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**A**nimals have been at the heart of agriculture for millennia, yet today there is a concerted campaign from a vocal minority to reduce – or even eliminate – animals from agricultural systems. While the livestock industry makes a significant economic and social contribution to Australia as an employer, provider of nutrition and a manager of landscapes, the sector is facing many challenges in public perception.

The environmental cost of traditional livestock production, changing animal welfare expectations and health impacts of animal protein consumption are some of the many areas of concern for which an activated public is questioning the sustainability of animal agriculture. Meat reducers and meat eliminators are a growing sector of the population. While this sector is still a very small proportion of consumers, the upwards trend is substantial and is being served by an increasing array of plant-based meat alternatives.

Several prominent reports have fuelled the frenzied discussion on the future of animal agriculture. In January 2019 the EAT-Lancet Commission released a report which recommended a fundamental shift in dietary

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patterns to enable improved human health and environmental outcomes,<sup>1</sup> stating that:

*“Global consumption of fruits, vegetables, nuts and legumes will have to double, and consumption of foods such as red meat and sugar will have to be reduced by more than 50%. A diet rich in plant-based foods and with fewer animal source foods confers both improved health and environmental benefits.”*

The report has attracted much attention and also significant criticism. Questions have been raised about the practicality of producing the food required for wide uptake of this ‘planetary health’ diet, including the potential impact on underdeveloped livestock-dependent nations.<sup>2</sup>

1 [https://eatforum.org/content/uploads/2019/07/EAT-Lancet\\_Commission\\_Summary\\_Report.pdf](https://eatforum.org/content/uploads/2019/07/EAT-Lancet_Commission_Summary_Report.pdf)

2 <https://newfoodeconomy.org/world-health-organization-drops-its-high-profile-endorsement-of-the-eat-lancet-diet/>

An Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Special Report on climate change, desertification, land degradation, sustainable land management, food security and greenhouse gas fluxes in terrestrial ecosystems was released in August 2019.<sup>3</sup> This report noted that “better land management can contribute to tackling climate change” and that “land must remain productive to maintain food security as the population increases and the negative impacts of climate change on vegetation increase”. However much of the media reporting focused solely on the recommendation to eat more plant-based foods and less meat in order to combat climate change.<sup>4&5</sup>

There is no question that the place of animal agriculture in a resource-constrained future is being debated vigorously – and is often done so with emotive and contradictory evidence. Reflecting this environment of uncertainty and change, the John Ralph Essay Competition for 2019 posed the question: ‘What is the future for animal agriculture?’

This competition was established in 2010 to honour the founding Chair of the Australian Farm Institute. John Ralph was instrumental in the establishment of the AFI and ensured that the Institute would be research-driven with a strong focus on providing objective, rigorous information to progress debates on strategic farm policy issues. In this spirit, the purpose of the essay competition is to engage the community in informed debate about policy issues impacting on the Australian farm sector.

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The finalists in this year’s competition (published in this edition) posited a positive future for animal agriculture in Australia. While taking different approaches to

addressing the challenges for the sector, each essay proposed strategies underpinned by the argument that animal agriculture is vital for the continued production of nutritious and sustainable food. As Alison Van Eenennaam summarised in her essay; at the current time there is no known, viable substitute for animal agriculture that addresses all the benefits delivered by the sector.

The winner of this year’s competition was Jessica Ramsden, Head of Corporate and Government Affairs, Elanco Australasia and PhD candidate, Australian National University. Jessica put the issues facing the sector into historical context noting that 2,400 years ago Socrates argued “that domesticated meat’s lavish land requirements inevitably lead to territorial expansion and war with neighbours” and that in 1932 Winston Churchill envisaged a world where we would all be eating synthetic

foods. Jessica argues that animal agriculture has always evolved in response to community concerns and changed expectations and that the industry faces a positive future if it continues to do so.

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I congratulate all the competitors in this year’s John Ralph Essay Competition and commend this collection of essays from the finalists to you. While addressing the complexities of modern animal agriculture the essays have portrayed a positive and passionate vision of Australian agriculture.



<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/srccl/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-49238749>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/eat-less-meat-to-save-the-earth-urges-un-pzvtqmp28>