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Foreword

Neil Andrew

Paper prepared for presentation at the “Biofuels, Energy and Agriculture: Powering Towards or Away From Food Security?” conference conducted by the Crawford Fund for International Agricultural Research, Parliament House, Canberra, Australia, August 15, 2007

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Foreword

THE HON. NEIL ANDREW

This conference was the thirteenth in an annual series established by the *ATSE* Crawford Fund to raise awareness of the benefits that accrue both internationally and to Australia from international agricultural research — research that has as its primary goal the reduction of poverty, improvement of food security, and conservation of natural resources for agriculture in developing countries.

The conference was held at a time of mounting concern about the likelihood of undesirable global climate change caused by an increase in atmospheric levels of so-called ‘greenhouse gases’, and about the reduced availability, greater insecurity and higher cost of the global oil supplies that provide most of our transport fuel. These concerns had led to a dramatic re-assessment of the role of biofuels as a partial replacement for fossil fuels, particularly oil. In the USA and in Europe, government incentives and enthusiastic investment by the private sector were driving a massive expansion of the biofuels industry using maize (USA)

THE HON NEIL ANDREW was brought up in the SA Riverland, where his family and later Neil had interests in horticulture. He was an active participant in the SA Agricultural Bureau movement, and was Chairman 1980–1982. In 1975, he was awarded a Nuffield Agricultural Scholarship to make an overseas study tour. In 1983, he was elected to the Australian Parliament as the member for Wakefield in the House of Representatives. With changes in the boundaries of his electorate, he later moved to Gawler. He held various positions including that of Government Whip from 1997, and from November 1998 became Speaker of the House of Representatives. Neil retired from the position and from his seat in November 2004. He now lives in Adelaide and became Chairman of the Crawford Fund on the retirement of The Hon. Tim Fischer in June 2005.

and oilseeds (Europe) as the primary feedstocks. Malaysia had announced its intention of producing biodiesel from palm oil for export to Europe. Brazil, already a major producer of ethanol from sugarcane, was considering a significant expansion of its biofuel industry. Several other developing countries (e.g. Thailand, India, China) were strengthening their production and use of biofuels, and in Australia the Government had set an annual target of 350 million litres of biofuel production by 2010 (a fivefold increase).

At the time of the conference, there was a perception that biofuels may offer an income bonanza to farmers world-wide, including in developing countries. However, a key downside of significantly expanded biofuel production might be its potential impact on world food supplies and food prices. During 2007, prices of many agricultural commodities were rising, partly because of the demand for these commodities for the production of biofuels.

Against this background, we organised a conference with multiple objectives. These were to alert the Australian community to the opportunities that biofuels provide as a partial substitute for fossil fuels; to raise public awareness of the role of biofuels as a means of lifting farmers’ incomes in developing countries and Australia during the next 20 years; to assess the possible downsides of widespread production of biofuels, particularly the possible trade-off in reduced food production; and to examine the need for international agricultural research to mitigate these downsides and identify options for the sustainable production and use of biofuels.

The conference was opened by The Hon. Alexander Downer, Minister for Foreign Affairs. It attracted a large audience — almost 300 people — and we had to close registrations well in advance of the day. The audience represented Australian parliamentarians, the diplomatic corps, Australian Government departments, agencies, statutory authorities and commissions, scientific organisations and universities, aid organisations, non-government organisations, the private sector, the media and the public.

A key message from the conference (articulated by our keynote speaker, Dr Joachim von Braun) was that with appropriate economic, environmental and social policies, biofuels have the potential to enhance food and energy security. New and complex winner-loser patterns across countries and among the poor will, however, pose big challenges for policymakers to achieve win-win solutions for the poor in terms of food security, energy security, and environmental sustainability. Another key message (delivered by Lord Ron Oxburgh) was that in the medium term, there needs to be a shift away from a biofuel industry based on food crops or crops grown on prime agricultural land towards an industry based on ‘second generation’ feedstocks and technologies.

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Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation

I hope you find the proceedings of the conference interesting and informative.



The Hon Neil Andrew
Chairman
ATSE Crawford Fund Board of Governors

