

CORRECTED VERSION

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING

REFERENCES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into environmental design and public health

Melbourne — 23 August 2011

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Witnesses

Dr R. Carey, research fellow, and

Ms K. McConell, coordinator, Food Alliance.

The CHAIR — Before you get started, for the record we need you to identify yourselves: your name, address and the organisation that you are representing. You also need to know that you are covered by parliamentary privilege in the course of the hearing but outside of the hearing you are not. A transcript will be provided to you in approximately a week. You need to check that, and if there are issues, deal with Keir to resolve any of those issues. If you could give a fairly short presentation, we will have maximum time to have an interaction with you.

Ms McCONNELL — Kathy McConell, I am a coordinator at Food Alliance. Our location is 221 Burwood Highway, Deakin University 3125.

Dr CAREY — My name is Rachel Carey, and I am a research fellow at Food Alliance. I am also based at Deakin University at 221 Burwood Highway, Burwood 3125.

Ms McCONNELL — Thank you for having Rachel and I and allowing us to present to you and also to provide a written submission. We want to congratulate you on this inquiry.

Overheads shown.

Ms McCONNELL — Before I get going I will just mention briefly a bit about the Food Alliance. We are funded by VicHealth, which you heard from this morning. We have had about two years of funding, and, as I mentioned, we are located at Deakin University where we sit. We were funded primarily to find solutions to some of the problems that we see within the food system. The premise we began with in looking for those solutions was trying to ensure that we see both a healthier food supply and an equitable, economically viable and more environmentally sustainable food system. We do this by looking for solutions based on the evidence — the literature, research reports and looking at what other countries are doing — so it is identifying, analysing and then encouraging this evidence-informed approach.

Today what we would like to talk about more specifically is food production and improved food access, particularly around fruit and vegetables. That will become quite clear as we go along. It will no doubt come as no surprise to you that research supports us eating adequate fruit and vegetables and that there is a strong link with reducing chronic diseases. The problem is in Australia probably less than 10 per cent of us are eating adequate amounts of fruit and vegetables, and in fact the trend is going down. In 2080 it was about 5.7 per cent of us. It is a bit of a problem.

There are lots of things we are doing to try to address that. Often we hear about some of the social marketing campaigns. What we want to talk about today, though, is something that we take for granted, which is the supply of that fruit and veg. We have modelling studies that show that there are some gaps, and in fact there are not adequate fruit and vegetables available to meet our nutrient needs if we were all to consume an adequate amount. One often says immediately, then what about importing? Can we just import this fruit and veg? Yes, importing will play a role and undoubtedly does and will in the future. However, relying solely on imports probably would have a few issues. Most countries source their fruit and veg domestically, in part because they are perishable items. But there are transport and refrigeration costs, which of course due to the price of fuel, the price of oil, will go up with time. Transport and refrigeration is also a source of greenhouse gas emissions. Other countries are themselves experiencing some of the extreme temperatures that we are experiencing and some of the natural disasters that Australia experiences as well. Basically what we are saying is we do not want to be reliant on those imports and we instead want to develop a robust supply for us here in Victoria and Australia. To do this, though, some of the pressures that these modelling studies have said are issues are land and water availability.

Moving on to land, Victoria, and Australia as well, has only a small amount of productive agricultural land, unlike Europe and America. Their soils are more fertile and less fragile than our soils. Also, the land suitable for fruit and vegetable production is in short supply and becoming more expensive in Victoria due to urban growth, which particularly affects vegetable growers in the peri-urban areas in the city fringe. In fact you might be surprised to know that over half of our vegetables and about 17 per cent of our fruit is grown within 100 kilometres of Melbourne in this peri-urban area. Melbourne's peri-urban areas of fruit and vegetable production are part of the green wedges. You do not need to see the words in this slide, but you will notice the coloured areas are the green wedges. The green wedges, which you are probably quite familiar with, were developed to set aside and preserve Melbourne's urban spaces. The urban growth boundary, which is right on

the inside of those, was introduced in 2002 to provide long-term stability to the limits of this urban development. It has been expanded three times since, and that area is under review again. The constant shifting of this boundary creates uncertainty, leads to rises in land prices and taxes and can make it difficult for farmers to make long-term decisions about their land.

