



**SUBMISSION TO THE ISSUES PAPER TO
INFORM DEVELOPMENT OF A NATIONAL FOOD
PLAN**

SEPTEMBER 2011

**Prepared by the
Western Sydney Regional Organisation of Councils Ltd**



SUBMISSION TO THE ISSUES PAPER TO INFORM DEVELOPMENT OF A NATIONAL FOOD PLAN

INTRODUCTION

The Western Sydney Regional Organisation of Councils covers 10 local government areas, totalling 5,500 square kilometres ranging from high density urban areas such as Auburn, Bankstown, Parramatta, Blacktown and Fairfield, to semi-rural and rural lands around the outskirts of Hawkesbury, Liverpool and Penrith. It also takes in the World Heritage area of the Blue Mountains.

The population in the greater Western Sydney area is currently around 1.9 million and is expected to increase by over 1 million in the next 20 years.

Our population has higher than average obesity levels and a correspondingly higher incidence of lifestyle-related illness. Socio-economic levels are lower than average in all LGAs except the Blue Mountains.

Local councils provide many of the front line and grass roots services associated with managing population health outcomes.

As a result, WSROC Councils are at the forefront of many of the key issues associated with food security, including competing land use demands, managing peri-urban agriculture and issues of obesity and poor health relating to inadequate access to fresh food and poor education about nutrition.

Last year, WSROC established the Urban Adapt initiative, bringing together councils and key stakeholders concerned with ensuring a secure and affordable supply of fresh food for Western Sydney residents.

Our policies and discussions have implications for food security across the whole of Australia, especially in key regional areas and as such we are happy to submit our contribution to the Commonwealth Government's development of a National Food Strategy.

KEY ISSUES AS DEFINED BY WSROC'S URBAN ADAPT PANEL

Getting the overall picture right

Australia's agricultural data relies heavily on statistics compiled by the ABS stats and these are not as comprehensive as needed to create a thorough understanding of agriculture in Australia. We need a better and more comprehensive system of reporting agricultural activity including who farms what and where, along with productivity rates measured in comparison to how resource intensive the activity is, to determine whether land is being utilised in the most sustainable way.

WSROC believes the Government will need to make some big decisions on how and where our food is produced. Water intensive activities such as rice or dairy production must be moved to areas of high rainfall. This will require a review and rethink of farming practices and traditions in some locations but is absolutely imperative in order to create a sustainable agriculture industry given the inevitable impacts of climate change.

The Government Issues paper notes that a large percentage of employment in market gardening are located in urban LGAs such as Liverpool, Penrith and Hawkesbury in Western Sydney and 57 per cent of employment in food processing is located in cities. Western Sydney therefore provides the perfect location to revive our flagging \$13 billion manufacturing industry, which already employs 102,000 people while improving food supply and work opportunities to the region.

Carbon impact

WSROC also believes that food production and transport industries need to be reviewed in the context of a carbon price. This would assess the carbon impact of both the production and distribution networks, to calculate a carbon footprint for common grocery production. For example, if eight kilograms of grain are trucked from Western NSW to supply one kilogram of chicken from a poultry farms on the outskirts of the city, then according to economies of scale and sustainability, it would make sense to move the poultry farms closer to their source of raw materials.

Processing plants in nearby towns, rather than in the Sydney metropolitan areas, could also provide a much needed employment boost to struggling regional areas. Reducing the volume of freight will also take pressure off our struggling roads and rail infrastructure.

In contrast, products which do not require processing – such as fresh fruit and vegetables should be grown as close to their end markets as possible which leads WSROC to support calls to protect and support peri-urban agriculture on the fringes of our major cities.

In both cases, prices should fall, making access to fresh food more affordable and accessible to all members of society.

Health and Nutrition

Western Sydney has among the highest rates of obesity and lifestyle related illness in NSW. Currently almost 60% of adults are considered overweight or obese and around 25% of children under 16. Almost 10% of the population has diabetes. Poor nutrition can be blamed for many of these illnesses, exacerbated by shift work, low income, lack of education and limited access to fresh food which all impact on consumer decision-making about their food choices.

Affordability is a critical issue for many western Sydney families when it comes making decisions about their food purchases.

While WSROC recognises the Government has encouraged competition in food industry with a view to putting downward pressure on prices – we are concerned that these measures are not having the desired impact on the right types of food.

Access to fresh produce is important to build nutrition and promote healthy lifestyles in those lower socio economic groups who have a lower disposable income and are often less educated as to their

nutritional needs. A \$1 cheeseburger available from a fast food chain between 12-2pm does not promote nutrition or health in the cash-strapped. We would argue that more needs to be done to ensure downward price pressure on the right types of food. Income support programs also do not specifically target food spending – food stamps, such as those used in US could be a more effective way of ensuring the government money is spent on what is needed most.

