Level 6, 34 Charles Street
Parramatta NSW 2150
AUSTRALIA

Tel +61 2 8833 5912 **Fax** +61 2 9891 5899
urcadmin@uws.edu.au
www.uws.edu.au/urban

University of Western Sydney
URBAN RESEARCH CENTRE

14 August 2009

The Secretary
Senate Select Committee on Agricultural and Related Industries
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

To Whom It May Concern:

Re: Senate Inquiry into Food Production in Australia

We welcome the opportunity to contribute to what is an important and timely inquiry into Australia's food production. At the Urban Research Centre we are currently working on research on Sydney's food systems to create more sustainable, equitable and adaptive food systems for the 21st Century city. This research addresses the multitude of environmental, economic and social challenges facing the city's food supply into the future. Greater knowledge of and attention to peri-urban agricultural production is a key aspect of this aim to develop more resilient urban food systems. We look forward to the outcomes of this inquiry with the hope it generates greater attention to and funding for research into food systems for an environmentally, economically and socially sustainable Australia.

Yours faithfully,

Sarah James

Project Officer *Feeding Sydney*
Urban Research Centre

Research and training for better urban life

Senate Inquiry into Food Production in Australia

Terms of Reference:

The production of food that is:

a. affordable to consumers

b. viable for production for farmers

c. of sustainable impact on the environment

Amid predictions about the future scarcity of resources such as oil and water, Australia's capacity to produce and transport food is gaining increasing public attention. One key, and often overlooked, aspect of food production in Australia is urban agriculture. The peri-urban areas of Australian cities account for an estimated 25 percent of the value of Australia's agriculture (Houston 2005). The Sydney region alone accounts for 40 percent of the value of vegetable production in NSW. These figures suggest that *urban* agriculture has a role to play when seeking to improve food affordability to consumers, economic viability for farmers and the environmental sustainability of our cities. This submission highlights two key issues – urban land use policies and food distribution systems – that need to be addressed to maintain urban food production in Australia.

Land Use

As Australian cities continue to expand through internal and external migration, there is increasing pressure on peri-urban land and the agricultural industries it sustains (Low Choy, Sutherland et al. 2008). While there have been some notable exceptions, protection of peri-urban land for agriculture in Australia has too often been haphazard. This has resulted in agricultural land being lost to housing development.

Protecting and preserving agricultural land close to the city is important when we consider facing a future in which there is decreasing fuel resources that drive current food systems and economies more broadly. The production of food close to the city markets ensures access to fresh produce that relies less on a fuel intensive distribution chain that requires both refrigeration and long distance transportation of food. While

there are a number of other important measures of the sustainability of food supply systems beyond the distance food travels (or 'food miles')(Weber and Matthews 2008), having food close to the city also reduces carbon emissions from freight. Furthermore, keeping farms on the urban fringes provides local employment in these areas. This further contributes to urban sustainability through the reduction of travel times to and from work, a key concern of Sydney's current 2005 Metropolitan Strategy (Newman 2004).

Some commentators assert that urban farms can simply 'move out' as the city expands. This does not represent a realistic long-term solution for urban producers given current settlement patterns. As recent studies illustrate the increasing spread of housing into formerly rural lands beyond the city have lead to a 'peri-urbanisation' of large areas of land surrounding Australia's cities (Low Choy, Sutherland et al. 2008). Along Australia's east coast this spread threatens to create an almost continuous peri-urban area along some of Australia's most arable land (Armstrong 2004). Such trends suggest that there may be no rural land (or arable land in close proximity to the markets and labour offered by the city) that urban farmers can simply 'move out' to. The current failure to plan for the co-existence of agriculture and housing in peri-urban areas arguably only delays the inevitable. If such planning is done now, however, the co-existence of farms and housing can be managed to ensure best outcomes – environmentally, socially and economically. While there is still land available governments have the opportunity to plan for the protection and preservation of urban agricultural land.

Key to the protection of peri-urban agricultural land is the development of tools that can adequately map and assess the current status of this land on the urban fringe. It is necessary to map long term patterns of land use change and the effect this has and continues to have on the capacity for urban agriculture. A consistent method to generate standardised and coherent data is important to ensure we can adapt to environmental challenges as the city's growth. While current 2005 Metropolitan Plan for Sydney (New South Wales Department of Planning 2005), and subsequent 2007 subregional plans (New South Wales Department of Planning 2007; New South Wales Department of Planning 2007), acknowledges the need for such mapping, it has yet to be put into action.

