# Interview with the Special Representative for Australian Agriculture, Su McCluskey

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## Transcript

[Video begins]

**Tim Dawson (Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry):** The Special Representative for Australian Agriculture, Su McCluskey, has a unique role as an industry voice representing our agriculture, fisheries and forestry sector on the world stage, where she advocates for fair, free and open trade and sustainable production in a changing climate. Today I’m speaking with Su from her cattle farm in Yass, New South Wales.

G’day, Su. How are you going?

**Su McCluskey, Special Representative for Australian Agriculture:** Good thanks.

**Tim**: So, for those who don't know about your role, can you explain the role of Special Representative for Australian Agriculture?

**Su**: So, the Special Representative for Australian Agriculture is essentially like a trade ambassador for Australian agriculture. I'm a strong advocate of Australian agriculture in global markets, but I also bring back and share what I'm hearing with our industries back within our shores. Importantly, I'm a ministerial appointment, but I'm an industry voice, so I'm able to get access to where perhaps industry might not get access into overseas, but I'm able to present very much the view of agriculture from an industry perspective.

**Tim**: And you've been in the role for 3 years. What's been your policy or technical focus over that time?

**Su**: Well, when I came into the role 3 years ago, it was going to be very much about engaging with the multilateral organisations. You know, the FAO, WTO, OECD are really around technical trade and market access. Very quickly, though, we realised it was all about sustainability, sustainability, sustainability. So that has very much been my focus since I came into the role and there's just only grown.

**Tim**: And over this past 3 years, where do you think you've made the biggest impact for the sector?

**Su**: So, I think the biggest impact for the sector has been being able to demonstrate in global markets just what Australia is doing in terms of sustainability. The great things we've been doing for a long, long time around our sustainable practises, how we look after our livestock, how we look after our land, how we look after our soils, how we're so conscious about water and land management. And we do that because we're not subsidised, we do that so we focus on productivity and profitability. And so, getting that message across in global markets has been very, very important.

**Tim**: What are some of the most promising innovations or approaches that the Australian agricultural sector's taking to be more sustainable and reach climate targets?

**Su**: So, I think the greatest things for Australian agriculture is around technology, digital agriculture, agritech, the advancements in innovations that we've been able to make over quite a number of decades has really been game changing for us. Australia's a huge country. We're actually a country that's confident and we have a lot of very, very remote areas and Australian farmers are really innovative and adaptive. And so we've had to learn how to deal with, you know, how we can manage water to very far remote areas and you know how we can actually manage with not enough staff when we've got vast tracts of land and so being able to do that and embrace technology particularly as connectivity starts to you know increase has really been a game changer and this is something that we have not only been able to do within Australia but we've been able to take to the rest of the world and demonstrate that.

**Tim**: And when you've been representing Australian agriculture on the global stage, what are some of the misconceptions that the rest of the world might have had that you've had to challenge?

**Su:** It's been really interesting being in global markets. You know things that we take for granted like we've been doing biodiversity for decades we've been, you know, looking after our land. We care for our animals because we know if we don't look after our animals and if we don't look after our soils, they won't be there for the next generation. But the perceptions that you get from overseas markets are that we use a lot of pesticides and chemicals and that our animal welfare practises might not be the best. And really it is about a misunderstanding about how different production systems, different environments, different climates actually need a different range of measures to be able to farm. And I always say there's no one-size-fits-all. So, the way I farm at my property in Yass in NSW is quite different. The way someone farms in Southern Victoria or particularly in the NT, and that's even more so across different countries. So, it's really important to remember we need to be outcomes focused. And not prescriptive about how everyone must farm in the same way.

**Tim**: You said that Australia's, you know, making a huge effort in the agricultural sector to be more sustainable and to meet climate targets. What are we doing to meet those 2050 net zero emissions targets?

**Su**: So, Australia's been doing a lot around meeting net zero targets. The focus has been very much on emissions reduction. We've been doing some great things in in that area. Firstly, when I look at methane cause methane is the greatest country contributor to our greenhouse gas emissions. The work we've been doing in research around genetics and we've got to remember that genetics, any research there is going to be an advancements are going to be permitted and permanent and cumulative.

