# Postcards from Post: Interview with Nektarios Tsirbas, Australia’s agricultural counsellor in Chile

(Duration 11 mins 58 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.

With 12 independent countries and almost half a billion people, South America is a whole continent of opportunity for Australian agricultural exports. Today we're talking to our agricultural counsellor based in Chile, Nektarios Tsirbas. Nek, how are you?

**Nektarios Tsirbas:** Excellent.

**Tim**: So you're based in Chile, but you have the whole of South America as part of your remit. Can you tell us which countries you're focused on?

**Nek**: Look, absolutely. Our primary trade focus has been Brazil. There's some enormous opportunities there for Australia where it's our, largest sort of export market. So we're dealing with a number of new products we want to get into Brazil. They're very interested in things like barley and wheat, and we wanna be able to access that market. So there's a lot of work going into there.

We have FTAs [free trade agreements] with Peru and Chile. So a lot of the work we do is taking advantage of some of those opportunities and probably, not always, talking about exports. Our biggest agricultural import from the region is actually from Argentina, which accounts for 80% of our animal feed to the chicken industry. So, it's actually vitally important.

**Tim**: What do we currently export from Australia to South America? And where can you see opportunities for us to increase that trade or find new products to export?

**Nek**: Look, our current exports are focused to being on barley, so we've got some great success here. Ecuador and Peru is you know, in terms of diversification and identifying markets for high quality malting barley, there are markets here in South America. Brazil is the one we really wanna, really make inroads into. That's a huge opportunity. They're one of the largest beer markets in the world and have huge amount of capacity. And if we can, get into that market, that's gonna be a huge diversification opportunity.

Similarly, a lot of the countries on the Pacific Coast, we're talking Ecuador, Chile, Peru, Colombia. They're all importers of a lot of the products we produce. Peru, Chile imports $1.2 billion worth of beef. A lot of that. And that's not all from Argentina or Brazil or countries in the region. They're importing it from other from places like the US and Canada at times. Similarly, they import a huge amount of dairy. So they're all products that we produce.

**Tim**: Nek, what opportunities are there for specific Australian commodities to get into South American markets?

**Nek**: I think there's enormous opportunity for Australian grains, so whether that's barley and wheat, but not solely those products. But we have huge markets here on the Pacific Coast that import often from Canada, even from France, products that we can export just as easily to some of these markets reliably. And in other cases, we've got markets that we can open, like Brazil, where they're huge importers of some of our commodities and in terms of having them as a market for diversification, that's really valuable.

And probably the other one is absolutely the same goes for meat into the Pacific coast and wine into markets like Brazil. It's one of those markets that's been expanding. We have a tiny footprint in Brazil, yet, you know, wine is a major import for them, and I'd love to see a lot more Australian wine, particularly into Brazil.

**Tim**: What does your role entail to help Australian industry realise some of these opportunities?

**Nek**: Look on a daily basis. We're talking with our counterparts in, you know, departments of agriculture, whether it's one day Brazil or whether it's another Argentina or Peru, to basically push our case for access for products. We'll also negotiate new and improved conditions, whether it's certificates more recently for sheep meat into Brazil, which will create new opportunities or opening new access with Peru, as we've done recently for beef and other occasions. It's about improvements like being able for our dairy exports, for Chile to recognise its equivalents, which we achieved last year. So they don't need to look and inspect at every one of our establishments. They'll, they're able to simply accept that, you know, if we have verified our products that they're happy to accept from any export establishment in Australia’s dairy products. So, a lot of it is that, but then we also have another component where we work with countries on things like sustainability, EU, deforestation, regulation issues internationally that affect us and about how we can partner with them either in the region or internationally to, argue our case.

In particularly in the case of Brazil. Obviously, we've been in talks with them over a prolonged period about issues of sustainability and EU deforestation. We're both beef producers. We both face issues in terms of, you know, making sure that consumers are comfortable with the level of sustainability of our production. We've had to develop systems and we exchange information on what's being developed in Brazil or in other countries as well. We share that with Argentina and they share it with us, and Uruguay as well. And then about being able to explain that sustainability message to markets and buyers and how we do that. For instance, this year there's a global sustainability roundtable that's going to be hosted in Uruguay, and we're going to see Australian industry represented there right alongside Brazil, Argentina, and that's one example.