In addition to mapping and planning for the maintenance of already existing peri-urban farms, urban agriculture also presents more 'blue sky' possibilities. The

suburban and inner city areas of cities in Canada, UK and US are increasingly being targeted for food production at a commercial and non-commercial scale (Martin and Marsden 1999; Toronto Food Policy Council 1999). While Australian cities have community gardens (Bartolomei, Corkery et al. 2003), there is a great potential for adopting a wider variety of urban agriculture measures within built up areas. Options such as rooftop gardens, more community gardens on vacant lots and promotion of backyard vegetable production can increase food security within the city (True Consulting Group 2007). These options also allow for the further redirection of urban wastes (such as water and organic garden and food waste), regeneration of brownfield areas in the city and reduce carbon emissions from food transport (True Consulting Group 2007).

Agricultural land within the city can be very productive and is well situated to provide fresh produce to consumer markets. This has the potential to reduce both economic and environmental costs of food production. Protection of urban agriculture, however, requires more innovative and dynamic approaches to urban planning than is currently adopted in cities such as Sydney. There is an increasingly pressing need to looking beyond conventional ideas of the built environment to generate truly 'living cities'.

Recommendations:

- Map existing areas of production in peri-urban areas to determine patterns of land use change. These maps can also be utilised to determine where new agriculture could go so it is commensurate with new housing developments.
- Establish in-depth consultation processes with urban growers to determine how to best meet their needs for land use.
- Make provision of land through zoning for developments such as agribusiness parks to facilitate agriculture in peri-urban areas.
- Examine approaches such as tradable development rights as adopted in Canada and other western countries.
- Analyse the potential to implement planning for inner urban agriculture through examination of the case studies of cities in countries such as Canada.

Alternative distribution networks

Inseparable from food production in terms of ensuring affordable food for consumers and viable farming businesses is the distribution of food produced. While there is much competition in other areas of our economy, the food distribution and retail sector is dominated by a few large supermarket chains. An estimated 50 percent of all fresh produce is sold through the two supermarket chains of Coles and Woolworths (Australian Competition and Consumer Commission 2008). To make food more affordable to consumers it is important for there to be alternative sources of distribution, facilitating in particular the access to fresh local food.

At present the price farmers report receiving from supermarket buyers are often less than half of what the produce is then sold for, sometimes less than a quarter (Thomson 2008). In creating more opportunities for direct sales to consumers farmers are not so reliant on the decisions of supermarket buyers and can gain a greater share of the consumer dollar. This potentially serves a dual purpose of ensuring consumers get more affordable and arguably better quality food and farmers get better prices.

To create a food distribution system that facilitates a more direct line of supply between producers and consumers, it is important to gain a better understanding of consumer patterns. This includes examining what drives choices about where food is bought and what forms of food are consumed. In many ways it is these consumer choices that direct food production in the agricultural industry. It is therefore necessary to look at the structures that shape the choices available to consumers and how to provide for greater access to and knowledge about local food.

Alternative (non-supermarket) modes of distribution have the potential to be quite significant in ensuring this access to local fresh produce for city consumers. The further development and support of points of sale such as farmers markets and community supported agriculture (CSA) provide consumers with greater options for obtaining food grown locally (Adams 2009; Food Connect 2009). While prices and accessibility varies at present, these alternative processes enable a more direct transaction between consumer and producer. This potentially reduces the costs to consumers while ensuring they can obtain very fresh produce. This is particularly important for those in neighbourhoods in lower-socio economic areas of the city that

have inadequate or insufficient access to affordable fresh food. It is these neighbourhoods that often suffer most from food insecurity (Nolan, Rikard-Bell et al. 2006). Access to fresh food should be a right for all inhabitants of the city. Creating greater links between producers and consumers ensures the livelihoods of local farmers at the same time as providing access to fresh food.

Alternative distribution measures also potentially contribute to a more environmentally sustainable food system. They provide a potential channel through which to distribute the large quantity of food produced by growers that are discarded along the food chain due to the standardised requirements of the size, colour and shape of produce (Knight and Davis 2006). The waste of food in a country where many people suffer from food insecurity and consume substantially less than their daily requirements of fruit and vegetables is a critical concern (Booth and Smith 2001; Nolan, Rikard-Bell et al. 2006; National Preventative Health Taskforce 2008).The potential to resource and redistribute the high percentage of food that is wasted throughout the food system is one of the environmental contributions of such alternative distribution points (Knight and Davis 2006). Greater access to locally produced food also contributes to reduction in carbon emissions produced through the transport of food from 'paddock to plate'. As noted in European studies, over half the emissions generated by transport in the food system are created by people shopping for food (Smith, Watkiss et al. 2005). Ensuring there is fresh affordable food in proximity to where people live is therefore important to reduce the carbon footprint created by food transport and waste.

