



contentgroup WORK WITH
PURPOSE

TRANSCRIPT OF PODCAST

Work with Purpose

EPISODE #117

**WHY LET'S CHAT CONNECTION,
CAPABILITY, AND CROPS WITH ADAM
FENNESSY PSM**

TRANSCRIPT

David Pembroke:

Hello everyone, and welcome to Work With Purpose, a podcast about the Australian public sector and how it serves the Australian people. My name is David Pembroke. Thanks for joining me. Now, I do say that every week, but I really sincerely mean it because we are very grateful that you have tuned in, given you have so much choice as to where to apply your time and your attention, so the fact that you are interested in the Australian Public Service and its people and its mission is a great thing. Indeed, a big thanks.

As we begin, as we do each week, I'd like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we are meeting today, the Ngannawal and Ngambri peoples, and pay my respects to their elders past, present, and emerging, and acknowledge the ongoing contribution they make to the life of our city and indeed this region. I'd also like to acknowledge the custodians of all the lands from where anybody listening to this podcast today is joining us from.

Now, my guest today is Adam Fennessy PSM, the Secretary of the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries, and Forestry, or DAFF as it is more commonly known. Adam has been on Work With Purpose before, but I am delighted that he has been able to find some time in, what is no doubt, an incredibly busy time as Secretary of the department. Now, before his appointment to the Secretary of DAFF, Adam was the Dean and CEO of the Australian and New Zealand School of Government or ANZSOG. And Adam has indeed worked for over 25 years in the public sector with experience at both the state and federal levels. Indeed, he has served as the Public Sector Commissioner for the great state of Victoria.

Now, Adam recently spoke at IPAA ACT's Secretary Series, and today we want to pick through some of the threads from that speech and to really look at maybe a little bit more detail about the department's new Growing Australia strategy, the future of flexible work, and how knowing your purpose can help drive your career. Adam Fennessy, welcome to Work With Purpose.

Adam Fennessy PSM:

Thank you very much, David. It's not only great to be here, but I love the connection with firstly IPAA and IPAA's around Australia and I also love the work that you do in partnership with IPAA because we're passionate, we love talking about what we do and connecting, and podcasts are a great way to keep up that digital and virtual connection.

David Pembroke:

Yeah, it's fabulous, isn't it? And the thing about the quality, I think, in Work With Purpose, each week you just discover more and more incredible people. I think that sort of sits at the heart of it. We'll get to this issue of mission and purpose. But the incredible work and the importance of the work that the public service does, there's not enough of it. We don't talk enough about it because it is such an important institution. And indeed, the Nobel Prize for economics has just been awarded to a group, and at the heart of the research that's been recognised is flourishing communities need strong institutions, of which the public service indeed in Australia is one. Again, this spotlight that we need to continue to put on the public service is important for the community, isn't it?

Adam Fennessy PSM:

It is, it is. And a point I'll make, picking up on what you've just said, is that the art of storytelling is really important. We have so many amazing stories to tell in the public service, and over the last say 10, 15 years, we've got more focused on why storytelling is as important a part of what we do as managing taxpayers'

money and measuring our impact as public servants. When you tell the story about what you do, that's where you connect with others, you connect with purpose and you remind people. I remind myself and my staff what we're here to do. I love podcasts that allows us to share stories and draw that thread between what we're here to do in the public sector to how that makes a difference to people's lives around Australia, and indeed around the world.

David Pembroke:

Now, I want to get to that and there are so many stories in DAFF. It is a story factory. But before we get to DAFF, your story, the Adam Fennessy story, where did it begin?

Adam Fennessy PSM:

I grew up in Melbourne, in the suburbs of Melbourne, and I've loved public policy from the very start. I studied at uni down there at Monash, and my first proper job was up here in the public service in the department, at that time it was called Transport and Regional Development, and was just down the road. In fact, a lovely little story there is the old buildings were on Northbourne and Mort Street, and I started as a grad on Northbourne Ave, I think it was 72 Northbourne Ave. Those buildings were knocked down maybe 10 years ago, and the new civic quarters were rebuilt, and I'm back in that building. For my career, over about 25, 30 years, I've come completely full circle, literally, to the very same spot where I started.

Started as a grad, Transport and Regional Development. Worked in Canberra for a number of years, loved it here. Moved back to Victoria where I was originally from, worked in different parts of government, particularly in infrastructure, then natural resource management, water and agriculture. I was eventually appointed as a Secretary in Victoria of Environment and Primary Industries, which included agriculture. That's where some of my connection to agriculture started. And then, lived for many years in regional Victoria including the Macedon Ranges and Bendigo, which is central Victoria. And that was also while I was the agriculture Secretary, that gave me that direct connection with a lot of agricultural communities.

