



Submission to the EPC (VLA) Inquiry into Securing Victoria's Food Supply

Prepared by Sustain: The Australian Food Network

April 2024



Table of Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	4
ABOUT THIS SUBMISSION.....	5
KEY CHALLENGES FOR VICTORIA'S FOOD SYSTEM.....	6
Govern the food system as a system and prioritise health	6
A farming sector in need of visionary transformation	6
Lack of policy support	8
An escalating climate crisis	8
Inflexible supply chains	9
Geopolitical instability	9
Poor human and ecological health outcomes	10
THE WAY FORWARD	12
RECOMMENDATIONS	14
Food system governance	14
Knowledge, education and training	16
Building resilience across food and farming systems	16
REFERENCES	19
APPENDICES	21
Appendix 1: Response to the Green Wedge and Agricultural Land Review Action Plan	21
Appendix 2: Recommendations from Linda Martin-Chew's submission	23

About Sustain: The Australian Food Network

Sustain is a health promotion charity and think-and-do network with a mission to create food systems that nourish people and nurture the planet. We know that transitioning to a healthier, more sustainable, and equitable food system requires good policy and practice, underpinned by a robust evidence base and inspiring examples that empower communities and governments to work collectively towards a better food future for all.

As connectors, we facilitate events, networks, and communities of practice for sharing knowledge and fostering collaboration amongst diverse food system actors.

As policy experts, we understand the critical issues facing local government and their communities. Our integrated approach aims to cut across the institutional and departmental silos that hinder cohesive and integrated food policy implementation.

As researchers, we translate and share our food system knowledge to build an evidence base for effective food policy and action.

As practitioners, we design and deliver community food projects (including our two urban farms and a food hub) that experiment with innovative approaches to food system transformation and model the change we want to see. Our projects aim to demonstrate in the here and now that, *yes, a better future is within our grasp.*

Sustain is a certified social enterprise registered with Social Traders.

Executive Summary

The **medium and long-term security of Victoria's food supply is at great risk** due to a lack of resilience caused by:

- Concentrated, just-in-time and long-distance supply chains that are inflexible and vulnerable to shocks and disruptions (e.g. extreme weather, geopolitical instability).
- Lack of comprehensive, whole-of-government, whole-of-system and whole-of-state food system and food security policy and governance.
- Lack of government action and clear policy directions to protect and facilitate the sustainable and productive use of green wedge and peri urban agricultural land.
- Lack of funding for, and recognition of, the importance of urban agriculture which is an essential part of ensuring a diverse, resilient metropolitan food system.

There is a **rigorous body of research, policy guidelines and a shared vision for Victoria's food system** for the Victorian government to draw on for immediate policy action including:

- [Consensus Statement: Towards a Healthy, Regenerative and Equitable Food System in Victoria](#)
- [FoodPrint Melbourne Roadmap for a Resilient Melbourne Food System](#)
- [FoodPATH: Food Policies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health](#) (VACCHO)

The Victorian food system represents vital urban and public health infrastructure. Victorian farmers should be regarded as the foundation of a healthy diet, sustainable ecosystems and lively food culture. Our health depends on their viability.

Peri-urban and urban food production are vital components of Victoria's food system. Strengthening and protecting these sectors is critical to securing Victoria's food supply for current and future generations.

Strong, evidence-based planning policy with a focus on localisation can protect against supply threats from pandemics, extreme weather, geopolitical upheaval, and fuel spikes.

Facilitating and supporting more direct and local market access (e.g. municipal markets - established and pop-up, greengrocers, farmers markets, food hubs etc.) can ensure economic viability for producers and lower-cost access to local and fresh food for consumers. A strategic focus on economic diversification is essential to mitigating the imbalance of power between the supermarket duopoly and smaller players within the food system.

Promoting more regenerative and agroecological models of farming ensures that farmers' costs are lowered, and the health, integrity and productive capacity of Victoria's soils are guaranteed for generations to come.

About this submission

The parliamentary website states that this Inquiry into securing Victoria's food supply' is focused on the peri-urban food system including:

- the impacts of urban sprawl and population growth on arable land and the farming industry in Victoria
- planning controls to protect agricultural land in green wedge and peri-urban areas
- the resilience of the Victorian food system, including the production of food, its transportation and sale.

This Inquiry commences its work in the wake of the recently concluded [Green Wedge and Agricultural Land Review](#) initiated in 2018 which culminated with the recently released Action Plan. There is obviously a very substantial overlap between the substance of that Review and the focus of this Inquiry, in particular the second bullet point regarding planning controls to protect agricultural land. We have a strong focus on urban and peri-urban agriculture and we welcome the focus on this critical component of Victoria's food system. At the same time, we strongly encourage the Committee to consider the bigger picture of Victoria's food system and accordingly welcome the explicit reference to matters concerning **'the resilience of the Victorian food system, including the production of food, its transportation and sale.'** This brings into direct consideration issues related to the capacity of the food system to cope with climate change, extreme weather events and other shocks and stresses, which raises the vital issue of agricultural production methods, as well as **food distribution and retail**. These areas are the focus our submission, along with associated recommendations.