Recommendations:

- Examine current food consumption and retail patterns among urban consumers.
- Map the current food distribution systems within urban areas, looking at both conventional (supermarkets) and alternative forms of retail (farmers markets or CSAs) represented.
- Map the retailing choices relative to opportunity. This would entail examining the opportunity different groups have to access locally produced fresh food beyond the supermarkets.

- Support innovation in urban food systems. This would include support of small to medium businesses involved in the production and retail of food as well as alternative outlets such as farmers markets, community supported agriculture and food box systems.
- Bring a policy and research focus to the issue of food waste along the whole of the food chain. Implement measures to reduce this waste while also seeking to improve redistribution of what is salvageable.

In Conclusion:

This submission has outlined only two key issues for food production in Australia, but has emphasised the importance of *urban* food systems for this inquiry. While there remains an image of Australian agriculture as distinct and distant from its urban nodes, the city is a site of both production and consumption of food. It is critical therefore there is greater political attention to and research into the generation of urban food systems that ensure quality, affordable food for consumers, the viability of small-scale producers and contribute to overall environmental sustainability.

References

Adams, J. (2009). Australian farmers markets. Invigorating Town Centres through Alternate Local Fresh Food Marketing Strategies. G. W. S. E. D. Board. Penrith Council Chambers, Sydney**:** 1.

Armstrong, H. (2004). New forms of green for mega-cities: peri-and inter-urban agricultural space. Designing Sustainable Urban Future, Brisbane, Australian Institute of Landscape Architects.

Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (2008). Report of the ACCC Inquiry into the Competitiveness of Retail Prices for Standard Groceries. Canberra, Australian Competition and Consumer Commission.

Bartolomei, L., L. Corkery, et al. (2003). A Bountiful Harvest: Community Gardens and Neighbourhood Renewal in Waterloo. Sydney, University of New South Wales

New South Wales Department of Housing.

Booth, S. and A. Smith (2001). "Food security and poverty in Australia - challenges for dieticians." Australian Journal of Nutrition and Dietetics **58**(3): 150-6.

Food Connect. (2009). "Food Connect: A Collaboration between Farmers and City Folk." Retrieved 21 Februrary, 2009, from www.foodconnect.com.au.

Houston, P. (2005). "Re-valuing the Fringe: Some Findings on the Value of Agricultural Production in Australia's Peri-Urban Regions." Geographical Research **43**(2): 209–223.

Knight, A. and C. Davis (2006). What a Waste! Surplus Fresh Foods Research Project. Wolverhampton, UK, Veolia Environmental Research Trust.

Low Choy, D., C. Sutherland, et al. (2008). Change and Continuity in Peri-Urban Australia, Peri-Urban Futures and Sustainable Development. Brisbane, Griffith University. **Monograph 4**.

Low Choy, D., C. Sutherland, et al. (2008). Change and Continuity in Peri-Urban Australia, Peri-Urban Futures and Sustainable Development. Brisbane, Griffith University. **4**

Martin, R. and T. Marsden (1999). "Food for urban spaces: The development of urban food production in England and Wales." International Planning Studies **4**(3): 389 - 412.

National Preventative Health Taskforce (2008). Australia: The Healthiest Country by 2020. Canberra, Australian Commonwealth Government.

New South Wales Department of Planning (2005). City of Cities: A Plan for Sydney's Future. Sydney, New South Wales Government.

New South Wales Department of Planning (2007). North West Subregion: Draft Subregional Strategy. Sydney, New South Wales Government.

New South Wales Department of Planning (2007). South West Subregion: Draft Subregional Strategy. Sydney, New South Wales Government.

Newman, P. (2004). Keynote address. Sydney Futures Forum. Australian Technology Park, Redfern, NSW Department of Planning.

Nolan, M., G. Rikard-Bell, et al. (2006). "Food insecurity in three socially disadvantaged localities in Sydney, Australia." Health Promotion Journal of Australia **17**(3): 247-54.

Smith, A., P. Watkiss, et al. (2005). The Validity of Food Miles as an Indicator of Sustainable Development: Final Report produced for DEFRA.

Thomson, J. (2008). Include us in grocery price inquiry: farmers. The West Australian. Perth**:** 11.

Toronto Food Policy Council (1999). Feeding the City from the Back 40: A Commercial Food Production Plan for the City of Toronto. Toronto, Toronto Food Policy Council**:** 38.

True Consulting Group (2007). Best Practices in Urban Agriculture: A Background Report for the City of Kamloops to Support Development of a Urban Agricultural Strategy. Kamloops, Canada, Kamloops Food Policy Council.

Weber, C. L. and S. H. Matthews (2008). "Food-miles and the relative climate impact of food choices in the United States." Environment Science and Technology **42**: 3509-3513.