In terms of storytelling, it allowed me to see firsthand that thread between what we do in the public sector in support of agricultural industries, communities, agribusinesses, right down to the local economy through to the exports globally in that particular jurisdiction. And I did a lot of work when I was a Victorian Secretary with Commonwealth Secretaries and with states and territories, so it also gave me a feel for how in government you've got to be able to work well at all different levels and all jurisdictions, local government, state and territory, Commonwealth. And that gave me a really strong connection around that part of Victoria, a lot of beef, a bit of grain, a lot of horticulture. It gave me a sense of the supply chain, which also picked up on my work in infrastructure and transport.

And then when COVID... I should say I did a few years in consulting in the private sector. That was great to give me a perspective outside of government, learnt a lot. I also learnt that I really loved the public sector and I wanted to come back. When COVID hit, I went back to Victorian Government, became the Victorian Government Public Service Commissioner. That gave me an opportunity to understand the public service system as a whole and capability connection leadership. Did one year at the Australian New Zealand School of Government where I really studied and taught leadership, and then was asked to apply for the role here back in Canberra. That was really good too because that was a proper competitive process run by PMNC as well as the Australian Public Service Commission. And I've ended back up here.

The final point I'll say in that little story is that I didn't ever think I'd be a Secretary full stop, and I certainly didn't ever think I'd end up back in Canberra as a Secretary. Working at that national level is so satisfying. There's never a dull day. There's always something going on. And people sometimes would say to me, particularly younger or people earlier in their career, "How do you become a Secretary?" And I say, "By not wanting to become a Secretary."

David Pembroke:

Do your job.

Adam Fennessy PSM:

Just do the best job. Do your job, do what is best right in front of you, think about who you're there to serve and what kind of impact you are making for the community, and your career will follow through. It won't completely look after itself in that you've got to do a little bit of planning, but if you think I want to become that title or do this particular role, you'll often find life takes you in another directions. To me, it's about service and the impact we make and not the title of our role. That's a little bit about my story of how I ended up back here in wonderful Canberra.

David Pembroke:

Where you are now. But in terms of that passion for the public sector, you said that from quite a young age, you knew and you understood that that was perhaps the path that you would go on. How old were you? Was it when you were in primary school? Did you have a teacher who inspired you? Did you have a family who were in the public service? What was that backstory?

Adam Fennessy PSM:

That's a wonderful question to ask. I did have a teacher, Year Nine, politics, Mr. Moore. And the thing I loved about studying politics, as well as I ended up studying political economy at uni, was not so much the raw side of politics, but it was how do we have these debates about how we make choices and trade offs? What's politics about? It is about properly representing our communities, and I was more interested in the public service side of that. How do you make an impact? How do you support elected officials who work so bloody hard? How do you do that in a good evidence-based way, acknowledging that politics itself can move around really fast?

The media has a very specific role. As to social media, how do you maintain that focus on best outcomes for the minister and government of the day whom you're serving and also making that impact into community. From probably Year Nine, I would've been about 14 or 15, that's when I got interested.

David Pembroke:

Did Mr. Moore teach you that stuff? Did he explain it all to you or did you discover it on your own?

Adam Fennessy PSM:

I think a bit of both. He taught us about different systems of government and democracy and autocracy and all sorts of other things. I also got the sense that there's many, many years of history that we work on. More when I was at uni, I learned about the Westminster system and the Washington or Washminster system, and I loved all that stuff, and it's often quite dry when you study it. When I became a grad and then got into the Australian government at the start of my career, you feel the trade offs and you feel industry groups, community groups saying, "We want this for our community. This is our preference." And then, you realise governments the day have got to choose between spending that last amount of money on education or health or local infrastructure. It's never easy.

If you put in place good transparent processes, you make really difficult decisions less difficult, but they're never easy. To give you one quick example of both my upbringing and then my work, like many Australians, even though I grew up originally in metropolitan Melbourne or suburban Melbourne, I had cousins up in Mildura who ran a grape block, table grapes. I had other second cousins who had sheep in western Victoria, another set who had sheep in eastern Victoria. And so school holidays-

David Pembroke:

You'd go and work.

Adam Fennessy PSM:

... I'd go and work. I remember picking grapes in Mildura, particularly when I was a uni student, wanted to get a bit of spare cash. It's bloody hard work. And I remember my uncle and auntie had to move away from table grapes because I think the market got oversupplied. They went to almonds. They then had native cockatoos eating their almond crop, but they weren't allowed to control those cockatoos because they were a protected species. So you see it all, and they're trying to make a business and they were trying to export internationally as well as locally. Even though I really wouldn't have understood it all at the time, I got to see it.