Sustain's response to the Green Wedge Agricultural Land Review Action Plan is presented in Appendix 1. We endorse the recommendations (contained in Appendix 2) made in the submission by Linda Martin-Chew (Rural Planner), with whom we have collaborated for several years on a shared advocacy agenda for healthy, resilient, and fair food system for Victoria.

Acknowledgements

This submission has been supported by input received from experts on the matters under consideration as well as over 100 stakeholders who participated in an event held at the Angliss Conference Centre on 9th April, *Shaping Victoria's Food Future: A Symposium for Collective Action*. We thank Emeritus Professor Michael Buxton (RMIT University), Professor Kathryn Backholer (Deakin University) and Dr Rebecca Lindberg (Deakin University) who participated in that event as well as Dr Sarah Mansfield MP who provided practical advice to attendees about the process and the format for making submissions. We especially thank William Angliss Institute for their generosity in hosting the event, partnering with us in its design and delivery and providing catering for attendees.

Key challenges for Victoria's food system

Govern the food system as a system and prioritise health

The food system heavily impacts human and ecological health and government policy. 37% of all greenhouse gas emissions are caused by the food system (IPCC 2018) and industrialised monocultural agriculture is a leading cause of species extinction and soil degradation (Brondizo *et al*, 2019). Over 40% of Australian dietary intake now is now comprised of ultra-processed foods meaning that diet is now one of the leading risk factors for disease and early death (Machado *et al*. 2019). Food insecurity is increasingly affecting Victorian households (Kelly 2023). Most farmers feel their work is not valued and as many as a third have attempted suicide or self-harm, with extreme weather and financial pressures leading causes (NFF 2023).

These and related matters are not random, disconnected statistics. They are all linked and they all stem from the same basic problem: that we have taken our food and agricultural system for granted and effectively out-sourced its governance to powerful corporate actors who make the key decisions – how farmers and suppliers are treated and what prices they are paid; what food is available for consumers, how it is priced and what is most heavily marketed – in the interests of shareholders and with the single goal of profit maximisation.

If we as Victorians want a resilient food system that optimises human and ecological health, then we must develop and implement policy and governance frameworks accordingly. This means that the Victorian government must recognise and govern the food system in a comprehensive, integrated manner as a system and do so in a manner that prioritises not the interests of the most powerful corporate actors, but the health and wellbeing of all Victorians, including farmers. This is the challenge before this Committee and the government.

A farming sector in need of visionary transformation

This Inquiry is therefore an important opportunity for the Committee members to make the Victorian government aware of how vital our food system is to the current and future wellbeing of all Victorians. Victorian eaters and farmers deserve a bold, visionary approach to re-imagining the Victorian food system as well as developing and implementing appropriate policy and programs to make that vision reality.

A truly resilient food system in Victoria will require courage, political will and leadership.

Supermarkets have become the most powerful actors in Victoria's and Australia's food system. Farmers have become price-takers, with some stating that the prices they receive for their

produce have not changed in nearly 50 years (ABC News 2024). This is contributing to declining farm viability and therefore a lack of sectoral revitalisation. Agriculture is increasingly perceived as an industry in which farmers earn minimal income, are not sufficiently valued and have limited agency in setting prices and determining how they farm and manage the land.

*“While other Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development countries have moved towards supporting multifunctional agriculture and a post-productivist regime since the 1990s, Australia has remained committed to an agenda of **“competitive productivism”**. Producers are under pressure to **“get big or get out”**, to pursue economies of scale in response to diminishing terms of trade. Terms of trade declined by 25% from 1981-2 to 2007-8 due to the reduction of protection and subsidies, increased competition and volatility in an oversupplied global market, persistent drought and rising rural debt. As commodity prices have fallen the cost of inputs such as fertiliser and fuel has risen, creating a **cost-price squeeze**. Declining farm viability has led to young people exiting agriculture, the disappearance of small and medium sized farms, negative environmental impacts, declining water for irrigation and the demise of rural communities.”* (Newsome 2020)

This has significant consequences for the social and economic wellbeing of rural communities. Unsurprisingly these economic and financial realities also translate into poor physical and mental health for farmers. A recent National Farmers Federation survey of over 1,300 farmers found one in three had attempted self-harm or suicide, almost half were depressed, and almost two in three were experiencing anxiety in recent years. Natural disasters (largely related to climate change), financial stress, inflation and other cost pressures are major contributors to poor farmer wellbeing (NFF 2023).

While farmers may see their role of feeding the Australian public as an essential service, three out of four feel their work is not valued (NFF 2023). The solution is not only more robust mental health support in rural communities but a re-valuation of the agricultural sector through policy initiatives that recognises and supports food production as an essential service alongside hospitals, schools and other public services designed to support the wellbeing of all Victorians.

The poor mental health of the farming community does not augur well for the current and future resilience of Victoria’s food system. It is no surprise that farming is not considered an attractive or viable path for young people. In response, young and new entrants into agriculture – many of them women – are turning away from the ‘get big or get out’ treadmill. These young people, particularly from non-farming backgrounds, are motivated to engage in smaller-scale agro-

ecological farming with a focus on direct marketing and community connections (Massy 2021). However, a largely unsupported and undervalued sector creates many barriers to participation in agriculture for people who are younger or culturally and linguistically diverse. This contributes to a less diverse farming sector that is not representative of the broader Victorian community.

