# Postcards from Post – Interview with Donna Bennett, Australia’s agriculture counsellor in the UAE

(Duration 12mins 50 secs)

## Transcript

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**Tim Dawson (host)**: Australia exports over 70% of its agriculture, fisheries and forestry produce, and DAFF has a network of agricultural counsellors posted in Australian embassies across the globe to help make that trade happen.

In this series, we'll hear from those counsellors. Welcome to Postcards from Post.

The Middle East and Gulf countries provide a huge opportunity for our agricultural exports. They need to import up to 95% of their produce. And today we're lucky enough to have our agricultural counsellor from the UAE, Donna Bennett, with us here in Canberra to talk about the opportunities in country. So welcome, Donna.

**Donna Bennett**: Thank you, Tim. It's a pleasure to be here.

**Tim**: So, your remit is broader than the UAE. Which of the other countries that you're responsible for?

**Donna**: OK, so if I work my way across North Africa so it's Morocco, right across to those other countries and Egypt, and up to Turkiye, and in between those Middle East countries. So, Israel, Jordan and Kuwait, Qatar and of course, the UAE. There's also the other countries Iraq, Syria, Lebanon but obviously I don't go to those countries at the moment.

**Tim**: Can you tell us a little bit about the market in the UAE, but also those other markets, and give us an idea of what they're like for Australian produce.

**Donna**: First of all, I'll say that Australia's reputation is absolutely up there, number one in trust of our product, and that goes to food safety as well, but also the integrity and the traceability of our products. And because we've got such a good biosecurity system, there's trust in that product being absolutely, you know, king or queen. And a lot of those products are grains that are going into the Middle East. So grains and pulses, particularly chickpeas and lentils, huge coming into the Middle East and also our canola seeds, the oils etcetera and then our sheep meat.

**Tim**: Can you tell us a little bit more about the extension of shelf life and how that's helping our Australian red meat industry?

**Donna**: So a really important negotiation has been occurring over a number of years and through one of our research organisations, they also helped to prove that it was fine for the meat so chilled and frozen to have an extended shelf life, and that has enabled us to be more competitive because it's such a long way to export from Australia in a container on a ship and to get to the shopping centres and on shelf etcetera. All of this was really reinforced with the extension of shelf life, for the vacuum-packed products chilled products, particularly. So, the beef at 120 days and the sheep meat lamb at 90 days and overall now we have agreement across the GCC countries so that is Saudi Arabia, UAE, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain and Kuwait and then other countries like Jordan have taken it up as well.

So, it's a great story. It just means we're more competitive now because we can have the product on the shelf longer. The big thing for Gulf countries is uniformity of size so that conformity and also disease free and the supply. So, as I said, food security is really important for the Gulf countries and is ever increasing, and they also want to make sure that there's no fraud in food so that they come across that as well. Not from Australia, of course, but you know, that's when we can guarantee what you get is what you get.

**Tim**: I guess that's where our traceability system is so important in proving the product is what it is.

**Donna**: That's right. That whole provenance thing is such an important story with food safety in that context, but also the food security. As I said, that's the number one issue and that came about well rose its head really during the COVID-19 crisis. So, for Australia to be a reliable and consistent exporter and with top quality produce and we're talking not just meat, but we're talking about other agricultural products like the grains and the pulses. We're really having a great reputation. I think it's really important to build on that because we have other representatives from other countries that are, you know, wanting to get their products in, too. So, it's really important that we have, you know, representative in these countries.

**Tim**: We've talked about the opportunities for Australian red meat, and we already have a good market in the Gulf countries and we're expanding and sending more packaged meat. But what other opportunities are there for Australian agriculture over there?

**Donna**: Well, I think there's a big opportunity for a lot of our fruit and veg and the horticultural scene in that sense. So, there's always a big Gulf food event in Dubai itself, which is really represented across the whole region, and people show their wares. So, there's always opportunities there to get more of our produce in there. Avocados come to mind, some of our fruits as well, even our tomatoes, potatoes, so we can certainly get a better footprint. And now that we've started the wave of, you know, agricultural produce of our sheep meat and our grains and pulses, this just adds to the recipe, if you like.

**Tim**: You can see these opportunities, and that's part of your role to identify them in country. What's your day-to-day role involved to help the Australian industry realise those opportunities?

