

PO Box 261 Deloraine Tasmania 7304

Office: 91 Emu Bay Road Deloraine.

31-3-2009

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

Inquiry into food production in Australia

Terms of reference

Food production in Australia and the question of how to produce food that is:

- a. *affordable to consumers;*
- b. *viable for production by farmers; and*
- c. *of sustainable impact on the environment.*

Preamble

We welcome the opportunity to provide input into the inquiry. This submission is relatively brief and of a preliminary nature.

The Environment Association (TEA) Inc is a not for profit, volunteer based, regional environment community association. TEA has a long-term interest in environmental and social outcomes in our region, Northern Tasmania, particularly in forest conservation, biodiversity and water issues. The Environment Association has worked in the public interest since its inception in 1990.

Whilst our comments include national issues we also wish to make reference to state matters here in Tasmania.

The production of food in Australia is a very large subject, well beyond terrestrial farming and involves many more industries and people than farmers.

The Current Circumstance

It has been suggested by Prof David Lindenmeyer (a Professor of Ecology and Conservation Biology at the Australian National University's Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies) that Australia feeds 300 to 400 million people.

About 50% of Australia is used for agriculture.

The price of food in real terms has been declining for decades.

The production of food involves vast impacts on the once natural systems of Australia.

Several consequences of the current agriculture that produces food are unsustainable.

Australia continues to engage in land clearance despite Governments knowing that it is a threatening process and despite an increasing number of threatened species.

Australia continues to sign free trade agreements.

Biosecurity concerns continue to arise.

Although Australia continues to export food we also continue to import it.

Farmers as a general rule have to grow more food to remain viable. Often this entails pushing the land harder.

Cropping of farmland in Australia is regularly associated with a draw down on soil carbon levels.

There appears to be no National Food Strategy for Australia.

Many Australians have unhealthy food consumption habits.

World resources of phosphorous are limited (100 years) and Australia has virtually no reserves.

Deforestation of Australia's natural forests continues and this plays a part in climate change. Forests have an important life supporting function including for farming systems.

We take food production to include:

1. Food for human consumption
2. Food for livestock consumption
3. Food from land.
4. Food from inland waters.
5. Food from oceans and estuaries.
6. Farmed food and wild harvest extraction.
7. Fresh food
8. Manufactured and processed food.
9. Frozen and dried Food
10. Organic Food
11. Biodynamic food
12. Water (for all intents and purposes water should be regarded as food, it is essential sustenance)

It is clear that the above list covers a very broad range of circumstances

National Issues

We recommend that a National Food Strategy for Australia be developed with a wide terms of reference and with a focus on food and not the industry. Such a strategy should include not only the sorts of terms of reference included here but more important food issues such as food safety, food security, food nutrition, biosecurity, food production and becoming sustainable under a rapidly climate change situation. Such a strategy seems elemental. It should seek broad public input.

A decision should be made about how many people Australia can actually feed in using sustainable agricultural and fisheries systems. It seems from all the problems out there that we are trying to feed too many people.

Those areas of the country that are not sustainably supporting farming should be retired and rehabilitated. Such hard decisions require government support to ensure people are not disadvantaged.

We oppose the import of produce, which may compromise (even at a small chance) Australia's biosecurity. New Zealand, USA and Chinese apples are a good example. Allowing such produce into Australia does not make sense.

We oppose the introduction of genetically modified food. A precautionary approach is warranted.

We do not support live sheep export, intensive piggeries, feedlots, battery and other intensive egg production.

We have ongoing concern about some farming practices such as aerial spraying and the common resort to using chemicals.

We support organic agriculture. In Tasmania the resources supporting this rapidly growing market sector appear scant. In some instances organic is more labour intensive but it generally brings a higher price for the produce. The move to organic food suggests people will pay a higher price for the safety benefit. Organic food is a considerable opportunity for Australia.