Lack of policy support

What is excluded from policy is equally as important as what is legislated. Although a sustainable, regenerative agricultural sector serves a critically important environmental, social and public health function in the Victorian food system, the current policy paradigm is leading to larger farms with fewer farmers. This is not the foundation of a resilient food system, a key characteristic of which is diversity of scale and production systems that regenerate rather than degrade the ecosystems on which they depend (Jacobs *et al.* 2020).

Current policy gaps include the lack of a coordinated and cohesive vision for the Victorian food system and appropriate multi-stakeholder governance frameworks that foreground the cultural connections and knowledge of First Nations communities and elders in Victoria. A particular policy gap which substantially impacts the resilience of Victoria's food system is an absence of regulation curtailing the ability of major food retailers to abuse their market power to the detriment of suppliers and consumers, a matter which is now before the Federal government and the Australian Consumer and Competition Commission. The 'competitive productivist' policy settings for food systems and agriculture noted above disadvantage all farmers over both the short and long term.

The largely free-market approach adopted by successive federal and state governments since the 1980s has left the governance of our food system largely in the hands of the most powerful private actors. Supermarkets are primarily accountable to their shareholders, not to a democratically elected government or the Victorian community more broadly. Yet, supermarkets remain the default anchor retailer in precinct planning processes. They are the beneficiaries of a policy vacuum in which the power of the supermarket to shape the Victorian food system has gone unchallenged. When faced with a choice between greater profits for shareholders and the health, resilience and sustainability of Victoria's food system, supermarkets will always prioritise their shareholder commitments.

An escalating climate crisis

An escalating climate crisis has caused devastating fires, floods, and droughts over large parts of Victoria in the last 5 years. With the climate crisis accelerating, these disasters are likely to become more prevalent, further plunging the food system into crisis. These events affect not only local food production, but also supply and distribution chains. Farmers experiencing

extreme weather lose crops, livestock, and become economically unviable while the effects on supply chains result in shortages in isolated areas affected by disaster.

With the climate crisis accelerating, these extreme weather events and associated disasters are likely to become more prevalent, and therefore likely to cause future emergency and crisis situations that will further impact food production and supply chains. These trends affect not only production and crop loss in Victoria's foodbowls such as Shepparton, but also the integrity of supply and distribution networks, leading to shortages in isolated areas (Murphy *et al.* 2022)

Inflexible supply chains

Victoria's food system relies on long, centralised, just-in-time supply chains, importing much of our food (typically processed foods) from global markets, while exporting locally produced healthy food. When disruptions to these supply chains occur as with COVID-19, the war in Ukraine, and the catastrophic fires and floods we have experienced recently, food prices skyrocket due to decreased supply and increase in logistical costs. This centralised supply chain was less flexible and adaptable during the pandemic compared to more agile and localised supply chains.

Many submissions to the 2023 Federal parliament's national food security inquiry highlighted critical supply chain vulnerabilities especially regarding road, rail, bridge and port infrastructure as well as the inherent lack of resilience (and substantial wastage) in the very long-distance movement of food around Australia. Key recommendations of the House Standing Committee on Agriculture's report ([Australian Food Story: Feeding the Nation and Beyond](#)) included (Recommendation 14, p103) the development of a National Food Supply Chain Map identifying:

- Where products are grown or produced and in what quantity,
- Where food is processed,
- Collection and distribution centres,
- Transport methods, major routes and vulnerabilities.

The Committee recommended (Recommendation 15, p104) that 'as part of the development of a National Food Plan, the Australian Government develop a transport resilience plan focused on food security, including the optimal location of distribution centres.' Similar actions can and should be taken by the Victorian government to identify key vulnerabilities in Victoria's food supply chain and associated transport, logistics and infrastructure; and remedial action taken to address those vulnerabilities, with the priority being food security for all Victorians.

Geopolitical instability

Conflicts abroad can have major impacts on Victoria's food production, supply chains and affordability. A reduction in exports from a major grain and seed oil producing nation such as

Ukraine produced an initial spike in wheat prices, although prices stabilised subsequently with other exporters (including Australia) making up the gap and the resumption of Ukrainian exports through the Black Sea humanitarian corridor (Donley 2024). Should Russia block Ukraine's access to the Black Sea, the impacts on global wheat prices and global food security would likely increase price volatility and uncertainty (Devadoss and Ridley 2024).

Russia and Ukraine are major exporters of fertilisers on which many Victorian farmers rely (Australia imports 80% of the nitrogen fertilisers it uses) (Ben Hassen and El Bilali 2022). As with wheat prices, an initial sharp spike in 2022 was followed by stabilisation and reduction in fertiliser prices in 2023 as other countries met export gaps (Rice and Vos 2024). As price-takers, Australian farmers have largely absorbed increased input costs, affecting their bottom lines.

