

Fishers, farmers and foresters trusted by the community

New report shows trust and acceptance of rural industries continues to grow

A new report released today shows trust in, and acceptance of, Australia's rural industries is strong and increasing. The majority of Australians see fishers, farmers and foresters as responsible stewards of the land and sea.

The report, *Community Trust in Rural Industries (Year Two)*¹, is the result of a collaboration of Australia's rural industries since 2019 to collectively and proactively address community trust in the sector. The Program's aim is to develop an aligned approach to long-term engagement with the community via a three-year research and engagement program.

The program is an Australian first - a partnership involving eleven Rural Research and Development Corporations, as well as the National Farmers' Federation and the NSW Department of Primary Industries.

According to Margo Andrae, Chief Executive Officer of Australian Pork Limited, a partner in the Program, collaboration has given the sector access to a deeper, clearer understanding of what leads to community trust in rural industries.

"The research is telling us that the community sees rural industries as one – not a collection of separate industries with unique challenges – so this program is our way of embracing that and working and learning together," she said.

The report also showed most Australians see fishers, farmers and foresters as responsible stewards of the land and sea.

"Community trust and visibility of the pork industry is central to our commitment to social responsibility. But our own preliminary research indicated that while communities were willing to give us the benefit of the doubt, they knew very little about pork production. This is why it is so important to share our stories. Being involved in this program has shown how community acceptance of rural industries, has increased from 87% to 93% in the past 12 months. This research has also helped us understand some of the key drivers of trust like environmental responsibility. So, seeing a rise in community trust from 87% to 89% in year two tells us we're on the right track," said Ms Andrae.

To date more than 14,000 Australians have been engaged in this program of work and shared their views on a wide range of topics and issues related to rural industries, through national surveys by research agency Voconiq.

The research revealed trust in rural industries is dependent on four drivers: environmental responsibility, responsiveness to community concerns, the importance of products produced by rural industries and (new in Year Two) - distributional fairness (that the benefits of rural industries are shared fairly - especially with regional communities).

According to lead researcher and CEO/Founder of Voconiq, Dr Kieren Moffat, the more community members feel a connection to the land themselves, the greater their level of trust in rural industries.

“Currently, Australians find this connection via the rural industry food and fibre products they purchase and use. This may be the most important advancement in the Year Two data, a clearer understanding of why industry products drive trust.

“Feeling connected to farmers, fishers and foresters through this exchange speaks to the power of a natural product; a transactional exchange that leads to a relational outcome,” he said.

The important role Australia’s farmers, fishers and foresters play in Australian society has been highlighted through the COVID-19 pandemic – it has increased community focus on, and confidence in, the work of rural industries in ensuring a safe and reliable source of food and natural products.

However, increased support for - and positive sentiment toward - rural industries brings with it great responsibility. The community expects fishers, farmers and foresters not to compromise environmental responsibility for economic sustainability.

Year Two research analysis revealed that taking action based on community concerns is fundamental to building trust with Australians.

“Acknowledging when things go wrong and actively responding, rather than remaining silent on challenging issues, received strong endorsement from community members. Industry responsiveness via listening and responding to community concerns remained a strong driver of trust in the Year Two research,” said Dr Moffat.

In Years Two and Three, the Program will inform and then examine industry activities designed to consolidate and build community trust through a series of industry-specific focal studies, as well as a sector-wide initiative to address a shared issue.

In a first for the sector, individual rural industries have volunteered to examine critical issues that also present community trust challenges. They will uncover the community’s concerns around a specific issue, respond to those concerns and share the results back to the sector. This will create a unique opportunity for the whole sector to learn from the process.

“The aim of these focal studies is to describe tangible steps to build community trust by building confidence through considered research,” said Matt Brand, Chief Executive Officer of Hort Innovation, a partner in the Program.

“In 2022, the program will also facilitate a sector-wide initiative to understand and address a shared community trust issue across all rural industries.

“Looking ahead, the program is evolving to consider how we can work together in the long-term and present a unified response to critical shared issues, in response to community concerns,” Mr Brand concluded.

For more information on the program, visit: <https://www.agrifutures.com.au/national-rural-issues/community-trust/>.

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For further information or to arrange an interview please contact:

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ⁱ Key Year Two Insights:

- 89 per cent of Australians trust rural industries, compared to 87 per cent in Year One; 93 per cent of Australians accept rural industries, up from 87 per cent in Year One.
- Almost two thirds (61 per cent) of Australians agree that farmers, fishers and foresters are responsible stewards of the land and the sea (up from 50 per cent in Year One).
- “When I buy Australian rural industry products, I feel connected to the farmers, fishers and foresters that produced them” (67% agree, 25% neutral and 9% disagree.)
- 85% of community members agreed confidence in Australia’s rural industries to supply fresh food was extremely high during COVID-19.
- 88% of community members also agreed that having a safe, reliable supply of fresh food is comforting during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 79% of community members surveyed also indicated agreement that the pandemic had made them more aware of the importance of food security for Australia.
- 61% of community members say economic sustainability of Australia’s rural industries should not come at the expense of environmental management (29% responded with neutral and 10% disagreed)
- “When rural industries acknowledge their mistakes after public outcry, I can forgive the mistake” (54% agree, 34% neutral and 12% disagree).
- “When a rural industry is silent about an issue I care about (like animal welfare or climate change) I assume they’ve got something to hide” (46% agree, 31% neutral and 22% disagree).

Responses were captured on a scale from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). Where the term ‘agree’ or ‘disagree’ is used, it refers to an aggregation of both ‘agree’ and ‘strongly agree’ responses and ‘disagree’ and ‘strongly disagree’ responses, respectively for each item reported.

About the program

The Community Trust in Rural Industries Program is a cross-sector initiative involving eleven Rural Research and Development Corporations (RDCs), the National Farmers’ Federation (NFF) and the NSW Department of Primary Industries to build the capacity of food and fibre industries to productively engage with the community.

Year Two of the Community Trust in Rural Industries program of work has delivered deeper insights into the pathways to community trust and acceptance for Australia’s farmers, fishers, and foresters. It involves community research by Voconiq, building on the Year One research, 5,358 Australians completed a comprehensive survey of their attitudes toward rural industries in Year Two between 29th September and 23rd October 2020, allowing for comparisons across time. Together with additional data collected during May 2020 to assess the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on community trust in rural industries, 14,225 Australians have participated in this program of work to date.

Voconiq is an Australian data science company built on a platform of research developed by Australia’s national science agency, CSIRO.