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Opinion

HELEN MILLICER: WE MUST CHANGE THE FUTURE OF FARMING, AND USE OUR ORGANIC 'WASTE'

We have a crisis upon us, and will we fast-track in time? Given we are being hit on all sides by climate change it is vital we change our systems to cut our emissions.

Australian agriculture feeds us, and helps feed millions around the world, generating an estimated economic benefit of $78 billion in the current financial year. This bounty comes from our soil and waterways, which have been depleted and polluted for decades. Simultaneously, our farmers and food production capacity are being impacted by climate change causing wildfires, weird weather, rising temperatures and lower rainfall. And in a nasty feedback loop, our national total greenhouse gas emissions are growing – and farming is partly responsible, adding 14.6% to national emissions in 2019 according to CSIRO data.

It's tragic - but it can be changed. We need to switch our priorities so it is cheaper to reduce pollution and easier to restore our soils than degrade them as we do now.

Experts estimate that each year we lose over a million tonnes of valuable topsoil due to erosion, and soil fertility is in decline due to conventional farming practices that do not add organic material, such as compost, mulch and biochar. This means farmers relying on chemical fertilisers to maintain crop yields. As costs increase for fertiliser (for example, urea, currently above $1,400/tonne, up by 230% in 12 months) farmers need easy, low cost and reliable access to high quality, clean compost and soil conditioners. Research from Queensland University, finds that the addition of 10-15 tonnes of manure and compost per hectare per year can increase soil organic carbon by .9% and .55% per year respectively, resulting in similar increase in available nutrients.

This silver bullet is currently mostly going in our bins or rotting in piles. We are also in danger of failing our own targets. In 2019, in the National Waste Policy Action Plan the Australian Government with states and territories agreed to:

- Introduce food organics and garden organics collection (FOGO) services to households and businesses by 2023
- Halve the amount of organic waste sent to landfill for disposal by 2030.

However, only 30% of Australians have access to a FOGO collection service. And no government in Australia or industry sector has yet introduced a program or changed laws or financial levers to capture 'waste' organics from businesses in cities and regions.

Audits of household general waste bins show 40-60% of waste to landfill is organic material, and every kg of that produces 500g of greenhouse gas when rotting in landfill. Plus, the lion's share of two thirds of our country's organic 'waste' from agriculture and fisheries is untreated and lost from our economy adding to climate change.

In other food-producing nations such as France and the Netherlands, organics from all sources are so highly valued they are diverted from landfills and put to work.

In France, since 2016 all supermarkets have been required to divert food and drink (not sold in store) either to charities for hungry people or to become biogas or compost or face fines. This successful program has now been extended to all food outlets such as catering businesses and restaurants.

Since 2012 the French have been strategic, and progressively and successfully they have transformed organics losses into nutritional wins for their hungry communities, farmers, soils and climate.

If we prioritise the same things in Australia and truly value our organics we will support our farmers to retain and enhance the productivity of their soils, and cut climate polluting emissions from excessive fertiliser use and landfills. This circular, low emissions and highly efficient future is ours to make.