This geopolitical instability leaves Victorian producers highly exposed to sharp rises in input costs in the form of a potential oil price shock and another spike in fertiliser prices (World Bank 2023). Cognisant of these risks, GrainGrowers has called for strong government action to reduce dependence on imported fertiliser through boosting domestic production capacity and the adoption of cleaner production methods (GrainGrowers 2023).

Poor human and ecological health outcomes

The food system, diet and the environment cannot be regarded separately in public policy. The current Australian and Victorian food system is a leading cause of ill-health and disease. Only 5.7% of Victorian adults meet vegetable consumption guidelines (only 1.8% of men compared to 9.4% of women) (Victorian Agency for Health Information 2019). Over 40% of Australians' energy intake comes from ultra-processed foods (UPFs) (Machado et al. 2019). The majority of UPFs are purchased in supermarkets where they are heavily promoted and often discounted.

This has contributed to what leading public health scholars have described as the 'creative destruction' of the human diet, with dominant manufacturers of UFPs being 'some of the system's largest accumulators of profit and distributors of capital' (Wood et al. 2023). Supermarkets are also disproportionately powerful players in the Australian food system, acting as 'primary gatekeepers' through their control of supply chains while also offer 'few positive health impacts' (Pulker *et al.* 2018). A diet shaped by supermarket interests and UPFs is not only bad for people but also the planet. Ultra-processed foods rely on monoculture production systems, are energy-intensive and contribute significantly to greenhouse gas emissions and food packaging waste in landfill (Liyanapathirana *et al.* 2023).

A food system that is oriented towards large corporate players and that encourages the production and consumption of foods that are unhealthy for people and the planet is neither

resilient nor sustainable, as its costs to public and environmental health are always externalised and paid for in other ways by the public purse.

It is time to recognise diverse retail models such as greengrocers, municipal markets and other independent food outlets as critical public health infrastructure. Farming is much more than just another industry sector. Victorian farmers are the foundation of a healthy diet, sustainable ecosystems and lively food culture. Our health depends on their viability.

The way forward

Victorians deserve a food system that will ensure an abundance of good food for generations to come, grown locally and strongly supported by the Victorian and Commonwealth government. It is inevitable that shocks to our food system will continue and become more frequent and severe. We must orientate our food system to secure future supply through greater localisation and diversification across production, distribution, and retail chains. This requires a fundamental paradigm shift from 'competitive productivism' to 'multifunctional agriculture and post-productivism'. This will foster a more resilient Victorian food and farming sector that will ensure food security, better health outcomes and more jobs.

Victorian farmers need support to transition to lower-input and regenerative forms of production, reducing their exposure to geopolitical instability and enhancing their capacity to deal with extreme climate change. Due to the challenges outlined above, many Victorian producers are facing increasing hardship (Rural Bank 2022). Exacerbating these challenges, levels of national government support for farmers is amongst the lowest in the world (Greenville 2020). Australia also has one of the most concentrated food retail sectors that has, over decades, been reinforces producers as 'price-takers.'

The long-term resilience of Victoria's food system requires support for farmers to transition to much lower-input forms of production through agroecology and regenerative agriculture (IPES 2015). Food Mornington Peninsula Shire Council is leading the way with its [Food Economy and Agroecology Strategy](#) and Action Plan to support Peninsula producers in developing and implementing their own peer-to-peer systems for verifying regenerative agricultural practices (Mornington Peninsula Shire 2022). This is a model approach to policy development and implementation that the Victorian government should support and enable other local governments across the state to follow.

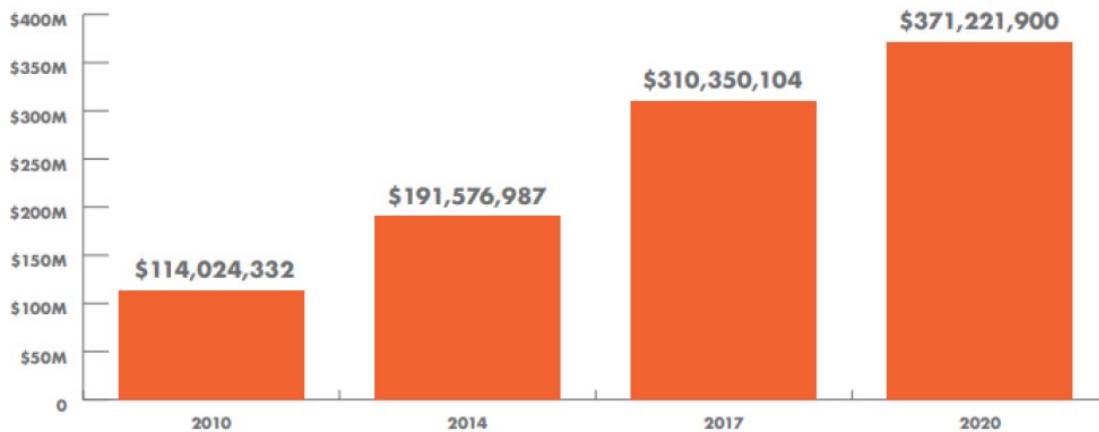
A resilient and regenerative food system recognises the relationship between human and ecological health. Investing in securing Victoria's food supply and supporting the transition to regenerative agriculture will result in a stronger, more resilient economy, a healthier population leading to lower healthcare costs, and social cohesion. The [Vermont Farm to Plate Plan](#) (see Figure 1) is an excellent model for an integrated, long-term approach facilitated and resourced by state government. This strategy more than tripled the amount of food bought from local producers from 2010 to 2020 and led to an 11% increase in food sector employment (Figure 2).