Also got the work that's been done around inhibitors. So how you how you can actually put additives into feed to actually inhibit the production of methane? And I've seen some great things when it comes to lick blocks that that livestock can eat or even boluses that you can put into the animal. There are great things in terms of additives into water, but there's also huge advancements on the other side of emissions and that's around waste. And I would like to talk to talk about waste because waste brings in the consumer and we've got to remember, we can't lose the connection.

Between the consumer and food and farmers and the consumers actually can do a lot about reducing food waste, which is a very big contributor to greenhouse gas emissions. So, an enormous amount we're doing right the way across the supply chain in terms of being able to meet our net zero targets.

**Tim**: And you've travelled this year to Canada and Europe, and you've done a lot of domestic engagement as well. Can you tell us a little bit about those trips?

**Su**: So, Canada was really interesting. You know, I always say Canada, we're a very like-minded big country they've they have big, big herds and they're very committed to agriculture and sustainable practises. What I hadn't realised until I was there was probably most of the country is actually very, very cold – too cold to farm and even in the areas where they do farm it can get down to -8, sometimes -48, sometimes even more. And they can be under snow for up to 8 months of the year.

So, their farming practises are very different. You know, it goes back to what I say about no one-size-fits-all and it means that they have very short growing periods. So, this sort of seeds and crops, they need to grow for their fodder is quite different to what we need to do. That said, we are very like-minded in our terms to commitment to free and open trade to the rules-based system to collaborating around research and development. I saw some great work that they were doing in Ottawa, around methane and around Agritech.

So, the opportunities to work with like-minded countries like Canada and New Zealand and others is really strong. I was able to bring back and share some of that with what I've you know I've been hearing with our industries here but also in Australia, a lot of my engagement has been with things like beef week up at Rockhampton. I spoke at the seafood conference in Hobart. I engaged with the Nuffield conference in Launceston, which was to, you know, be able to speak to our emerging leaders and those that are going to be able to, I say helps share the load with me when we're in country.

So I've been really trying to get around as much as possible. The Hawk Connections Conference – so that I can share what I'm hearing with a whole range of different industries, but also learn what they're doing so I can take those examples, use them as case studies when I'm talking overseas.

**Tim**: Nice, and earlier in the year you travelled to Europe and Europe has very different farming practises to Australia. What were you looking to impart for the Europeans and what did you bring home from that experience?

**Su**: So, a couple of things. I think that look, I spoke at a couple of conferences over there in agriculture Innovation Conference in Frankfurt and then the Green Tech Conference, which is largely around horticulture in the Netherlands. And so I was able to talk to you know both those conferences about what we're doing around sustainability. I think one of the greatest things when I'm in global markets, I can talk about is the Australian Agricultural Sustainability Framework. You know, we are the only country in the world that has something like that, which is an overarching national articulation of what we're doing around sustainable sustainability.

Then drops down to our individual industry sector sustainability frameworks, which actually shows that there is no one-size-fits-all, but we embrace that diversity and that is something that other countries are really looking to pick up and use for themselves. You know, including Canada are really keen to have something like this. So I was able to really talk about what we do around sustainability and share and learn from what others are doing.

**Tim**: Su, the world's trying to meet sustainability and climate targets in all sorts of different ways. Can you give examples of what good and bad policy might look like?

**Su**: So good policy is really about open consultation. Being transparent, co design, so that is where you actually get industry in the room with government and you say, what should this look like? What role does industry need to play and what role does government need to play? And I've been really pleased to see that that is the process that Australia has been using under the ag and land sector plan consultation process. So not jumping in too early, coming up with the legislation and saying industry, just you try and make it work. It's about saying what should good policy and legislation look like. So that's a really good example of good policy process.