We support a national system of certification of organic and other produce such as biodynamic and a nationally consistent marketing plan. Other certifications of a different standard should also be considered for systems of agriculture, which are obviously more sustainable.

A person from Goolwa in S.A. sent me some photos of the so-called estuary of the Murray River. It has not flowed to the sea in the last three years and is now a metre or so below sea level at the mouth. Raises the issue, where is the environmental flow?

We have known about climate change for decades but have not been doing sufficient to address the problem. That situation continues. Not only is it embarrassing but also it is unwise.

Free trade agreements in effect allow countries with lesser standards and a lower cost of production to out compete Australian farming enterprise.

We need to think about what sort of farming community we want. Do we, as the world's most urbanised country want more rural decline? Do we want to replace farming families with industrial agribusiness?

Tasmanian Issues of Concern

There is a major problem with the competition for agricultural land from Managed Investment Scheme forestry plantation corporations. This unfair competition out competes the farmers for land and is converting agricultural land to tree plantation. Forestry should not be regarded as agriculture. Forestry does not produce food. This situation is likely to be exacerbated by carbon trading and needs redress.

Sadly land use planning in Tasmania appears unable to comprehend the fundamental difference between forestry and farming.

Unsustainable land clearance continues in Tasmania and it seems the Commonwealth is supporting this destructive activity.

There is a perception that Tasmania has plenty of water and that merely by building more dams and buying more centre pivot irrigators the problem of climate change will be solved. It won't. If it does not rain the dams will not collect water. Much of Tasmania does not have surplus water and some parts have been drought stricken for years.

In that context good land (land capability wise) with reasonable rainfall should be used for food production.

Water in Tasmania is largely controlled by the Hydro Electric Commission. We know the historic reasons for this but cannot understand why the situation continues. Currently about 70% of Tasmanian power comes via Basslink and not from hydro impoundments.

Water intakes for many towns do not meet health standards. In Tasmania are some of the world's shortest most polluted streams.

The state policy on the Protection of Agricultural Land (2007) is a hopeless and incompetent document, which sadly does not protect agricultural land.

Tasmania, in building more dams will inevitably destroy important remnant vegetation that is generally 100% required for conservation. The recently completed Meander Dam did exactly that. Damming watercourses has a huge impact and such large dams are not the solution. Have a look at the Craigborne Dam, if it doesn't rain there is no point building dams. The consequences of inadequate climate change planning.

Water continues to be mismanaged in Tasmania. There is no metering of rural water in most situations. There is no control over groundwater extraction at all. If the rumours are correct the State of Tasmania is going to regulate future bore drilling but not regulate and not meter the existing bores. That is not good enough.

There is a massive expansion of irrigation in Tasmania. Who is determining the limits to growth? Such development appears to be uncontrolled.

It would be good to see the livestock excluded from waterways. It is unsustainable to have waterways polluted by livestock. Setbacks from streams are needed.

Tasmanian lambs for the Tasmanian market are now slaughtered over in Victoria and then shipped back to Tasmania. That cannot be sustainable.

The conservation and protection of private land ecosystems remains very low in Tasmania. Out of 2,651,000 Ha of private land only 47,000 Ha is reserved (mainly by covenant) (ie under 2%). There is substantial coincidence between the private land areas used for agricultural production and key fauna habitat of threatened species. The Commonwealth's program is coming to an end but the targets have not been met. This is worrying. The program should be improved and expanded, not ended.

Conclusion

We do not consider that the current economic structures support farmers growing food. Most Australians do not need cheaper food and could afford to pay more for food. Our island continent has been degraded by human use and yet now we know that we must do things another way but that other way costs money.

Every Australian has a responsibility to the public interest but it is unreasonable to lump the improvement of degraded rural ecological systems in farming areas solely onto the farmers in an economic climate where they are getting less and where the economic rules are being changed relentlessly.

We advocate a better environmental performance from food production and believe that such improvements are essential for our survival, but it will come at a cost.

END