Figure 1 – The Vermont Farm to Plate Plan



Figure 2 - Purchases in Vermont food in Vermont



Recommendations

Food system governance

Develop a whole-of-government strategic framework

- Create a **Victorian Food System Strategy and Investment Plan** to build long-term resilience, viability and sustainability in the Victorian farming sector and the wider food system.¹ The **Vermont Farm 2 Plate initiative** is a best-practice example of a whole-of-system state government policy with impressive outcomes achieved since implemented in 2009.
- **Empower and resource local governments to lead the participatory development of community food system strategies** appropriate to their local contexts.
- **Develop a Victorian Food Supply Chain Map** to understand the production, transport and distribution of food within and across Victoria as well as identify key vulnerabilities in transport and distribution infrastructure.
- Revise the Victorian planning provisions legislation to **prioritise human and planetary health as key strategic objectives of land use planning decisions**.
- **Resource a comprehensive food system monitoring framework** to track success of a statewide strategy and ensure its responsiveness to changing circumstances.

Establish a cohesive, collaborative food systems governance model

- **Establish a Victorian Food Council** to oversee the implementation of the Victorian Food Systems and Food Security Strategy and Investment Plan, with diverse representation including First Nations representatives, primary producers, municipal and wholesale markets and other key stakeholders.²
- **Establish and maintain collaborative partnerships between government, industry, academia, and community organisations** to address the complex challenges facing peri-urban farming and to develop holistic and sustainable solutions for the future.

¹ The report of the [NSW Environment and Planning Committee](#) (2022) had as its first recommendation “That the NSW Government develops a comprehensive Food System Plan for NSW with clear and measurable targets”. Similar the federal [House Standing Committee on Agriculture](#) (2023) had as its first recommendation “that the Australian Government, in consultation and cooperation with State and Territory Governments, relevant industries, sectors and the community, develop a comprehensive National Food Plan providing for the food security, including nutritional security, of the nation and its people”.

² The NSW EPC report (2022) had as its second recommendation “That the NSW Government creates a Food System and Security Council responsible for implementing and reporting on the NSW Food System Plan, and acting as a single coordinating body to address issues in the NSW food system”. Similarly the House Standing Committee on Agriculture had as its third recommendation that “the Australian Government appoint a National Food council, made up of industry and community experts, to advise the Minister for Food [recommendation 2] on matters pertaining to the food system, and support the development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the National Food Plan”.

Recognise food as a public good and a basic human right

- **Legislate the universal right to good food** to implement the Victorian government's obligations under the United Nations International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.
- **Embed food as a public good** (like open space, schools, healthcare, etc) in land use and precinct planning, housing and suburban development processes, i.e. plan for communities to have secure access to good food through diverse sources of provisioning through both commercial and non-commercial markets.
- **Support and resource community gardens and other forms of urban food production** as a public good recognising their value for food system leadership development, social cohesion, climate resilience and health and wellbeing.

Rethink strategic planning priorities

- **Integrate preventative health and food system resilience within state and local planning provisions** as key strategic objectives of planning decision-making.
- Prioritise local and regional food production over export markets.
- **Embed a 'right to farm' via the Victorian Planning Framework** in designated urban and peri-urban areas proximate to Victoria's major population centres.
- **Enforce planning protections, including urban growth boundaries and green wedges, to immediately halt further encroachment on peri-urban agricultural land.** Prioritise medium density housing in inner and outer suburbs to accommodate population growth.
- **Revise the Precinct Structure Planning Guidelines: New Communities in Victoria** (VPA 2021) to explicitly embed diverse food production, distribution and independent retail outlets to support the Victorian government's vision for 20-minute neighbourhoods.
- Support local government to **incorporate spaces for local and community food production** (e.g. urban farms, community gardens, community orchards, etc) in new suburban and housing developments.
- **Ensure land use planning processes are genuinely participatory** from their inception, ensuring that related inquiries and strategies are consultative, transparent and democratic.
- **Comprehensively map and audit peri-urban land to assess its suitability for local food production.** Ensure this mapping process and the resultant data are conducted in an open and participatory manner.
- Incentivise public and private land to be used for agroecological food production through meanwhile clauses, rate discounts and land tax rebates to support local food production.

Knowledge, education and training

Prioritise First Nations food sovereignty

First Nations Peoples successfully managed, cared for and nourished themselves from the lands we now call Victoria for tens of thousands of years before European colonisation.

- **Work with First Nations communities to advance their own food sovereignty goals** including recovery and transmission of cultural knowledge, permanent land access and land restoration.
- **Support the cultivation and processing of native crops by First Nations-owned and controlled enterprises** to provide opportunities for connecting the Country for the lasting social, cultural and economic benefit of Victoria's First Nations peoples.

