



Committee Secretary
Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Australia
By email: rrat.sen@aph.gov.au;

Dear Secretary and Committee members

**Re: Inquiry into the Competition and Consumer Amendment
(Australian Food Labelling) Bill 2012 (No. 2)
Submission of the Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance**

The Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance (AFSA) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Australian Food Labelling Bill 2012 (No 2). We represent 110 individuals and organisations across Australia, including family farmers, community gardeners and food-related small businesses, who are working for an equitable, sustainable and resilient food system for all Australians.

The Food Sovereignty perspective

Our perspective is rooted in the global movement for Food Sovereignty, led by the family farmer movement La Via Campesina, which embraces hundreds of millions of people in over 70 countries. The concept has been adopted by the United Nations Special Rapporteur for the Right to Food, and the United Nations Committee for World Food Security. The core principles include the following:

- Food is a basic human need, so access to good, healthy food at all times for all people is a basic human right, which our governments at all levels are obliged to uphold, having regard to the fact that Australia is both a signatory to the United Nations Covenant on Economic and Social Rights, and has ratified this foundational document of international human rights law
- Thriving rural communities and viable family farms are basic to a healthy food system
- Agriculture is impossible without healthy land and waterways, so farmers must be supported in their role as environmental stewards caring for soils and landscapes
- Sustainable agriculture for the future will increasingly be based around the principles of agroecology, where knowledge is freely shared amongst farmers and growers¹

¹ We refer the Committee to this recently made short video, which provides an excellent synopsis of the extremely serious difficulties confronting proponents and adherents of the further expansion of large-scale industrialised, input-intensive agriculture:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uem2ceZMxYk&feature=player_embedded.

- Our prime agricultural lands are the basis of our future: they need to be identified and protected from suburban sprawl, coal-seam gas mining, foreign ownership and control
- Food systems that are fair to farmers and eaters, and that are environmentally sustainable, are ones that are diversified and decentralised
- Excessive corporate concentration and control over any sector of the food system – seeds, inputs, land, distribution, retail, trade - is inconsistent with the democratic core of Food Sovereignty

We have elaborated these principles in a ‘Values, Principles and Best Practice’ document for a People’s Food Plan for Australia, which we attach to this submission as an Appendix.

The Australian Food Labelling Bill

We write in support of the Bill, and would urge the Committee to recommend its speedy passage through both Houses of Parliament. There is clear evidence, produced by Choice and others, that the current proliferation of country of origin claims made on food labels creates confusion in the minds of Australian consumers.² Similarly, there is good evidence that a majority of Australians want to support local farmers and food processors, but that the current legislative and regulatory framework prevents them from doing so.³

As Senator Milne pointed out in her second reading speech, the current labelling provisions regarding ‘Made in Australia’ give in effect a competitive advantage to non-local producers and manufacturers, since shoppers preference such produce believing, often wrongly, that its core ingredients come from this country. As will be clear from our People’s Food Plan draft discussion document, the Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance is firmly of the view that thriving and diverse rural and regional economies are fundamental to the future prosperity and food security of this country.

Regrettably, the economic and political trends of recent decades, both national and international, have largely negatively affected rural and regional Australia in general, and family farmers in particular. Family farmers continue to leave the land at the rate of 1% a year, as they have done for thirty years; and they are not being replaced. This is a silent demographic rural crisis, which is really a very serious national crisis. Given the consequences for this and future generations, this situation should be dealt with as a matter of national urgency. It should be beyond and above the daily contestation of party politics. The effort to rebuild Australia’s deeply troubled food system must be a matter of consensus, and the work needs to start now.

Hence we welcome this initiative to clarify and simplify the legislation regarding the claims the companies are able to make about the origin of food, as a necessary step in the right direction to give Australians the certainty they need to know that their choices are supporting our farmers and manufacturers.

² <http://www.choice.com.au/reviews-and-tests/food-and-health/labelling-and-advertising/nutritional-labelling/country-of-origin-labelling-survey-results.aspx>

³ *Ibid.*

There are of course many other matters that need urgent attention with regard to labelling, including

- the need for mandatory labelling of products that contain GMO ingredients,
- the need to introduce the simple and effective 'traffic-light' labelling system in terms of determining the health and nutritional benefits of foods
- the need for a similar coded labelling system to inform consumers about the ethical and environmental standards by which food was produced

We recognise that these matters are beyond the scope of this Committee, which is concerned only with the question of country of origin labelling. We do however wish to draw these matters to the Committee's attention, in order to re-state our view that there is an urgent need for a much broader national debate around the future of food and agriculture, and that labelling law reform has a central part to play in that debate.

Yours sincerely

Nick Rose
National Coordinator
Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance