

**Response to the Issues Paper of the National Food Plan.**

**September 2011**

The Sydney Food Fairness Alliance (SFFA) welcomes the decision to develop an overarching National Food Plan for Australia, and the opportunity to contribute to its development.

In recent years, most Australians have been fortunate to be able to count on a reliable, fresh food supply but this is coming under increasing threat on many fronts: through climate change, free trade agreements, peak oil and phosphorus and the growing shortage of water.

Even now, our food system does not serve everybody equally, and considerable numbers of Australians are 'food insecure' and unable to access sufficient and nutritious food, with consequent impact on both short term and long-term health.

The SFFA was formed in 2005 in response to the increasing community concern about failures in the food system in Australia, in both food production, distribution and consumption, and in particular the lack of comprehensive, integrated planning to meet current and future challenges to food security. For more information, see [www.sydneyfoodfairness.org.au](http://www.sydneyfoodfairness.org.au).

The very diverse membership includes primary producers, environmentalists, health and welfare workers and major charities, local councils, food activists, ethicists and academics. Since 2005 the SFFA has been campaigning for development of a NSW State food policy. Many of the issues that we have raised at a state level require action at the national level, and the SFFA believes that it is imperative for local, state and federal governments to work together to streamline responses to the challenges and to maximise the opportunities to develop a resilient food system now to meet future demands.

We note that the relatively short time-period allowed for submissions, and the limited advertising of this process, means that many people and organisations with an interest in this issue may not have had a chance to participate at this stage.

We strongly urge the Working Group to adopt a transparent and inclusive consultation process similar to that undertaken in Scotland during the development of 'Recipe for Success', in which widespread consultation across the country resulted in a broad-based community debate about the issues, resulting in clearer public understanding and commitment to the strategies proposed.

**What do you think is the most important thing a National Food Plan should try to achieve ?**

The National Food Plan should:

- Initiate a widespread public debate and community engagement about Australia's food security now and into the future that will raise awareness about the food system. This is already emerging as a major issue for public discussion
- Develop a framework for an overarching and planned approach to future food

- Be a 'living' document with an ongoing process so that it is regularly updated to take account of a rapidly changing national and international context, with clear performance goals and a monitoring system to ensure these goals are progressed
- Be developed within a global context. This includes both Australia's responsibility as a net food exporter in the likely scenario of a future shortfall in global food supplies, as well as preparing for situations in which Australia's ability to import foods may be restricted by pressures on global food supplies.
- Recognise that access to healthy and affordable food is a human right
- Acknowledge the importance of food to sustainable and liveable communities
- Facilitate the livelihood of farmers
- Ensure that food and agriculture are considered at centre stage along with other infrastructure in longer-term planning eg city planning, regional and economic development
- The Food Plan should support the many innovative food programs by both government and non-government bodies currently underway, and seek to encourage new initiatives
- Consider pressures on global food supplies, such as pressures on the world's fisheries
- The Food Plan needs to be adequately funded for successful implementation.

### **What do you think the vision and objectives for a national food plan should be?**

**Vision:** To ensure a reliable supply of safe, nutritious and affordable food produced in a sustainable way with fair returns to producers, and resilient in the face of potential challenges.

### **Objectives**

- Set up a Food Security Agency/Ministry with overall responsibility to implement and monitor the plan in consultation with representatives from producers and consumers, and which will provide a framework for all levels of government to work together
- To provide for healthy food that is accessible to all – geographically , economically, culturally
- To achieve resilience against future and unforeseen shocks through dispersed and localised production and reduced reliance on food imports
- Food Plan to be based on thorough analysis of all relevant current issues and taking account of future projections and scenario planning for potential challenges (as in Scottish plan)
- To enable identification and protection of prime agricultural land in perpetuity
- To improve food security for those currently disadvantaged and food insecure
- To minimise waste at all stages of the food chain
- Protection of water and soil so that current use does not undermine future use
- To meet environmental standards for sustainability eg minimising food miles and embodied energy

- The Food Plan should be clearly linked to climate change and sustainable cities policy
- Planning for known contingencies such as population growth, climate change, peak oil, peak phosphorus
- Significantly reduce the threshold for scrutiny of overseas purchase of agricultural land

**What do you see as the major risks to Australia's food supply in the coming years and decades? How could they be avoided or managed more effectively?**

The SFFA argues that many risks now confronting food production have arisen because of the lack of forward and integrated planning and over-reliance on market forces.

**Climate change**

Recent dramatic climate events such as the prolonged drought, followed by cyclones and floods in Australia and overseas, have demonstrated that Australia is not immune to disruptions in domestic supply. The CSIRO has predicted that there will be drop in Australian agricultural productivity of 27% by 2080 if climate change is left unchecked. Lowering of greenhouse gas emissions needs to proceed at a much faster rate and specific adaptations to future possible scenarios need to be planned.

Foreseeing such risks and pursuing efforts that aim to decentralise current food infrastructure toward a system that is localised and more immune to such risks should be considered as a response.

**Loss of prime agricultural land**

Agricultural land is being lost due to the competing land uses of urbanisation and mining. It is important to identify prime agricultural land and to develop and implement strategies for its protection and preservation. For example, in the Sydney Basin, 50% of market gardens lie in the designated growth areas under the Metropolitan Strategy, which barely considers future food needs of the increased population.

The lack of systematic mapping and identification of prime agricultural land has contributed to a situation in which competing uses such as urban development and mining are valued more highly.

Without a strategic approach to future food production, land use decisions are made in a piecemeal fashion and Australia risks losing much of its most productive land. Recent public debate has highlighted community concern about other examples such as the current drive to extensive Coal Seam Gas extraction, with the risk of water contamination, and the lack of restrictions on overseas purchase of agricultural land by sovereign wealth funds and other foreign investors.

There needs to be strong discouragement of the development of biofuels that are produced on agricultural land.

**New technologies**

An over-enthusiastic adoption of new technologies to provide 'quick fix' solutions to future food needs, when these have not been thoroughly tried and tested. More research is also required into the potential of organic and sustainable farming technologies to provide solutions for sustainable agriculture, as recommended by United Nations Food & Agriculture Organisation.

### **Gobal depletion of resources needed to support food supply**

Key resources on which current agriculture depends for production and distribution are under serious threat of depletion. These include water and oil, which are receiving increasing attention, but also other resources such as phosphorus. Strategies will be needed to minimise fuel use, to cut waste and to recycle and recover key minerals such as phosphorus.

### **Pricing and affordability**

Food prices have been rising more rapidly than the overall cost of living in recent years, and predictions are that this will continue, through diversion of crops to biofuels, depletion of resources, and effects of climate change.

Food price rises affect the vulnerable disproportionately and are likely to increase the numbers of people who are food insecure.

The Food Plan should aim to address and decrease this disparity.

It is important to note that food insecurity is a key factor in community conflict.

### **Agricultural workforce declining**

The rapid decline in the agricultural workforce, with both graduate and farm labour shortages, presents a risk to Australian production. Innovative strategies will be needed to counter this decline, and to ensure that farmers can ensure a fair return for their investment and labour.

Examples here include financially investing in human capital, for example making post graduate agricultural studies financially appealing compared to non-agricultural career prospects.

Innovative methods such as agroecological farming can also offer attractive opportunities for development as well as being more sustainable.

### **Long food chains with high food miles**

Centralised distribution by the major supermarkets has resulted in food travelling thousands of kilometres, which is both environmentally and economically unsustainable, and can affect nutritional value of fresh foods.

A response here is the investment and promoting of self sustaining localised food systems, which can also benefit regional economies.

### **Reliance on imports**

While the issues paper states that '98% of Australia's fresh food is produced domestically', this masks the fact that Australia is a net importer of both fruit and vegetables. This reliance on imports could represent a future danger if shortages or failed crops overseas lead to restrictions in exports. Recent bans on wheat exports by Russia, and on rice exports by Vietnam, show that this is a real risk.

