



Bridging the Gap: Food policy and the environment

Insights from the primary food and public health sectors

In 2009 a series of meetings was initiated by representatives of the primary food industry and public health sector to understand the impacts of food production on environmental sustainability from a public health perspective.

The public health representatives indicated that, while environmental sustainability is important, an integrated approach, similar to that described in the UK's food policy strategic framework, *Food Matters – Towards a Strategy for the 21st Century*, is required in Australia to harness the many food system-related health determinants into a food policy. Consequently, all aspects of the food system impacting on public health – including health, food security, economic sustainability and social equity – should be considered in conjunction with environmental sustainability.

To guide the discussion, the following working vision for a food policy in Australia was adopted: 'Continual improvement in Australia's health, wellbeing and prosperity through the delivery of a secure and sustainable food supply'.

The following is a summary of key insights derived from these meetings.



Primary foods and health

Nutritional profile

The ready availability of inexpensive, energy-dense, nutrient poor foods and the lesser availability of relatively more expensive, nutrient-rich foods with lower energy density are considered to be an important factor contributing to diet-related diseases in Australia, particularly overweight and obesity.

Foods produced by the primary industries, such as dairy foods, meat, eggs, grains, vegetables and fruit, are regarded as 'whole' foods or foods requiring little processing for their consumption. Among reasons these foods are recommended in the current Australian dietary guidelines, are that they tend to be nutrient-dense and lower in energy density than many other foods.

Strategies for reducing the energy density and lowering sodium content of foods through modification of food formulations are therefore relevant to food manufacturing rather than primary production practices. The public health priority for the primary food industry is to promote consumption of foods as recommended in the dietary guidelines (or national dietary goals).

Monitoring consumption practices

Monitoring is required to understand current consumption practices. In the absence of regular national nutrition surveys and apparent consumption statistics, supply chain insights and statistics used for industry purposes may provide useful alternative sources of information. These include data such as volumes of food produced and per capita consumption, volumes of food imported and exported, distribution of foods through the supply chain, retail market share, and consumer insights.

Food safety

Food safety is an important issue for public health. Food safety programs based on the

internationally-recognised Codex HACCP standard provide strict guidelines to ensure use of safe practices throughout the supply chain, including primary production. Verification activities confirm that safe practices are being maintained, and monitoring and independent audit systems are in place to ensure corrective actions are taken as soon as issues arise. Consequently, Australian produce has the reputation of being among the safest food globally. It is imperative that these high standards are maintained.

Perspectives on economic sustainability

The primary food industry perspective

The primary food industry is market focused and export oriented. For primary food producers, there is a strong focus on productivity efficiency and meeting market demand because these are critical determinants of primary food producers' economic viability.

Productivity efficiency

For primary industry, productivity (defined as the ratio of production costs to price received) is a key determinant of the economic sustainability of agriculture. Producers are generally considered 'price takers' in that they have little control over the price received for their produce.

Producers try to improve their productivity efficiency by reducing the cost of inputs and maximising outputs through a variety of methods: natural resource management, stock or crop management, use of technologies such as selective breeding and mechanisation, use of cheaper inputs, and by improving economies of scale.

Productivity efficiencies may result in improvements in environmental sustainability and can also lead to improvements in the nutritional quality of food.



Global competitors

Competition from imports is a major challenge for Australian producers. Imported produce available at lower prices has adverse consequences for the viability of Australian primary food industries, particularly those only supplying the domestic market.

To remain commercially viable, Australia must not only have international market access but must focus on increasing exports to existing and new markets. Australian export produce must meet quality and food safety requirements as well as, in some markets, give evidence of environmentally sustainable agricultural practices.

The public health perspective

Addressing increasing healthcare costs associated with diet-related diseases, and reducing health inequities are priorities for public health.

Ensuring nutritious foods are readily available and affordable is essential for the long term health of the population.

Prevention strategies

Healthcare costs are rising and this trend is predicted to continue. A large proportion of healthcare costs are associated with treating and managing preventable diet-related diseases, including type 2 diabetes, cardio- and cerebro-vascular diseases and cancers. Overweight and obesity increase the risk of many diet-related diseases and consequently contribute to a large proportion of healthcare costs.

