



*Creating equitable, sustainable and resilient food systems for all Australians.*

# **Awareness of Food Security amongst the Australian adult population**

**Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance**

July 2012

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## **About the Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance**

The Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance (AFSA) is a collaboration of organisations and individuals working together towards a food system in which people have the opportunity to choose, create and manage their food supply from paddock to plate. Formed in July 2010, the AFSA is an incorporated not-for-profit association in the Australian Capital Territory.

### **Mission**

The Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance is working towards fair, diverse and democratic food systems for the benefit of all Australians.

### **Values and Principles**

These describe the foundational beliefs and attitudes that form the platform from which AFSA operates.

*Inclusive* - All Australians, especially the poor and disadvantaged, have a right to choice of and accessibility to high quality, fresh and nutritious food.

*Collaborative* – we work with, network and give voice to the multifaceted fair food movement.

*Professional* – we conduct our interactions respectfully and with humility, ready to learn, not lecture.

*Transparent* – we are democratically accountable to our members, supporters and the wider public; and our meetings and processes are open.

*Wise* – Where possible, we seek and develop positions based on fact, not hearsay; but we are open to intuitive understandings of our environment, culture and society.

*Courageous* - We aim to provide strong leadership in setting out a vision and action plan to bring about the necessary transition to new food and farming futures.

*Sustainable* – We act in accordance with social, ecological and economic justice, and with the precautionary principle.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## *Food security 'an issue for Australia'*

Much has been written and spoken about food security in recent years, in the wake of the 2008 'global food crisis'. Despite an abundance of food at the global level, and extraordinarily high volumes of waste, nearly a billion people continue to suffer hunger and malnutrition. The reasons why this situation persists are complex. Yet they are commonly reduced to a simple formula of 'produce more, and export'.

Australia's own food security is taken for granted by Federal and State politicians, simply because we, as a country, export three-fifths of what we produce. When we integrate health into the equation, the picture becomes less rosy. Australia does not currently produce sufficient fruit and vegetables for all its inhabitants to consume a healthy diet. The diseases associated with poor diets are now described by those working in the field as a 'pandemic'; and constitute a major public health challenge for Australia in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

When we integrate climatic and environmental considerations, the picture becomes more complex still. On current trends of climatic change, Australia's major food producing regions will suffer substantial declines in productivity in coming decades, due to the combined effects of water stress, rising salinity levels and degraded soils. Our food distribution system involves tens of millions of road miles in refrigerated transport every year, which makes it highly vulnerable to petrol price increases and / or supplies in disruption. Prime farmland close to cities, which could form the basis of a more resilient food system, is being rapidly lost due to relentless urban sprawl.

Eighteen months ago the Prime Minister's own scientific Expert Working Group concluded that 'food security is an issue for Australia'. A key message of this report was to 'raise the importance and awareness of food in the public consciousness'.

## *Most Australians lack awareness of food security*

This hasn't happened. The results of this national survey show that there continues to be a very widespread lack of awareness of food security and associated issues amongst the Australian adult population. Further, food continues to be largely taken for granted. The key findings are as follows:

- 61% say they have never heard of the term, 'food security'
- 14% say they have heard of it, but don't know what it means
- 25% say they have heard of it, and know what it means
- 57% say they have no concerns about Australia's food supplies over the next 10 years
- 65% say they have no concerns about Australia's food supplies over the next 50 years

These levels of popular complacency reflect both the lack of awareness about the complexity of the issues around food security; and the complacency towards food security at the state and federal political levels. The finding that the percentage expressing no concerns increases over a longer time frame is surprising and worrying, since most research suggests that difficulties will mount in Australia's food production and supply systems if current trends continue, and there continues to be a lack of strategic vision and planning regarding, for example, the safeguarding of key resources.

What these findings reveal is the need for a dedicated and sustained effort to raise levels of awareness amongst the Australian public about food security: what it means, what the foreseeable threats to it are, how these can be addressed, what steps are currently being taken in this direction, and what role individuals and communities have to play in the national effort. This is part of what is known as 'food literacy': 'understanding [our] connection to the story of the food [we] eat, from farm to table, and back to the soil'. There are well-established curricula and courses for food literacy being developed and implemented in the United States, for both children and adults. These could easily be adapted for the Australian context.

### ***Food growing at home on the rise***

This survey also found that there is a renaissance of home-based food growing in Australia. The key findings are as follows:

- 53% are growing and / or raising some of their own food, most commonly fruit and vegetables
- Food growing is more popular amongst women than men; amongst older Australians than younger Australians; and amongst Greens voters than either Coalition or Labor voters
- 26% of those growing and / or raising food had been doing so for more than 10 years, rising to 35% in rural areas
- 59% of those growing and / or raising food commenced in the last five years, with 19% starting in the last 12 months

The noticeable trend towards home food-growing is to be welcomed for many reasons. Through the acquisition of skills, knowledge and experience, and the building of social networks around food, it builds resilience at the individual and community levels. It makes a direct contribution to the food requirements of individual households. It is a form of physical exercise, and contributes to mental well-being. It builds understanding of, and connection to, the food system as a whole. In short, it makes positive contributions to both food security and food literacy.

### ***Recommendations***

The Federal Government is currently preparing a National Food Plan, the first-ever such Plan for Australia. These findings support the case for the inclusion in that Plan of:

- Nation-wide food literacy campaigns, working in partnership with schools, health centres, local governments and community-based organisations, targeted at both children and adults
- The establishment of long-term programs to encourage and support the practice of home- and community-based (including schools) food growing, working in partnership with schools, local governments and community-based groups.

# Introduction

The AFSA / TAI poll on food security had the following goals:

1. To gauge the extent of awareness and understanding of the term 'food security' amongst the general Australian populace
2. To gauge the level of perceived concern about actual or potential threats to Australia's food security over the next 10, and 50 years
3. To gauge the extent to which Australians are growing or raising some of their own food at home, and for how long they have been doing so

Food security, and potential threats to it, have received extensive coverage in Australian media over the past decade. The public profile of the issue has risen significantly in the wake of the 2008 'global food crisis'. In the Australian context, extreme weather events, most notably the 2011 Queensland floods, and Cyclones Larry and Yasi that devastated, for a period, tropical banana production, have ensured that food security has not disappeared from the media radar. A google search of "food security" and "Australia" performed at the end of June 2012 reveals over 7.5 million hits.

In May 2012 the Prime Minister spoke of her ambitions for Australia to become the 'food bowl of Asia'. Later in the same month, Victoria's Minister for Agriculture and Food Security, Peter Walsh, urged the state's primary producers to 'double their production by 2030' in order to exploit the export opportunities that rising global food demand was creating. While Western Australia and Queensland were mining superpowers, Victoria could become a 'food superpower', according to Mr Walsh.

These political ambitions reflect several assumptions, widely shared across the political spectrum. First, achieving food security is above all a matter of supply, of producing 'more' food. Secondly, and flowing from the first assumption, Australia is 'food secure' because it exports two-thirds of its produce. Thirdly, that food security issues elsewhere are best dealt with via the greater liberalisation of trade in agricultural productions. Finally, and flowing from the previous assumptions, food security challenges are mainly an opportunity for Australian producers and exporters to exploit.

Mainstream political debates rarely acknowledge that food insecurity exists as a tangible, and quite likely growing, phenomenon in Australia. Challenging the assumption that Australia is food secure, recent analyses suggest that we don't produce enough fruit and vegetables to supply a nutritious diet (according to national dietary guidelines) for our population. On the distribution side, food desertification – the spread of localities where fast food outlets proliferate relative to fresh food shops – is barely mentioned. In terms of access and affordability, far too little attention is paid to the difficulties faced by those on low incomes in obtaining and preparing healthy food for the families, in the face of rising housing, utility and transport costs.

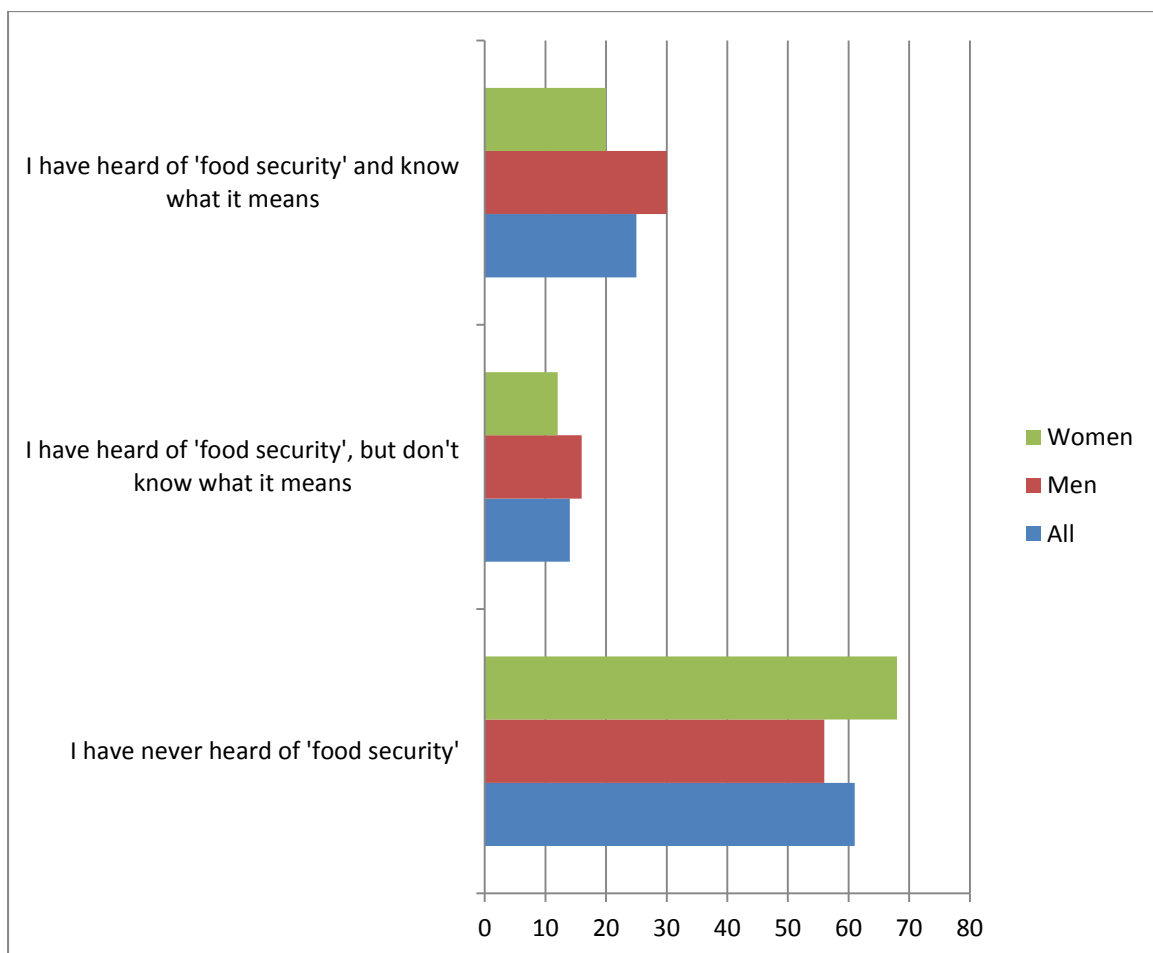
Food security, in other words, is a very complex issue. 'Feeding the world'; feeding ourselves well; and, importantly, safeguarding the ability of future Australians to feed themselves well, cannot be reduced to the simplistic equation that "more = better". Nor can it be assumed that we don't face major challenges in safeguarding our food security. This research shows that while many Australians do have a nuanced understanding of the issues, the case for a sustained public education campaign to raise levels of 'food literacy' is overwhelming.

## Levels of awareness of 'food security'

### Key points

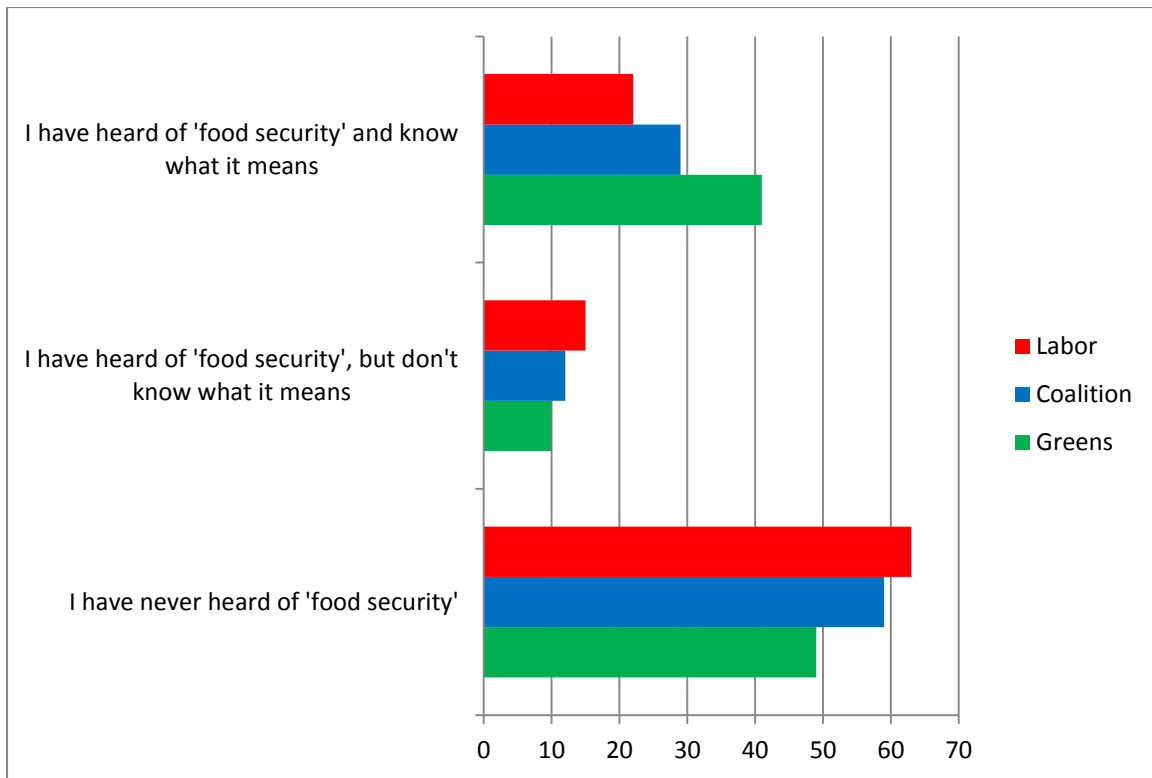
- 61 per cent of respondents say they have never heard of 'food security'; and a further 14 per cent say that while they have heard of it, they don't know what it means
- Significantly fewer women than men (20 percent compared to 30 percent) express confidence that they know what 'food security' means
- A significantly higher proportion of Greens voters (41 percent) say they know what 'food security' means, compared to Coalition (29 percent) and Labor (22 percent) voters

### Levels of awareness of the term 'food security' by gender



### Levels of awareness of the term 'food security' by political affiliation

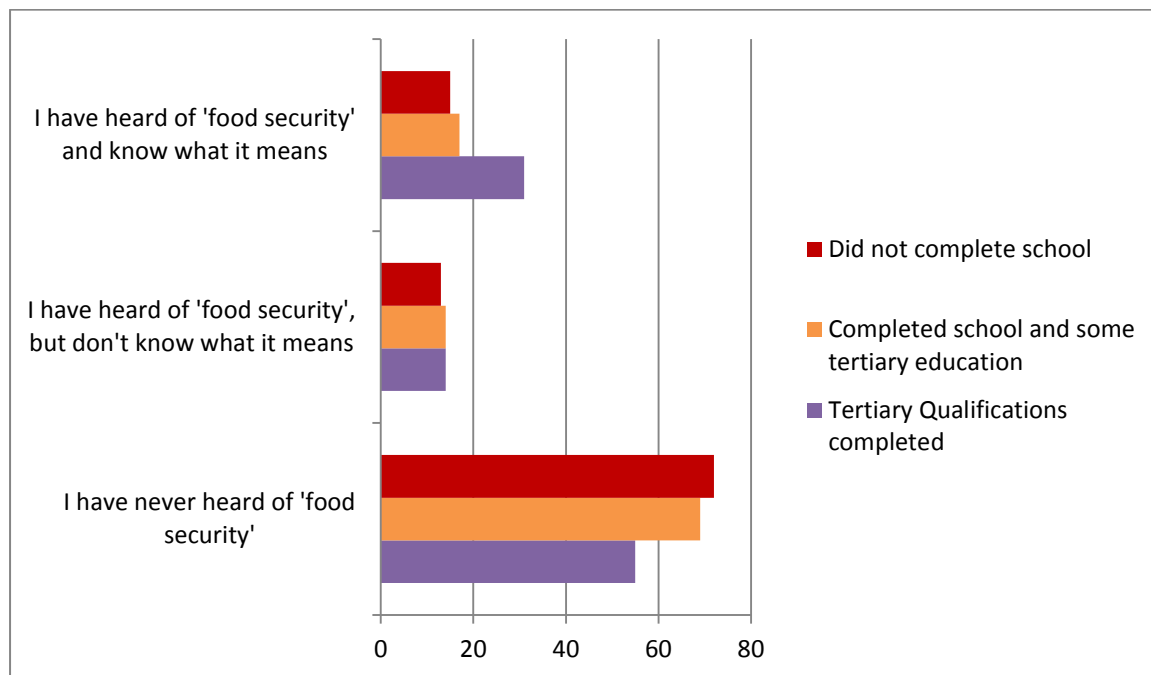




### ***Further findings***

- A slightly higher percentage of rural dwellers express confidence that they know what 'food security' means compared to city dwellers: 28 percent to 24 percent
- Older respondents express slightly higher levels of confidence that they know what 'food security' means compared to younger respondents: 27 percent of over 55s, compared to 26 percent in the 35-54 age group, and 22 percent in the 18-34 age group
- Awareness of what 'food security' means rises with educational qualifications: 31 percent of those with tertiary qualifications say they think they know what it means, compared to 17 percent amongst those who completed school and did some further education, and 15 percent amongst those who did not complete school
- Awareness of what 'food security' means decreases amongst households with incomes under \$40,000 per annum (22 percent), compared to 30 percent for households in the \$40-\$80,000 income bracket, and 29 percent in the over \$80,000 income bracket

### Levels of awareness of 'food security' by educational level



### Discussion

The finding that three-fifths of the Australian adult population have never heard of the term 'food security', and that a further 14 percent who have heard it don't know what it means, is a matter of serious concern. Even amongst those with tertiary qualifications, a majority (55 percent) have never heard of the term.

As revealed by other recent research (ANU 2012), individual and household food insecurity, in the sense of having inadequate or insecure access to healthy food, exists as an observable phenomenon now across Australia, quite likely at levels higher than the five percent figure that is most commonly reported. When one includes the steeply rising burden of dietary-related ill-health in what health experts now term an 'obesity pandemic', food insecurity in the broader sense is a major national challenge.

Further, there are many substantial grounds for believing that, on current trends and policy frameworks, levels of individual and household food insecurity, both in Australia and elsewhere, are likely to worsen and intensify. In October 2010, the Prime Minister's Science, Engineering and Innovation Council (PMSEIC) handed down its Expert Working Group report, *Australia and Food Security in a Changing World: Can we feed ourselves and help feed the world in the future?* The report opened with the statement that 'Food security is an issue for Australia'; and went on to identify a 'complex array of intersecting challenges which threaten the stability of our food production, consumption and trade'. According to the Expert Working Group, these included climate change, land degradation and soil fertility decline, declining R & D investment in agriculture, and loss of farmland due to urban sprawl.

A key message of the PMSEIC report concerned 'raising the importance and awareness of food in the public consciousness', with the authors noting that 'there appears to be a society-wide lack of appreciation of the fundamental role of food in health'. The sheer abundance of food, and its low cost relative to average wages - particularly in historical terms in comparison with earlier generations - means that, for society as a whole, it has become taken for granted. Food, and the work of those who produce it, has become de-valued in our culture. The close linkages between food, individual health and well-being, wider societal health, and the well-being of ecosystems, go unrecognised by most people, most of the time. They certainly go unacknowledged by Federal and State policy-makers, for whom the main, if not the sole, function of food is as a commodity for export in order to boost Australia's trade surpluses.

Food security, however, is not something that can or should be taken for granted. Given the complexities surrounding the issue, and the often simplistic equation of food security with increased production in much media and political commentary, it is hardly surprising that there is confusion surrounding the term. Of even greater concern is the finding that most Australians have no awareness of food security at all. These statistics confirm the key message of the PMSEIC report: we need as a country to raise the importance and awareness of food in the public consciousness. What this, and similar recent research revealing [low levels of basic knowledge amongst children regarding the provenance of basic foodstuffs](#), points to is an Australian population that needs to be supported to achieve much higher levels of '[food literacy](#)', defined as:

Understanding the story of one's food, from farm to table and back to the soil; the knowledge and ability to make informed choices that support one's health, community, and the environment.<sup>1</sup>

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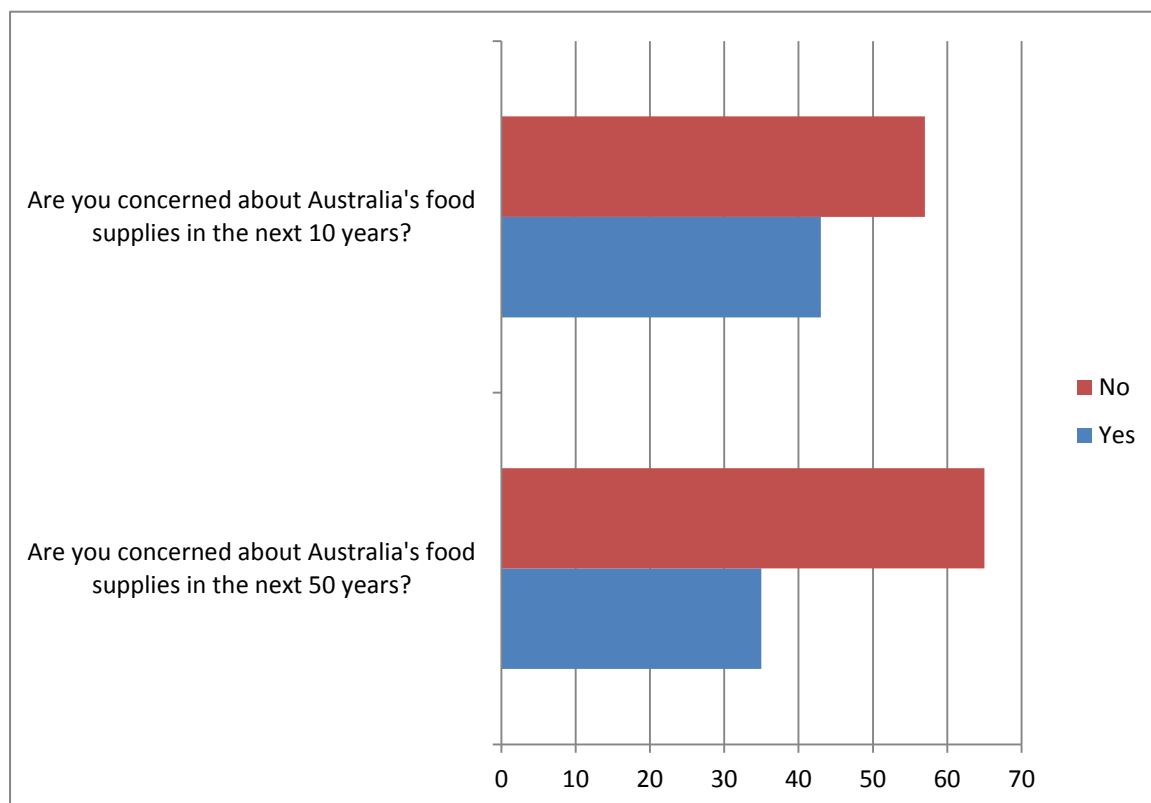
<sup>1</sup> <http://www.nourishlife.org/learn/glossary-d-f/>, accessed 25.6.12

## Levels of concern about food security

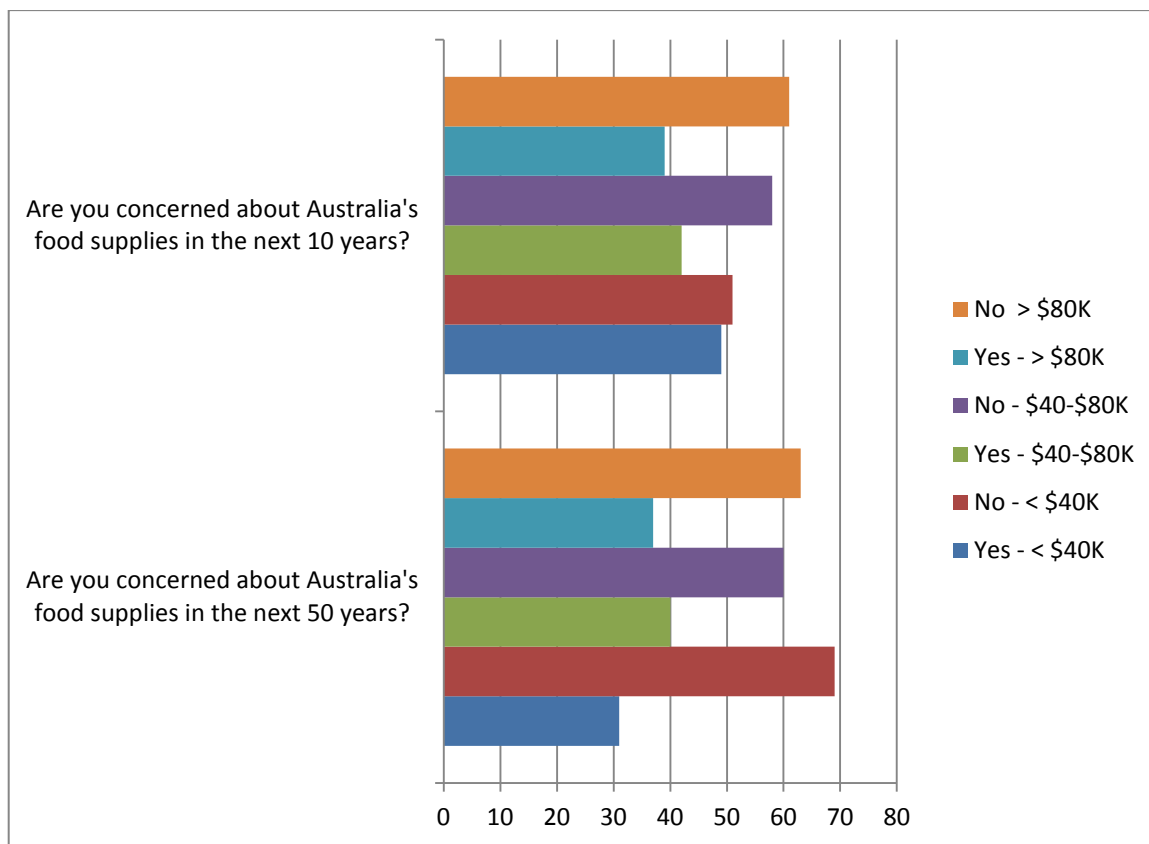
### Key findings

- A majority (57 percent) of respondents said that they had no concerns about threats to Australia's food supplies in the next ten years, increasing to 65 percent when asked if they had concerns about threats to Australia's food supplies over the next fifty years
- Rural respondents, and older respondents, were more concerned about threats to Australia's food supplies over the next ten years than city dwellers (49 percent to 41 percent) and younger respondents (53 per cent of over 55 year olds, compared to 31 percent of 18-34 year olds)
- Coalition voters (49 percent) were more concerned about threats to Australia's food supplies over the next ten years than either Labor (41 percent) or Greens (45 percent) voters
- Green voters (49 percent) were significantly more concerned about threats to Australia's food supplies over the next fifty years than Coalition (37 percent) and Labor (38 percent) voters
- Levels of concern about threats to Australia's food supplies over the next ten years diminished according to household income levels: 49 percent of households with annual incomes under \$40,000 were concerned, compared to 42 percent of households in the \$40-\$80,000 income bracket, and 39 percent of those with household incomes over \$80,000

### Levels of concern about threats to Australia's food supplies



*Levels of concern about Australia's food supplies according to income bracket*



**Other findings**

- Levels of concern about threats to Australia's food supplies over the next ten years were highest amongst those who did not complete school (54 percent), and lowest amongst those who completed school and did some further education (39 percent). 44 percent of those with tertiary qualifications said they were concerned about threats to Australia's food supply over the next ten years
- Slightly less men than women (42 percent compared to 44 percent) were concerned about threats to Australia's food supply over the next ten years
- Levels of concern diminished across all demographics when the time horizon was lengthened to fifty years, except as noted amongst Greens voters, where an increase of four percentage points was recorded

**Discussion**

It is hardly surprising that a majority of Australians express little concern about food security. Australians live in an apparent cornucopia of food, much of it astonishingly cheap. The idea of there being any potential significant threat to our food supply and distribution system seems remote to most people. Even the impact of extreme weather events such as cyclones seems temporary; and only results in increased prices for a period of weeks.

Yet, as we mentioned earlier, there are many factors impinging on the stability of Australia's food

supplies which certainly provide cause for concern amongst many of the experts working in, and writing about, this area. In his 2010 book *The Coming Famine: The Global Food Crisis and What We Can Do to Avoid It*, Professor Julian Cribb, describes the challenge of sustaining global and national food supplies through the 'ominous constellation of factors' converging in the next forty years as a 'planetary emergency' that is 'the most urgent issue facing humanity in the twenty-first century, perhaps in all of history'.

While Professor Cribb might be accused in some quarters of exaggeration or even scare-mongering, many of the issues he raises are well-supported. In 2011, Melbourne University's Victorian Eco-Innovation Lab (VEIL) published a report titled, *Victorian Food Supply Scenarios: Impacts on availability of a nutritious diet*. This research, which is now in a second stage, modelled the impact of different policy frameworks relating to the allocation of key resources (land, oil, essential chemicals and minerals used in food production) over the coming decades, and their impacts on Victoria's ability to feed itself. While the research was only of a preliminary nature, the authors stated that

A sophisticated and strategic approach to resource allocation is urgently required, if the multiple objectives of food security, energy security, greenhouse emissions reductions, sustainable resource use, a healthy environment and a viable economy are to be achieved.

The message, again, is that a secure food supply for the future cannot be assumed, simply because that is what we have enjoyed up to the present time. It must be strategically planned for, taking into account the risks and uncertainties of which we are currently aware, and which we can reasonably anticipate.

Bearing in mind that risks and challenges such as climate change, resource constraints and population growth are all expected to increase and intensify over time, it is perhaps surprising and, from the perspective of inter-generational equity, worrying that levels of concern amongst the Australian population about our food supplies diminish over a longer time horizon. We can speculate about the reasons for this, which may be related to the tendency to discount the future, relative to the present. There may also be an unspoken but widely shared assumption that technological changes and advancements will resolve the future food security issues faced by future generations. Further, the biggest drop (18 percent) recorded was amongst households with incomes under \$40,000 per year, which may reflect the more immediate concerns of this sector of the population.

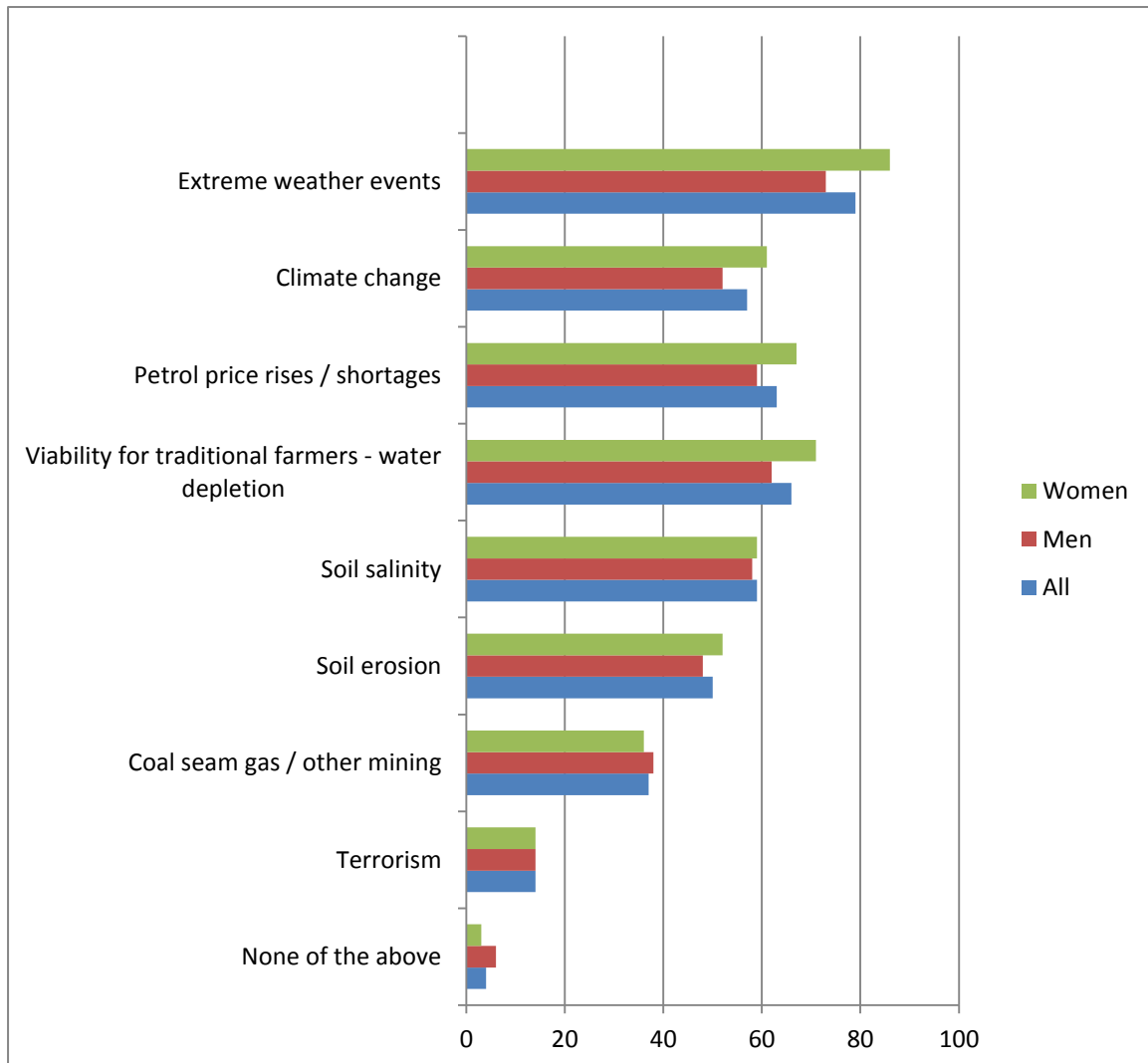
Further research would be required to explore these reasons why more Australians felt that food security would pose fewer problems in fifty years' time than now. In any event, the findings in this research both suggests that there is widespread complacency about food amongst much of the population; and reinforces the case for sustained education and awareness-raising to increase levels of food literacy.

## Threats to Australia's food supplies

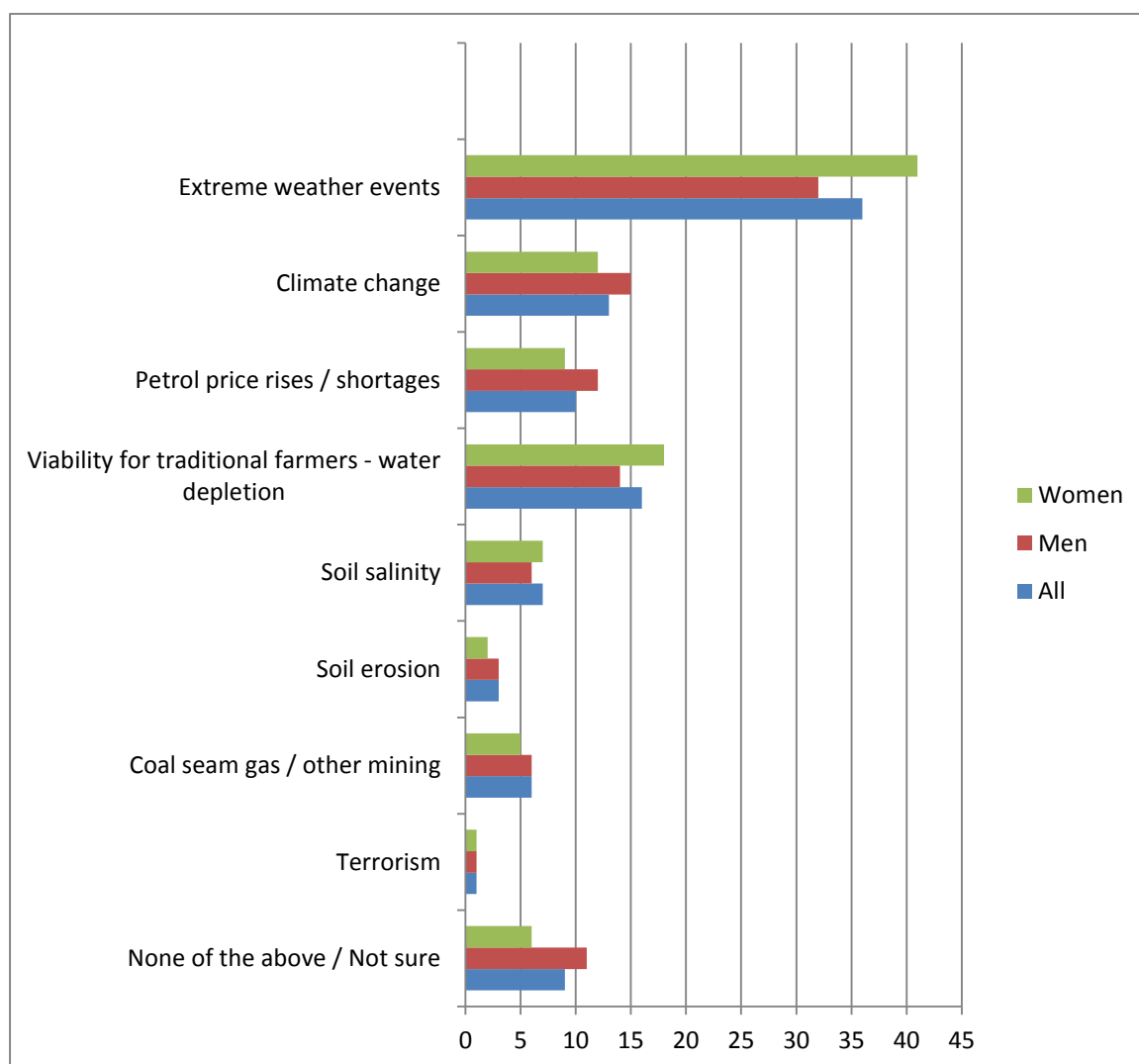
### Key findings

- 96 percent of respondents identified one or more potential threats to Australia's food supply
- Across all demographics, the threat identified by most respondents was extreme weather events (79 percent), followed by viability for traditional farmers – water depletion (66 percent) and petrol price rises / oil shortages (63 percent)
- Asked to identify the biggest single threat, 36 percent of respondents nominated extreme weather events, 16 percent nominated viability for traditional farmers – water depletion; and 13 percent nominated climate change

Which of the following would you regard as a threat to the food supply in Australia?