Invest in education, training and capacity building

- **Embed food systems training in vocational training packages including certificates and diplomas in cookery, hospitality, horticulture, food processing, etc** to build food systems literacy in TAFE graduates working within the food and farming system.
- **Embed agro-ecological production in vocational horticulture training programs.**
- **Education, training, and extension support for farmers** to shift to more agroecological and resilient practices.
- **Invest in food systems professional development opportunities for state and local government staff** to build capacity for effective food system policy and program development across multiple departments and jurisdictions.
- **Strengthen delivery of the VCE Food Studies curriculum** to build food system literature for Victorian students, with a focus on health and wellbeing, sustainability, ethics and First Nations culture.
- **Develop intergenerational mentoring programs** to support the transmission of critical agricultural knowledge between older and younger farmers.

Building resilience across food and farming systems

Support regenerative production systems

- **Create financial incentives for farms to transition and practice agroecological food production** (including for biodiversity enhancement, reforestation and soil conservation and restoration) to ensure the short-term financial risks are not borne exclusively by individual farmers.
- **Build climate resilience within the peri-urban farming sector**, including measures to mitigate the impacts of extreme weather events and changing climatic conditions on food production.

Diversify and localise supply chains

- **Support the formation of cooperative models** across all areas of the food system (production, logistics/distribution and retailing) to strengthen a community-led food system and encourage economic diversification.
- **Invest in community food infrastructure** including abattoirs, commercial kitchens, warehousing, and processing facilities, food hubs and so on to support the financial viability, diversity and quality of the Victorian food system. This could be achieved through Agriculture Victoria's Food to Market and Small-scale and Craft Program.
- **Improve market access and distribution channels** for peri-urban farmers, including opportunities for direct-to-consumer sales and local food networks to enhance market opportunities, reduce costs and economic viability.
- **Recognise greengrocers and municipal markets as critical public health infrastructure** and invest in the expansion and viability of this retailing sector as an essential public service and critical to ensuring economic diversity within the food system.

Support peri-urban farmers and new entrants

- **Develop programs and initiatives to address the unique challenges faced by peri-urban farmers**, including land access, quality water access, land speculation, zoning regulations, and competing land uses.
- **Provide support for and facilitate land-sharing arrangements** or fund the existing efforts underway in the NGO sector to bridge landowners with new entrant farmers including education, training, and mentorship opportunities for aspiring and existing peri-urban farmers, equipping them with the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in the sector. Agriculture Victoria currently funds a small pilot program developed by Mornington Peninsula Shire Council– Gateway to Small Scale Farming. This, and similar initiatives, should be expanded and resourced.
- **Advocate to Federal Government** for better disaster relief for producers affected by extreme weather events, investment in research and training in agroecological farming models and a cohesive and comprehensive approach to food system resilience at the national level.

Expand the urban agriculture sector

Urban agriculture can play a vital role in supply food in Victoria and creates resilience to shocks that may disrupt longer supply chains such as bushfires and floods. As the Federal House Standing Committee on Agriculture recognised in its *Australian Food Story: Feeding the Nation and Beyond* (2023), urban agriculture provides an excellent training ground and career pathway for the new and next generations of Australian producers, without whom Victoria will not have a

food secure future or resilient food system. We recommend adopting the Roadmap to expand Victoria's urban agriculture sector presented in Sustain's [Growing Edible Cities and Towns report](#) (commissioned by Agriculture Victoria), specifically:

- **Planning:** amend local and state planning frameworks to include urban agriculture; develop and implement professional education resources for planners to build understanding of the role of urban agriculture in supporting healthier and more sustainable urban environments.
- **Sector coordination:** establish an urban agriculture advisory group to provide strategic advice for building capacity and programming across local and state government and to identify mechanisms for policy integration.
- **Access to land:** work with public and private stakeholders (including public utilities) to audit and identify suitable land; create pathways to facilitate access to it through fiscal incentives (e.g. rates discounts, land tax rebates).
- **Grants:** develop dedicated grant streams that are flexible and appropriate to operational size/capacity, and which support organisational capacity building.
- **Information, advice and training:** establish a centre for urban agriculture as a central hub for research and development, information, advice and training.
- **Research:** invest in research that identifies best practice globally and pilot new initiatives and approaches to capturing the sector's multifunctional impacts and benefits.