These areas are the fruit and vegetable-growing areas. A significant amount of our vegetables, in particular, is grown here, including over 90 per cent of the state's cucumbers, celery, leeks, parsnips, Asian vegetables, silverbeet and spinach. Some areas are quite valuable for one crop in particular. About 90 per cent of Australia's asparagus is grown at Koo Wee Rup. Werribee, in the south, grows about 70 per cent of south-eastern Australia's kale and leafy vegetable crops.

In view of the significance of the fruit and vegetable supply to public health, we are saying the protection of these peri-urban fruit and vegetable-growing areas should be seen as a public health issue rather than only in terms of protecting the economic value of this production. Food Alliance would suggest that the areas of agricultural productive land like these be mapped and protected so that as future development occurs it does not compromise our fruit and vegetable supply. There have been several reports and even inquiries into this very issue around agricultural land. These investigations stressed that the long-term stability of this urban growth boundary for at least 10 to 15 years is important to provide certainty to farmers, as well as stressing the need to identify and protect this land. These reports also highlighted a number of other mechanisms for protecting productive agricultural land, including possible amendments to the state planning policy framework.

We would also like to see planning for water availability, especially for these key fruit and vegetable production areas. Fruit and vegetable growers predominantly rely on irrigated water. Over half of Victorian vegetable farmers see the availability of irrigated water as an impediment to the future viability of their business. One of the best options for improving water security in the peri-urban areas is through recycled water schemes. Some of Melbourne's best horticultural land is located closest to the city's two water treatment plants, the southern and western plants, located in Cranbourne and Werribee. Land in this areas where there is optimal soil and climatic conditions where they co-occur and with this potentially secure source of water should be regarded as being of the highest possible agricultural value and be protected from other development.

Not only is commercial farming important, but we are also proposing that back garden community production of fruit and vegetables can play a role in addressing food security and public health. There is a lack of Australian data, but in the UK and America there are studies that show a link between these gardeners and the fact they have increased fruit and vegetable consumption. There is also some areas in Melbourne where some studies have taken place. They found that between 16 to 21 per cent of people experiencing food insecurity grow some of their own food. This may help to increase the reliance of these vulnerable groups to increases in the price of fruit and vegetables such as those we have seen recently due to the drought and during the floods. Planning and design of new residential communities and retrofitting of existing communities should include opportunities for people to grow their own fruit and vegetables.

People living in the outer suburbs might also have little access to fruit and vegetables grown in peri-urban areas close to them because food that is grown there is usually sent to central warehouses of major supermarkets or to central wholesale markets. Food Alliance suggests that we need to plan for more ways of connecting farmers to the people who live in these areas. Provisions for farmers markets and box schemes are one way, but farmers markets have so far tended to operate in more of the higher socioeconomic areas rather than the lower. In the US one way it is doing this connecting is through the development of food hubs which help to re-localise this food distribution by supporting smaller farmers and processors such that they can share storage, warehousing, packing and even transport infrastructure in order that they can sell to other businesses in the area as well selling directly to consumers.

In summary, the recommendations that the Food Alliance would suggest to you when considering planning are to consider food production within the terms of the inquiry, and we would recommend that the value of productive peri-urban land be considered in terms of its public health value as well as the value of agricultural production, that significant areas of productive agricultural land be mapped and then protected from development, and that we include references to the planning of food production and food security within the state planning policy framework and the Victorian Planning and Environment Act 1997.

Ms PENNICUIK — I was just interested; you were talking about the stabilisation of the urban growth boundary over 10 to 15 years. I was wondering whether that was actually long enough, because 10 years is not very long, or whether that needs to be a bit longer. I was wondering whether you could comment on that.