*What is the biggest single threat to Australia's food supplies?*



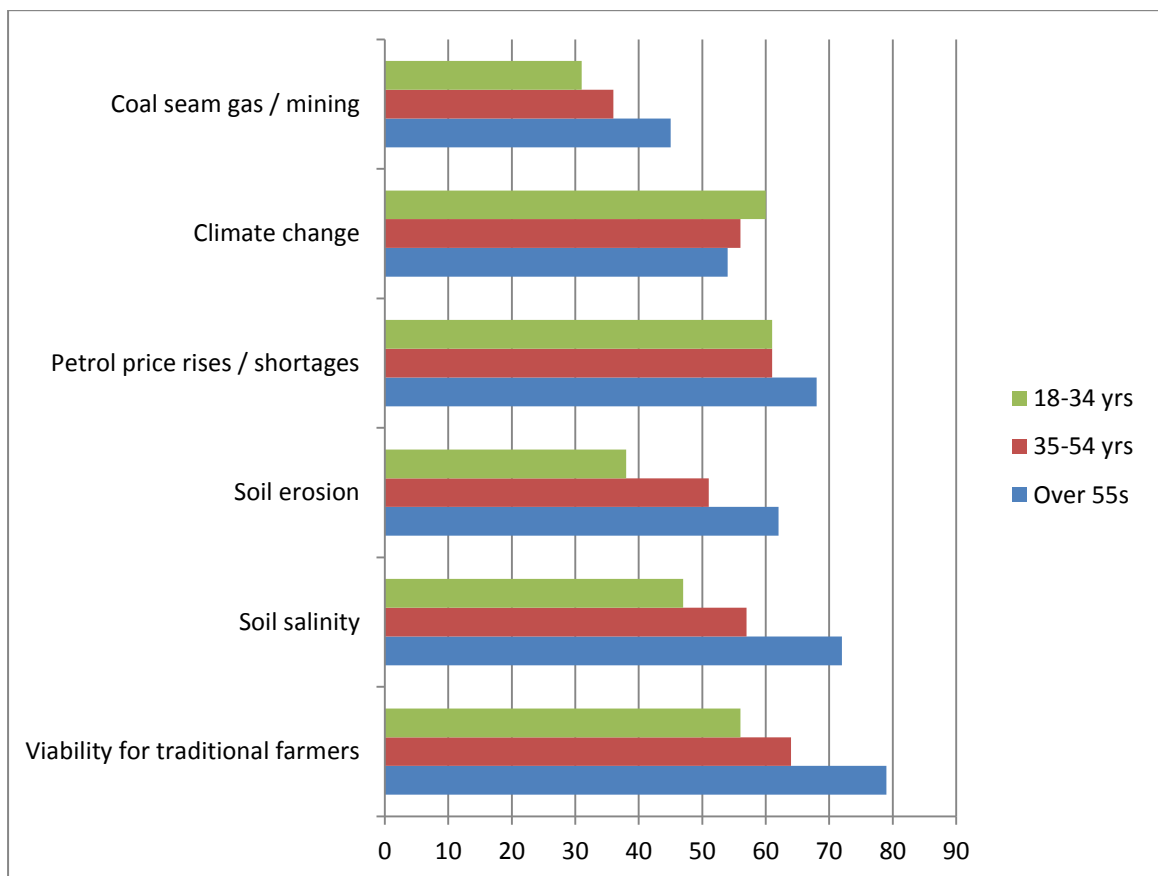
**Other findings**

- Soil salinity (59 percent), climate change (57 percent), soil erosion (50 percent), coal seam gas or other mining (37 percent) and terrorism (14 percent) were other potential threats to food supplies identified by respondents
- Twice as many men as women (six percent compared to three percent) did not identify any threat to Australia's food supplies
- Only two percent of older Australians (over 55s) identified no threat to Australia's food supplies, compared to seven percent of 18-34 year olds, and five percent of 35-54 year olds
- Older Australians also nominated more threats to Australia's food supplies than younger Australians. 79 percent nominated viability for traditional farmers, compared to 56 percent for 18-34 year-olds, and 64 percent for 35-54 year olds; 72 percent nominated soil salinity, compared to 47 percent for 18-34 year olds and 57 percent for 35-54 year olds; 62 percent nominated soil erosion, compared to 38 percent for 18-34 year olds, and 51 percent for 35-54 year olds; and 45 percent nominated coal seam gas or other mining, compared to 31 percent for 18-34 year olds, and 36 percent for 35-54 year olds.



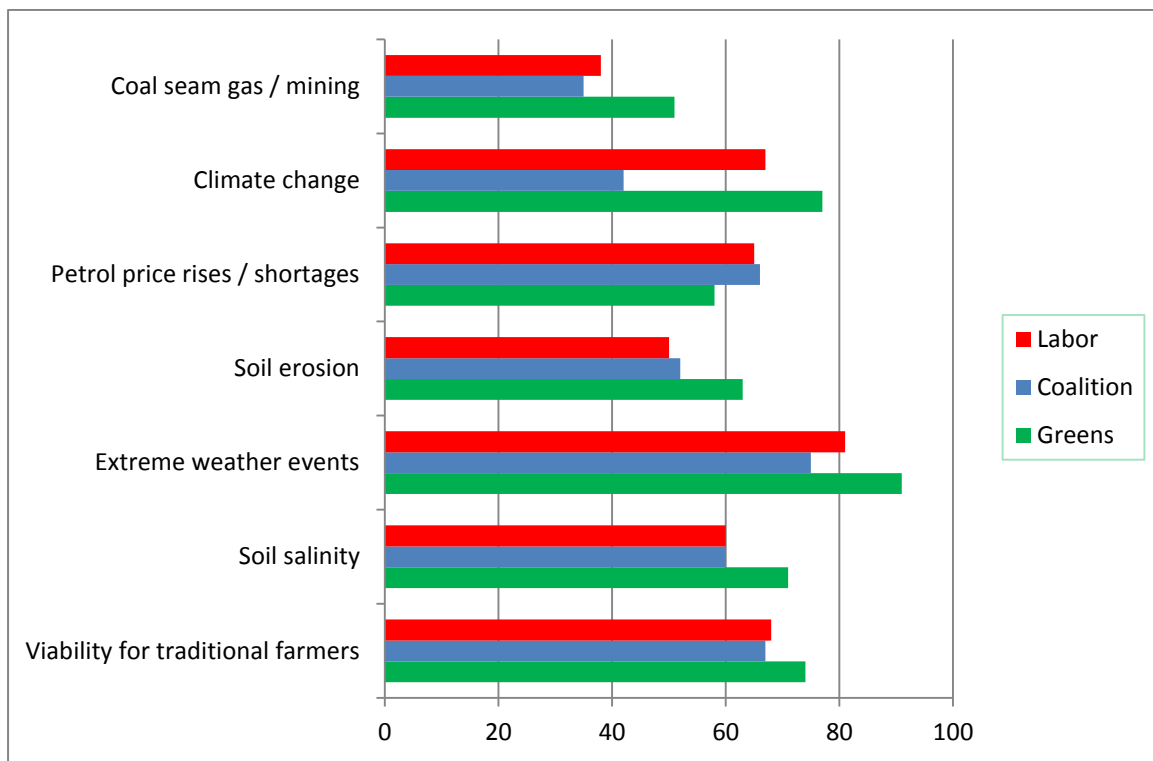
- Greens voters also nominated more threats to Australia’s food supplies than Coalition or Labor voters. 91 percent nominated extreme weather events compared to 75 percent for Coalition voters and 81 percent for Labor voters; 77 percent nominated climate change compared to 42 percent and 67 percent for Coalition and Labor respectively; 74 percent nominated viability for traditional farmers, compared to 67 percent and 68 percent for Coalition and Labor respectively; 71 percent nominated soil salinity, compared to 60 percent of both Coalition and Labor voters; 63 percent nominated soil erosion, compared to 52 percent and 50 percent for Coalition and Labor respectively; and 51 percent nominated coal seam gas or other mining, compared to 35 percent and 38 percent for Coalition and Labor voters.
- A minority (10 percent) identified soil-related issues as the biggest threat to Australia’s food supplies
- Three times as many Greens voters as Coalition voters (21 percent compared to seven percent) identified climate change as the biggest threat to Australia’s food supplies
- Conversely, 12 percent of Coalition voters identified petrol price rises & / or oil shortages as the biggest threat, compared to two percent of Greens voters

*Which of the following would you regard as a threat to the food supply in Australia?*



