



AUSTRALIAN FOOD SOVEREIGNTY ALLIANCE

Submission on Growing Australian Agriculture to \$100 Billion by 2030

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About the Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance (AFSA)

The Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance (AFSA) is a farmer-led civil society organisation made up of organisations and individuals working together towards a food system in which people can create, manage, and choose their food and agriculture systems. AFSA is an independent organisation not aligned with any political party. We have around 700 farmer, individual, and organisational members.

AFSA provides a balanced voice to represent farmers. We connect small- and medium-scale Australian farmers for farmer-to-farmer knowledge sharing, work with all levels of government for scale-appropriate and consistent regulations and standards for agriculture, and advocate for fair pricing for those selling to the domestic market.

We are part of a robust global network of civil society organisations involved in food sovereignty and food security policy development and advocacy. We are members of the International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty (IPC), La Via Campesina – the global movement of peasant farmers, and Urgenci: the International Network for Community-Supported Agriculture, and work regularly with Slow Food International and many of its Australian chapters. We also support the Australasian representative on the Civil Society Mechanism (CSM), which relates to the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS).

Our vision is to enable regenerative and agroecological farming businesses to thrive. Australians care now more than ever about the way their food is produced, including its social and environmental impacts. Food produced on small- and medium-scale regenerative farms is increasingly in demand, and government is bound to heed changing community expectations and facilitate and encourage the growth and viability of regenerative agriculture, thereby protecting the environment and human and animal health.

As a key stakeholder and representative body of small- and medium-scale producers Australia-wide, AFSA is appreciative of the opportunity to submit on growing Australian agriculture to \$100 billion by 2030.

Context

On 22 August 2019, the Minister for Agriculture, Senator the Hon Bridget McKenzie, asked the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Food Resources to inquire into and report on growing Australian agriculture to \$100 billion by 2030.

AFSA welcomes this Inquiry by the Committee and looks forward to further genuine consultation. We appreciate the acceptance of our submission past the due date, and note that other submissions have not had the benefit of “hindsight” that the COVID-19 pandemic has provided us with. We hope the Committee reads all submissions in light of the massive impact the pandemic has had on the makeup of our food supply chain. We would even suggest that perhaps the terms of reference for the inquiry need to be re-written. For instance, is export/import still the most appropriate focus for the Australian government? Or is sustainability and ensuring a resilient local food supply at long last to be a number one consideration? AFSA hopes for the latter.

‘A considerable inertia, manifest in public policies, corporate structures, education systems, consumer habits and investment in research, favours the currently dominant model of agriculture and food systems, representing a series of lock-ins. In the dominant model, environmental and social externalities are not properly considered and, therefore, not appropriately factored into decisions influencing the development of food systems. To overcome this inertia and challenge the status quo, it is imperative to create a level playing field on which different approaches can be equitably compared. This requires redirection of investments and efforts to design and implement innovative approaches, including agroecological approaches, that provide concrete alternatives to the dominant model and open transition pathways towards SFSs [sustainable food systems].’¹

Recommendations

Recommendation 1	The terms of reference should be revised to prioritise a regulatory and commercial environment that supports smaller, local farmers, and moves away from a misguided and ecologically-unsound focus on exports.
Recommendation 2	Agroecology should be supported and promoted over industrialised agriculture systems.
Recommendation 3	The COVID-19 pandemic presents a compelling learning opportunity around the fragility and inherent risks of globalised industrial food systems, while highlighting the strength of local food systems, solidarity economies, and strongly networked and collectivised communities. Local food economies and

¹ HLPE. 2019. [Agroecological and other innovative approaches for sustainable agriculture and food systems that enhance food security and nutrition](#). A report by the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition of the Committee on World Food Security, Rome.

	rural infrastructure to support them should be prioritized over export agriculture.
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Issues

The Food and Farming System in Australia

Australia has over its colonised era set up a regulatory and commercial environment that prioritises expensive, high-tech solutions, while our national food system is struggling under the burden of worsening public health, undemocratic concentration of market power, and an unsustainable focus on narrowly defined economic outcomes. The current regulatory requirements ensure the oligopoly of the big operators over smaller farmers, and multinational corporations over SME's that have traditionally been the lifeblood of our regional and rural communities. This narrow and misaligned focus is paid for in rural inequity, highlighted by our shrinking rural communities, consistent lack of investment in rural infrastructure and significantly poorer social and mental health outcomes² for these communities.

The simplistic message of 'scale up production and export more' is not assisting ailing rural communities, is creating shocking animal welfare outcomes, and is a direct driver of multiple negative ecological impacts contributing to drought, fires, and climate change. Australia's export focus and insatiable appetite for growth enables a system that sells off our valuable natural resources – soil health and water – in the form of agricultural commodities for the profit of a minority of private interests. Over-grazing, over-tilling, and repeated and prolonged use of agrichemicals has depleted Australian soils of carbon and organic matter to dangerously unhealthy levels. Australian water resources are traded as commodity and allocated unfairly to big irrigators primarily producing food and fibre for export, severely limiting water access for many farms, communities, and the environment.

Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has clearly demonstrated the fragility of the industrialised system, in contrast to the agility with which small-scale local producers were able to adapt and continue to operate ensuring their products were still supplied to their markets, a lot of whom increased as people moved away from supermarkets and their emptying shelves.

Australian producers are being forced to adapt quickly to climate changes that happen in months and years, not decades³. In addition, increasing the demand on farmers to produce more with the focus on chemical fertilisers, genetically modified crops, and intensified livestock production systems does not lead to a sustainable system.

² <http://www.crrmh.com.au/index.php/our-work/research-projects/armhs>

³ Stokes C & Howden M. (Eds.) 2010. Adapting Agriculture to Climate Change: Preparing Australian Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries for the Future. CSIRO PUBLISHING.

We take the view that while we need to support our farmers with access to markets, encouraging more intensive, large-scale, and export-focused farming is not the solution to long-term food security and food sovereignty in Australia.

Farmers committed to producing healthy, sustainable food for their local communities should have assistance, support and training for the continual necessary transition to genuinely sustainable forms of production. Small-scale farmers across Australia are already engaged in sustainable practices to provide nutritious food for their communities while caring for the soil they grow on.

Agroecology and its Potential

Agroecological farming is the application of ecology to the design and management of sustainable agroecosystems⁴. It is a whole-of-system approach to agriculture and food systems development based on local food system experiences. It links human and ecological health, culture, economics and social wellbeing in an effort to sustain agricultural production, healthy environments, and viable food and farming communities.

For example, this is achieved through using renewable resources such as biological nitrogen fixation, using on-farm resources as much as possible and recycling on-farm nutrients. Agroecology aims to minimise toxins and conserve soils by using perennials, no-till or reduced tillage methods, mulching, rotational grazing, and mixed-species paddock rotations.

The most important aim of agroecology is to re-establish ecological relationships that can occur naturally on the farm instead of monoculture farming's narrow, input- and output-reliant paradigm with its associated externalised costs. Pests, diseases and weeds are carefully managed in diversified systems instead of 'controlled' with damaging chemicals. Intercropping and cover cropping draw in beneficial insects and keep moisture in the soil. Integrated livestock ensure a symbiotic relationship between soils and animals. Efforts are made to adapt plants and animals to the ecological conditions of the farm rather than modifying the farm to meet the needs of the crops and animals.

From an economic view, agroecological farmers aim to avoid dependence on a single crop or products. They seek out alternative markets and many rely on Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), farmers' markets, 'pick your own' marketing, value-added products, processing on-farm and agro-tourism. These direct connections and regular engagement with local and urban consumers are of material benefit to the profitability of farmers, and importantly, they are also of further benefit to the economic and social health of rural communities.

The 2019 report from the UN World Committee on Food Security (CFS) undertaken by the High Level Panel of Experts (HLPE) *Agroecological and other innovative approaches for sustainable agriculture and food*

⁴ <http://www.agroecology.org/>

systems that enhance food security and nutrition made very clear recommendations for States and local authorities to support a transition to agroecological and other innovative approaches, and away from industrialised agriculture. It is worth repeating some of those recommendations at some length here:

All stakeholders involved in food systems (including: States, local authorities, intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), civil society and the private sector, research and academic institutions) should learn from agroecological and other innovative approaches concrete ways to foster transformation of food systems by improving resource efficiency, strengthening resilience and securing social equity/responsibility. In particular, they should:

- a) take into account and value the diversity of food systems and their contexts across scales when developing transition pathways to SFSs;
- b) use relevant performance metrics for food systems that consider all environmental, social and economic impacts of food production and consumption;
- c) recognize the importance of improving the ecological footprint of food systems as an operational principle for transitioning to SFSs, and thereby encourage appropriate consumption alongside agricultural and other food production practices that maintain or enhance, rather than deplete, natural capital;
- d) encourage integration of transdisciplinary science and local (including indigenous) knowledge in participatory innovation processes that transform food systems.

States and IGOs should:

- a) Support diversified and resilient production systems, including mixed livestock, fish, cropping and agroforestry, that preserve and enhance biodiversity, as well as the natural resource base, exploring:
 - i. redirecting subsidies and incentives that at present benefit unsustainable practices, to support transition towards SFSs;
 - ii. supporting use of participatory and inclusive territorial management planning to identify and foster locally sustainable practices and to protect common natural resources at different levels (landscape and community, national, regional and global);
 - iii. building adaptation of international agreements and national regulations on genetic resources and intellectual property to better take into account farmers' access to diverse, traditional and locally adapted genetic resources, as well as farmer-to-farmer seed exchange;

States, IGOs and, as appropriate, local authorities should:

- a) develop strategies to promote transitions towards SFS setting long-term goals at national and regional levels, ensuring policy coherence across sectors at different levels, bringing together public administrations responsible for, and other relevant stakeholders involved in, agriculture, forestry, trade, health, gender, education, energy and environment;
- b) explore ways for trade agreements and rules to better support transitions towards more sustainable agriculture and food systems;**
- c) support inclusive and democratic decision-making mechanisms at all levels in food systems and take specific measures to ensure the participation of marginalized and vulnerable groups most at risk of food insecurity and malnutrition;

States and IGOs, in collaboration with academic institutions, civil society and the private sector, should:

- b) redirect public and private investment and specifically agricultural subsidies to support farms based on the comprehensive performance metrics set out in 5a that assess their sustainability and impact on FSN;
- c) recognize the importance of true cost accounting for negative as well as positive externalities in food systems and take steps to effectively implement it where appropriate.