Strategies for improving diet and managing overweight and obesity have the potential to reduce the incidence of disease and associated healthcare costs.

Collaboration between, and combining data from, the primary industry and public health sectors provides an opportunity to determine the cost effectiveness of such strategies in helping to reduce healthcare costs and, at the same time, contribute to the economic sustainability of the primary food industry.

Strategies for reducing risk factors of diet-related diseases by improving nutrition have the potential to reduce healthcare costs. For example, the Go for 2&5[®] campaign has achieved an increase in vegetable and fruit consumption, which reduces the risk of several diet-related diseases and, consequently, healthcare costs associated with their treatment. At the same time, increased consumption will benefit the fruit and vegetable industry and provide employment in regional and remote areas.

Health inequities

Nutritious foods tend to be less readily available in low income and remote areas of Australia and also tend to be more expensive than in higher income and urban areas. Strategies are required to increase accessibility to healthier food and lifestyle choices among vulnerable population groups.

Food security

Food security concerns both the public health and primary industry sectors, but in different ways. According to the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organisation, food security exists “when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life”¹. Issues associated with food security differ at the global, regional, community and household levels.

- At the global level, two key factors that affect global food security are the ability for food to move around the world and, in the long term, climate change. International trade policies, market access and market demand determine the extent, origin and destination of global food trade. Climate change and declining resources are likely to limit global food production. In the face of the rising world population, food producers face the challenge of adapting to and mitigating the effects of climate change while ensuring sustainable, safe and adequate global food supply.
- At a regional level, food security includes the economic and environmental sustainability of primary food industries in regional areas of Australia. Primary food industries are responsible for a large proportion of employment in rural and regional areas, which is a key determinant of community health.
- At a community level, food security exists when all members of the community are able to access a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through a sustainable food system that maximises community self-reliance. Land use management and community gardens may help to increase access to nutritious foods at a local level.
- At a household level, the adequacy of household income is a key determinant of food security since income determines the ability of individuals to reliably access nutritious food.

Since many of these key determinants lie beyond the influence of the public health and primary food industry sectors, there is a need to share information with other sectors (such as trade and social welfare) to achieve sustainable solutions.



1 FAO. 1996. Rome Declaration on World Food Security and World Food Summit Plan of Action. World Food Summit 13-17 November 1996. Rome.



Environmental sustainability

The role of primary food industries is to ensure that the types and balance of foods recommended by the public health sector for optimal population health can be produced in Australia without compromising the long-term sustainability and quality of the environment for future Australians.

Producers play a critical role in environmental management, including weed and pest management and wild fire control, as an integral part of their on-farm practice. Agricultural industries take this responsibility seriously and, along with government, have invested in research on sustainable management practices through research and development corporations (RDCs). Industry-specific natural resource management programs contribute to the protection of vegetation, biodiversity, water and soil values in landscapes used for food production. Primary industries recognise their contribution to climate change. A focus of current research is climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies across the diverse range of geographical and commodity systems in Australia.

Conclusions

1. As part of a national food policy, an integrated approach is required to establish effective strategies for addressing aspects of the food system required to improve health outcomes.
2. Since the environmental sustainability of food production in Australia has implications for economic sustainability, food safety and food security, it is best addressed as part of a overarching food policy.
3. Collaboration between food producing primary industries and with other sectors, may help establish a 'common' language for considering the primary food industries' role in the Australian food system.
4. There is value in developing 'task groups', consisting of representatives from relevant sectors, to work together in solving joint problems relating to food. RDCs are uniquely placed to play a role in such task groups since they tend to have access to several disciplines which would not normally be considered together, including agriculture, environmental sciences, economics and nutrition.

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Facilitators:

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Chaired by Neil Inall

Neil Doyle (Meeting 2, July 2009)

Sarah Pennell (Meeting 3, December 2009)

Presentations can be downloaded from
www.aecl.com.au or
www.redmeatandnutrition.com.au