I also knew that the Murray River and in Mildura and in Sunraysia district, the Murray River's starting to get a bit brown and muddy by then because of all the water entitlements taken out. Fast forward, when I was in Victorian government, I spent five to 10 years on the Murray-Darling Basin work. And that's one area where New South Wales, south Australian Victoria were arguing about the Murray River when they were colonies, before federation, and depending on who you believe, it slowed federation down by a year because they couldn't work it out. They had to wait until 1901, and we are still debating the Murray-Darling Basin. That sits in the environment and water part of federal government. I still do a lot. And for agriculture, it's a critical part of irrigated agriculture, who gets to decide whether that last bit of water goes to the environment, to local urban use for urban communities or towns along the Murray, or irrigated agriculture. We're still debating that to this very day.

David Pembroke:

And probably will be-

Adam Fennessy PSM:

And probably will be for many years to come, and that's what I love about public policy. What I also learned back when I was in Victorian government and I catch up regularly with Andrew McConville and the Murray-Darling Basin authority in my current role, is you've got to get out to the community and you've got to talk, have the difficult debate, listen to people and sometimes hear that really things that are harder for public servants to hear, these are people's livelihoods. You could be impacting their life. They could be very unhappy. And at the same time, we have long-term environmental values to look after across whole of government as well as the lifeblood of local towns and communities.

The sometimes lost art of listening, using the older ear and the old technology, is as important as the digital and latest technology. And then, in Australia, there's also the 65,000 odd years of looking after country that First Nations have. So that's why I love it. There's never an easy answer, but there are important processes to work through, so we're always asking what is the best use for this outcome locally, globally, and regionally?

David Pembroke:

Would you say that the public sector, the Australian public sector, is improving its ability to be able to listen, understanding the importance of old technology and getting out and getting in front of people?

Adam Fennessy PSM:

Well, I'd say two things. Having worked for more years in my career at state government level than federal government level, I think it's a challenge for each level of government. The further removed you are from communities in a kind of geographic or an institutional sense, the harder it is to remember the impacts. It is said of the Commonwealth government, I'm there as a Secretary, that that is a challenge because many of us

are in Canberra. It's harder to listen to communities in say, Northwest WA or Southwest Tazzy, if you spend all your time in Canberra because we're just a long way away from them.

Having said that, in our department, we've got about 7,000 staff and more than half of our 7,000 are distributed across Australia, so that's important. Most of our senior executives are here in Canberra. It's about remembering the importance of getting out and about as well as for me being here in Canberra to support the minister when parliament's sitting or to lead our head office where a lot of our staff are. Firstly, you've got to get out and about. Secondly, when I lived in regional Victoria, I was a Secretary in Victorian government, and I think I was the first Secretary for about 20 years who didn't live in Melbourne, and I would talk to people in my community, and particularly when I worked in environment and agriculture and water, they'd say, "What do you do?" And if I said I work in that department, they'd always have an opinion and they'd often give me an earful about what wasn't working, and that's good. It's feedback on the ground.

One of the risks of public servants, particularly those based in big cities, is if you want to avoid difficult conversations out and about, you just don't go out and about and you can spend all your time in your head office. It's not actually hard to avoid that, but it means you are not listening and connecting. Ministers tend to do this well, particularly MPs because their electorates are embedded in their communities and their job is different. It's a political job. It's a representative job. Senators represent whole states or territories, but often ministers will have a better feel than some public servants. To me, how do we remember the need to get out and about?

And then, the second point is to give credit to the Australian Public Sector Commission, and then going all the way back to the Thodey review. One of the capabilities of a public service organisation is that that ability to engage, do good consultation, listen. As part of our capability review that the APSC led, that was one aspect of it. How are we refreshing those skills to do good consultation, listening, engagement? We don't have to be all things for all skills for all people. Some of that is good partnering with good community embedded partners. It's also working with state territory government and local government.

To me, that art of listening is something I've kept through my whole career, and I found it was helped by living outside Melbourne. I didn't say this in my intro, I now spend a lot of my time in Canberra, but I don't live in Canberra. There's a small number of secretaries that live in other parts of Australia. I live these days in Brisbane. That's a long story, but I moved from Bendigo to Brisbane. I think I'd only live in towns that started with a B. And Brisbane's not a regional city, although in Canberra it's often called a regional office. But in agriculture, a lot of our biggest beef and livestock companies are based in Brisbane, sugar industry, horticulture.

Now, I have a national role, so I think about all states, territories, all industries across Australia. I pretty much go back and forth between Brisbane and Canberra. And when I'm in Brisbane, I will catch up with local head offices that will often be national or international companies, sometimes more local companies, and it just keeps me a little bit in touch or more in touch with the debates going outside of Canberra. There's a whole lot of content in there about the need to think about and connect.

David Pembroke:

We might unpack... Sorry, we will unpack that in a moment. But you just mentioned something there before that I'm interested in because I hear it a lot when I'm out and about and it's this notion of having difficult conversations either internally or externally, and I think it's been identified as a challenge. It's not just the APS, it's any organisation. It's hard to have difficult conversations. What's your advice to people about having a difficult conversation? How do you have a difficult conversation?