"The way in which the urban agriculture sector could be best supported is through more funding. Everyone I know in the industry is underpaid and over worked, which is not sustainable. In order to build frameworks for a greener future, more investment needs to happen." (Urban agriculture survey respondent)

References

- ABC News (2024, January 16). Farmers paid '1978 prices' by supermarkets [video]. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-01-10/farmers-paid-1978-prices-/103307180>
- Ben Hassen, T., & El Bilali, H. (2022). Impacts of the Russia-Ukraine war on global food security: towards more sustainable and resilient food systems?. *Foods*, 11(15), 2301. <https://doi.org/10.3390/foods11152301>
- Brondizio, E.S., Settele, J., Díaz, S., Ngo, H.T. (2019). Global assessment report on biodiversity and ecosystem services of the Intergovernmental Science- Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services. Bonn, German: IPBES secretariat; <https://ipbes.net/global-assessment>. Updated 2019.
- Devadoss, S., & Ridley, W. (2024). Impacts of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on the global wheat market. *World Development*, 173, 106396. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2023.106396>
- Donati, K. and Rose, N. (2022). Growing Edible Cities and Towns: A Survey of the Victorian Urban Agriculture Sector. Sustain: the Australian Food Network. <https://doi.org/10.57128/MIUD6079>
- Donley, A. (2024, February 14). Study details Ukraine war's wheat market impact. *World-Grain.com*. <https://www.world-grain.com/articles/19623-study-details-ukraine-wars-wheat-market-impact>
- GrainGrowers (2023, September 8). GrainGrowers report finds change is required to unshackle dependence on overseas fertiliser supply. <https://www.graingrowers.com.au/news/graingrowers-report-finds-change-is-required-to-unshackle-dependence-on-overseas-fertiliser>
- Greenville, J. (May 2020). Analysis of government support for Australian agricultural producers. Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Sciences. https://daff.ent.sirsidynix.net.au/client/en_AU/search/asset/1030322/0
- Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) 2018 Special Report: Global Warming of 1.5°C. <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/>.
- International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems (May 2015). *The New Science of Sustainable Food Systems: Overcoming Barriers to Food Systems Reform*. https://www.ipes-food.org/_img/upload/files/NewScienceofSusFood.pdf
- Jacobs, N., Clément, C. W. Y., & Frison, E. (2020). From uniformity to diversity: The potential of agroecology to transform food systems. In *Biodiversity, Food and Nutrition* (pp. 64-81). Routledge.
- Kelly, C. (2023). Australia in 'the midst of a food security crisis' as 3.7 mn households struggle to buy enough to eat. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/oct/23/australia-in-the-midst-of-a-food-security-crisis-as-37m-households-struggle-to-buy-enough-to-eat>
- Liyanapathirana, N. N., Grech, A., Li, M., Malik, A., Ribeiro, R., Burykin, T., ... Raubenheimer, D. (2023). Nutritional, environmental and economic impacts of ultra-processed food consumption in Australia. *Public Health Nutrition*, 26(12), 3359–3369. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S136898002300232X>
- Machado, P. P., Steele, E. M., Levy, R. B., Sui, Z., Rangan, A., Woods, J., ... & Monteiro, C. A. (2019). Ultra-processed foods and recommended intake levels of nutrients linked to non-communicable diseases in Australia: evidence from a nationally representative cross-sectional study. *BMJ Open*, 9(8), e029544. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2019-029544>
- Massy, T. (2021). *Regeneration: Growing New Farmers*. Young Farmers Connect and Farmer Incubator.
- Mornington Peninsula Shire (2022). Food Economy and Agroecology Strategy 2022-2028. https://www.mornpen.vic.gov.au/files/assets/public/v/1/new-website-documents/about-us/business-support/docs/mps_agroecology_2022_final-2.pdf

- Murphy, M., Carey, R., & Alexandra, L. (2022) *The resilience of Melbourne's food system to climate and pandemic shocks*. University of Melbourne, Australia. <https://doi.org/10.46580/124370>
- National Farmers Federation. (2023, March 29). Farmers in crisis: Depression and anxiety rife among Aussie farmers. https://nff.org.au/media-release/farmers-in-crisis-depression-and-anxiety-rife-among-aussie-farmers/#_ftn1
- Newsome, L. (2020). Beyond 'get big or get out': Female farmers' responses to the cost-price squeeze of Australian agriculture. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 79, 57-64.
- Parliament of Australia (November 2023). *Australian Food Story: Feeding the Nation and Beyond*. Commonwealth Government of Australia.
- Pulker, C. E., Trapp, G. S. A., Scott, J. A., & Pollard, C. M. (2018). What are the position and power of supermarkets in the Australian food system, and the implications for public health? A systematic scoping review. *Obesity Reviews*, 19(2), 198-218. <https://doi.org/10.1111/obr.12635>
- Rice, B. & Vos, R. (2024, March 21). Who's afraid of high fertilizer prices? [blog] International Food Policy Research Institute. <https://www.ifpri.org/blog/whos-afraid-high-fertilizer-prices>
- Rural Bank (2022, December 13). Production costs to bite as farmers look to improving conditions in 2023. [media release] <https://www.ruralbank.com.au/news/production-costs-to-bite-as-farmers-look-to-improving-conditions-in-2023/>
- Vermont Farm to Plate. *Vermont Agriculture and Food System Strategic Plan 2021-2023*.
- Victorian Agency for Health Information. (2019). Victorian Population Health Survey 2019: Summary of Results. Victorian Government. <https://vahi.vic.gov.au/reports/population-health/victorian-population-health-survey-2019-summary-results>
- Wood, B., Williams, O., Baker, P., & Sacks, G. (2023). Behind the 'creative destruction' of human diets: An analysis of the structure and market dynamics of the ultra - processed food manufacturing industry and implications for public health. *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 23(4), 811-843. <https://doi.org/10.1111/joac.12545>
- World Bank (2023, October 30). Conflict in Middle East Could Bring 'Dual Shock' to Global Commodity Markets. [press release] <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2023/10/26/commodity-markets-outlook-october-2023-press-release>