You were talking about mapping the areas and protecting them. We have already lost a lot like suburbs like Oakleigh and Wantirna that used to be orchards only 25 to 30 years ago. Now they are all built over by housing. Does there need to be something a bit more radical like a moratorium and then a mapping and protection thing? I sort of agree with you that we need to keep food security as a growing issue and that local food production is the way. But those are the two things I was wondering about.

Ms McCONNELL — As far as that absolute number of years goes, I do not know we have a recommendation about what is ideal. In part this 10–15 years has come from some of the reports we have read. However, I guess what is important is there is some long-term security. In terms of what that equates to, I will not say a certain number.

Dr CAREY — No, I think we have seen that in other parts of the world. I think you are right. In places in the States perhaps they have looked at longer term protection than 10 to 15 years — up to 20 to 25 years. I think Kathy is right. It is the longer term security that is important, and then that has an impact on reducing the kind of speculation that occurs around those areas. Otherwise that long-term protection is not there.

Ms PENNICUIK — Also I think in terms of the other issues you are talking about like creating hubs and connectivity if you have only got that 10 to 15 years. It takes a lot to develop those, so I just wondered about that.

The CHAIR — I just take up on the point you mentioned about farmers markets often being at the high end. I think we sort of know that, but we have a situation in town where on Friday mornings we have a thing called the Port Produce Market. It is just amazing how people who are on limited incomes, older people and pensioners, use that. It is stuff that is pulled out of the ground that morning. It is on the local primary school premises. It also works in where men in the community help out with the community garden. I think it is auspiced by the Bellarine health service. I am just wondering whether you know of other partnerships that happen in local communities that are not designed at the high end. It is actually there for people who are on low incomes, and it is really high-quality, locally grown produce.

Dr CAREY — I guess you would be looking at some of the projects that happened through the Food for All project that VicHealth funded. I am not personally well enough across the specifics of the individual projects that occurred that — —

The CHAIR — So VicHealth might have some more information.

Dr CAREY — I think the VicHealth Food for All project did look at some examples of that that did take place in particular areas, and they were evaluated as well I believe, would I be right to say?

Ms McCONNELL — Yes, they were very well evaluated. It has happened over five years. There were nine different locations. It might be worth looking at them. I am quite familiar with what you are talking about in that project. It is a lovely example. I know the woman who was running that; I saw her do her presentation. They have done some really unique consultation with the community to ensure that they can keep the prices affordable. It is not the standard practice of most farmers markets to undertake that consultation that is needed so they can keep the prices down. There is constant negotiation between the health centre that I know supports it and the farmers who come and bring their produce there to keep those prices affordable.

The CHAIR — And also not cut across the so-called larger market that happens once a month or at the end of the month.

Ms McCONNELL — Yes.

The CHAIR — Negotiation is essential.

Mr TEE — Thank you for your submission. I suppose the suggestions you make in terms of the amendments to the Planning and Environment Act 1997 are timely because I think we are about to see that legislation in the Parliament shortly. That will give us an opportunity to have a look at that. There is also the

review around the Victorian planning policy, so again there are opportunities and scope for that. I suppose I am a little more concerned in the context of your submission about the three reviews that are going on in relation to the green wedge. I am wondering whether or not we ought to put on hold those amendments until we have mapped and protected the agricultural areas or whether it is sufficient that those reviews get expanded from their current terms, which are commercial and housing development, to incorporate the sorts of things you are talking about in terms of the primary agricultural land. I wonder if you have got a view on either or both of those.

Dr CAREY — I think the idea of having a moratorium brought up was an interesting one, because you are right: the key issue is we have not yet mapped those areas so we do not know where they are and we do not know the values of some of those areas that we might be about to lose. I think that is a really important point that until some of that mapping of those areas has been done there should not be any further encroachment into them because, as you brought up before, we have already lost many of those fruit and vegetable-growing areas and, if you think as well, traditional areas of Bentleigh, Brighton and all of those kinds of places. As far as I am aware, the only one of the original market garden areas that is left now is Werribee. That augurs for those now gone that have been pushed further and further out, but the difficulty with pushing further and further out is that in fact we do not necessarily have the land that is suitable with the right kind of conditions.