Adam Fennessy PSM:

Well, I'll give two examples. One's with communities and the other one's with staff or within an organisation. So with communities, it is about being prepared, know a bit of the local context because that's respectful. And

in agriculture, fisheries, forestry, I learnt a lot working in forestry in Victoria, a lot of heavy politics, a lot of change in history. I remember going out to far East Gippsland, right into the old growth forests, and there was a lot of debate around native forestry planning, bushfire management and mitigation, environmental values, so many different views.

I remember catching up with some interest groups. I went with a really experienced forester who'd come from New Zealand to Australia. And he said to me, "You just got to listen." And I remember talking to a person who'd been passionately advocating for forest conservation for decades, and he said to me, "No one senior's ever come from Melbourne to listen to me." He more or less had tears in his eyes, and I was a bit uncomfortable because I thought, "My God, what's he going to say?" What I learnt is just the art of listening, and then we had a process and we took a written submission from his interest group, and then we went and listened to the next very passionate stakeholder.

Firstly, I didn't just rock up. I was prepared. I was briefed. What were the interests of their group? What were the competing trade-offs? What was the process we could point them towards to allow them to put in a systematic submission? But the thing I learned the most was the importance of me sitting there, and it was literally in a little town hall way out in far East Gippsland. It was a little bit cold, and I remember thinking, "Don't let your teeth chatter, just relax." The difficult conversation, and it was a conversation because I then talked a bit about what we were going to do, but being prepared and being able to listen was really important there.

David Pembroke:

Turning up.

Adam Fennessy PSM:

Turning up, making the effort and going to people where they are, and then going back to staff. And this is a real issue and a challenge for the public sector, all our data and our census results tell us that in big organisations, including the public sector, we're not good at performance management. And I remember years ago, someone gave me an excellent book called *Fierce Conversations*.

David Pembroke:

Fierce Conversations.

Adam Fennessy PSM:

Fierce Conversations, and it was about how to get into difficult conversations that you want to avoid, just by human instinct because they're difficult. The simple learnings there that I had was make it about the issue and be prepared to step into an uncomfortable space.

In fact, when I had the IPAA discussion a few weeks ago at the Rex, which was part of the Secretary series, I quoted a very well-known Australian philosopher and cultural figure, Damien Neuveridge, who used to say, "Drive into the skid." And the regional Victorian aspect of that is if you're ever on a dirt road, well, regional Australia, if you lose control of the car and you hit the brakes, you'll spin out and you'll probably have a bad accident. Whereas, if you resist the temptation to put your foot on the brakes and you work against or do the counterintuitive thing, which is drive into the direction that you're losing control and you keep your foot off the brakes, it slows you down and it stops you losing control of the car. But everything in your body fights to just slam on the brakes.

I use that in the public sector is that when you want to just avoid something and you just don't want to do it, that's probably a growth moment and you should do it. You might have a direct report or a person in your team and you know that some of their behaviours are perhaps causing a bit of rub, it would be easy to say,

"Look, you're doing all right, good luck next period of time." It's harder to say, "These are the things I would like you to work on and we'll hold you to account for that."

The good thing about the APSC framework and the capability review is we support managers to have those conversations and also you've got to do it yourself. If I feel any discomfort about giving feedback to my direct reports, they've had a busy year, they've done everything I've asked for, and if I say to them, "I want you to improve here and here," they think, "Oh, really?" But they are the important conversations to have and that's how we improve our organisations.

Whether it's looking at an upset member of the community who you don't feel like talking to because they might yell at you or a member of your staff where you know you've got to think about and talk about improving their performance or a member of a lobby group or industry, and you just think, "I would prefer not to have that conversation," having those difficult conversations makes a huge difference, and you can learn and be coached and learn from others about how to do that well.

David Pembroke:

Now, I do want to get on to DAFF, wonderful department, incredible mission, and I'll declare an interest. I've done a lot of work in that department over the years, and I just love the people, love the work, love everything about it. Take me back to that moment when you decided you wanted to be the Secretary of DAFF. You entered the process and you got the job. What was going through your head and your heart at that moment when you were appointed?

Adam Fennessy PSM:

Well, I was very fortunate in that I had been a Secretary of Agriculture at a state level, and I remembered all the things I loved doing the most in that role. They were invariably when I was getting at about regional Victoria, but also regional Australia because Victoria was always working closely with South Australia, New South Wales, Tazzy, and going up to Canberra. I used to do a lot of work in that jurisdiction with dairy, meat, horticulture, grains, because they tended to be the bigger industries, and I have a very curious mind and I would learn something every day. I tapped into that curiosity and that excitement.