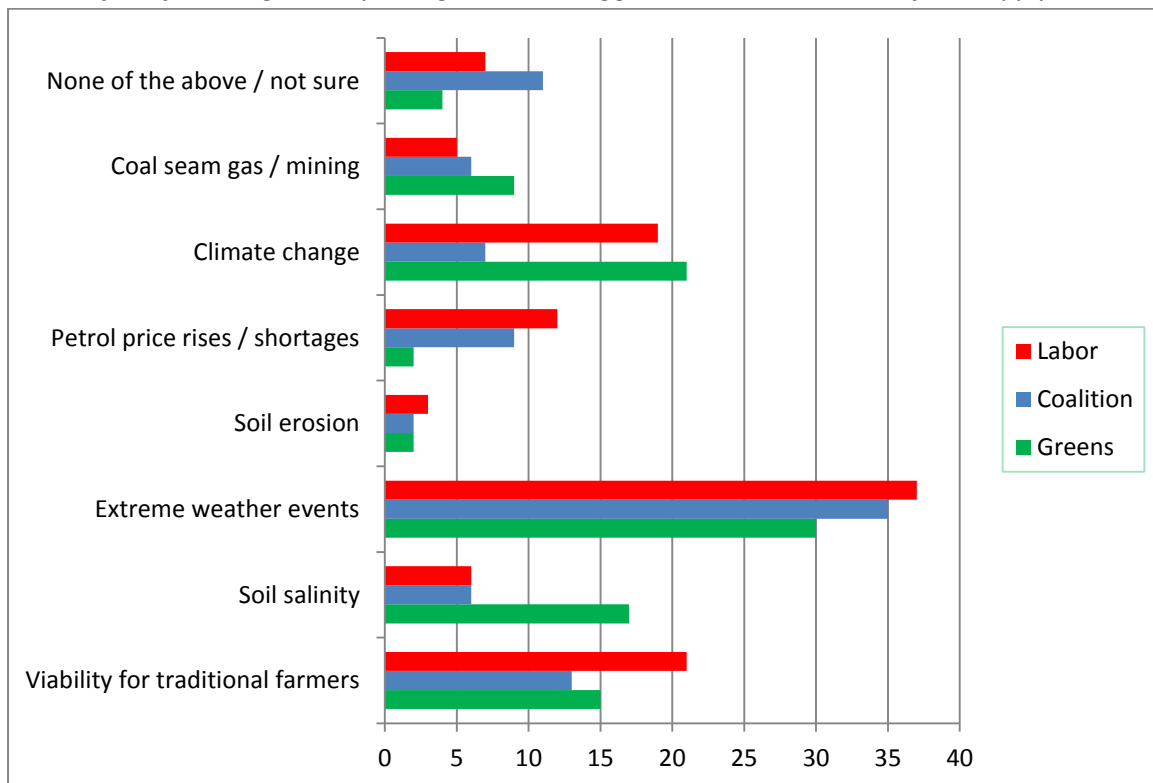
Percentage of responses, by age group

Which of the following would you regard as a threat to the food supply in Australia?



Percentage of responses, by identified political affiliation

Which of the following would you regard as the biggest threat to Australia's food supply?



Percentage of responses, by identified political affiliation

## ***Discussion***

Given the spate of extreme weather events that Australia has experienced in recent years, and the impacts of these on food production (e.g. cyclones and north Queensland banana production), it is not surprising that these should be most commonly identified as a threat to the food supply. Nor is it surprising that extreme weather events are the most commonly identified single biggest threat by most people.

On the other hand, it is somewhat surprising that climate change is not as commonly identified, given that extreme weather events are often regarded as one of the likely consequences of a changing climate. The fact that climate change is mentioned as a potential threat to Australia's food supply by a minority of Coalition voters, as compared with Greens and Labor voters. Is perhaps reflective of a growing wave of 'climate change scepticism' that is sweeping through the political right in Australia and other countries. This is further confirmed by the small number of Coalition voters who see climate change as the biggest single threat to Australia's food supply, as compared with Greens and Labor voters.

Viability for traditional farmers, petrol price rises and shortages, soil quality issues, and the impacts of coal seam gas mining are also commonly identified as potential threats. There are other potential threats about which survey respondents were not specifically asked, such as loss of peri-urban farmland to urban sprawl, acquisition of farmland by foreign companies, and the impact of cheap food imports undermining conditions for local producers. The power of Australia's supermarket duopoly to dictate terms and conditions to downstream suppliers cannot be left out of this equation either. The relatively high percentage of 'none of the above / not sure' answers in relation to the biggest single threat question perhaps reflects the absence of these options.

Several of these issues come together in the form of declining viability for traditional farmers, which looms large as a threat to Australia's food supply. Even assuming that we have adequate arable land, fertile soils, secure access to fresh water supplies, and a climate whose temperature range permits the growing of a good range of crops and pastures, if we don't have men and women willing and able to do the work of producing the food, then none of these natural assets will be of much use to us. In the relentless and ongoing drive for ever-higher levels of productivity and efficiency, an undeniable 'get big or get out' dynamic has been created, which has seen the numbers of Australia's farmers decline by nearly a third since the mid-1970s, while the average age of the Australian farmer has passed 55, with many much older. Urging the remaining producers to produce more and export more will not address this intensifying rural demographic crisis. Current trends are towards further rationalisation of industry sectors, concentration and consolidation of landholders, and further centralisation of the food supply system under the control of the two main supermarkets.

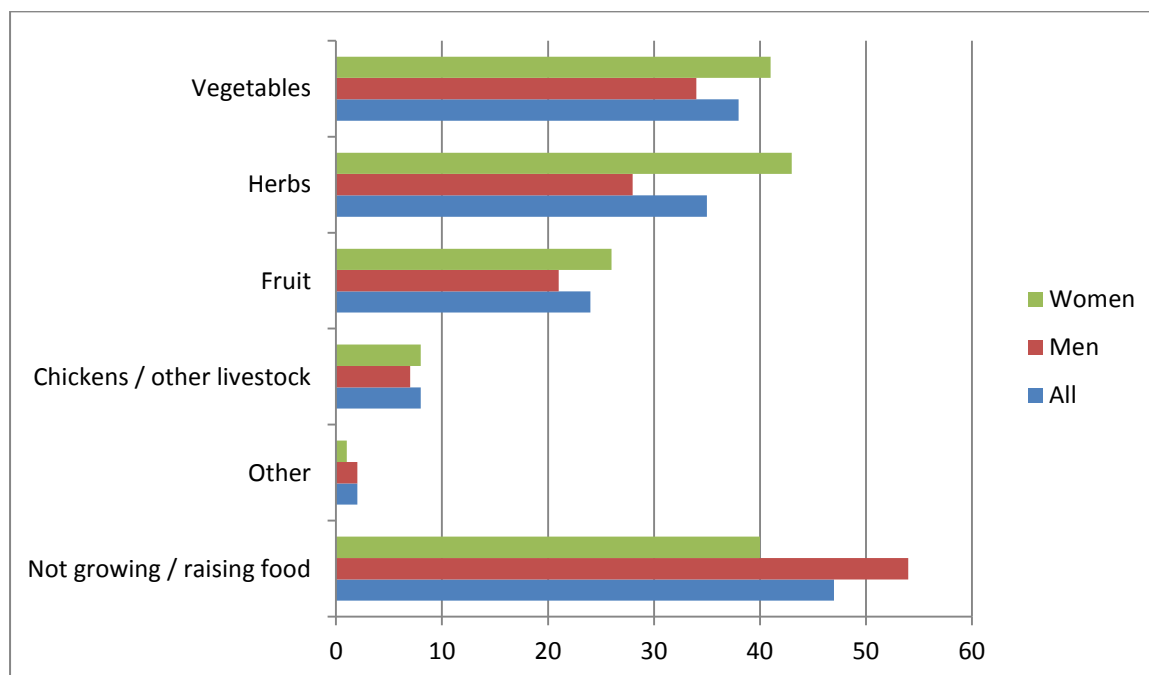
The wide range of threats identified to Australia's food supply, combined with known other threats not expressly included in the survey, serves to highlight the complexity and multi-dimensionality of the issues around food security. There are many potential responses to these issues, drawing on best practice working models in business, policy and institutional development from around the world. At this point, however, we reiterate our call for public education and awareness-raising on the core issues, including the design and incorporation of food literacy into primary and high school curricula.

## Extent of food growing and livestock rearing

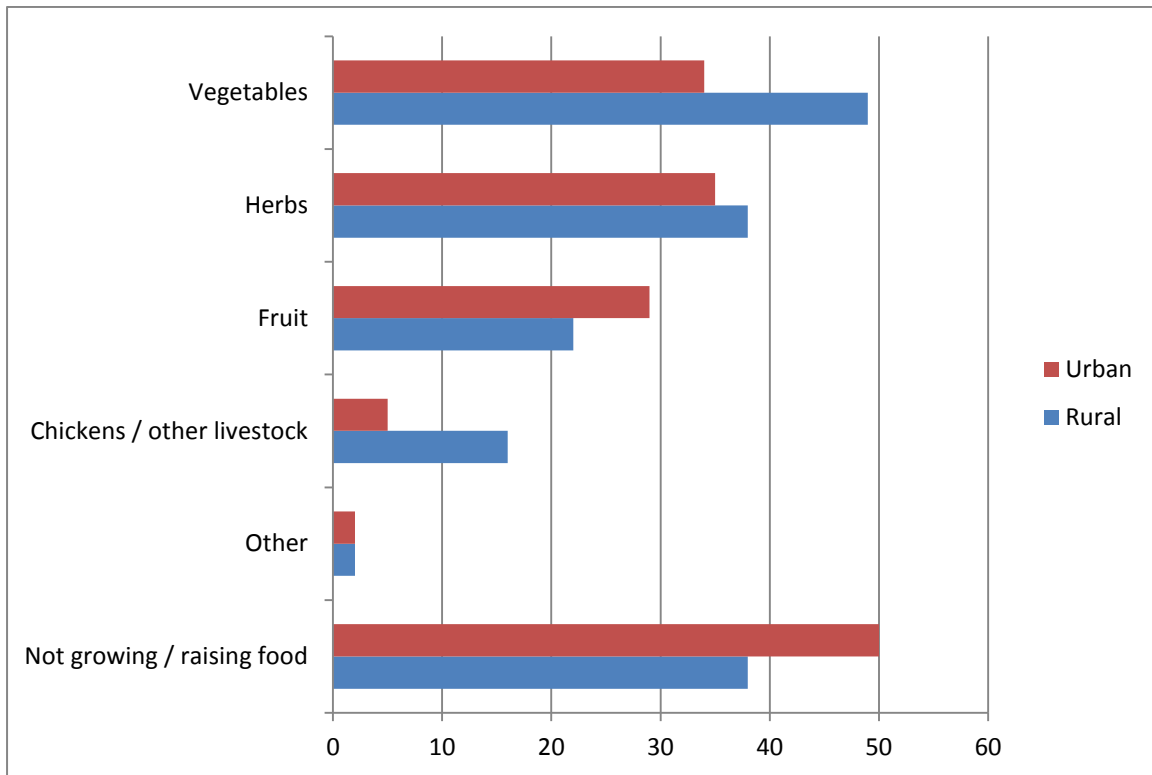
### Key findings

- A majority of Australians (53 percent) are growing and / or raising some of their own food, with vegetables the most popular item (thirty-eight percent), followed by herbs (thirty-five percent), fruit (24 percent), and chickens / other livestock (eight percent)
- More women than men reported growing vegetables, herbs and fruit: 60 percent as compared to 46 percent
- Food-growing is more common in rural than urban households: 62 percent compared to 49 percent
- Livestock rearing is three times more common in rural areas (16 percent) compared to urban regions (five percent)
- Older Australians are more likely than younger Australians to grow or raise some of their own food: 58 percent, compared to 46 percent for the 18-34 years bracket, and 54 percent for 35-54 years bracket
- 62 percent of those growing food and / or rearing livestock had commenced in the last five years, with 19 percent commencing in the last twelve months
- 26 per cent of those growing food and / or rearing livestock had been doing so for more than ten years, rising to 35 percent in rural areas, compared to 21% in urban areas

