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FARMER NUMBERS DECLINING GLOBALLY AS PART-TIMERS TAKE OVER.

The number of professional, full-time farmers is rapidly declining in most developed countries, and the number of part-time farmers who rely on off-farm income to remain viable is generally increasing, according to the authors of papers in the first edition of "Farm Policy Journal", a new quarterly publication produced by the Australian Farm Institute.

The Journal contains papers written by academics and authorities from the United Kingdom, Denmark, the USA, New Zealand and Australia on the theme 'the future of farmers and farming.'

"In each of the five countries, the authors noted significant falls in the numbers of full-time, professional farmers in their countries over the past few decades, and a rise in the number of part-timers," explained the Institute's Executive Director, Mick Keogh.

"This trend was a common observation in all countries, despite the dramatic differences in national farm policies."

"Increased global competition means that only the most efficient farmers remain viable, which usually means larger-scale production, farm consolidation, and fewer farmers. The only alternative for small-scale farm businesses is to supplement farm income with off-farm work."

The other common theme to emerge from all the papers was the significant change that has occurred in the attitude of the general public towards farmers.

Fifty years ago when the threat of food shortages was a reality, farmers were held in high esteem and their activities rarely questioned. Increasingly, however, farm practices are being challenged on environmental, food safety and animal welfare grounds, and these challenges are being translated by Governments into growing regulatory controls.

"One significant contrast to emerge from the papers is the attitude communities have to public-good environmental services provided by farmers. In both North America and Europe, public funding is regularly made available for farmers who are required to change their farm management practices to achieve environmental outcomes – such as the conservation of biodiversity – that the entire community benefits from. The policy focus is very much on providing farmers with environmental incentives."

"In Australia and New Zealand, the focus has been almost entirely on command-and-control regulatory measures, which simply don't work for farmers, or for the environment."

"Australian governments could learn a great deal about better farm environmental policies from their northern hemisphere counterparts," Mr Keogh concluded.

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