**Donna**: So, within Dubai itself, I have contact with industry. So, it's Meat and Livestock Australia, Dairy Australia and I also have opportunity to deal with Austrade. So, that's the business to business dealing. So, I'm more a government to government dealing, but it's we work as Team Australia, so it's a really good connection about how we can share information and how we can capture opportunities. This role is also about working through others, and I'm based in Dubai. But I do get to go to the other countries, and I work through DFAT posts. So, if there is a local issue, then now that I've had the opportunity to develop those relationships, I'm able to ask those people for help or support in order to either solve an issue or explore an opportunity. So, it's a really important role, to develop good, meaningful relationships and trusted relationships. And that's one of the things I love about it as well.

**Tim**: Earlier, we were talking a little bit about, two animals that we might not immediately think of in agriculture, horses and camels. Can you tell us a little bit about them?

**Donna**: Yes. So, both of those animals are revered in in the gulf countries. They're always looking for the fastest racing camels and of course, the sustainable or endurance racehorses, too. So, the Arabs, as a breed, and also racehorses, thoroughbreds and Australia has a great reputation across those breeds and species.

We've had multiple occasions where they've asked for the import of live camels from Australia. Not so easy, really, because our camels are wild even though they have, you know, strong vigour, etcetera of what they're looking for. But it's not an easy commodity to export. However, we do export camel meat into other the Northern African countries. When we get to horses, we do export quite a lot of horses. And as I said, the Arab horses, are quite unique because they they're racing in these gulf countries along the sand. And, they just think we've got the best. And so, they fly over their big white jumbo to pick up quite a lot of horses out of Australia on a regular basis.

**Tim**: What opportunities do you see for us to expand the export of either camel genetics or meat?

**Donna**: Look, I think there's a lot of opportunity there, and I'll bring into this some camel milk. So, there are camel farms in Australia that are milking camels, so camel milk again is a commodity that Gulf countries are uniquely wanting, and that's something that we could certainly capture into that and camel meat. As I said, we've got a processor in Australia that regularly does that, the camel genetics is an interesting one. And I think that's one that we could certainly explore and much easier to export than live ones.

**Tim**: Absolutely. And you're living and working in part of the world that is a desert environment. Some of these countries are importing, like the UAE, up to 95% of their produce their food. When it comes to a desert climate, it's hard to have fish and forest as well. So, what are the opportunities for our fisheries and our forestry industries?

**Donna**: Yes, again, big opportunities, I was only in Qatar the other day, and they're actually creating their own aquaculture centres. So, they're importing Australian barramundi fingerlings, which are about this big, and they're growing them in the big sea tanks. So, sea rings, if you like, so they're actually in the sea, and they're growing them to a stage where they can process them in, Qatar processing facility. And then they're exporting back to Australia, too. Which is really interesting. So, a product that hailed from Australia, grown in Qatar, processed in Qatar and then exported around the world, including Australia.

The other opportunity is for what they call shrimp, which obviously prawns. They're wanting to grow prawns and, you know, have a seafood industry within Qatar, but also to supply other countries nearby. And they've got the resourcing that they're able to produce these tanks if you like, breeding ponds and in the middle of the desert. So, it's incredible. I saw the facility the other day. They haven't quite finished it, but there's an opportunity for Australia to provide some brood stock, to send our breeding prawns over there.

**Tim**: What's the importance of the role of the agricultural Councillor in country?

**Donna**: The importance is to maintain those relationships and also to just keep our product, you know, in the top of mind because if we're not there, others will come in. So you know, it's a it's a competitive business. It's trade. So, if you're not there to represent your country and your products, and remember, we rely on export markets because over 80% of what we produce in the agricultural space is exported. So, it's really important for us to have that sustainable export process. And if you're not there, then you may get off the list or, you know, down the down the chain.

**Tim**: And how does it feel to be representing Australia?

**Donna**: I feel really proud. Yeah. I mean, this to me is my career pinnacle. I've been wanting to have post for quite a few years, and it just it is the icing on the cake.

**Tim**: Well, Donna, thank you so much for your time today. I think you've actually been doing Australia proud in a big way in, those Gulf countries. And we're very happy to have you over there representing us in Australian agriculture.

**Donna**: Thank you, Tim. And thank you, DAFF

[Video ends]

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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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