



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

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Contact: Keli McDonald, CEO, National Rural Women's Coalition
Contact number: [REDACTED] /email: [REDACTED]

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Preamble

The National Rural Women's Coalition

The National Rural Women's Coalition (the NRWC) is a grass roots organisation, established in 2002, that works to support and grow vibrant rural, remote, and regional communities throughout Australia. We are a coalition of six rural alliances - the Australian Local Government Women's Association, Australian Women in Agriculture, Country Women's Association, National Rural Health Alliance, Women in Seafood Australasia and Transport Women Australia Limited.

For over twenty years, we have worked to ensure better social, economic, and environmental outcomes for women in rural townships, in rural communities and in primary production throughout Australia. The NRWC provides a collaborative, powerful national voice for women living in rural, regional, and remote Australia through:

- Representing the diverse views and voices of women in rural, regional, and remote Australia
- Providing advice to the Australian Government on policy issues relevant to the views, circumstances and needs of rural women
- Contributing to building a positive profile of rural women, their achievements, and their issues.

We believe it is important that the unique views of rural women who reside in the numerous rural, remote, and regional communities throughout Australia as farmers, businesswomen, community leaders and volunteers, have substantial input into consultations about their communities, industries, needs and issues, including any matters relating to women's rights, gender equality and discrimination.

Introduction

Food security is a priority for the NRWC. It is a very complex issue involving many different actors from the local farm gate to the global food plate. It cannot and must not be viewed as a single or linear issue. Food security is an emerging issue and has gained more prominence recently because of Covid-19 and following the bushfires and floods when supply chains and production was disrupted.

Many of our members are at the frontline of terrestrial and aquatic primary production. For these women food security is a very personal, moral and emotive issue that is critical not only for their own individual wellbeing but for the environmental, social and economic viability of the communities they are part of. Living in rural, regional and remote (RRR) Australia they know all about the high prices of food and fuel, the decreased range and quality in perishable goods, and the need to travel long distances to access food outlets.

They see the health burden that arises from food and nutrition insecurity in their community as it is reflected in the higher rates of noncommunicable diseases (cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, cancer and obesity), particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults and children. They also experience at first hand the impacts of climate change, the changes in land use, changes to soil and water quality, trade agreements, food loss and waste, consumer choices, corporate supermarket food standards, fluctuations in energy and fuel costs and the biosecurity risks from pests, feral animals and antibiotic resistance. As such, the NRWC welcomes the opportunity to provide this feedback to the House Standing Committee on Agriculture inquiry into food security in Australia.

Rural women demographics

According to the 2016 Census, 28% of the Australian population live in rural Australia, 51% of the adult population in rural Australia are women, with the largest proportion (64%) living in inner regional areas, 29% in outer regional areas, 4% in remote areas and 3% in very remote areas¹.

Rural women are facing multiple interrelated social, economic and environmental challenges such as lower incomes, under employment and lack of access to transport, lower education attainment, access to health care and gender inequalities. Rural women earn 21% less per week and report higher levels of cash flow problems (for

example when they could not pay an essential services bill on time (i.e., gas, electricity, or phone)². The average gender pay gap is currently 14.1%, meaning women earn \$263.9 per week less than men³. Compared to women in major cities, rural women have a lower life expectancy that can be as much as a 15 year gap between women in major cities that have a life expectancy of 84 years compared to women in very remote areas with a life expectancy of 70 years⁴.

All of which contribute to food insecurity for Australian rural women.

Defining Food Security

Food security, defined by United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. The definition includes the dimensions of availability (quality, quantity and type of food e.g., fruit and vegetables or discretionary food), access (affordability, geographically accessible, transport, culturally appropriate), utilisation (through our food choices and lifestyle and what food is consumed to meet nutritional and physiological needs, clean water and sanitation and if the food is safe to eat) and stability (and reliability of all four dimensions)⁵.

In 2020, two additional dimensions have been added these are agency and sustainability. These two criterion are especially relevant to RRR communities. Agency refers to ‘the capacity of people to make their own decisions about what foods to eat, what food to produce, how it is produced, processed and distributed, and their ability to engage in processes that shape food’⁶. Sustainability refers to ‘the long-term ability of food systems to provide food security and nutrition in a way that does not compromise the economic, social and environmental bases that generate food security and nutrition for future generations’⁷.

