

ONE ON ONE

Paddock Thai

The leader of a visiting parliamentary delegation from Thailand finds opportunities for further cooperation with Australia on a sheep station outside Canberra.

Images of Thailand we usually see are of a lush green tropical country. But in the north-east region conditions are considerably drier, with dryland salinity a particular problem for farmers.

So when a parliamentary delegation from Thailand recently visited Australia to mark 60 years of bilateral relations between the two countries, the MPs and senators welcomed the opportunity to inspect a Yass Valley sheep property outside of Canberra to see for themselves how Talaheni Station owner John Ive had tackled his property's crippling salinity issues.

The farm visit was particularly relevant for delegation leader Dr Khunying Kalaya Sophonpanich, a nuclear physicist turned parliamentarian who comes from an area affected by salinity. She was keen to hear about the science behind the Talaheni success story, including how three decades of water monitoring, pasture control and planting trees along the ridgelines have helped lower the water tables causing the salinity problems.

"The north-eastern region where I come from is a vast area and is probably the poorest part of Thailand where we have dryland salinity," Dr Sophonpanich said.

"Few trees and grasslands grow in that area and we cannot make very much use of the land. It is a big part of Thailand so it's important coming here to the farm to learn how they have tackled this problem. They have corrected the salinity and become very successful at increasing productivity, especially in producing fine wools for Australia.

"This is something that we can learn about and cooperate on in the future. I hope to bring back very good information from the farm to the researchers and the farmers in Thailand. I have talked to John that one day we might send some farmers who want to personally learn from this farm.

"Coming to Talaheni farm was very fruitful. The owner John is a very special farmer. He has got so many awards and so many prizes for combating environmental changes."

During the visit to Australia, the delegation also met with climate change and energy experts at Sydney University, and with a range of parliamentarians, including Parliamentary Secretary for Foreign Affairs Richard Marles and members of the foreign affairs and climate change committees.

Noting the cooperation that already exists between Australia and Thailand in the fields of science, education, business, manufacturing and agriculture, Dr Sophonpanich said the parliamentary meetings provided a valuable insight into the common issues that parliamentarians from both countries must confront.

"We learn about each other's problems," she said. "Australians are very frank, open people and we think our meetings were very fruitful from a parliamentarians' aspect."



SALINITY SOLUTIONS: Thailand's Dr Khunying Kalaya Sophonpanich with Yass property owner John Ive

The Thailand National Assembly is much larger in size than the Australian parliament with 500 members in the Thai House of Representatives and 150 senators in the upper house to serve a population of 64 million.

Size aside, Dr Sophonpanich, an opposition MP with the Democrat Party, noticed some more subtle differences between the two parliaments, especially at question time. In Thailand, question time is only once a sitting week and far less boisterous.

"When people talk, we cannot talk at the same time, we have to take turns one at a time," she said. "Our question time is a very serious one."

At the 2011 Thai general election, the new Pheu Thai party won 265 seats and a majority in the House of Representatives to take government from the Democrat Party led by Abhisit Vejjajiva.

Controversially the new government is seeking to push through a reconciliation bill it hopes will help Thailand move beyond the political turmoil of recent years. But opposition MPs remain concerned by proposed laws seeking to water down or remove the penalties for a range of alleged past political misdemeanours that engulfed Thailand between 2005 and 2011, including the 2006 military coup.

Despite a challenging few years of military rule and at times violent street protests between rival political camps, Dr Sophonpanich remains optimistic about Thailand's democratic future that began in 1932 with the advent of its first people's assembly.

"After we have gone through a learning curve for 80 years, we essentially hope that people will learn the lessons from what has happened," she said. •