

## Concerns over farm ownership



One-tenth of Australian farmland is owned or part foy foreign owned. *Photo: Tamara Voninski*

MORE than one-tenth of Australian farmland is owned or part-owned by foreign firms, according to a government report released yesterday. It cites buy-ups by mining companies as a key reason for foreign ownership.

The report, by the Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Sciences, states that foreign interests also own about 9 per cent of water entitlements and just over 1 per cent of agricultural businesses.

However the report has been swiftly dismissed by the Coalition as "a whitewash" on the grounds that it relies on previously published figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics and contains no information on the nationalities of foreign owners nor the value of agricultural production under foreign control.

"Today's ABARES report on foreign investment in Australian agriculture glosses over the very issues needing forensic examination and fails to shed new light on who owns what in our own backyard," said shadow minister for agriculture and food security John Cobb.

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The National Farmers Federation welcomed the government's vow to carry out surveys of foreign ownership every two years but stressed it still had concerns. In particular, sovereign purchases - buy-ups by foreign governments - could be used to distort prices of farm products, said NFF president Jock Laurie. "Australian farmers rely on competition. It's something we're very concerned about," he said.

The report found that at the end of 2010, some 11 per cent of Australian farmland was owned, wholly or partly, by foreigners. This was nearly double the amount of foreign-owned land the last time a major survey was taken in 1984.

While foreign ownership had gone up and down over the past three decades, it had risen significantly in recent years, partly because mining companies were buying up farm land for exploration, the report stated.

Assistant Treasurer Mark Arbib said the report "addressed community concerns" about foreign ownership and showed that Australia's regulation of foreign investment "protects the national interest".

However, he acknowledged that the report also highlighted "the need for better data sources" on foreign ownership.

Liberal Senator Bill Heffernan blasted the report, saying the 1 per cent figure on foreign ownership of businesses was meaningless because it was based on "completely flawed" ABS figures that surveyed farm operators rather than owners and did not look at land titles.

He said Australia urgently needed to plan for its food security in a world that would be home to 9 billion people by the middle of the century.

"If we don't tackle this, we will end up a nation of serfs - tenant farmers," he said.