Food security statistics in Australia

In Australia, it is estimated that between 4% and 13% of the general population are food insecure; and 22% to 32% of the Indigenous population, depending on location⁸. Foodbank estimate that over 2 million Australian households have experienced severe food insecurity in the last 12 months⁹. Foodbank also estimate that a third of Australians (29%) experiencing food insecurity live in regional and remote areas¹⁰.

The main reasons reported for food insecurity are increased/high living expenses, reduced/low income or government benefits, a change of household living arrangement or because of a natural disaster. Households with dependent children, those with young adults 18-24 years old, those who are unemployed/looking for work or households that are currently renting are more susceptible to food insecurity¹¹.

Many of the factors that facilitate food security at the household level are outside the of power of influence. This includes the food system, including the price and availability of food, employment, housing, education and transport¹². The impact of food insecurity can have lifelong negative effects to health and our physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development throughout the life course.

NRWC Response to the Inquiry Terms of Reference

A large amount of research and discussion papers have already been published on the subject of food security. Our submission will focus on the main issues that have been raised by our members and networks, and through our advocacy work.

National production, consumption and export of food

The food system has been impacted by numerous disruptors including the pandemic, extreme weather events, conflicts such as the war in Ukraine (and the disruption to energy and food supplies) in this year alone. The world’s population also reached 8 billion people and is set to increase by a further half a billion by 2030¹³. Alongside the increasing human population and global social-political disruptors a number of planetary boundaries that the food production system relies on are being exceeded. These include biodiversity loss, land clearing, impacts to fresh

water, ocean acidification and the biochemical flows of nutrients such as nitrogen and phosphorus. These boundaries have been transgressed predominantly due to present-day industrial and agricultural production activities¹⁴.

Australia exports 72% of farm production with the largest amount being from meat and live animal exports, followed by grains¹⁵. As Australia exports more than we consume, it is easy to conclude that Australia is food secure i.e., will not run out of food anytime soon. However, there are indications that Australia may not be as food secure as one might think.

Australia ranks 22nd /113 countries on the Global Food Security Index (but five years ago Australia was ranked 5th). The Global Food Security Index measures affordability, availability, quality and safety and sustainability and adaptation. Australia scored the highest for affordability (which is debatable from a RRR perspective), but is ranked 33rd for sustainability and adaptation, and 48th for availability. The availability category measures indicators for food loss, sufficiency of supply and supply chain infrastructure. On all of these points Australia ranks quite well compared to other countries. However, Australia's score drops for farm infrastructure and volatility of agricultural production and for the lack of an overarching National Food Security Strategy.

With regards to sustainability and adaptation, Australia ranks lower for indicators measuring land degradation from the impact of agriculture and the impacts to oceans, rivers and lakes¹⁶. The State of the Environment Report, released in July of this year supports this¹⁷. Australia's environment is deteriorating. National production of food is dependent on functioning ecosystem services and without it, quite simply food security is threatened.

National production of food in Australia must also be considered as part of a broader system that includes production, transport, processing, packaging, storage, retail, consumption, loss and waste¹⁸. At each part of this system there are impacts on people and planet. This means that if Australia is to continue to be key food producer domestically and globally, the food system as a whole, must become more sustainable across the board. Having sustainable food systems means producing "food and nutrition for all in such a way that the economic, social and environmental bases to generate food security and nutrition of future generations are not compromised".¹⁹ Given the state of the environment the NRWC has concerns about the future food system prospects.

Sustainable agriculture needs to be integrated into a bigger holistic approach that includes all of these factors, akin to the concept of the Circular Economy. Over a third of the food produced is lost or wasted contributing to pollution, resource depletion and greenhouse gas emissions²⁰. The idea of the Circular Food Economy is one where "food waste becomes valuable, affordable healthy food becomes accessible to everyone and innovation uses a regenerative approach to how food is produced, distributed and consumed"²¹.

