

**Embargo: 6am Tuesday, 12 February 2019**

## **DON'T SWALLOW FAKE NEWS ON FOOD AND AGRICULTURE**

The 'fake news' workshop information is [here](#) and the AARES [program](#) is online. Please contact [Cathy Reade](#) 0413 575 934 for releases or to arrange attendance or interviews.

Gene technology offers much for the benefit of people and the planet but public perception, fake news, and 'alternative' facts from powerful lobbies play a significant role in shaping public policy in agricultural and food production, including in Australia. How can facts win?

A who's who of economists and researchers working on agricultural and food policy around the world will address this issue at a full-day workshop on 12 February titled, '**Evidence-based Farm and Food Policy in an Era of Fake News,**' as part of the 63<sup>rd</sup> Annual Conference of the Australasian Agricultural and Resource Economics Society (AARES) at Melbourne's Convention and Exhibition Centre.

One of the speakers at the workshop is Dr Alison Van Eenennaam from the University of California, Davis, a prominent science advocate who grew up in Melbourne and is now at the forefront of biotechnology in animal agriculture.

"We are in the middle of a measles outbreak in the United States at the moment due to misinformation and fearmongering about the safety and importance of childhood vaccinations. Misinformation about agriculture is equally rampant, and I fear we are going to have the same problems overcoming the fearmongering around gene technologies, wasting many years dealing with misinformation and untruths when we need urgent access to these technologies to allow breeders to adapt our food plants and animals to disease, drought and heat stress," she said.

"While people may have a negative gut reaction when made aware of game-changing food and agriculture technologies, including my own work, they have a direct and tangible impact on issues consumers do care about, that is, access to safe, nutritious food produced with improved animal welfare and a reduced environmental footprint," said Dr Van Eenennaam.

"'Precision breeding' of livestock using the latest gene technologies can be faster and more effective compared to traditional breeding methods, and is just one example of the game-changing technologies that misinformation threatens."

"Policy makers and politicians find it easier to appease powerful lobbies, based on misinformation but this leads to over-regulation, unfounded safety concerns, and public scepticism."

"We can't let the fearmongers dominate the technology debate. The opportunity cost of doing nothing is too great."

"Gene-editing technology has big potential in farm animals. It has been used to create pigs resistant to certain viruses (e.g PRRS), heat tolerant cattle, and sheep whose wool grows longer. My own work has focused on tweaking the genome of dairy cows to turn off horns, thereby eliminating the need for physical horn removal while retaining excellent dairy genetics. And scientists at CSIRO, here in Australia, are working to produce monosex female chickens for the egg industry; with obvious animal welfare and efficiency benefits."

"Australia's laws around gene technology have allowed a limited number of products to come to market, such as insect-protected cotton which has enabled a dramatic reduction in insecticide use.

And yet some States are still opposing the use of these technologies to address problems faced by farmers. The inappropriate regulation of technology based on opinion or political pressure rather than a science-based evaluation of risks and benefits is a growing concern globally. Given projected population increases and climate variability, we need access to genetic innovations in agricultural breeding programs perhaps now more than ever,” said the award winning animal geneticist.

The workshop will feature presentations from six highly distinguished speakers:

- *The Benefits of Multiple-Win Technologies in Agri-Food Systems*, Shenggen Fan, Director-General, IFPRI
- *How Misinformation about Agriculture Threatens Sustainability and Innovation*, Alison Van Eenennaam, University of California, Davis
- *How Social and Commercial Media Affect Consumer Perception*, Jill McCluskey, Washington State University
- *Rational Ignorance, Bad News and Food Policy*, Jo Swinnen, Catholic University of Leuven
- *Should Public Opinion Be Considered in Public Policies Such as GM Labeling?* Ellen Goddard, University of Alberta
- *Economic Reasoning and Evidence for Policy Linking Food to Farms*, Dan Sumner, University of California, Davis

These presentations will be followed by discussion sessions, each of which will be opened by one of Australia’s leading agricultural economists with a focus on what should be done about the issue.

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