

Enquiry into food security

To the honourable members of the agriculture committee,

I would like to respectfully ask for my submission to be considered into this enquiry.

I live in far northern WA, in the mining town of Port Hedland. I have lived in Hedland for nearly 16 years now, so am no stranger to the insecurities of food in a remote area. For the past 4.5 years I have run our local community garden. Food security has become a passion of mine, and I was fortunate enough to present at the food security conference held in South Hedland only yesterday, run by food community.

Food security in the remote areas of Australia is a pressing issue, even before the challenges of the shortages caused by the 2019/2020 fires, the pandemic and now floods that are ravaging the east coast of Australia. Any significant rain event or cyclone sees our roads closed and we are cut off from all forms of viable food delivery. The longest I have known it to be for was 4 days with no supplies making it through.

The arrival of the above-mentioned disasters has only added to the instability of food arriving, and having it be fresh when it arrives is an even greater challenge. Add to that the cost of transporting it to us. If it is available, it is rotten sometimes within hours and it becoming unaffordable for many to even attempt to purchase this food for their families. All of this is forcing more and more people, and disproportionately it is our first nations people, to feed their families on fast food and not much else.

Unless drastic and immediate actions are taken to combat the climate emergency, our food security issues will know no long-term positive solutions.

Our modern agricultural system is one of the leading contributors to the climate emergency. That is not to say I am laying blame with the farmers; they have put their trust in their agronomists who have in turn listened to chemical and fertiliser companies who have been out for profit over human and planetary health.

I do not believe there is one single solution to the long-term future of our food security, instead I believe the solutions lie in many smaller operations, that will see us regenerate our food system.

One of the first steps to me, is to change one key word/s. Sustainable/sustainability needs to be taken off the table, and needs to be shelved way up high as an eventual goal to be enjoyed by our descendants. Where we are now, if we try and sustain it, we will not survive. Now is not the time for sustainability, it is the time for regeneration. Only through regeneration can we hope to one day shift to sustainability.

Our country, and indeed the planet, does not have a food supply issue. We have a food distribution issue. With the exception of possibly the past couple of years, this planet has grown enough food to feed ten billion people. So, we are wasting enough food to feed two billion people who don't exist every single year.

Since the introduction of synthetic fertilisers, we have seen rapid degradation of our agricultural lands. A transition to regenerative agriculture practices needs to be at the forefront of all policy making decisions. I am not talking about an instant ban on chemicals, although that would be nice, it is not practical for the short-term survival of crops or people. Our reliance on these chemicals needs to be stopped, for many reasons, environmentally, economically and health all being at the forefront of those reasons.

The degradation of our soils has seen so much of the nutritional density stripped from these soils, that the food we eat no longer has many health benefits left in them. So, as well as not having access to food, the so-called healthy food we are eating, isn't as good for us as it once was. Transitioning from modern agricultural to regenerative agricultural practices will see a reversal in this and a return to more nutrient dense foods. The higher density of nutrients in our food, the better they taste, and the less we need to consume to be full and consume adequate quantities of vitamins and minerals.

The consumption of higher nutrient dense foods leads to the need for less food, which has a flow on effect to the need for less to be produced, needing less land for agriculture, less transportation, less reliance on seasonal and often unavailable workers, while still maintaining profitability for the producer.

There needs to be an immediate scrapping and massive education program surrounding the cosmetic food standards. Food that doesn't look perfect, is no less tasty or healthier for you than its perfect looking counterpart. This food needs to stop being thrown away, contributing to the landfilling of these products and the releasing of methane gasses due to rotting. If all the food that doesn't meet the cosmetic standards was sold or used in other food production enterprises, that alone would possibly be a huge step to easing the problem.

There needs to be an overhaul of the system that has a small number of corporations growing and controlling the food we rely upon. A return to the small, local holder, who only transports their goods a shorter distance needs to play a massive part in the solution.

Legislation needs to be put in place to stop the likes of Coles and Woolworths from forcing producers to sell their products to them for less than what they cost to produce.

Federal, state and local laws need to be changed and implemented to empower and educate individuals to be able to grow and sell their own produce, eggs, jams and preserves etc that is affordable and realistic to the backyard producer.

All towns and cities no matter their geographical location need to have a food producing industry. Even mining towns have the capabilities to grow crops for local consumption. A town like Port Hedland could never grow everything it needs to sustain its population, however, there are certain crops that do grow very well here, and should be grown on a commercial scale (not monoculture) to help ease the burden of transported goods.

New technologies such as Agrivoltaics need to be invested in at scale, which solves many problems with one initiative. All new solar farms should have to be agrivoltaics and not just stand-alone solar systems. Studies out of the US have shown that these technologies are best suited for arid regions, of which Australia has unlimited amounts of. These systems could not only help us reduce our reliance on fossil fuels faster, could grow more food, can grow more food in remote locations, reducing the need for costly transport, and employing people in the regions. Having these systems on country can also create meaningful employment for our first nations people, and assist them to be able to stay on country.

Our first nations people need to be supported to grow their traditional foods on country, which can contribute to the explosion in popularity in mainstreaming bushtucker foods. They need to also be supported to be owner/operators in these businesses, creating meaningful employment on country, helping keeping them connected to country and culture, providing for their future while maintaining their heritage.

Investment in community gardens who will commit to having an emphasis on public education to empower local people to grow their own organic, regenerative food, plus things like composting, worm farms, backyard chicken raising etc should be implemented.

An overhaul of the education system when it comes to our children being taught about where their food comes from and how it is produced. The Stephanie Alexander program is fantastic, but it isn't enough, and isn't being utilised in enough schools.

We need to stop importing food full stop. We grow more than enough to feed ourselves. We do not need grapes, oranges, apples, cherries from the US, Asparagus from Mexico and garlic from China. I would ask you to stop what you are doing, and sit and remember back to your childhood. Its almost Christmas, and the grapes and cherries are in season. Local and fresh. Remember pigging out on them until you were so sick of them that you didn't want them again until they were in season again next year? There was nothing wrong with that. We do not need out of season produce that has been picked unripe and transported across the world to us, at untold levels of emissions from transportation, only to be gassed with bromide to kill any potential biosecurity risk, to then be fed to our kids.

Similar can be said for exporting. We have starving people in our own country, feed them before exporting to other nations. Export excess if needs be, but instead of selling food to poorer nations, why not instead assist them to be productive in growing more of their own foods, ensuring their own peoples future food securities.

As for protein, please stop importing all protein. We have the capabilities to produce all the animal protein we need. A ban on all feedlot/battery/sow stall production methods needs to be legislated, and animals need to be free ranged, and raised/slaughtered in a more humane manor. Bring back local abattoirs for locally produced meats.

Ban and prosecute all international fishing boat trawlers, and protect our marine parks. If we are exporting certain types of seafood, then we are overfishing it.

Thank you for your time

Sincerely

Robyn Todd

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