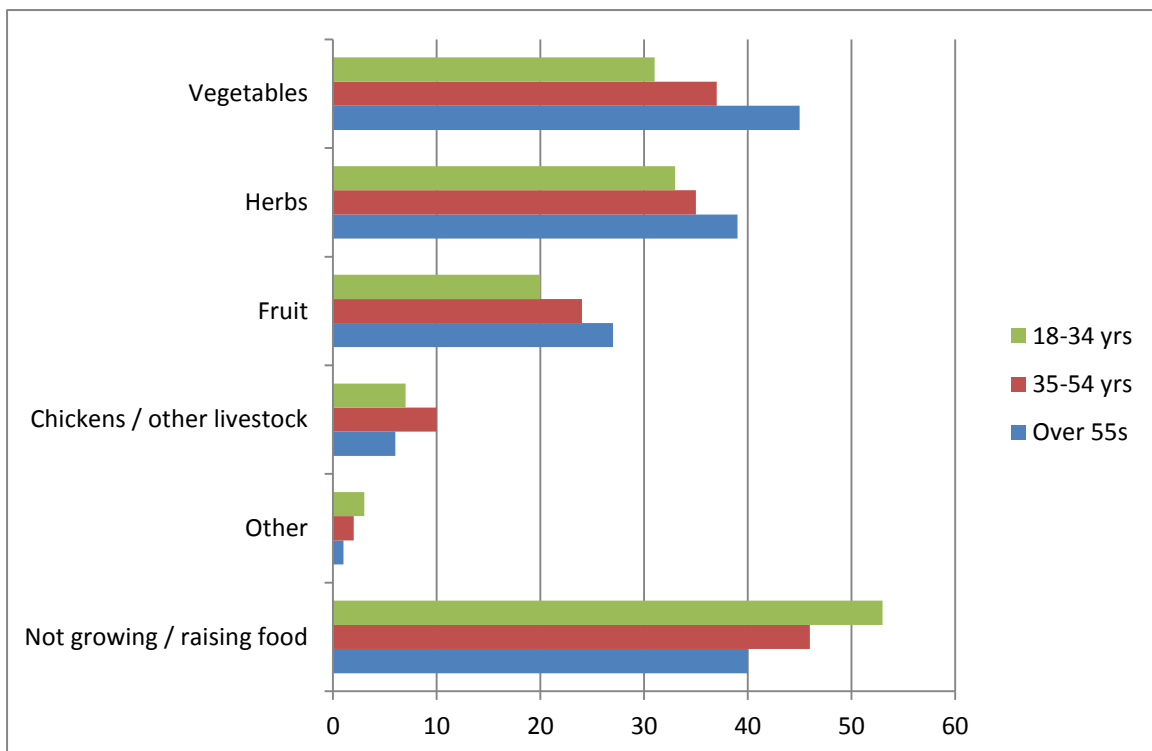
Please state if you grow or raise any of the following foods (gender breakdown)



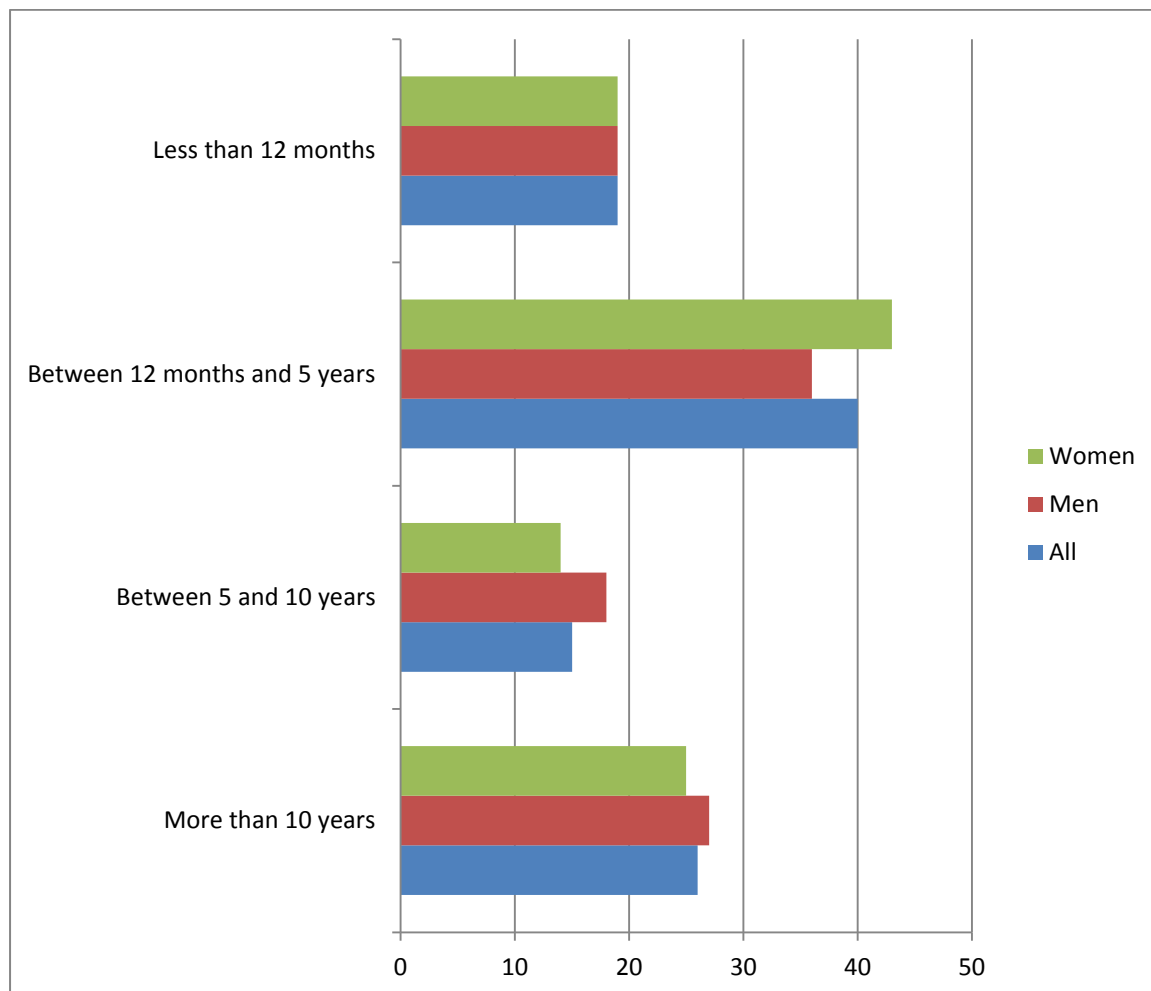
Please state if you grow or raise any of the following foods (rural / urban breakdown)



Please state if you grow or raise any of the following foods (age breakdown)



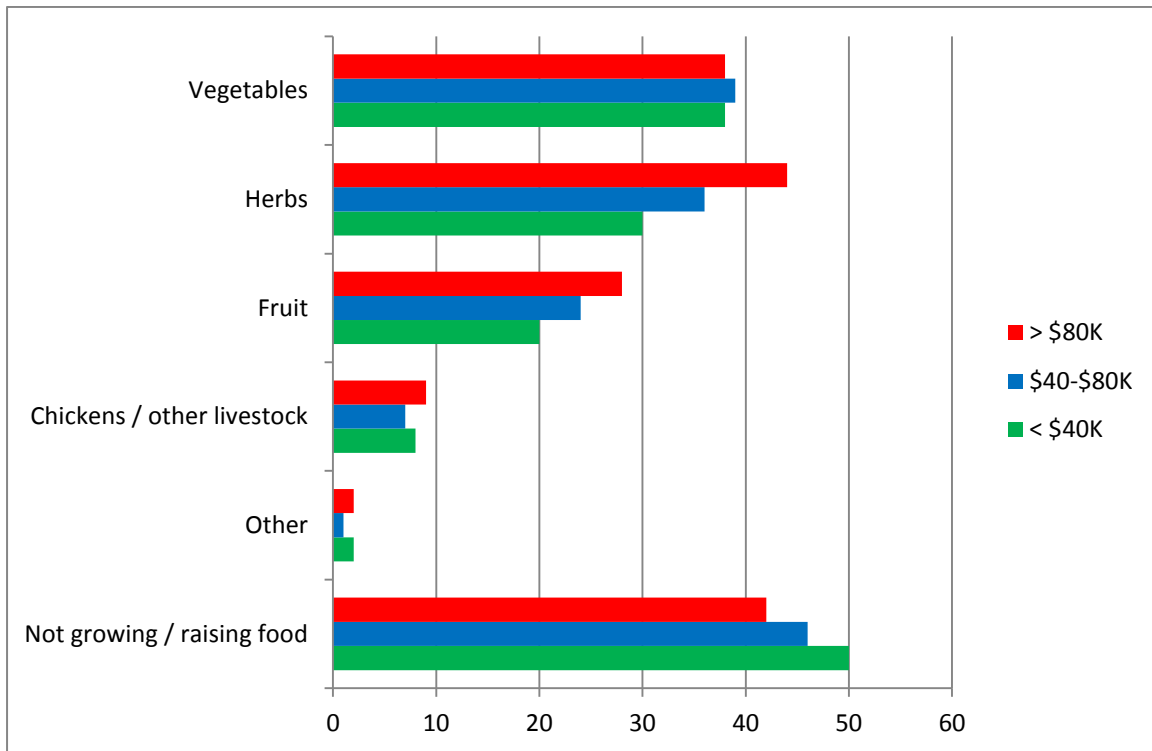
*For how long have you been growing / raising your own food? (gender breakdown)*