In line with keeping food production within the limits of the planetary boundaries is the concept of sustainable healthy diets. Sustainable and healthy diets have co-benefits for the health and well-being of both consumers and producers, as well as for planetary health²². A new dietary culture is emerging, and this is the move towards more plant based diets and less meat, particularly red meat. As a consequence, meat producers are already developing ways to adapt to this scale of change. However, Australian producers may struggle to keep up with the pace and demand for change and will need support to adapt their business models, invest in infrastructure and technology.

Implicit in food security is the notion of consuming the right type and amount of nutrients. National production and consumption are influenced by market choices and consumer preferences. The NRWC has received feedback from members about their concerns regarding food fraud. The adulteration, concealment, counterfeiting, dilution, mislabelling and substitution meat, seafood, fruit and vegetables²³ of food is a serious risk to food production and to healthy eating.

A lot of the food security narrative focused on terrestrial food supply. But seafood has just as an important role to play as terrestrial animal and plant production in addressing food security. Research shows that food security and seafood is under researched, and that seafood and terrestrial production remain siloed, missing opportunities to address common issues around food security for both terrestrial and aquatic systems²⁴.

Recommendations:

- Develop, fund and implement a National Food and Nutrition Security Strategy
- Increase investment in sustainable primary production and the circular food economy. This includes funding and education to support an equitable transition to sustainable food production methods and funding to support research and development into new technology.
- Increase funding to address food waste across the whole food system.
- Implement a social marketing campaign and public health nutrition program to raise awareness of sustainable healthy diets and educate consumers on food waste and seasonal produce.
- Address food fraud.
- Ensure seafood is included in addressing food security.

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

Fuel is the biggest issue in the food supply/value chain for RRR communities. Research undertaken by AgriFutures show that logistics are the largest single cost item in the production of many agricultural industries, amounting to as much as 48.5% of farm-gate cost²⁵. Many family owned transport companies in rural Australia have closed this year because they cannot keep up with the cost of doing business, and as they are not able to pass on cost to customers, it is easier for them to shut down. This is having a ripple effect beyond the company and the drivers. Their business closure is impacting other local businesses that used to provide services to them, such as mechanical support and fuel. The high cost of diesel is an ongoing issue. And our members are consistently asking us to find out why diesel is so expensive. The fluctuations and unpredictability of fuel prices is also making it hard to do business in RRR. To reduce fuel costs some members have been investigating how they could transition to using electric vehicles. Whilst not opposed to the idea itself, it is felt that for RRR we are a long way off in being able to transition our industries and move away from fossil fuels. This is primarily due to the lack of infrastructure and capacity for long haul freight to be fully electric and of course cost. In smaller or regional urban places electric vehicles could be feasible particularly for waste recovery and local transport. However, this will still require significant investment and assistance to transition. Customers are demanding products and services to be delivered by green business but due to lack of infrastructure and cost which makes being an authentic green business is out of reach for many RRR businesses.

Fertiliser - Rising energy prices have pushed the cost of farm inputs, such as fertiliser. The World Bank estimate the price of fertiliser has increased by 30% in 2022 and will continue to rise. Given the disruption to the import of fertiliser there are calls from our members for Australian farmers to be able to access Australian made fertiliser. Opportunities now exist to explore the production of green ammonia and urea using green hydrogen and other non-fossil fuel energy sources to address this supply issue.

Labour -The National Farmers Federation estimate that there are going be long term disruption in the food system and 172,000 workers are needed or prolonged higher food prices for consumers and reduced food availability will continue throughout 2022 and beyond. The global pandemic reduced availability of the migrant and domestic workforce^{26,27}. Alongside this there was an increase in the number of city residents migrating to regional areas putting housing prices up and decreasing availability of accommodation that could be used for the food production workforce. Access to housing and affordable accommodation is a key factor in attracting and retaining the workforce we need.

Water – The NRWC notes that water is not in this list of inputs but is a critical factor for food production. At the moment much of the agricultural belt in Australia has been inundated by floods. Climate change predictions show there will be more sea level rise, coastal inundation, floods, erosion, drought, fires and cyclones. This will impact on the quality and quantity of the water supply, cost, access, equity, water security. It will also affect salinity, irrigation practices, and farmers preparedness and response to adapt to these variable climate conditions.

