

2017 AARES Distinguished Life Member

Associate Professor Bob Farquharson



Associate Professor Bob Farquharson's career in agricultural economics developed from growing up on farms and concurring with his father's suggestion that this would be an interesting discipline to learn. Bob has studied at the University of New England and the University of California Davis, and worked at the Bureau of Agricultural Economics (now ABARES), NSW Department of Agriculture/Primary Industries and the University of Melbourne. His lifetime career in agricultural and resource economics research has now been extended to teaching and student supervision at the University of Melbourne for the past 9 years. Bob's career interest has been in the economics of agricultural production and natural resource use, and new technology assessment in farming systems contexts in Australia and developing countries.

In his time at the BAE in Canberra (1976-86) Bob was involved in field survey data collection for the Australian Agricultural and Grazing Industries Survey. Research projects using that survey data included an IAC Inquiry into Assistance for Fertiliser Use in Australia, analysing supply response in the Australian dairy industry, and analysis of wheat industry trends. Bob also studied trends in the number and age of Australian farmers. He then transferred to Grafton at the NSW Agriculture Research and Advisory Station (1987-1994) where he worked in a multi-disciplinary environment with other scientists and advisory officers. His work included farm-level technology evaluations of a potential twinning technology for beef cattle (Master's thesis topic), the farm-level economics of nutrition x breed interactions in beef cattle systems, an assessment of the returns from investment in beef cattle genetics breeding and research for the Australian beef industry, an assessment of research priorities for beef cattle breeding, and a policy evaluation of the effect of single-desk selling by the NSW Grains Board. The position also involved presenting at field days, particularly a herd-level economic evaluation of a Crossbreeding x Nutrition project and the economics of pasture improvement in the upper Clarence Valley.

Awarding of an AMLRDC scholarship allowed Bob to study at the University of California Davis and obtain a Master of Science (Agricultural and Resource Economics) degree. Then at the NSW Department of Primary Industries Tamworth Agricultural Institute (1997-2008) he conducted an analysis of managing soil fertility as a natural resource under cereal crop production in northern Australia (PhD thesis topic, studying under Oscar Cacho and John Mullen). He also conducted an analysis of the economic costs of weeds, developed an economic framework for Nitrogen fertiliser decisions for cereal producers, conducted farming systems studies (including salinity in the Liverpool Plains region of NSW), and investigated a cotton industry issue of using soft versus hard chemicals to manage cotton crop weeds in the context of insecticide resistance.

Bob has been involved in ACIAR projects in Cambodia since 2001 and more recently in Myanmar. These have included assessment of field crop technologies in the context of semi-subsistence farming in the upland regions of Cambodia, including Rhizobium inoculation of legume seeds. He has also assessed the financial and opportunity costs of agricultural labour in Cambodia, with implications for rice production technologies. Recently, Bob has commenced work in Myanmar relating to fertility management for semi-subsistence cereal (rice and maize) farmers in the dry zone.

At the University of Melbourne (since 2008) Bob has analysed the potential of perennial plants as an adaptation to climate change for dryland farming systems in southern Australia, helped assess the potential effect of a carbon price on dairy farm profitability in Victoria, helped develop an economic model of the Sri Lankan coconut industry to evaluate the potential effects of farm-level adaptations to climate change on the coconut supply chain, developed an economic framework for sharing water within a river catchment, and is working on applying the production economics framework to Nitrogen fertiliser decisions in semi-subsistence agricultural systems, including developing appropriate extension messages to Myanmar farmers.

An AARES member since 1976, Bob has been a long-standing Councillor for AARES representing the New England and Victorian Branches and has been Federal Secretary since 2011. Bob was co-chair (with Garry Griffith) of the Local Organising Committee for the 49th Annual Conference of AARES at Coffs Harbour in 2005 and served on the LOC for the 2011 Melbourne Conference. Recently he has guided Council through the process of transforming itself to a Not-For-Profit Company Limited by Guarantee with Charity status.