The other thing I loved about Ag is there's a lot of history around Ag and a lot of some mythology and a little bit of nostalgia. The other thing I loved about Ag in my first time around was that technology in the R&D was amazing. I remember seeing new or cutting edge agribusiness farmers around that state using drones before we hadn't really thought about that. Using satellite technology or LIDAR graphic mapping technology to just get that extra bit of productivity out of their crop so they could export, make more money, but not just to make money because they wanted to produce top quality food and fibre.

While a lot of Australian agriculture is private business and exports, government does have a role to look at the overall system to support international trade, protect biosecurity, help with R&D, and so I love both the traditions and history of Ag and that physical connection with the land. I love the emerging tech, and I'm excited to say we still have that. We very much have that. And just I think two weeks ago, we got our third Australian Good Design award for taking farmers to market, which was providing more online and app-based technologies for Australian farmers to work out how to avoid international tariffs to the greatest extent to get to new markets at the least cost, and that's all data-driven as well as a lot of longer term reform we're doing at the border for imports and exports.

Going back to your question, I thought, "Well, what were the things that excited me about Ag?" And it was both the local land-based and regional economic traditions as well as the latest cutting-edge technologies to support Australian businesses.

David Pembroke:

The vision for DAFF is to create a more sustainable and prosperous Australia through biosecurity, agriculture production and trade. You've put together a growing Australia together strategy. How does the strategy match to the vision and what are you trying to achieve?

Adam Fennessy PSM:

There's three things. One is about growth, and I've mentioned, so in Australia, to put some context, our agricultural value of our production is about \$90 billion, and we are always aspiring to go further, to \$100 billion. And of that, a bit over \$70 billion is exported, so a huge amount of Australian quality food and fibre goes overseas. So growth is looking at how do we grow that? And that's a lot about our trade systems, but it's also about domestic growth, but particularly international trade and markets.

Secondly, securing our food and fibre and protecting it from international diseases, animal and plants. Our biosecurity becomes critical. For the storytelling aspect, I say to people, "When you're coming back from an overseas holiday and there's a sniffer dog at the airport terminal, just checking that you haven't smuggled in something that's going to bring a new disease into Australia, that's our dog, our detector dog and our dog handlers." That's our frontline operational staff who are working in quarantine and inspection, because Australia as an island nation has a lot less diseases that can wipe things out, which gives us a comparative advantage if we invest in that. International trade biosecurity.

The third one, which is very interesting and exciting, is sustainable agriculture, thinking about the sustainable use of water, the impact on climate, the impact on soil quality. And on one hand, we can lower our carbon emissions if we are more aware of what impacts we have. And then, in the market context, if we have clean green produce that impacts the environment less has less water use, people are willing to pay a premium.

Australian beef and Australian wheat have the lowest carbon emissions profiles globally. There's still work to do there. There's a lot of methane impacts in beef, for example, and we're doing a lot of work on that. That comes from years and years of research and development and looking at every aspect of farmer's operations. Leading farmers, in many cases, are already there. We'll learn from them. But how do we use that learning and that technology, local research, international research, for that sustainability? And that is exciting as well because it means that we are having less impact on the environment as a big production sector and allowing farmers to access markets where people are willing to pay a premium and therefore you get more profitability.

David Pembroke:

What are your biggest concerns? What are the things that you lie awake at night sometimes thinking, "Oh gee, this is a big issue." Is it the biosecurity stuff that is probably potentially the most damaging?

Adam Fennessy PSM:

Yes, biosecurity. And if you watch the news, and in fact the story I told the other days, I was shopping for eggs down at the Coles in Civic because I wanted to make a Thai dinner, and the eggs were all gone, and that's because we had an avian flu outbreak that hit Victoria, New South Wales and the ACT, and you don't get a lot of notice. Often, it's on a Friday, you find out there's a new variant of some disease that's hit Australia.

Now, to get technical, that was called the H7 variant that led to the destruction and disposal of nearly two million poultry, in terms of flock about 7 or 8% of the national flock, and that cost maybe \$120 million. That was a short, sharp outbreak. It actually was the biggest outbreak we've ever had. That is now under control and we are normalising our systems.

David Pembroke:

How did that happen?

Adam Fennessy PSM:

We don't really know. Often, that is spread by wild birds flying around and over poultry farms. But we trace and in some cases, it just comes in through an import, which is why biosecurity is so important at the border, and sometimes it's wild birds. The new risk, and we've just announced at the start of this week \$100 million dollars investment, is what's called the H5 variant of bird flu. It's in every continent in the world except Australia, and it's now in Antarctica and it's in Indonesia. Our best experts are saying it's not a matter of if it's going to get to Australia, it's when, and you can only prepare.