Biosecurity – Another input that is not listed is how production is impacted by biosecurity risks. Pests and disease cause considerable costs damage and losses to our food supply. Biosecurity risks to Broadacre and horticulture crop industries are estimated to be \$29.3B and \$2.7B for forestry²⁸. Biosecurity surveillance and the monitoring and management of emerging human infectious diseases and the links to global food production; the use of chemicals such as pesticides; controlling feral animal; and antibiotic resistance all need to be considered as part of the input conversation.

Recommendations

- Continue the Fuel Tax Credit Scheme for agriculture and explore ways to expand the FTC to support disadvantaged RRR communities.
- Build infrastructure and provide funding to support RRR businesses and communities to transition to electric vehicles.
- Include housing and affordable rents and accommodation as part of a workforce strategy in the National Food and Nutrition Security Strategy.
- Invest in Australian green fertilizer made from green energy sources such as green hydrogen.
- Water is a precious resource. Ensure water security is included as a priority in all government strategies.
- Increase investment in biosecurity surveillance and management to reduce the need for pesticides and maintaining food safety which includes (but not limited to) increasing measures to increase biodiversity (regenerative farming and conservation), increasing funding to support agencies to address feral animal, and fund a public health awareness campaigns to raise awareness of antimicrobial resistance.

The impact of supply chain distribution on the cost and availability of food.

The food supply chain starts with production and ends with consumption and waste recovery. From a logistics perspective AgriFutures predict that the supply chain and particularly freight will be impacted by rising input costs, particularly wages and fuel costs. Supply chains will also be impacted by technology developments; and climate change, through changes in volume, seasonal variability, and location of crop and livestock production²⁹. Covid-19 and extreme weather events highlighted how quickly the supply chain can be disrupted. Panic buying and flooded areas isolated and cut off from food distribution led to empty shelves in RRR supermarkets.

Food is a human right³⁰. Elements of the right to food (as with the definition of food security) include availability, affordability and adequacy. Adequacy includes food that meets dietary needs. It can be argued that many towns in RRR do not have their rights to food met on all three elements. Unfortunately, this is not news and has been an ongoing issue for decades.

Research shows that the cost of food can be 30% higher in RRR. Research also shows that in some places although a healthy diet was found to be 20% cheaper than a diet with discretionary foods, the price of a healthy diet is still unaffordable to many people on lower incomes in RRR³¹. The high costs of food are linked to the cost of freight, the lack of bulk purchasing power and high operating costs. The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs Report on food pricing and food security in remote Indigenous communities has sixteen recommendations, none of which address the problems listed above.

The NRWC has received feedback from our members and networks that 'Bill shock' is increasing in rural homes with competition for the household budget for housing, utilities, and communication (e.g. access to digital technology). In 2020 the NRWC undertook a Food Basket Survey. The survey showed that our members are concerned about the cost and availability of food in their towns. When asked about the affordability freight, access to Australian and more preferable locally grown produce, and the dominance of the two main supermarket chains were key themes. Comments from respondents in the survey included:

Fresh fruit and veg makes up a third of our grocery bill but in quantity is only about a fifth. [NRWC Food Basket Survey Respondent#5)

If freight and courier costs were lower for deliveries to rural, regional, remote communities more members would be able to afford food and have access to vegetables and fruit. By the time we do receive produce some are rotten or

not ripe and we still have to pay gross amounts as the seller needs to cover the costs of having it in stock". [NRWC Food Basket Survey Respondent#6]

Figure 1 Shopping docket showing cost of milk in a remote Australian community Supplied by AMSANT (Published on Facebook 21 April 2022)



There is also the issue of waste in the supply chain. The National Food Waste Strategy that was launched in 2017 aims to halve Australia’s food waste by 2030. However, only A\$1.37 million investment was committed to the strategy for a problem that costs the Australia over \$20 billion a year³².

Access to food aid is unfortunately needed in RRR Australia. It seems incongruous to know that Australia produces more than it can consume yet over 3.4 million people are food insecure. One reason is they simply do not have enough money to buy food. It also seems incongruous to know that food is wasted (about 15%) before it leaves the farm. One reason for food wastage is because of the regulations the major supermarkets have on the size, shape and colour of produce, yet there is nothing nutritionally wrong with the food.