Food safety is also an important consideration, especially for perishable products such as fruit and vegetables, as seen in recent outbreaks of food poisoning in Europe. Where countries exporting to Australia have less stringent safety regulations, this also represents a potential risk.

### **What does food security mean to you?**

The well-accepted World Health Organisation (WHO) definition is: 'When all people at all times have physical and economic access to sufficient, nutritious food for an active and healthy life'. This relies on 4 pillars recognised by the WHO:

*Availability* – safe, secure, reliable, healthy supply is available

*Accessibility* – people have physical access and the economic means to purchase it, and food which is culturally appropriate

*Utilisation* – people have knowledge, skills, equipment, storage and cooking facilities to use it

*Stability* of these three elements.

The issues paper states that in general, Australia is food secure; however this refers only to the first pillar, availability, and reflects the current rather than the future situation. National surveys consistently show about 5-6% of the population (about 1 million people) experience food insecurity, and research in disadvantaged areas shows that this proportion can be much higher – about 20% for households, over 30% for households with children, and almost 50% for single parent households. Although numbers are small, some evidence shows that there are even higher levels of food insecurity in some at-risk groups such as newly arrived refugees and Aboriginal families.

Food insecurity has been linked to overweight and obesity and has many adverse physical and mental health impacts.

### **How would food security be achieved ?**

The SFFA believes that policy and planning for food needs to bring these important issues of production and consumption together.

#### **Production**

In order to maintain the reliable food supply on which Australia has relied in recent years, it is imperative to address the following:

- Identify and protect prime agricultural land
- Protect water supplies and soil
- Increase local and regionally-based supplies to minimise food miles
- Foster a pro-active approach to plant patents and restrictive food ownership and practices
- Encourage agricultural careers and training
- Encourage research and development and effective extension of sustainable farming practices. It is important to include low cost practices as well as high technology solutions.

#### **Access**

More attention must be paid to those who are currently food insecure and whose numbers are likely to rise in face of predicted increases in food prices globally and in Australia. Important issues to be addressed are:

- Welfare benefits and income supports to keep pace with food prices

- Supporting innovative new food systems and enterprises such as agroecological farming
- National approach to planning regulations to promote and ensure food access within walkable distances, and to encourage urban agriculture
- Increased public awareness about food production
- Seeking opportunities for more home and community growing – home gardens, community and school gardens, verge plantings
- Building designs to maximise opportunities for city growing- vertical gardens, rooftop gardens.

#### **How would we know if/when we are food secure?**

- Institute regular data collection to monitor food security at the individual and household level
- Diversified food production in regional and peri-urban areas adjacent to cities. Reliance on a limited range of food production areas increases the risk of food shortages due to climate change or disease effects
- Young people choosing careers in agriculture and a stable agricultural workforce
- Australians investing in farming with confidence
- When we no longer have an average of one million Australians (at current population) reporting food insecurity

#### **What are the most important benefits that Australian consumers should get from their food supply?**

- Reliable food supplies
- Fresh and nutritious food needed to promote good health is readily accessible and affordable
- Access to fresh food grown locally with minimal environmental impact
- Access to sufficient food to enable participation in normal social functioning
- Confidence in the safety of all foods
- Clear and comprehensible food labelling to enable informed consumer choices
- Food is produced in a sustainable and environmentally friendly way which will not compromise the productivity of land nor deplete resources and so affect welfare of future generations
- Locally based enterprises providing local jobs and opportunities for social engagement
- Access to culturally appropriate foods.

#### **What two or three actions by governments would most benefit food consumers ?**

- Establishing an ongoing and transparent process in the Food Plan to maximise community engagement
- Action to mitigate climate change

- Adoption of precautionary principles in regard to all new food technologies such as nanotechnology and genetic modification (GM)
- Promotion of more competition in food distribution and retail
- Provision for local fresh food outlets such as farmers' markets, corner stores to be incorporated into zoning and planning laws
- Higher taxation of 'junk' foods and targeted subsidisation of fresh fruit and vegetables
- Education around food literacy
- Support and encouragement for traditional indigenous food systems on homelands.

**What two or three actions by NGOs would most benefit food consumers ?**

- Projects to support food security including knowledge and skills as well as access to foods
- Promoting food-based social enterprises such as produce box schemes, cafes, co-ops
- Investigative work to promote transparency in labelling
- Monitoring and supporting local food systems

**What two or three actions by governments would most benefit businesses that make, distribute and sell food ?**

- Identification and protection of prime agricultural land so that farmers can invest with confidence
- Strategies to support farmers and agricultural workers as 'essential' workers like teachers and nurses, and including promotion of agricultural degrees and career paths
- Investigation of feasibility of Transferable Development Rights and Land Trusts to keep land in agricultural production
- Assistance for farmers displaced by urban growth to relocate. Consistency between government agencies to enable relocation (eg embargo on farm dam construction may limit access to water, thereby preventing resumption of farming)
- Assistance for the many culturally and linguistically diverse farmers on city fringes to address increasingly onerous legislative requirements
- Work with state and local councils re SEPP for protection of land with state and regional significance.

**What two or three actions by governments would most benefit communities that are highly dependent on food production, processing, distribution or sale?**

- Encouraging more competition in the retail sector in order to ensure proper return to farmers, in light of ever-increasing profits by major supermarkets
- Strong protection for farmers who wish to grow GM free crops including measures to prevent contamination by GM crops.

**What two or three actions by NGOs would most benefit communities that are highly dependent on food production, processing, distribution or sale?**

- Initiation and support for local food enterprises such as community supported agriculture, farmers markets.
- Food industry to take a lead on minimising waste at the farm gate for example through sale of non-standardised fruit and vegetables.

## Chapter 2

### Current approach to food policy

**Do you think that the development and implementation of government policies related to food are adequately co-ordinated? If not, please explain why and provide examples. What mechanisms could the government consider that might address your concerns?**

#### Co-ordination

The SFFA believes that a co-ordinated approach to food policy is critical to ensuring future food security. Better co-operation between the national, state and local government would assist in co-ordinating planning and regulation to prioritise food production.

The current 'silo' approach in which planning relating to population, development of mining and coal seam gas industries, and urban development are considered with little or only token consideration of impact on future food supplies, is not sustainable. Agricultural production is often a 'remnant' issue to be considered after everything else.

Some recent examples are the discussion paper 'Our Cities, Our Future' from Infrastructure Australia, which focused on housing, industry and transport as key elements of infrastructure, with food rating barely a mention; the Sydney Metropolitan Strategy (MS) Review document (the blueprint for the next 25 years of development in Sydney) included one chapter on 'Balancing the needs of development and farming on the agricultural fringe'. This was an element missing from the original document, and was a welcome inclusion, but demonstrates how often food appears to be an afterthought. The MS plan allows for designated growth areas which will displace 50% of Sydney Basin market gardens, and 40% of greenhouses and poultry ie disrupting major sources of fresh produce for Sydney and affecting the livelihoods of countless farmers.

Once this land is lost to development it will be impossible to retrieve, despite its clear value with close access to markets, good land with reliable rainfall, close to sources of labour. Not only is the land lost and the diversified food source, but the farming knowledge often built up over many generations is also lost.

#### Food and Health

There is a similar disjuncture between concern at the exponential growth in health care costs attributed to chronic disease, overweight and obesity, and the lack of strategies to increase access to fruit and vegetables and other healthy foods which are key to prevention. In South Australia *Health in All Policies* has shown that, at current rates of growth, the health budget will out-strip the total state budget within 30 years. This is clearly of major economic importance.

The SFFA believes that policy and planning for food needs to bring these important issues of production and consumption together.

#### Lack of information

While information is readily available about food imports and exports, there has been a gap in the knowledge about who is farming what, and where, that is only beginning to be addressed, principally by individuals and groups of academics at several universities. It is hard to develop policies to support agriculture and food production without a comprehensive picture of the existing situation.

#### Overseas purchase of land

Another consequence of the lack of integrated planning for Australia's food security is that Australia has been slow to address the potential dangers of foreign purchase of prime agricultural land. The current enquiry is welcome, and SFFA believes that Australia should adopt an approach similar to the NZ government, which sets a much lower threshold for scrutiny of overseas purchase, at 5 ha compared to Australia's current \$231m threshold.

### Scenario planning

Another area in which there appears to be a shortage of knowledge is in 'scenario planning'. Few attempts have been made to consider what future needs might be, and how these could be provided for.

With such calculations, it becomes possible to plan more effectively.

Examples are:

- The DPI in NSW has calculated how much land *would be needed* in the Sydney Basin to provide for 50% of Sydney's vegetable needs.
- Victorian Eco Innovations Lab has also done some 'scenario' planning, considering the potential impact of increases in the price of oil on distribution and freighting of agricultural produce.
- In Scotland, there is a 'resilience advisory board'.

### Chapter 3 Food security

#### **Have all the possible risks to Australia's food security been identified in this paper? If not, what other risks are you aware of?**

There is an indirect but nevertheless inherent risk in the fact people are so far removed from their food sources, and so used to the expectation of cheap, reliable and 'perfect' food available year-round regardless of season, that the true value and cost of production of food is not recognised, and that the result will be continuing currently wasteful practices into the future.

A well-publicised debate around the National Food Plan offers an opportunity to discuss these issues and to engage the public in supporting and developing sustainable practices in food production and consumption.

#### **Impact of global problems on Australia:**

There has been global drop in productive land per person over the last 20 years, at a time when production needs to increase to feed the world. Climate change and extreme weather conditions overseas have resulted in bans on exports such as the recent ban on wheat exports by Russia and on rice exports by Vietnam. It has been predicted that deep aquifers in India and China which have supported local agriculture are likely to fail within 15 years. Climate change is impacting on ocean fisheries and unsustainable fishing methods such as Fish Aggregating Devices threaten future fish supplies.

These and other factors have the potential to impact on the global availability of food and on prices in Australia.

In addition, food insecurity and lack of access to key resources such as water are an important ingredient in community and international conflict.

#### **What specific additional actions by government sector would most benefit our food security status?**

- Audits of prime agricultural land, identification and protection in perpetuity
- Encouraging peri-urban agriculture and adopting Food Sensitive Urban design as a key principle
- Restoration of research budgets and inclusion of ecological and organic farming methods

- Consider subsidies and promotional strategies to increase fruit and vegetable production and intake.

## **Conclusion**

The Sydney Food Fairness Alliance welcomes the development of a National Food Plan.

Access to and production of food is central to the economic, social and cultural well being of society. This is a unique opportunity to design a comprehensive strategy to address current and future food needs

We can no longer be complacent about our future food. It is timely to rethink some key assumptions, based on abundance of land, water, cheap oil, phosphorus and the desire to have all products available all year round, often travelling great distances.

Food security means many things to many stakeholders, and requires a cross-cutting approach with strong national leadership.

We believe that the challenges we all face in a future of diminished resources will require active commitment from all sectors of the community, and that the Food Plan provides an opening to debate and discuss these issues widely within the community, both to raise awareness of the issues and also to learn about the many innovative solutions which are already being adopted.

We would like to see the Working Group expanded to be more representative of a broad range of stakeholders. We also recommend that the Working Group adopt a similar approach to that taken by the Scottish government and many cities such as Toronto, Vancouver and London in developing their food policies, which have been strengthened through encouraging public debate which gathers and disseminates information simultaneously.

We look forward to a Food Plan which has been transparently developed and to which we can continue to contribute.

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30 August 2011