Farming

Agriculture – growing crops and raising livestock – is a major part of Australia’s economy, worth $155 billion each year. More than 150,000 farms cover about 48 per cent of Australia, making agriculture the dominant land use across the continent. Australian farms produce beef, cotton, chicken, dairy products, dried fruits, timber, grains, pork, rice, sheep, sugar and wool.

Did you know?

Some farmers practise dry-land farming (using only rainfall) while others use irrigation to water their pasture or crops.

Different farms for different climates

There are three different ‘zones’ of farming in Australia, which depend on the climate:

- Zones with high rainfall – such as Tasmania and the east coast – are used for dairy and beef production.
- In the wheat and sheep zone, sheep and beef cattle graze, and crops such as wheat and beans are grown.
- The pastoral zone receives little rainfall and has less fertile soils. Here, cattle and sheep are grazed over very large areas.
IMPACTS
Agriculture has a far-reaching impact on the environment, notably its requirements of land and water. In particular, European methods of farming are not well-suited to the dry climate and poor soils of Australia.

More than 100 million hectares of forest have been cleared since Europeans arrived, mostly to make way for farms. Land clearing for agriculture continues today.

Agriculture is the largest consumer of water in Australia. Different types of farming require different amounts of water. For example, an average of more than 15,000L of water are required to produce one kilogram of beef. One kilogram of vegetables requires just 322L of water. However, these numbers are different depending on the type of farming practised (i.e. dry-land or irrigated). Taking water from rivers for irrigation affects river flow and can make the soil overly salty, meaning plants can’t grow.

Challenges
We are learning how to adapt farming techniques to Australia’s hot, dry climate. But finding new ways to maintain and grow the farming industry in the future is a significant challenge for Australia. Climate change, drought, and water availability, and declining soil fertility are key problems that must be addressed.