To give huge credit, the government and our minister, Minister Julie Collins, has just announced \$100 million dollars in preparedness. It's not here yet. We're working with states, territories, poultry industry, and more broadly. A lot of those impacts are actually going to hit wildlife, so that'll be brought in by migrating birds. They'll either come up from the Antarctic to Tazzy or the Koorong in South Australia, or they'll come down to the northern territory or maybe to far north Queensland. We're investing in known wetlands around the edges of Australia, and more importantly, we are looking at our vaccine stockpiles, how we work with states and territories. We've run three exercises already called Exercise Volare to model a H5 avian flu outbreak. Bird flu can jump species. It's got into dairy cows in the US and it can get into humans. The good news for now is it's a mild flu, but when flus move really fast, they can mutate. That's what keeps me awake at night.

The one other thing I'll add is international trade is always precarious. Australia is a trading nation. 70% of our agricultural food, fisheries, forestry is exported. For example, a number of years ago, we got locked out of China, \$20 billion worth of trade. The lobster ban was lifted, announced by the PM on Friday. That was the last main trade block. Trade is always difficult when there's a move back to protectionist policies. Without naming names, we have an election in a very big democracy on the other side of the world. One of the candidates wants to put in place a 10 to 20% tariff on everything. We export billions to that nation, the US, so we're already planning for what happens if there are new trade tariffs on... Australian beef's going gangbusters into the US, other products. Trade, biosecurity keep me awake at night. All you can do is plan, invest, and prepare and then respond as it happens.

David Pembroke:

In terms then of preparing your 7,000 people to be the best that they can be, what are the capabilities that you are addressing at the moment to ensure that DAFF is able, best able, to acquit its mission?

Adam Fennessy PSM:

This goes to another topic you've already flagged. This is about a well-connected and flexible workforce. Even when I started, we put a little bit of extra investment into our digital systems and capabilities because digital connectivity just across our staff is really important. Last week, we had an all-staff update. We had about two or 300 in our big meeting room, all-staff meeting room in our Canberra office, which is just down the street from here. We had about 1700 people dial in from around Australia. We've got staff in every capital city, a lot of the bigger regional cities all the way through including some of our drought fund and drought policy staff. I met a couple of young people who live in the Hay Plain in the middle of New South Wales between Canberra and Adelaide, and they get good internet from satellites and from Starlink.

David Pembroke:

Starlink.

Adam Fennessy PSM:

Wherever there's a internet service, there is the opportunity to talk to staff. We were talking about strategy, what's coming up, what's happening across the business. Connecting in with staff is very important. And then,

also getting out and about. This week, I'll finish the week in our Brisbane office. I'll go and chat to all sorts of staff. They'll tell me all sorts of things, which is great. I get a feel for how everything's working.

Throughout the calendar year, I'll move around the country as best I can when there's some business I've got to do in each of those cities. And then, I ask our executives to do the same, always thinking about the taxpayer and value for money, but it's also if there's ever an opportunity to connect with staff, we've got to do that. That's one thing. And the other is to encourage staff to work in a distributed way because that puts us close to our business, puts us across regional Australia.

On things like flexible work, yes, we will work within our enterprise bargaining agreement and we'll work within all government guidelines. To me, the best way of approaching flexible work, from my experience, is work where you get your best outcomes. If you're working on national drought policy, you'll probably do a great job if you are based in our regional New South Wales office, which might just be a connected link to our bigger offices in say Sydney or Canberra, or we've got staff in Southwest WA. We've got staff, Tazzy, the Northern Territory, all around the country.

I also want to encourage our senior executives that doing a good job is not about being seen in an office environment. It's about knowing what we're there to do, connecting with staff, delivering, measuring what we do, and in some cases, you do get your best outcomes in an engaged interpersonal office environment. You'll learn from others. You do your strategy and your work. In other times, you might work remotely, you might work from home because you've got to do a lot of complicated analysis. We've got some amazing data experts and economists. It shouldn't be you're all in the office or you're all working from wherever. It's what are the best conditions for you to perform? And then, secondly, how do we support our managers to learn those newer skills-

David Pembroke:

New skills, yeah.

Adam Fennessy PSM:

... Of managing and supporting a very distributed team? How do we check in on the health and wellbeing of our remote staff? How are we having those conversations? How are we bringing people together in one actual location? And how are we supporting staff who work all over the country?

We have agricultural vets who work in meat establishments to do inspection for animal welfare and also animal health. They do a lot of work on weekends. I'm catching up with some of our on plant vets in a few weekends time just to say hello, and they got tough job. They'll often be one or two vet inspectors in a massive or maybe in a smaller meat works. It's thinking about how do we meet our staff where they are and how are they contributing to, in that case, exporting meat internationally and certifying it, and how do we support them doing a bloody difficult frontline job?

David Pembroke:

So clearly a lot of DAFF staff can't be in the office and they're not in Canberra. But how do you then reflect when you see announcements like New South Wales government, for example, which is back to the office? Amazon, the CEO, Andy Jassy, "Righto, I need you back in the office." When you see that, how does that tally with your experience of what's happening?