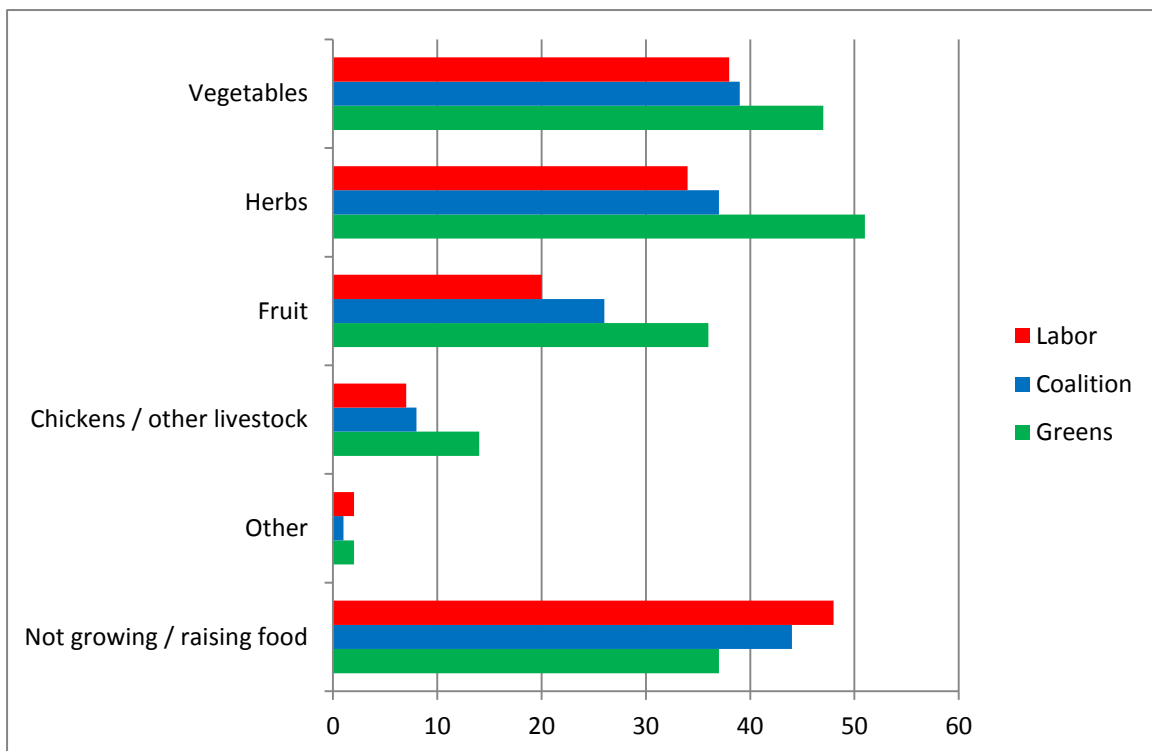
**Other findings**

- Greens voters are more likely than Coalition or Labor voters to grow food and / or rear livestock: 47 percent grow vegetables, 51 percent grow herbs, 36 percent grow fruit, and 14 percent rear livestock, compared to figures of 39 percent, 37 percent, 26 percent and 8 percent for Coalition voters, and 38 percent, 34 percent, 20 percent, and 7 percent for Labor voters
- Households earning in excess of \$80,000 per year were more likely to grow food and / or rear livestock than households in lower income brackets: 58 percent, compared to 46 percent for households in the \$40-\$80,000 per year bracket, and 50 percent for households in the under \$40,000 per year bracket
- Those who had completed tertiary qualifications were more likely to grow or raise their own food, compared with those who had not completed school or who had not completed tertiary qualifications: 56 percent, compared to 51 percent and 47 percent respectively

Please state if you grow or raise any of the following foods (income breakdown)



Please state if you grow or raise any of the following foods (political affiliation breakdown)



## ***Discussion***

Anecdotal evidence and locally-based research has for some time suggested that home- and communal-based food production is being carried on to a significant extent in Australian households and spaces such as community gardens and urban orchards. Historical studies, and the living memories of generations of Australians born in the inter-war period, testify to the fact that the backyard vegie patch and the chicken coop were in earlier decades commonplace features of the suburban landscape.

The findings of the AFSA / TAI survey confirm what many have suspected: that home- and communal-based food growing and (to a lesser but still significant extent) livestock rearing is experiencing a definite renaissance. Apart from the principal finding that a majority of Australians are growing and / or rearing some of their own food, there are two statistics in particular that stand out.

The first is that the growing of vegetables, fruit and most especially herbs is more popular amongst women than men. This correlates with the observed reality in those regions of the world where, for many families, food production is a necessity rather than a choice; namely that the bulk of food growing is done by women. The popularity of herb growing amongst women also has historical overtones in western culture, where in early and pre-modern times women played prominent roles as healers utilising medicinal herbs.

The second is that two-fifths of those growing and / or rearing their own food had begun doing so quite recently, i.e. within the last five years. This period has of course coincided with the global financial crisis of 2008-9 and its continuing aftermath, as well as with an increased number of major extreme weather events in Australia. The combination of ongoing economic uncertainty, cost of living pressures (housing, utilities and transport), and extreme weather events seem to be acting as a spur to people to begin some food growing at home or in a communal space. There are of course many other reasons why people start growing their own food: taste, quality, concerns about safety, the relaxation and health benefits of gardening, and the sociability of communal gardening are all part of this picture.

There are other statistics here worthy of comment, and of further research. While it may not be surprising that food growing and rearing is more common in rural than in urban areas, urban forms of food production are clearly widespread. 63 percent of those growing food in urban areas had begun doing so in the last five years, with 21 percent starting in the last 12 months. Clearly there is a strong trend here, which Federal and State governments would do well to take note of, and support.

Similarly, Australians over 55 years old are more likely than younger Australians to grow and / or raise some of their own food; and many (60 percent) have been doing so for over 10 years. This suggests a substantial body of experienced home gardeners. Yet younger Australians are embracing food growing in increasing numbers: of the 46 percent of 18-34 year olds who are growing and / or raising some of their own food, three-quarters had begun doing so in the last five years, and nearly a third in the last 12 months. There is, we believe, an enormous potential for exchanges of knowledge and experience to take place, from older gardeners to younger ones, so that the skills of previous generations are not lost.



## **Concluding remarks**

The findings we have reported in this survey reveal a complex picture, with both encouraging and discouraging elements. On the one hand, the lack of awareness of food security and what it means, its complex and multidimensional character, and the apparent complacency regarding the many converging threats to Australia's food security, are a cause for concern. Combined with other recent research, and the documented impacts of a food system that is increasingly dysfunctional as regards the objectives of optimising human health and ecosystem well-being, they point to the need for a sustained education and awareness-raising campaign amongst the Australian population as a whole, and amongst our children in particular.

On the other, the finding that a majority of Australians are now growing and / or raising some of their own food is, having regard to the many serious challenges that the country is facing in food security terms, extremely encouraging. While Australia might have a highly efficient and productive food system, in terms of the volumes of food produced and the mechanisms in place for its distribution, there are serious concerns about its longer-term resilience and sustainability. This system relies very heavily on the continued availability of cheap oil and fossil fuel-derived inputs. As many international energy authorities are now reporting, this availability cannot be taken for granted.

The vulnerability of a highly centralised food distribution system which is based on hugely extended supply networks spread over vast distances to oil price rises, and /or disruptions in supply (such as a repeat in some form of the 1973 OPEC embargo) is obvious. A resilient system is one that is able to cope with external shocks without being at risk of catastrophic failure or breakdown. Diversity is a characteristic of resilient systems; and our current dominant food system, from plains to retail outlets, is increasingly monocultural. A distributed food system, which would include, as is now happening, millions of Australians growing some of their own food, either individually or collectively, is more likely to be resilient.

The prime role of a government is to promote and safeguard the welfare of all its people. One of the best ways to do this is to find ways to help people to help themselves. Supporting Australians to become educated about food security, and the food system; and supporting Australians to become skillful growers and producers of their own food, are sensible steps in the right direction. They are, really, just common sense.

### ***Recommendations***

The Federal Government is currently preparing a National Food Plan, the first-ever such Plan for Australia. These findings support the case for the inclusion in that Plan of:

- Nation-wide food literacy campaigns, working in partnership with schools, health centres, local governments and community-based organisations, targeted at both children and adults
- The establishment of long-term programs to encourage and support the practice of home- and community-based (including schools) food growing, working in partnership with schools, local governments and community-based groups.

## ***Methodology***

This survey was conducted for the Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance by the the Australia Institute. The data was collected using an online survey of 1422 respondents, over the age of 18, in March 2012.

Respondents were sourced from a reputable independent online panel. Respondents who completed the survey were provided with a small incentive (\$2.00) by the panel provider in accordance with the panel provider's standard procedures. Quotas were applied in order to approximate the profile of the adult Australian population and results were post-weighted to precisely match population figures.

The survey sample for this research was representative of the broader Australian adult population by age, gender, rural / urban, household income bracket and voting preferences.

Online panels are a recognised way of accessing survey samples which are representative of the general population in most respects. Online survey research is increasingly the favoured option for researchers and research companies, particularly as landline phone penetration declines and internet access rates rise.