For many low income families and socially disadvantaged groups such as pensioners and the disabled, food spending becomes part of their disposable income. Faced with increases in rent, energy bills and utilities bills and rates, food budgets get squeezed and cost savings aren't always the healthiest outcome. Many people in lower socio-economic areas are effectively excluded from fresh food on basis of cost. As fresh food tends to be more expensive and many of those in lower socio-economic groups have not been properly educated about nutrition and how to cook and grow their own food so when it comes to making a decision about food purchase, fresh food is rarely the first choice.

Convenience is another major issue for working families and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. As the cost of fresh produce is rising, fast food chains are getting cheaper – which is one of the most significant contributors to rising rates of obesity, especially among children and young adults. These groups are at particular risk of the effects of even minor malnutrition as they are dependent on a good balanced diet to enable them to fully participate in education and employment opportunities.

WSROC also believes that more needs to be done to offer nutrition education with particular emphasis on people from Non English Speaking Backgrounds (NESB), Culturally And linguistically Diverse (CALD) and newly arrived migrant communities would also be helpful.

Western Sydney is home to over 100 nationalities speaking over 130 different languages. Many of these newly arrived migrants, such as those from Sudan and the Middle East are resettled without adequate support services. As a result they are often not aware of how and where to source the ingredients for their traditional foods, and so resort to recognisable fast-food brands in place of their usual nutritious diets. Introductory lessons in shopping and how to access ingredients which are not commonly found in western cooking, such as goat, would be an important part of any resettlement program and help not just the new arrivals, but their children to grow up with healthy eating habits.

Community engagement

If the National Food Plan is to be successful it needs to find ways to engage with the community and allow them to take part in local decision making processes. There are many local groups in Western Sydney which are already working on issues associated with food security and protecting peri-urban agriculture and WSROC would encourage the Government to look at ways of consulting with these groups as part of the governance structure of the National Food Plan.

By providing a reference point to localise issues it increases their relevance to the community and makes it easier to convince consumers to change their behaviours. Better community input and understanding of the issues will in turn create greater support for local agricultural programs and producers.

KEY POLICIES

- Incentives for farmers to farm peri-urban land to offset rises in value for housing – investigate a system of Transferable Development Rights as used in US.
- Nutrition and shopping classes for lower income and socio-economic groups, including special settlement programs based on traditional diets for CALD migrants and new arrivals.
- Fresh Food stamps for those on benefits and low income earners to ensure at least a percentage of weekly food spending is directed towards fresh produce.
- Support for and promotion of local farmers markets to provide a variety of options for growers and to allow greater interaction and understanding between producers and consumers.
- Ensure that teaching kids about healthy food choices is a key part of the school curricula.

RESPONSE TO SPECIFIC QUESTIONS OUTLINED IN THE ISSUES PAPER

Overarching questions

1. National food Plan should achieve a broad ranging and sustainable approach to managing our agricultural production to ensure enough food is available to feed not only ourselves but to make a major contribution in meeting global food consumption needs.
2. Visions and Objective: ensure secure and affordable supply of a wide range of healthy and nutritious foods, with particular emphasis on fresh fruit and vegetables, produced by a farming and agriculture sector which achieves maximum production using minimal natural and other resources (including land, water, transport infrastructure etc)
3. Major risks to our food security include:
 - Climate change
Expected changes to rainfall and temperature patterns across Australia should prompt a complete rethink in the location and methods of food production in Australia. With southern regions expecting reduced rainfall, it may be necessary to relocate water-intensive agriculture such as rice or dairy farming from dry areas in the South, particularly along the drought-prone Murray Darling basin, to areas of more reliable rainfall such as the NSW North coast and northern states and territories.
 - Unmanaged and unsupported population growth
Population growth is inevitable and must be managed and planned for well in advance in order to ensure that sufficient housing infrastructure, employment and services are in place when they are required. Providing sufficient and appropriate access to affordable fresh food is a key part of this strategy. With a projected population growth of 1 million people over the next 20 years, WSROC is among the regions which is already looking at issues and policies to support and manage this growth and has contributed to the Government's Sustainable Population Strategy.

- **Competing land use**
As the Issues paper notes, agricultural land is often subject to conflicting demands for use, including from mining and housing. This is particularly vivid in Western Sydney where semi-rural areas or peri-urban agriculture have been earmarked for housing development – including the major growth centres of the North West and South Western which have been designated for development of 80,000 new homes. Demand for scarce land has driven property prices way up, and this land is now far more valuable for housing than it is as productive agricultural land, placing long term landowners in a difficult position.
- **Mismanagement of key resources such as water**
Western Sydney’s agricultural industry is not immune from the national issue of ensuring adequate water supply for its activities, in competition for environmental and recreational use. The Hawkesbury Nepean river, is the key water provider for Sydney’s peri-urban agriculture sector as well as being in demand for the environment, industry, recreational use and to supply a large percentage of Sydney’s fresh drinking water. New water metering technology is critical to ensuring that this scarce and valuable resource is utilised to its maximum potential in the most sustainable and environmentally friendly way.