Adam Fennessy PSM:

There's two things. I always ask, "What does the evidence tell us?" There's a lot of anecdotes and there are CEOs who say, "I think I need my team back in the office." I would ask of any organisation, "What does the data tell you of how your workplace can function most effectively?" And then secondly, when I was the

Victorian Public Sector Commissioner, Victoria went through the heaviest lockdown through COVID. I think Melbourne was the second most lockdowned city in the world. I think I was the Victorian Public Sector Commissioner. I had to work out how do we keep providing public services under very restricted conditions?

The Victorian government was an experiment that no one asked to happen. Schools kept running, public sector schools, courts, health services. There was still a lot of frontline workers, particularly in say hospitals, but the entire state school system flipped to online for a few months in a row and then was unlocked, and then had to do it again. The whole office-based Victorian public service more or less worked from home and continued to provide services.

Not only did we say, "Well, that could actually happen," but we started researching what are the conditions to allow that to succeed? Here in Canberra, University of New South Wales, Canberra, Deb Blackman and team have done some fantastic research on flexible working in the public sector. They did a lot of that with the ACT government, and there's a lot of international research. There's still a lot of debate, but a lot of the evidence-based research from around Australia and internationally says that you don't have to be full-time in the office to be productive. If you're full-time working out of the office, you will lose some of that connection, so there's going to be a balance, and it really depends on what you do.

David Pembroke:

It's interesting, isn't it? Because Atlassian, the Australian technology company, they're still distributed workforce. Come in when you like. They're totally committed to it, so their data is obviously telling them that it's working for them.

Adam Fennessy PSM:

Yeah. And people will ultimately vote with their feet. And it's very interesting to watch this quietly, or maybe not quietly, but in the ACT, is there going to be a flow if the Australian Public Service in Canberra is more restrictive on flexible working than say the ACT government? There might be a movement of people. Might be too early to tell. It depends on your work. Certainly, I know with Amazon following that story, some people may vote with their feet or maybe they won't. We'll see.

But to me, you've got to move away from anecdote to evidence. The best first point of evidence is what do my staff tell me? A lot of the work we did in Victoria was surveying your staff, ask them what will help them do their job and see what the data says. Now, that will always be a bit messy, but that's a really good first point. Don't tell your staff what you think they need to do, ask them. And from a leadership perspective, you're not just going to do exactly what your staff tell because it'll be very varied and quite distributed but it's a good piece of data to look at.

In the case of big systems, big employers, talk to the experts, look at the evidence. We look at our APS census data about flexible working, and we work out how do we help Australian agriculture, fisheries, forestry, and what does a work system look like for that? Rather than should people work in the office or not, I start with what are we going to do for Australian fisheries, forestry, and agriculture? And then, what do our staff say? What does the APSC guidelines say? What does our data tell us?

David Pembroke:

It's also interesting, isn't it? Looking into the future, it's fairly futile when we don't really understand what also new technologies are going to evolve and it's very hard to know. So really adaptability is probably your best bet and building a culture, and as you say, putting the work at the centre as you make your decision.

But maybe if I could ask you just to look a little bit into the future, what would you like to see, say 12, 18 months down the track, what would you think is going to be a good progress for you in your role as Secretary of DAFF?

Adam Fennessy PSM:

Two things I'm looking for, and these are both very much inward looking, the working day before I started in my role as Secretary, the capability review for DAFF landed and we were very fortunate. I was very fortunate because I got a blueprint on what to do with DAFF, what was working well, what needed extra investment or improvement. Every Commonwealth government department has had a capability review done or is getting one done. A very technical answer is I want to be implementing the next wave of the capability review. That was day one priority for me, and I'm happy to say that a year down, we have implemented a huge amount of that work. Some of it's longer term and goes from-

David Pembroke:

Has it a number? What have you done, 50 per cent of the recommendations or they're in flight 75%?

Adam Fennessy PSM:

I think just about all the recommendations are now in flight. Some quite implemented, some not so much. A good example is that statement of strategic intent, growing agriculture together, that was a recommendation. Get a clear strategy. That's been done. Consulted with staff, consulted with the industry, stakeholders launched, so that's a tick. Now we've got to implement some of the detail in there.

Workforce planning is still progressing digital capability. In fact, it's a four year timeframe to implement the full capability review. We're a quarter of the way through and I'm pushing really hard on that because I know that's investing in our own people and capability, which will make us better to support Australian agriculture, fisheries, forestry. That's one thing I'll be looking for.

And then, secondly, to see some visible shifts in our culture, the cultural indices that come out of our APS census. People who are happier at work, firstly, it's a better place to work. I talked at the recent IPAA speech about the qualitative factor of hearing people laugh. Hearing people laugh at work is great because it means they're going to enjoy being there. Now you have good days, you have bad days, you have some days where you're really under the pump. If you feel like turning up to work and you enjoy it, that's really good. Culture is how you feel at work, how you interact with others, how you work as a connected organisation. Watching our cultural indicators is really important because that's not just some hypothetical data point, that's actually how we feel and what motivates people.