The COVID-19 impact on Australian Food Systems

One of many things the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted is the role industrial agriculture plays in increasing risks of future pandemics. In the very moment that we are suffering the negative impacts of the current pandemic, the Government is proposing to increase the ecological pressures that led to it in the first place. Changes in land and water use due to agriculture and extractive industries are the biggest drivers of loss of biodiversity, and loss of biodiversity is a key driver of the (re-)emergence of zoonotic diseases. Australia must change course to conserve biodiversity – both on and off our farms – and pushing for greater exports is entirely contrary to all recommendations from the FAO⁵, the CFS⁶, and the CBD⁷ that would see us reduce the risks.

AFSA would suggest there are several other key learnings from the COVID-19 pandemic. Supermarket shelves emptied fast as panic buying set in. Their ‘just-in-time’ model of distribution proved to be as precarious as food security researchers have told us for many years

Many farmers’ markets were closed, either by risk-averse and ill-informed councils, or the organisers themselves, though others remained open, with social distancing protocols in place, or moved to online platforms and thrived⁸. This left many small-scale farmers in the desperate position of having to rapidly find other ways to connect to their eaters, and forced some farmers’ market shoppers back into the arms of their jilted supermarkets. But on the whole the reports were promising – those who approached the situation with a can-do attitude found their markets and flourished⁹.

Farmers whose usual market is food service were thrown into crisis along with the nation’s chefs and other workers, and had to rapidly find new markets for their produce. For small-scale farmers, there has been a greater capacity to pivot to selling directly to households, though in many cases this meant arduous hours doing direct deliveries without any time to develop these new systems. Entities such as Open Food Network¹⁰ rose to the challenge to bring a thrilling wave of new farmers onto their platform to directly connect with eaters looking for alternatives to the supermarkets. The upsurge in people seeking memberships with community-supported agriculture (CSA) farms was breathtaking. Farms that had struggled to compete with peoples’ addiction to ‘convenience’ and achieve full

⁵ <http://www.fao.org/3/ca9456en/CA9456EN.pdf>

⁶ <http://www.fao.org/3/ca5602en/ca5602en.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.cbd.int/doc/recommendations/wg2020-02/wg2020-02-rec-01-en.pdf>

⁸ <https://www.farms.com/news/farmers-markets-thrive-selling-online-during-covid-19-pandemic-155047.aspx>

⁹ <https://www.farmonline.com.au/story/6730566/startup-helps-local-growers-thrive/>

¹⁰ <https://openfoodnetwork.org.au/>

subscriptions are now turning people away or working out how to increase production to “let more people in”¹¹.

For large-scale farms, there was no such agility in a global pandemic. For example, a watermelon grower in the Northern Territory whose market is primarily restaurants, caterers, and airlines, has very little choice but to watch the melons rot in the fields. With 600 tonnes versus 6 tonnes of produce to sell, selling direct to eaters is not an option¹².

The pandemic has demonstrated that globalised food systems are brittle and threatened, while local food systems, solidarity economies, and strongly networked and collectivised communities are strong. AFSA requests that this learning be first and foremost in the Committee’s ongoing consideration of the Australian agriculture industry.

AFSA thanks the Committee for the opportunity to submit and would welcome further discussion and debate.

¹¹ <https://insidemcgc.com.au/2020/05/04/weve-had-a-taste-of-disrupted-food-supplies-here-are-5-ways-we-can-avoid-a-repeat/>

¹² <https://www.weeklytimesnow.com.au/agribusiness/horticulture/farmers-forced-to-destroy-fruit-vegetable-crops-due-to-coronavirus-disruptions/news-story/62a5fd11338ca38444fb84ab7d5beb7a>

About Food Sovereignty

“Food sovereignty asserts the right of peoples to nourishing and culturally-appropriate food produced and distributed in ecologically-sound and ethical ways, and their right to collectively determine their own food and agriculture systems.”¹³

The core of food sovereignty lies in the following principles:

- Food is a human need and a basic right, rather than a commodity.
- Food systems should be democratically constructed, responding to diverse social, cultural and environmental conditions.
- Food systems should be based on a strong commitment to social justice: for farmers, food system workers, and the most vulnerable members of our society who experience food insecurity.
- Resilient food systems require long-term environmental sustainability, transitioning away from dependence on fossil fuels and chemical inputs.
- Resilient and sustainable food systems will be more localised and regionalised.
- Trade in food and agricultural products can enhance economic and social well-being but should be conducted on the basis of international solidarity, respecting and not undermining the food sovereignty ambitions of other peoples and countries.¹⁴

¹³ The Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance, <<https://afsa.org.au/?s=food+sovereignty+>>.

¹⁴ Patel, R. (2009). What does food sovereignty look like? *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 36(3), 663-671.