Appendices

Appendix 1: Response to the Green Wedge and Agricultural Land Review Action Plan

The Green Wedge Agricultural Land Review that was first established in 2018 has finally published its recommendations in the form of an [Action Plan](#). The Plan details 20 actions grouped under six themes, namely:

- Protecting Melbourne's Food Bowl
- Planning for Future Farming
- Securing the Right to Farm
- Establishing Stronger Protections
- Adopting Smarter Land Use
- Setting Tighter Controls

We acknowledge that the Plan commits the State government to principles that, if fully implemented and sustained over time will enhance the resilience of Victoria's food system and strengthen food security. That said, the Plan is in many respects 'a Plan to create a Plan'. As such, it falls short of what many stakeholders expected from the Victorian government after many years of consultation and engagement on these questions.

Thus, many of the actions are framed in language such as 'develop criteria', 'update agricultural planning policy', 'explore opportunities', 'provide more guidance', 'develop a new regional policy', 'develop a new Planning Practice', 'review and update decision guidelines' and the like. Given the extensive detail provided in nearly 1300 submissions we and others expected that many of these new guidelines, policies and criteria would have been drafted and released together with the Action Plan to demonstrate a sense of urgency on the part of the government considering the serious challenges facing Victoria's food system outlined above.

In February 2023, Sustain facilitated a workshop with 40 market gardeners from the Werribee South Market Garden green wedge area as part of a food systems capacity building project with the City of Wyndham and stakeholders in that municipality. The farmers raised two key issues: the quality and price of recycled water, and other costs of maintaining agricultural businesses, particular rates based on increased land values.

Water quality: Several farmers stated that they have lost crops due to high chlorine levels in recycled water from the sewage treatment plant as well as ongoing salinity issues. The Werribee River Association has consistently raised concerns about pollutants found in treated

water, including drugs, synthetic hormones, and other harmful substances. Notifications from Southern Rural Water about algal blooms were also raised.

Water price: Farmers stated that the current model of 'user pays' makes recycled water unaffordable, especially in a context where other input costs are raising. They want a new costing model for recycled water, with the cost shared between government, taxpayers and producers. They are calling for long-term investment to improve the quality and lower the cost of recycled water, while assuring that such water is truly fit for purpose.

Land use policy: Farmers raised the increasing value of land due to speculative investment by non-farming parties (land banking). This has led to an increase in rates, which farmers are struggling to pay. Further, the ongoing uncertainty about the future of the green wedge and whether Werribee South may be rezoned for urban development in the future restricts their willingness to invest in infrastructure and other upgrades to their businesses.

Action 1 of the Action Plan commits the government to 'introduce a new planning scheme overlay to protect key irrigated agricultural areas in Werribee and Bacchus Marsh' which, when implemented, will in theory permanently protect Werribee South for agricultural production. However, there is very little in the Plan that addresses the farmers' long-standing concerns regarding the quality and price of recycled water. Further, there is little in the Plan that would assist with the long-term financial viability of farmers by, for example, compensating local governments to provide rate relief to farmers in areas such as Werribee South where land values have risen sharply in recent years.

The Plan falls far short of what would be required to truly 'future-proof' the foodbowl areas of Melbourne and other Victorian cities and towns.

We recommend the incorporation of the series of benchmarking principles created by Linda Martin Chew (see Appendix 2) to guide the development and implementation of planning policy (state and local) to achieve this aim. The benchmarking principles provide a model for what success might look like in a food systems-positive planning system.

Appendix 2: Recommendations from Linda Martin-Chew's submission

1. Commit to land use planning regulation to prioritise peri-urban agriculture over other land uses. Apply the benchmarking principles listed from page 11 onwards in any review of planning regulation because they are specifically aimed at supporting a local, sustainable food system.
2. Government intervention is required to reduce the rate of conversion of agricultural land to residential use. Bring forward Action 16 from the Planning for Melbourne's Green Wedges and Agricultural Land Action Plan to require parliamentary ratification to subdivide land below the minimum lot sizes in the Farming Zone and Rural Activity Zone within 100 kilometres of Melbourne. Noting this appears to require an amendment to the Planning and Environment Act 1987, investigate measures to prevent a rush of rural subdivision applications in the wake of the recent release of the Action Plan and prior to the implementation of this action.
3. Skills development in food systems planning and food literacy is needed at all levels of government so that long term planning and policy actions promote a resilient, sustainable, healthy, and fair food system for Melbourne.
4. Sustainable agricultural practices that are associated with productive uses should be a specific inclusion in the purposes of each rural zone in Victoria. The support for "sustainable agriculture" in Victorian planning schemes could be strengthened, along with additional guidance on what attributes sustainable agriculture is likely to have. For example, agroecological production models are recognised as providing and supporting biodiversity enhancement, sustainable land management, and the retention of landscape values.