

Climate Change

I am a farmer from central west NSW. How do I feel about climate change? I have several responses on several different levels.

Firstly – in my face at home it is gut wrenching. My husband is the 6th generation of his family on the farm. Never has it been like it is now. What makes this even worse is that if it was just a 'one off' shocking year we would batten down the hatches and make it through but we have been going backwards since 2002. There are simply no physical, financial or emotional reserves left to face the situation we are in.

We and the majority of our neighbours are good farmers. We take pride, like most of you, in a job well done. To grow a good wheat crop, send quality prime lambs to the sales, bale sweet smelling hay is reward for the months of toil to get the produce to that state. At the end of September we were forced to sell some potentially magnificent lambs as we had simply run out of feed, at a period of time when the pasture should be up to our knees. As I sat balling my eyes out as they left it wasn't for the significantly less money that they would receive at the sales but simply a feeling of failure.

A few weeks later we baled up the dying wheat crop which we should have been harvesting in the next few weeks. We joked about how quickly we were able to bale and cart the hay in, but then cried at the miserable corner of the hay sheds that it occupied. Letting regular buyers know that there will be no hay or straw this year reinforces the feeling of failure and helplessness. The humiliation of dealing with the businesses in town to whom you owe money is another story.

Over the last few weeks I have been preparing budgets for the bank so that we can incur even more debt just to pay our bills and get through the next 12 months. There is a thudding realization that nothing short of a miracle is going to save us now, but what else can we do as who will buy a farm for a fair price in these conditions?

At synod last year, during the debate on the sale of Bolong, a speaker from Canberra made the comment that if he left his home to the Diocese in his will, and if in 50 years time the diocese thought it prudent to sell that property he would be delighted. What he and so many urban dwellers don't realise is the spiritual connection to the land that farmers feel. Farmers, perhaps more than any other profession, are faced with God the Creator on a daily basis. As I drive through the countryside the site of huge numbers of established eucalypts dying beside the road and in paddocks from moisture stress is apocalyptic. These are supposed to be the superbly adapted species. As creation is groaning at present we on the land weep.

I grieve for my kids. They and I have dreams about their future. My daughter is awaiting what I fully expect to be excellent HSC results. But how we will fund her university education is daunting. My eldest son is desperate to come home on the farm but that simply is not possible now. And even if it were would I condemn him to a life of struggle if the climate is permanently changing?

We are not environmental cowboys. We belong to a landcare group, are constantly trying to improve our patch of creation, we employ farming practices to conserve soil and water, and use the latest technology tractors that use less diesel.

I am also a science teacher and have been teaching about global warming for the last 15 years. What makes me so angry is that as a nation we seem to have little collective will to do anything about it – it has simply not been believed or seen as a fait accompli. How often do we not learn from history? The warnings about tobacco smoking, the rise of Nazism, the dangers of asbestos, the Rwandan genocide – the list could go on and on. Whilst some of these are not environmental concerns, as a society we were still warned, but chose to follow the path of disbelief, either because burying our head in the sand was easier or because it was in the interest of big business to discredit the warnings. Global warming is no different.

I know we don't have all the answers but I do know that we have to pressure our governments into believing that we have a crisis and to make the hard decisions. They do have to legislate for improvements in emissions – if what Al Gore says about Chinese cars having better emission controls than ours is true, then it is a sad indictment of our government's political will.

Last week I attended a teaching inservice where we were told that what only five years ago a PhD student would spend their whole thesis, a period of 3 years or more, discovering the structure of a protein – this can now be done in a matter of minutes in a mass spectrometer. I have absolutely no doubt that if the funds are made available the scientists can develop the technologies that can economically use renewable energy sources allowing us to further improve agriculture to feed the world and have a world worth passing on to future generations.

The will of the people and faith in God brought down the Berlin Wall and the Apartheid system. We can repair the damage done to our planet.

Alexa Barr