

Citrus Industry Inquiry Productivity Commission
Locked Bag 2
Collins Street East Post Office
Melbourne Vic 8003

NSW

5th December 2001

Dear Sir/ Madam,

RE: Citrus Growing and Processing

I would like to take the opportunity to voice my opinion on the state of affairs in regard to the Citrus Industry. Approximately fifteen (15) years ago, my wife and I made a conscious decision not to expand our operations because we saw a lack of enthusiasm in the leaders of this country, which we thought, should be nurturing a struggling industry. We invested in other areas and encouraged our children to pursue other careers. I have also had a full time second job for more than twenty (20) years.

My farm is twenty one (21) acres in area and would keep most individuals employed full-time, however, my ever-increasing expenses and my flat or declining commodity prices require me to supplement my income. My son, wife and I, harvest our oranges and work the land without employing external employees. My wife is required to irrigate along with other tasks while I am engaged at my other job and my son administers the large amounts of paper work along with other labour intensive jobs in his own time. This leaves weekends for us to pick our own fruit because paying pickers is just not viable. Even with these cost cutting measures, progress is only quite minor.

From my point of view, whether the citrus industry survives or not, will not dramatically affect my long-term future. My wife and I are approaching retirement, my daughter is studying and has started her own family and my son has a professional career. It does however, disappoint me to see all the hard work and pride we've injected into our place, resulting in a legacy not worth passing on. Furthermore, I feel for the individuals who solely rely on the citrus industry and do not have the skills or the money to move into secondary processes. I fear that those farmers will not survive in the industry. In the current climate, the days where a fifty (50) acre farm will support a family are gone. Too many of my friends have encouraged their children to leave the land and pursue other careers. This leaves the older generation farmers which when they retire, will have their farms taken over by large conglomerates or left to deteriorate.

The decision makers in this country need to decide whether we want a citrus industry. If the answer is YES, then our citrus farmers need to be on the same level playing field as other farmers overseas. This may mean an increase in tariffs on imports or subsidies for new technologies. Margins for increased productivity are already very

small. As stated previously, I have a very low cost base and still I cannot provide for my family solely with the farm income. There may be individuals who subscribe to the idea that an industry not able to be financially viable without government intervention should wither away and die. I say to these people, come and confront the farmer and tell him or her that their skills are no longer required and tell their employees that they need to find work elsewhere or receive unemployment benefits.

I believe that some of the problem is that the average Australian believes that a farmer is a person who farms sheep and wheat. I do appreciate that these farmers have their own problems and issues, however an increased awareness of the other primary producers in Australia will help our plight. Moreover, it seems that in current political climates, marginal seats only, seem to attract special consideration. Even though our federal member has tried to increase awareness, it seems that unless the political heavy weights lend their support to certain issues, change is impossible to come by.

I believe than an industry that still cannot produce enough products to satisfy its own domestic needs, can survive and prosper with some government intervention.

Thus, I hope that at the very least, I have conveyed to some extent, the efforts expired by citrus farmers, to ensure that they survive in the industry. Unfortunately, survival is not enough and without government assistance prosperous days will not been seen. Otherwise, this increasing trend whereby our families are moving off the land to pursue other careers will leave a skeleton of a once proud industry.

Yours faithfully,

M. Piccolo