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Push for milk levy to boost incomes

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Simone Smith | April 17, 2013

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NEW lobby group Farmer Power has called for a levy of 50 cents a litre on all drinking milk.

Group spokesman Warrnambool accountant Garry Smith said this would return 12 cents a litre extra to all dairy farmers and make their businesses viable.

Mr Smith, told a meeting at the Colac RSL last night, this would cost an "average" consumer \$53 a year.

He called for the dairy industry support the this levy which would be enforced by the government.

Mr Smith also said an extra 16 cents a litre could be returned to dairy farmers if Woolworths and Coles sold house-brand milk for \$1.64 a litre, the same price as local branded Sungold Milk.

Victoria supplies 8 per cent of its production into the fresh drinking milk market.

About 150 people attended the meeting and Farmer Power was also collecting signatures to support a "true independent" review of industry body Dairy Australia.

The current review of Dairy Australia would be done by former Australian Dairy Farmers president Allan Burgess, chairman of Apple and Pear Australia John Lawrenson, former Dairy Australia director John Doyle and Dairy Australia company secretary Ross Joblin.

Farmer Power asked Dairy Australia to release funds to conduct an independent review but south west accountant Kevin Ashworth said it was refused.

Mr Ashworth explained how dairy farmers pay the industry levy but they may not actually be registered "group A" members and able to vote at annual general meetings.

He called on the group to contact Dairy Australia to ensure they were registered as group A members.

Mr Ashworth's presentation focused on the Dairy Australia constitution and how he believed there was a "conflict of

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interest" between some group B members, such as lobby group Australian Dairy Farmers and Australian Dairy Products Federation, and group A members.

While group B members can't vote on resolutions, he said there were people in the industry who were both group B and group A members.

"A group B member can move a resolution and vote through the group A membership," Mr Ashworth said.

"A group A member can move a resolution and vote as long as they have the backing of 100 (group A) signatures (collected in 14 days)."

The night also included a Rural Debt Summit and speakers from the national Rural Debt Roundtable Working Group, including chairman Queensland grain-grower Rowell Walton.

Mr Walton said agricultural organisations have failed to generate policy that ensures the viability of farmers and as farm debt increases and returns are not sufficient.

"Our organisations have failed us, I don't quite understand why," he said.

"Our state organisations have failed us and the national (organisations) are almost invisible."

Queensland economist Ben Rees provided the history of Australian agriculture's growing debt and how this problem has evolved due to farmers using debt to increase production.

He said debt was a symptom of a deeper problem, low farm incomes.

Mr Rees called for the establishment of a farm bank to remove default securities, or approaching default, from the banking system and the bank issued with government securities as a replacements.

Economist professor Mark McGovern said rural Australia must be repositioned as there was currently \$60 billion in Australian rural debt.

He said the banking system was holding debt for farmers with inadequate income to service these debts.

"We are operating on an unsustainable basis. Dr McGovern said and if agriculture continues to talk about production issues and ignore financial problems nothing is going to change.

"There have been policies trying to solve a financial problem looking a production," he said.

Later he told the group: "We have modelled the world as if finance doesn't matter, the world left itself open to a financial crisis," he said.

In "real terms" farm incomes were heading towards zero in 2007, according to Dr McGovern.

Affordable interest rates and drought relief would also help farmers stop spiralling debt.

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