

INDUSTRIALS

Table of industrial stocks with columns for Last Sale, Move, Buy, Sell, 12 month High/Low, Sales 100, Div Yield, and P/E.

THE SHORT CUT



AUSTRALIA is undergoing a period of structural change. The decade-long mining boom is maturing, and we are now searching for the next big thing that will keep us in the lifestyle to which we have grown accustomed.

As was the case with the mining boom, China is expected to be our economy's saviour. With more than one billion mouths to feed and limited arable land, China is looking abroad for sustainable sources of food, and Australia is well placed to satisfy this need.

There has been a flurry of investment activity to capitalise on this phenomenon, evidenced by the prolonged bidding war for Warrnambool Cheese and Butter Factory Limited and the Federal Government vetoing the takeover of Graincorp.

Before you rush into an investment with an agricultural company, it helps to first understand the dynamics of the sector. Farming is similar to mining, in that its earnings are based on commodity prices. It is a highly fragmented industry where most family farmers do not place a reasonable price on their labour.

Like miners, they are price takers, and this typically does not present a sustainable value proposition.

For Australia to generate sustainable returns, we must build value. And the way to build value is through innovation.

Yet innovation doesn't automatically translate to considerable profits. For instance, Freedom Foods (ASX: FNP) is an Australian company that has a comparative advantage producing allergen-free foods, but is only generating a return on equity of 8 per cent. For the company to offer compelling value, it requires scale. Food production is a capital-intensive process. Freedom Foods owns \$45 million of plant, property and equipment, with which it generated \$6.4 million of operating profit in 2013. The more scale

that the company can achieve, the more efficiently it can run its operations.

Greater scale will also lead to greater bargaining power with parties in the supply chain. Woolworths (ASX: WOW) and Coles (ASX: WES) have considerable market power in Australia, which is reflected in their superior return on equity — Woolworths is generating a return on equity of around 27 per cent.

The practices that Coles and Woolworths have used to accumulate this market power have attracted considerable public attention, and have resulted in the supermarkets agreeing to a voluntary code of conduct (if you see the writing on the wall, it's far better to rewrite the rules than have someone else do it for you).

One condition is that Coles and Woolworths will stop using the intellectual property of their suppliers in the production of their private labels. Controlling intellectual property is a major determinant of pricing power, so hopefully the move will encourage more producers to invest in research and development.

Investors are certainly seeking new opportunities in Australia's agricultural industry, evidenced by the premium share prices that are being demanded for listed companies — Freedom Foods' share price is trading at a multiple of 36 times their expected earnings for 2014, while at \$9.60 per share, Saputo is paying a prospective 26 times for Warrnambool Cheese.

Investors are expecting that Freedom Foods will achieve considerable growth, but it may take a number of years and further industry reforms before this is realised.

While agricultural companies may not currently offer compelling value on a micro level, investment in the sector is a positive sign for Australia's future.

Roger Montgomery is founder of Montgomery Investment Management

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