Agriculture, as you would know because you've seen this in the department, is full of very passionate people and getting that passion to connect more across is a really positive challenge. And then, finally, seeing shifts in Australian agriculture is also part of it. Now, they can be subject to global trade trends to global weather so they can move around. At the same time, every time we open up a new multilateral or bilateral trading negotiations, it's more opportunities for exports. Every time we put more digital technology into our biosecurity systems will mean faster detection at the border. Every time we get more R&D into our agricultural systems means more water resilient, climate resilient grain or beef or horticulture. Finally, that's what we're there to do. We will succeed if we've got a strong culture and that'll allow us to do all of that exciting work.

David Pembroke:

Is the \$100 billion figure still there?

Adam Fennessy PSM:

Yeah, it's still there.

David Pembroke:

Still sit there as a target?

Adam Fennessy PSM:

Yeah, and what's interesting is we just about hit it, I think about three years ago. Now, we're back close to 86. The biggest swing factor is drought and climate. If there are drought conditions across different parts of Australia, that number will come down. So longer term, sustainable, resilient agricultural systems help in the long term.

We had an El Nino that didn't really hit hard. We now have a La Nina. Climate's notoriously difficult to predict but, or I should say and, we have a half a billion dollar future drought fund, which is as much about resilient agricultural systems. There's always some part of Australia in drought. Southwest Victoria, SA, north Tazzy and Southwest WA are in drought at the moment, and there's a lot of water and rain coming through other parts like North Queensland and the NT. To get back to your question, a lot in Ag is the long game, and that's because climates and land works on long-term cycles, and doing everything we can every year to influence that is important.

David Pembroke:

A final opportunity perhaps for you to send a message to your 7,000 people. I'm sure you get an opportunity to talk to them all the time. But more broadly also to the APS and the APS audience and people listening to the podcast today, what would you like to say to them?

Adam Fennessy PSM:

What I'll say to our staff is I love what you do. Keep up your passion and direct it to those community industry business, agribusiness, outcomes because you make a difference. So I love what you do, keep doing what you do and then work together as one DAFF, one department. And then for other parts of Australian government and other public service and public sector entities, while we are very technical and we sometimes might get too focused on Ag, we are part of a much broader system of how regional communities, regional economies work, how we work with environment and health and industry. We love what we do and we want to keep working with you more broadly across public sector and also into communities in the private sector. So we'll keep working with you and we love what we do.

David Pembroke:

Excellent. Adam, thank you so much for giving up so much of your time. I've been a little bit greedy today. We probably could have kept talking because there's so much to talk about in this wonderful world of agriculture, forestries, and fisheries, and indeed more broadly around the APS. So thanks for coming into the studio today, for sharing your time and your wisdom and your knowledge and your experience with us. Thank you very much.

Adam Fennessy PSM:

Thank you, David. Thanks everyone who's listening and I love this community that you continue to support, so thanks for the conversation.

David Pembroke:

Indeed. And for you out there who are listening, a rating or a review. I do ask every week and we do get some fantastic, I think we're well up over the 50 now, which is a great thing. But if you could just take the time now actually, hit the pause button and jump over and do a rating or a review, and we would be very grateful that you could do that. There are plenty of other Work With Purpose podcasts that are available that you can go back and listen to. Many of them are timeless, but whether it's Spotify, Apple Podcasts, wherever you get your podcasts, go back and have a listen to those. And indeed, if you'd like to follow the latest information about

Work With Purpose and stay up to date, you can follow it at contentgroup or indeed at IPAA ACT and LinkedIn is probably the best social channel for all of the information about Work With Purpose.

Now, I know many of you have wanted to come to Work With Purpose live and indeed we do have our very first live podcast. On the 20th of November, we'll be talking to Matthew Short from the Department of Health, Matthew Breen from Running for Resilience and Lachlan Vivian-Taylor from Comcare, and it's about the important topic of men's health. We invite you to actively shape the conversation and join us. There are tickets available on the IPAA ACT websites. There are only limited tickets available. We'd love to see you on the 20th of November for that very first live recording of Work With Purpose.

A very big thanks again to Adam Fennessy for coming in and talking to us today, and a big thanks for you for coming back once again. Work With Purpose is produced as a collaboration between contentgroup and the Institute of Public Administration of Australia ACT and supported, as always, by our very good friends at the Australian Public Service Commission. That's it for another episode of Work With Purpose. My name is David Pembroke, and it's bye for now.

Voice Over:

Work With Purpose is a production of contentgroup in partnership with the Institute of Public Administration Australia, and with the support of the Australian Public Service Commission.