4. Definition of Food Security

Our definition of food security means ensuring a reliable affordable supply of fresh and nutritious food which is easily accessible to all members of society. There are components to achieving this, including managing the endpoint price of food by shortening the distance it needs to travel and keeping the production and processing of food as close as possible to each other. For example: one of the most vexing conflicts between peri-urban agriculture and residential amenity is the location of poultry farms in areas such as Kellyville which has become increasingly residential over the past 20 years. Residents now complain about the smell and the noise and traditional council pollution laws – which require that these kinds of pollutants are confined within the geographical boundaries of the enterprise – which is clearly impossible in the context of noise and smell. This is also complicated by the fact that these farms were established well before the residential development.

Apart from the land use conflict, the location of these poultry farms is not economically or environmentally sustainable for other reasons. The food supply for these poultry farms comes from Western NSW where bulk grain is grown and trucked in to the outskirts of Sydney. It takes eight kilograms of grain to produce one kilogram of chicken. If the chicken farms were located next to the grain supply, the number of truck movements (and associated carbon costs) could be reduced to one-eighth of their current levels – without affecting the quantity or quality of fresh chicken available to Sydney residents.

With climate change, carbon emissions associated with food miles, and the heavy demand on current infrastructure, there are many good reasons to relocate poultry farming away from peri-urban agricultural areas.

In contrast, horticultural produce such as fruit and vegetables creates virtually no noise or smell, and can be carried out in intensive, high-tech, high output facilities which require less land to produce more food and can therefore co-exist more successfully alongside residential areas.

Establishing a local farmers market connects the growers directly with the consumers, promoting better understanding of nutrition and virtually eliminating food miles and carbon costs associated with transporting the produce to the consumer. It also provides a direct economic support to the growers by offering them an alternative to selling to the supermarkets and reduced prices, and creates social benefits by bringing the community together.

WSROC believes encouraging low impact, high output horticultural agriculture around residential areas and supporting the development of farm gate and local market distribution points is the best way to ensure sustainable land use and food accessibility to both our farmers and residents.

RESPONSE TO BUILDING A COMPETITIVE, PRODUCTIVE AND EFFICIENT INDUSTRY

Transferable Development Rights

The financial viability of the agriculture sector in Western Sydney faces additional challenges from competing land use for land in the region, and the corresponding high value of land. Traditional horticulture and market garden properties are being swallowed up for new housing and as such – are more valuable to their owners as potential subdivisions than as farms.

In the USA landowners and developers have been able to access a system of Transferable Development Rights (TDRs) which allows them to capitalise on the value of the land while at the same time retaining it for agricultural or environmental use. In these cases, a landowner is allowed to undertake increased development in one area, in return for agreeing to preserve other areas of agricultural or environmental significance.

The US experience in more than 22 states has found this to be an effective land management tool development. WSROC believes there is merit in considering whether this system could help manage land use conflicts around all our major cities.

Buying and selling local

Market gardeners and peri-urban agricultural producers frequently complain of the dominance of the two large supermarket chains in setting produce prices. WSROC believes small producers would benefit from a supported local network of farmers markets and grocery outlets which allows them to connect directly with their consumer.

Without requiring mark-ups to cover long distance transport and distribution costs, producers can charge slightly below supermarket rates and still achieve prices well in excess of what they would otherwise receive at wholesale. Local markets have additional benefits in promoting community access and awareness of where their food comes from and better communication between producers and consumers.

Reducing the need for long distance transporting of produce will also have beneficial flow-on effects for national infrastructure which is already struggling to cope with current freight levels.

Finding the workers

The National Food Plan Issues paper notes that agriculture employs a high percentage of early school leavers and that 57.4% of agricultural workers have no post school qualification. Education levels in Western Sydney are significantly below that in other parts of Sydney and as such, there is a potentially significant labour supply located in the outer suburbs of the city.

The Commonwealth and State governments could assist in teaching and promoting agriculture and horticulture in schools, and TAFEs, especially in Western Sydney which combines a good labour supply in close proximity to existing peri-urban agricultural areas. As noted in the Issues paper, moving to a building blocks system of skills and training programs may be appropriate for these sectors, and would certainly fit the preference for flexible learning options which suit some Western Sydney communities.

Market and local community gardens can also provide a good solution to the problems of finding work for unskilled long term unemployed and integrating them back into the workforce. There is also the opportunity to pilot such programs in conjunction with mental health and disability services to establish community gardens, which will act as appropriate therapy while at the same time ensuring a supply of fresh food to the most vulnerable groups in the community.

For more information contact Karin Bishop, Deputy CEO
WSROC Ltd
PO Box 63 Blacktown NSW 2148
Tel: 02-9671 4333; Web: www.wsroc.com.au