Examples of not so good policy process. When I was in Europe, you know, I saw very blunt instruments under the EU's farm to fork legislation where I saw a farmer, a young, passionate farmer, doing paddock to plate, 34 years old, wants to keep farming, but because of the rules in the EU that says to meet their emission reduction goals, they need to reduce their cattle herd by 30 to 50 percent. He's not going to be able to keep farming because the government are going to buy up that land and turn it into potato growing. That doesn't have the emissions and he's going to have to leave the Netherlands if he wants to keep farming cattle. And I think that shows how blunt instrument can actually have adverse consequences, particularly for agriculture and for farmers themselves.

Another example of where policy hasn't quite worked – and this was an interesting one – I was in New Zealand probably almost 3 years ago when I first came into the role, and New Zealand had a really powerful process of getting their farmers to know their number, measure their carbon and they were really very gung-ho about it. And I was impressed that because I said this is a strong compliance burden, how are you able to do this a couple of years down the track? And I was in New Zealand recently – their policy platform to get know your number has been abolished because they've had a change of government. They're a bit at loss around multiple calculators. And I think the thing that they didn't do was bring industry with them to start with and actually make it a co-design process like we're doing here in Australia. So, I think there's some important learnings that we can get when we go overseas from different markets.

**Tim**: What's the importance of keeping an Australian voice in these international discussions to keep fair and free and open trade?

**Su**: It's essential that we do have a strong voice that can advocate for Australian agriculture in global markets because Australia is a long way away from the rest of the world, and if we don't continue to be able to advocate for Australian agriculture to be able to demonstrate that we can farm productively profitably in the absence of subsidies and still be able to compete in an open and free marketplace.

Then our voice gets drowned out and our voice gets drowned out by the noisy protectionist voices that we see in overseas markets that have had an adverse impact on their farmers and we cannot let that happen here. So, it's important that we continue to strongly advocate for Australian agriculture in any global forum we can.

**Tim**: Part of your role is to tell Australia's agricultural story more broadly. We don't want to keep preaching to the converted at agricultural conferences, for instance. So where can we expand that message and get it out to a broader public audience?

**Su**: So, it's a very important message I give whenever I speak to any audience at any conference is we've got to actually be able to crack the mainstream. So, we can't just keep talking to ourselves. We need to tell our stories to the average person in the street. We need to tell our stories to the broader consumers. I've been actually very pleased since I've been saying this. I've got invitations now, not just from agricultural organisations but from property organisations.

Legal firms, accounting firms, investment firms and I think that's really important. The more we can actually get our stories out into the mainstream and you know, one of the things I now say is how do we get into things like the women's weekly, you know, how do we get into the sort of mainstream media the average person reads and says, oh, I know, I need to eat. And this is a great story about an Australian farmer. That's the sort of thing we really need to do.

Because if we keep talking to the converted, we're only going to be patting ourselves on the back.

**Tim**: I think you're taking off as early as next week to go to Southeast Asia. Can you tell us about the importance of that trip?

**Su**: So next week I'm going to Southeast Asia, which is really to speak at a sustainability summit in Thailand.

And then also be able to engage with a whole lot of different people in Thailand, Thailand. They're a member of the Cairns Farm Leaders group. So, they're like minded with us, support free and open trade, support, sustainability. So that is going to be a great opportunity to be there. And then I'm doing a short trip to Singapore following that I'll be going to Europe.

I'm going to London to actually look at work they're doing around natural capital. Natural capital is the next thing we need to be focused on and so I'm keen to learn from them, but also speaking at a conference in in the OECD in Paris, and then on to Rome for the World Food Forum, and of course later this year, going to COP29 in Azerbaijan. So once again, a marvellous opportunity to engage and demonstrate Australia's agriculture and sustainability in a climate context.

**Tim**: It’s really great to have an industry voice to spread the Australian ag story on the world stage. Thank you, Su, for all the hard work you're doing and enjoy your trip next week.

**Su**: Thanks very much. Pleasure to be here.

[Video ends]

[End of transcript.]

**Acknowledgement of Country**

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of Australia and their continuing connection to land and sea, waters, environment and community. We pay our respects to the Traditional Custodians of the lands we live and work on, their culture, and their Elders past and present.

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