But we want to see our industries and our governments working together, whether it's at UN climate change conferences, the UN FAO, WTO. We have common interests, and we want to be promoting free and fair trade, and the contribution that makes to food security globally the contribution. You know, how we can work together to reduce emissions for meat production and other products. And now we can produce and show consumers we can sustainably producing food

**Tim**: With this engagement on the international stage around sustainability and climate targets and so on, with South America, it seems your role, is not only a bilateral trade one, but one that affects potentially international policy around the production of agriculture. Since you've been over there, what are some of the major wins that we've had in trade and market access to South America?

**Nek**: Always want to have more, but probably our most recent key wins we've seen, into Peru. We've seen, beef market access. So that happened this year. We finally got a number of establishments listed and so we'll be able to trade into the Peruvian market. That's a win for industry.

We've recently been able to open the market for genetic material, you know, beef, sheep, goats into the Ecuadorian market as well as live cattle into the Ecuadorian market. We do a lot of co-operation because the area, the countries, are really eager to learn about our biosecurity system and our export systems. They often face pest and disease risks and have an enviable status, particularly in Chile. And they look to us and being able to engage with them on that co-operative level, really, actually, it might seem counterintuitive, it actually really helps the trade relationship that having a good discussion with them and assisting them on cooperation, you'll find that it actually does help other discussions and getting and, you know, helps advance market access because these other issues are very important to them.

**Tim**: What would your message to Australian industry be if they want to start exporting products to South America?

**Nek**: Look, I think the first thing would be to come to the market and actually go to some of the events that we see here in South America. We have a number of events in Chile, whether in Ecuador or Brazil. And you will see Canada, the United States, the European Union represented there. And I think it's important to have our industry come and have a look and start to have those discussions with importers here in South America and see what some of the competitors that they compete with other markets. Because if the US and Canada can sell here, so can we.

**Tim**: What do you love about being in South America? And, what excites you about your job?

**Nek**: Look, it's amazing to be in a region that I guess, many of us don't know much about. Obviously South America's dynamic. It's growing. It's got a growing population. It's got a lot of exciting places and a lot of exciting history so that, you know, from a personal perspective, that's it. That's amazing. It always surprises me how little, I guess, to one extent they know about us, and we know about them to the same thing that we don't know about the opportunities, vice versa. They sometimes don't know how to deal with Australians, you know, because they don't see them. And, you know, just educating them about, you know how easy it is actually to work with Australians. And that's one of the key lessons that we learned from barley, that, you know, once they knew how to deal with and, you know, trade with Australia, it was actually a really straightforward and easy thing to do.

**Tim**: So would you say it's very important to have that human-to-human connection on the ground?

**Nek**: Absolutely. Just to have those discussions because we do suffer from not necessarily, having a lot of Australians visit, whether that's from industry or government. For many, South America is a long way away. But I know, at the end of the day, it's only like 14 hours by plane. It's a lot closer than Europe and a lot of other places, you know, similar to America. So, it's, you know, something that can be done and even just exercises of educating of what we have and what we can provide is something that we don't do a lot of in South America. And one thing that we've managed to do is and we do a lot through having a counsellor here, is we do provide some, you know, whether it's industry or government, a lot of service in terms of explaining to them what we do, what we can offer and doing that often in Spanish and Portuguese for them because one of the keys is make it as easy as possible. And that's one thing that counsellors can help do.

**Tim**: Nek, you have, a whole continent to care for, and you're just one person. How do you do it?

**Nek**: Look, I'm very lucky. I've got two locally engaged staff. I don't know about the experience of other counsellors, but I mentioned before language. Language is a real challenge here. It's very often that you'll be talking to senior officials that do not speak English. That's not something you necessarily see in a lot of other markets, even markets in Asia. So having my support staff has been incredibly valuable. You know, if I had to shout out and you know, I need to recognise my staff Eduardo and Lara, for all the work they do, but really, it is incredibly critical. And, they have a lot of coverage, just like me.

**Tim**: Well, Nek, thank you so much for your time today. The importance of your role for a whole continent can't be understated. It's an enormous remit. You're doing Australia proud over there. So, thank you for representing us.

[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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