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AgriFutures unleashed

By Afraa Kori

The 2025 AgriFutures Stakeholder Summit was the largest and most ambitious yet, tripling in scale and relocating to Canberra for a week of powerful connection and collaboration among Australia's leading and emerging voices in agriculture.

Held last month in Canberra, the Summit brought together more than 150 participants from across the country, including Horizon Scholars, AgriFutures Rural Women's Award (RWA) Finalists, industry innovators, MPs, Ministers, Senators, research leaders and key representatives from AgriFutures Australia's levied and emerging industries.

This is the first time these voices have come together in one place, working side-by-side as part of the Summit's unique program to tackle some of the greatest challenges and opportunities for Australia's rural industries.

AgriFutures General Manager, Workforce, Communications and Adoption, Jennifer Galloway, said this year's Summit was deliberately positioned in Canberra to elevate the reach and influence of rural leadership.

"Canberra isn't just a backdrop. It's part of the design, placing young leaders and grassroots industries face-to-face with national decision-makers, departments and other Research and Development Corporations, Ms Galloway said.

"We're creating opportunities for genuine engagement that leads to real outcomes."

At the heart of the program was the National Hackathon, where cross-disciplinary teams of past and present Horizon Scholars worked on urgent issues identified by AgriFutures Australia's levied and emerging industries, such as sharing the story of Australian agriculture to garner ongoing community support, climate-smart rice production and transforming poultry research careers.

AgriFutures General Manager, Levied and Emerging Industries, Samantha Beresford, said the Summit brought new collaboration opportunities.

"Our industries are grappling with real, complex issues. This Summit gives them a voice and a chance to work directly with emerging leaders who bring new thinking, energy and perspective," Ms Beresford said.

The program included a candid panel on systems change hosted by Ms McGowan, featuring

Troy Williams, CEO of the National Farmers' Federation, and Senator Susan McDonald, Shadow Minister for Resources and Northern Australia.

This was followed by a morning tea connecting Scholars, RWA Finalists, and AgriFutures Levied and Emerging Industries with parliamentarians and senior public servants.

As Cathy McGowan explained, the panel, and the Summit as a whole, was about bringing together the people who were making things happen in agriculture.

"It's not just about ideas; it's about action. By connecting researchers, industry leaders, policy makers and emerging voices, we're creating space for real conversations that lead to change," Ms McGowan said.

"It's a reminder that regional and rural Australia is full of solutions and when we work together, the impact is national."

The Summit's Stakeholder Showcase Dinner featured industry leaders past and present, including Jory Kitsch (Flux Robotics), Tanya Egerton (RWA 2024 National Winner and Op Shop Project) and Dr Mary Wu (Chicken Meat Federation). Together, they reflected on how courage, collabora-

tion and innovation shifted systems and unlocked opportunity.

Dr Mary Cole, Victorian finalist for the AgriFutures Rural Women's Award, attended the Summit and reflected on the unique gathering.

"It was the first time the Rural Women's Award state finalists, summit for new and emerging industries and the Horizon scholars were all together and interactive for the week," the Garfield resident said.

"The horizon scholars are young leaders in their fields in university still studying some aspect of agriculture. Brilliant young minds. The future of Australian agriculture will be in good hands."

"It was a very well organised but exhausting week. The Rural Women's Award state finalists made their pitches for the National Award on Tuesday. The national winner will be announced at the gale dinner at Parliament House on October 28."

Canberra media, policymakers, and sector leaders were encouraged to engage throughout the week to witness firsthand the leadership, innovation and impact forged across Australia's rural industries.

Magic beneath the mud: Sheree Marris dives in

By Violet Li

For years, marine biologist Sheree Marris believed she had to travel overseas to witness the world's most spectacular marine life. But now, the award-winning environmental communicator has come full circle, realising the magic she'd been searching for has been in her backyard all along: Western Port Bay.

Her latest project, Western Port Down Under, is not just a documentary and a book. It's a full-scale social impact campaign designed to showcase the rarely seen underwater world of the bay she grew up in, and to inspire a new generation of environmental stewards.

"Western Port is like the poor cousin to Port Phillip and the even poorer cousin to the Great Barrier Reef because it's really muddy, because at times it can be really cold. But that is actually a part of its charm and its magic that I'm discovering," she said.

"There's a lot of pressure on Western Port, and one of the greatest challenges is that while there are all these great champions of trying to protect Western Port, we don't really have a compelling narrative about what's under the water."

"We know a lot about on top, but we're not doing so well when it comes to showing the magic that is in the mud, that is in the mangroves, that is in the rocky reefs or the sandy plains, and that's something that I love and that's something that I know I do well and I want to work with amazing people to show this story."

"Because if people don't know, they can't care."

So what's under the water?

The team recently filmed soldier crabs inside self-made "muddy igloos"—tiny air bubbles they create underground to breathe.

"These are the type of things that really excite me because people think mud's really boring. It's not. It's so cool, these animals," Sheree said.

With world-class cinematography and compelling storytelling, the film will explore



Sheree Marris in the field. (Photo by Agnes Sabonsolin)



Weedy Seadragon by Sheree Marris.

everything from prehistoric marine creatures like elephant sharks and sevengill sharks, to vibrant nudibranchs, described by Sheree as



Sheree Marris's latest project Western Port Down Under.

"land slugs on acid."

"It's this nursery. It's this environment that cultivates a habitat for all these animals to come

and breed. It's incredibly unique," Sheree said.

"There are animals in the sea grass and in amongst the mangroves, and it's just, anywhere you look, there is magic and there is wonder and there is still so much we don't know."

The Western Port Down Under social impact campaign, backed by the Unico Conservation Foundation, officially kicked off with the first community conversation set for Wednesday 13 August at Warneet Motor Yacht Club.

"I want the community to come along, but I want to learn from the community," Sheree said.

"What do they know about Western Port that I don't? Are there any secret little places? I want to get the community to take ownership of that project because it's not just my Western Port. It's everyone's Western Port, and I want them to become environmental stewards for this really unique place that we have."

The centrepiece of the campaign is a documentary from the award-winning team behind Melbourne Down Under, which will be launched in the summer of 2026-27. But the team isn't stopping at the film.

Sheree plans to host the footage, images, and research on a public online "legacy portal," where students, scientists, and everyday nature lovers can explore the underwater world of Western Port.

The social impact campaign also includes other initiatives: a free school program, a discovery trail across key sites, a community screening roadshow, and a free marine media library to support local conservation.

While a teaser for the documentary has been completed with philanthropic support, Sheree and her team are now actively seeking additional funding to bring the full vision to life.

"It's an underworld paradise and playground. People just do not realise the magic and how lucky we are to have it," Sheree said.

To know more about the project, visit: westernportdownunder.com.au/

You can join the community conversation from 6pm to 8pm on Wednesday 13 August at Warneet Motor Yacht Club.