

Family homesteads

More housing. More jobs. More growth.

To the Hon. Anthony Roberts, MP, N.S.W. Minister for Planning





A **family homestead** is a small plot of land, at least one hectare, that includes a house and a garden, a comfortable place for raising a family and for retiring in old age. It is a person's homeland on Earth, supporting good health, scientific innovation and social well-being (Tsapkov 2016). It provides food, fibre, medicine and materials using ecological principles, and it is *relaxing* (Semerenko 2015, Poznenenko 2016a). The family homestead fosters harmonious civic engagement (Kolganov 2017) and promotes feelings of love between parents and children (Richards 2010:165).

The idea of a family homestead was first put forward in the "Ringing Cedars of Russia" series, written by Vladimir Megre between 1996 and 2010. The series calls for each person to create their own family homestead, and many have responded—and not just in Russia. Family homesteads now number in the tens of thousands (Pozanenko 2016b, Anastasia Foundation 2018). They have been described as "multigenerational homesteads practicing small-scale agriculture", and also involve broad land reform (Davidov 2015). In their ideal form, family homesteads are allocated for free lifetime use, to be passed on by inheritance, but not to be bought or sold.

Family homesteads could be a cheap, positive measure to create affordable housing, long-lasting jobs, and ecological sustainability (Dimitriev & Karpov 2014) and present novel solutions to social, ecological and economic problems (Zadorin et al. 2014). This report outlines the potential of family homesteads in Australia.



Growing the economy

In 2016-17, agriculture showed the biggest growth of any industry in Australia (Office of the Chief Economist 2018). Though mining still underpins the economy, agriculture is marked as a future winner along with tourism and education (Macquarie Bank 2017).

Australian agriculture has long benefitted from a “clean, green” reputation (Chang & Kristiansen 2006), and while “mining to dining” is not the whole story (Russell 2016), the synthesis of agriculture, tourism and education offers positive opportunities for green growth within planetary boundaries. The CSIRO points to “natural foods”, “green and ethical value chains” and “tourism” as the best pathways to expansion (CSIRO Futures 2017:14).

Caring for natural capital delivers also cross-benefits to other sectors. For example, education in sustainable agriculture is a growing export (Australian Trade Commission 2015) and the natural environment is still our biggest tourist attraction (Hardiman & Burgin 2017).

Although technology is sometimes hoped to drive green innovation (e.g. PwC Australia n.d., National Committee for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food 2017), it unfortunately also contributes a lot of global emissions (Belkhir and Elmeligi 2018), creating a “rebound effect” that may negate its benefits (Malik et al. 2016). By contrast, family homesteads offer a way to make money without damaging the environment.



Planting a municipal garden in Krasnodar, Russia.

Creating new jobs

Australia has more arable land per person than any other country (World Bank 2018), but less than one percent of the population are farmers (Jeffrey 2017). By increasing the rural workforce and upgrading the value of our products, there is a lot of value still to be tapped from this comparative advantage. Allotments for family homesteads could get people onto the land, and provide a large supply of long-lasting jobs. In good times, people can always work from home, expand or develop new businesses. But a homestead is also a secure backup job and basic subsistence in case of unemployment (Kolganov 2017).

While mining exports continue to be strong, the principles of sustainability, diversification, flexibility and resilience suggest that we cannot rely on it alone indefinitely. A family homestead allotment program could help us stay competitive in agriculture and tourism, besides other benefits. When done correctly, small farms can be more resilient, require less labour (Sharaskin 2008:239), and are better able to adopt sustainable practices (Baumgart-Getz

et al. 2012). Then, upgraded supply chains would provide improved access to overseas markets (NSW Farmers 2018).

However, there is also competition. There are 508 settlements of family homesteads in Russia and Eastern Europe (Anastasia Foundation 2018), and natural products are already appearing internationally alongside workshops and tourist experiences (Megre 2018, Ringing Cedars 2018, Maul 2016). In 2017, Russia began allotting free hectares of land, receiving 113,000 applications and processing 37,700 plots for use within the first year (Ministry for the Development of the Russian Far East 2018a, 2018b). Russia enjoys lower production costs than Australia, is closer to customers, and is already encroaching on our business in Europe and Asia (Australian Export Grains Innovation Centre 2016, Kalisch Gordon et al. 2018).

Yet, with abundant land resources, a strong economy, and a creative, free, educated society, Australia is extremely well placed to compete on the global stage. It would be good to use our advantages properly.



Planting trees at Skazochniy Krai family homestead settlement, Krasnodar, Russia

Protecting the environment

Family homesteads produce a yield using little more than soil, seed, sun and rain, relying mostly on family labour (Donchevsky et al. 2016, Kolganov 2017). They are embedded in the natural capital of Earth, without chemicals, pollutants or machinery.

