waste, including encouraging processing in productive regions.
- Support the research, development and production of farm machinery, chemicals and biological products that supports better, safer and more affordable farming practices.

- Increase research and development of more efficient agricultural water use practices.

Food Security—at home and abroad

There are few things more important than maintaining a secure and reliable supply of healthy food. In a world where over a billion people are starving, the deliberate destruction of food crops is criminal. Food should be produced and distributed to satisfy need, not to make profits.

Australia is more than capable of providing for most of the food needs of its population, and should assist our neighbours in the region – especially in the developing world – by sharing our sustainable agricultural practices and surplus food in order to improve the well-being of humanity as a whole.

The Socialist Alliance will:

- Increase and redirect agricultural research into improving the sustainability of agricultural ecosystems and regions.
- Restrict the use of prime agricultural land for urban development or mining.
- Increase the scope of agricultural education, including at a primary and secondary school level.
- Encourage the creation of urban and peri-urban “city farms”, community and “permaculture” gardens to maximise the proportion of food produced in cities and large towns, improving both food quality and reducing emissions from unnecessary transport.
- Expand on projects like Food Bank, redistributing “excess” food to meet social needs, preventing food wastage and ensuring public access to nutritional food sources.
- Increase foreign aid aimed at developing self-sufficient sustainable food production practices in developing countries and seek to prevent “food dumping”.
- Develop “fair trade” policies with like-minded countries and increase foreign food aid programs in order to help prevent starvation and malnutrition.

Agriculture and Climate Change

Agriculture accounts for around 16% of Australia’s greenhouse gas emissions, and current agricultural practices – from fertilisers to food transport – consume huge quantities of fossil fuels. Land clearing and outdated forestry practices account for a further 6% of our greenhouse emissions.

Preventing climate disaster will require that net emissions from the rural sector be ended. At the same time, carbon dioxide must be removed from the atmosphere through reforestation, including farm forestry, and improved farming practices.

Soil carbon levels need to be enhanced through encouragement of no-till and organic farming methods. Land currently used as low-grade pasture, or which climate change renders too dry for cropping, must be returned to native vegetation or employed in an environmentally responsible way for tree farming.

The Socialist Alliance will:

- Encourage a shift away from fossil-fuel based chemical pesticides and fertilisers.
- Encourage “Carbon farming”: increasing the amount of carbon locked in the soil and the ecosystem through methods such as permanent reforestation and the use of sustainable farming practices such as composting.
- Expand research on the production and use of biochar in order to increase crop yields, water retention, and plant nutrient availability, to enrich soil biota and to reduce reliance on synthetic fertilisers.
- Prevent industrial biofuel or biochar production or broadscale carbon “offsetting” through unsustainable plantations that lock up prime farming land.

- Permit land clearing only in exceptional circumstances and only when offset by the reforestation of equal areas of similar native vegetation.
- Promote the restoration and remediation of native vegetation and ecosystems, reducing the release of greenhouse gases and limiting serious soil degradation.
- Develop sustainable grazing practices, in order to improve soil stability and water availability.
- Sharply reduce cattle and sheep numbers and improve stock management to minimise methane emissions per head.
- Drastically cut the numbers of feral ruminants, especially camels.
- Risk management for climactic changes that minimise the effects of weather extremes – require agricultural practices to adapt to climactic limitations.