Food can also be wasted by inappropriate cold chain management. “The greatest risks for perishable food occur during transportation and handling between mobile and stationary refrigeration points when there are sometimes huge temperature variations between truck or trailer, loading docks and storage facilities”³³. The Australian Food Cold Chain state that a robust quality management system is essential for food safety. Voluntary standards such as the Australian Food and Grocery Council’s Australian Cold Chain Guidelines are advisory only³⁴. This means that there is potential for mistakes to occur along the cold chain system. In addition to freight costs and irregular deliveries, poor store infrastructure in some remote communities, compromised cold chain logistics, and commonly occurring power outages also affect food quality and have been found to contribute to higher prices and a limited range of foods³⁵. In addition, because of the workforce shortages because of the pandemic some producers are reporting that half of their crop will be left unharvested and left to rot as there is no workforce available to harvest it³⁶.

Recommendations

- Develop, fund and implement a National Food and Nutrition Security Strategy that includes disaster preparedness and management and include dimensions of freight and logistics management, equitable food price management, access to food relief and workforce supply.
- Undertake a serious review of food prices in RRR Australia and address this food security inequity as a priority.
- Implement the 16 recommendations from the inquiry into food pricing and food security in remote Indigenous communities and add into the mix cost of transport and freight.
- Support the National Food Waste Strategy and invest an appropriate of funding to address the scale of the issue.

- Work with the food industry to address the gaps in cold chain management and explore the potential to regulate/ mandate the Australian Cold Chain Guidelines.

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

According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) global food systems contribute 21-37% to total global greenhouse gas emissions³⁷. In Australia, emissions from agriculture (not including land use, land use change and forestry emissions in the estimate) emissions are estimated to be around 12.9% (67.8 Mt CO₂ –e) of net national greenhouse gas emissions³⁸. At the same time as food production contributes to climate change, climate change will impact food security. As a result of climate change there will be increasing temperatures, changing precipitation patterns, and greater frequency of some extreme events³⁹. Agriculture is also part of the solution and can contribute to climate change mitigation by reducing crop and livestock emissions, sequestering carbon in soils and biomass, and by decreasing emissions intensity within sustainable production systems⁴⁰.

Earlier this year, the NRWC undertook the *Climate change snapshot survey*. It is very clear from the results that rural women are very concerned about climate change. Respondents are noticing how changing weather patterns and growing seasons in their communities are changing and forcing them to change how, what, where and when they produce their produce. There is an awareness by rural women of how a number of other environmental issues are also contributing to climate change. Such as land clearing, fertiliser use, runoff causing water pollution, mismanagement of the land, fire risks, changing farm practices to more sustainable methods by diversifying crops, minimal tillage, maximum feed efficiency, stock rotation, regenerative agriculture and water harvesting and micro irrigation⁴¹.

Climate change is impacting rural women's health and wellbeing. The survey showed that 85% of respondents identified environmental and extreme weather events as having the highest impacts on their health and wellbeing. This due to experiencing flooding, violent storms, drought, high seas and warmer oceans. Climate change is having an effect on stress levels (71%) and impacting on access to fresh affordable nutritious food (64%).

The survey results also showed strong support for more education and communication on climate change issues. This includes understanding climate change, learning new technology, sustainable farming, food waste, recycling and waste management, environmental stewardship, and indigenous knowledge of land and sea⁴². With regards to food security specifically rural women identified supporting investment in sustainable primary production as their highest priority, (83%) followed by addressing food waste (77%), supporting efficient and recyclable water practices (75%) and educating consumers on 'In Season' produce (also 75%).

There are many co-benefits for supporting a more sustainable food system. There are opportunities to combine supply-side actions such as efficient production, transport, and processing with demand-side interventions such as modification of food choices, and reduction of food loss and waste, that reduces GHG emissions and enhances food system resilience⁴³.

Recommendations

- Invest in measures to enable rural communities to transition to renewable energy to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions.
- Provide more education programs to raise awareness of climate change issues.
- Increase investment in sustainable primary production.
- Increase investment in addressing Food Waste including education of consumers on 'In Season' produce.
- Support efficient and recyclable water practices.

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