

Submission to the House Standing Committee on Agriculture Inquiry into food security in Australia

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission. Please find below my thoughts and recommendations listed according to the Terms of Reference (TOR).

I make this submission as an individual and Accredited Practising Dietitian with 16 years' experience working and volunteering in and around the food system. I am not writing as a representative of my workplace.

TOR 1: National production, consumption and export of food

When it comes to food security there is an urgent need to act to address climate change. Healthy and robust food systems rely on healthy and resilient landscapes and communities. Emissions reduction is essential to our future food security if we have any hope of avoiding an increase in extreme weather events that have devastating impacts on agriculture, processing facilities and the supply chain (i.e. the whole food system).

Water security should also be included in this process as it is inextricably linked to food security.

Another major barrier to food security in Australia is inadequate income – people need the economic resources to be able to buy and utilise foods that are safe and nutritious, adequate in quantity and culturally appropriate. The impact of financial insecurity on people's ability to access and use foods cannot be underestimated. There are many different ways that this can play out. Some people are working a number of jobs to make ends meet as the minimum wage is not keeping up with household expenses. Other people are unemployed but not receiving enough income to feed themselves adequately. The mental impacts of undernutrition, and the stigma associated with being unemployed, also undermine a person's ability to feed themselves and their family well. In addition, people on low income also often live in areas that have limited access to supermarkets and other sources of nutritious food.

Recommendation 1: develop and implement a [National Nutrition strategy](#) as advocated for by Dietitians Australia, Heart Foundation, Public Health Association of Australia and Nutrition Australia.

The National Nutrition strategy proposal recommends four key principles namely health, equity, environmental sustainability and monitoring, surveillance and evaluation:

- Equitable access to nutritious and culturally acceptable foods is currently lacking in Australia often due to low wages and inadequate income support but also factors related to where people live – healthy foods cost more in remote and rural areas and disadvantaged areas in cities and towns often lack access to supermarkets and grocers (often referred to as food deserts). Degraded environments and extreme weather events related to climate change negatively impact food security.

- Eating patterns that support good health are often those with [lower environmental impact](#) (e.g patterns that accord with the Australian Dietary Guidelines: less processed, more plant-based for example). Degraded environments and extreme weather events related to climate change negatively impact food security.
- Data is essential in order to track progress towards our goals and refine food systems to support Australians and the countries that we export to.

Recommendation 2: act to ensure that minimum wage and income support payments are above the poverty line (also ensuring that the poverty line is regularly reviewed and updated according to economic conditions). Include increases to the remote area allowance to ensure that people in remote and rural locations aren't further disadvantaged.

Recommendation 3: invest in researching consumption, food security and food systems (monitoring, surveillance and evaluation in a national nutrition strategy). We are lacking adequate national data on consumption and food security in Australia. For example, the last National Nutrition survey was more than a decade ago 2011-2012 and the last infant feeding survey was in 2010. To understand food insecurity national surveys should use a tool like the [18 item household food insecurity survey module](#) or one that has been developed for [Australia specifically](#).

TOR 2: Access to key inputs such as fuel, fertiliser and labour, and their impact on production costs

The pandemic has shone light on the need for labour to grow, harvest and process foods – people need good wages and conditions in order to be attracted to the work and be able to be food secure themselves (to sustain work and quality of life). Cost of fertiliser has also [increased in recent years](#) which makes farming harder and increases food prices.

Recommendation 2 above, also applies here.

Recommendation 4: Increase production of fertiliser in Australia from innovative sources for example:

- following Sweden's lead and using [human urine](#) to create nitrogen and phosphorus rich fertiliser. This has the added benefit of having a lower carbon footprint than many other fertilisers that are created through energy intensive processes, or mined, and shipped to our shores.
- Rescuing and utilising food waste as a [source of nutrients for farming and aquaculture](#). Again this has the co-benefit of reducing emissions from the food system by diverting food from landfill and action on climate will hopefully moderate the extreme weather events that could damage our food security in decades to come.

Recommendation 5: Include water security in any strategy to address food insecurity. Water supplies are also tested when it comes to extreme weather – drought is obvious, but flooding can reduce the amount of water that is available for agriculture and food processing by damaging infrastructure and storage, overwhelming water treatment systems and fouling of rivers and lakes.

TOR 3: The impact of supply chain distribution on the cost and availability of food

Once again labour comes into supply chain and a well-functioning workforce needs to have good pay and conditions. We need to consider changes to the tax structure to support and fund an increase in minimum wages and income support. This will reduce income inequality and make work in the food supply chain more attractive and able to support good quality of life and food security for workers and their families.

Food supply chains being simplified and localised where possible. For example, rather than trucking food to a hub hundreds or thousands of kilometres away and then back, invest in processing hubs in the regions. Consider food security and production in states and regions – food sovereignty at a sub-national level. The standards applied to produce within the supply chain could also be addressed to reduce the amount of food sent to landfill.

Recommendation 2 above, also applies here.

Recommendation 6: returning to a food system that learns from our first nations people and centres health and sustainability. Specific actions could include investing in urban agriculture and food systems at a state/regional/local level as proposed by the Victorian consensus statement produced by Sustain: [Towards a Healthy, Regenerative and Equitable Food System in Victoria; A Consensus Statement](#).

TOR 4: The potential opportunities and threats of climate change on food production in Australia.

Climate change is the biggest threat to food security and health that we face.

Recommendation 7: reorient our tax system and [fossil fuel subsidies](#) to:

- support and subsidise mixed and regenerative agricultural systems that include [agro-forestry](#) to increase resilience of our food systems. Using mixed/diverse systems can help address climate change (with more soil carbon stores and carbon stored in trees) but also mitigate damage of extreme weather events. For example, trees can help reduce erosion and water run-off in extreme weather events and also reduce wind speeds and wind damage. They also provide shade and cooling benefits from evapotranspiration. Both of these can assist with reducing water loss from the farm system but also protection of livestock.
- create and implement a national soils policy with the aim of maintaining and restoring soil health as recommended by the [National soils advocate in 2017](#) (appointed by the Prime minister in 2012).
- provide subsidies to agriculture and food production sector to electrify and invest in renewable energy systems.
- invest into research and innovation in resilient agriculture and food production systems that learn from the first nations people who sustainably fed themselves from this land for many millennia prior to colonisation.