Commitments to curb emissions under the *Paris Agreement* (2015) are not currently adequate to achieve the 2 degree limit (MIT Joint Program 2017:9), threatening multiple aspects of the economy and society (Cribb 2016:91). Negative emissions technologies (NETs) are widely hoped to correct this overshoot, and the favourite candidate is Bio-energy with Carbon Capture and Storage (BECCS), a system of tree-planting and low-carbon burning for energy (Burns & Nicholson 2017).

Experience shows that tree-planting projects

are most successful when land tenure is secure (Delang and Yuan 2015:96), and only sequester carbon when sustainable techniques are used (Fajardy & Mac Dowell 2017). Tree-planting on family homesteads, which does use such techniques, could be sold as credits on the carbon market, including government-to-government (Lal 2004, Stavins & Stowe 2016:59). Growing food near cities also reduces transport emissions (Lee et al. 2015) and enhances their overall sustainability (Martino 2009, Eigenbrod and Gruda 2015). Meeting *Paris* targets boosts our clean, green reputation.

By using ecological solutions, family homesteads provide a surplus with minimal pollution, and are better able to implement effective management practices (Semerenko 2015:24). With smart distribution networks, these benefits are compounded.



A simple, cozy home at Skazhocniy Krai family homestead settlement, Krasnodar, Russia.

Better affordable housing

Family homestead allotments could improve access to housing, while also providing secure, long-lasting jobs (Ministry for the Development of the Russian Far East 2018a, Kolganov 2017). Allotments are cheaper than public housing (Tsapkov 2016), and settlers of family homesteads sometimes develop their own infrastructure (e.g. Megre 2018, Brovarets and Yaramov 2017). Deals like this could offset major development costs—a new kind of public-private partnership.

The current plan to upzone, fast-track DAs, and build more infrastructure may not be effective (Gurran et al. 2018) and is typically carbon intensive (Hoornweg et al. 2011, Dimitriev and Karpov 2014:4). Many people also call for more public housing, but there is a gap in funding (Martin and Pawson 2017). Presented the right way, family homestead allotments could be a cheap and popular solution.

By considering multiple sectors together—economic factors together with social and environmental—family homesteads offer mutual benefits. For example, the Greater Sydney Commission recognises the need to protect agricultural land (2018:141), but competition between agriculture and housing is still the most common source of land-use conflict (Department of Primary Industries 2011:1). The small-scale ecological techniques of family homesteads could mitigate the nuisance caused by machinery and chemicals, by combining two essential land-uses together.

Natural surroundings also improve human health (Ryan et al. 2010, Biedenweg et al. 2017) and social cohesion both within and among families (Boukharaeva and Marloie 2015:129). The warm feelings associated with a family homestead can make people “not just happy and healthy, but basking in an overwhelming atmosphere of love” (Richards 2010:165).



Settlers of a family homestead, who have developed infrastructure for their settlement.

Progressing family homesteads

In December 2017, Major General the Hon. Michael Jeffery called for the Prime Minister to “recognise Australia’s soil, water and vegetation as key national natural strategic assets” (Jeffrey 2017:19)—and not just for the sake of the environment. Caring for our natural capital ensures stable economic growth, builds social trust, and protects our national security.

Family homesteads are a novel idea for Australia, but could offer a cheap means of expanding business, housing and jobs, while protecting our natural assets. They create co-benefits between sectors, and place development within its natural ecosystem. They are not a rejection of modern life, but can accommodate all tastes and working habits—settlers typically have multiple income streams (Kolganov 2017), commute, work from home or develop their own entrepreneurial initiatives (Dimitriev and Karpov 2014:4).

Under a family homestead program, the Department of Planning would purchase cheap rural land, rezone it, subdivide it, and allot hectares for use by citizens. Regulation would ensure that allotments were developed appropriately, were not bought or sold, and were put to their intended use. Precincts of smallholders could develop their own cost-effective supply chains and local services. Allotments would save money on welfare and public housing in the short term, and make money in agriculture, tourism and education in the long term. Within current zonings, Small Lot Primary Production (RU4) is best suited to family homesteads.

This review concludes that family homesteads could be promising in Australia, especially given our vast land resources. With the support of the Minister, more research could be undertaken to assess the feasibility, cost-benefits, and implementation of a family homesteads in Australia.



Natural strawberries grown on a family homestead in Russia.

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NB. References in Russian have been translated by the author, and can be verified using online tools such as translate.google.com and en.pons.com/translate/russian-english. Full English translations may be available in the future.

Image sources

Cover: Ladnoe family homestead settlement, Vladimir, Russia. Photo by the author.

Page 1: Schematic drawing of a family homestead. Katya and Ilya Boykovi vk.com/wall161460006_4833?w=wall-44281566_284&z=photo-44281566_456239021%2Falbum-44281566_00%2Frev

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Back cover: Australia has more vacant arable land than any other country on Earth. Photo by the author, near Myrtleford, Victoria.