Ms PENNICUIK — Building houses on the best land.

Dr CAREY — That is right, and the right soil conditions and security of water access, which is also really crucial. It is not the case that we can simply keep relocating those areas; there are not places to relocate them to. That is really important.

Mrs PEULICH — We are getting to the nitty-gritty. One of the areas I represent, and I live very close by, is the Kingston section of the green wedge. Your general principle that that sort of thing should be mapped and then protected in development does need a little more detailed work. I would assume that the mapping also implies therefore assessment, does it?

Kingston has actually done its own, I think by an independent consultant. They are currently concluding that. Basically what came out of that is that Kingston, ironically called the green wedge, is a very brown wedge. Most of it is extractive industry, tips and landfill which causes significant health problems for the community, in particular local schools, students and so forth. But the fact that emerged out of that particular study, that consultant's report, in my understanding, is that 20.1 per cent of the land in the so-called Kingston segment of the green wedge is in the green wedge and the rest is zoned for special uses including extractive industry and/or golf courses.

All I am suggesting is that, whilst in principle that concept is a valuable one, I think there is one word missing in your 'map and protect'. It should be 'map, assess and protect' because, yes, of course we all want to see food production remain viable, affordable, accessible and all that, but at the same time there are areas that you are talking about that have very significant health problems for the local community. Do we lock up and protect those and see no change? Or do we isolate those productive bits of land for agriculture and allow other things to occur rather than extractive industries which cause health problems? That is the dilemma with your very general statements. Are you able to comment on that?

Ms McCONNELL — I am just thinking about assessing.

Mrs PEULICH — I would like to take you for a bit of a walk through what is, essentially, a wasteland.

Ms McCONNELL — We have thought a little bit and we have tried to look, especially around the Department of Primary Industries, and we have found on their website too that they do seem to have done a bit of assessing where they are actually out there testing soils and looking at all kinds of complicated things, which we can understand, from all kinds of acidity, to all kinds of things. It looks like some of that is done and done for lots of Victoria.

Mrs PEULICH — But I think you need to include it in this.

Ms McCONNELL — Yes, it is a good point.

Mrs PEULICH — We would rather have sporting fields than extractive industry, if you know what I mean?

Ms McCONNELL — Yes, absolutely.

Mrs PEULICH — So we really agree, I think most people want better health outcomes, generally speaking. It is not 'at loggerheads'. There has got to be some sensible way of moving forward.

Mr SCHEFFER — Is the field of your work just the areas around Melbourne and the Yarra Valley? Or do you go beyond that? Because I want to know how to pitch my next question.

Mr TEE — He has only got limited time, you see.

Ms McCONNELL — Food Alliance deals with other issues as well, not just this, but if you are talking about geographically, as far as why we are focusing on this peri-urban part of Melbourne, it is because we realise how significant it is and that it is at risk. But as far as we know, we are quite aware that a lot of the fruit is going much more north.

Mr SCHEFFER — Because what I wanted to ask was about meat.

Mr ELSBURY — We have heaps.

Mr SCHEFFER — Is there is a lot of meat in the area, cattle and sheep? There are chickens in that area clearly, but what about in terms of beef. I am not expert in this area at all; I am just going from news items about some of the potential dangers of meat and beef. There has been quite an interesting debate around the relative land use of growing beef. There are different arguments about it. There was a recent science show, you might have heard, arguing the opposite, that actually it is a very good use of resources to run beef. Then there is a more mainstream argument that it is probably questionable.

Given that, and also noticing areas in East Gippsland, which is part of my electorate, where quite a lot of land is turned over to horticulture and agriculture, and what I am told is that that is actually a more productive use of land than raising cattle. I just want to know whether that is part of what you do, and what do we say to a community that arguably eats more meat than it ought to, from the 10 per cent, as you were saying before, where there is a public health issue and a land-use issue?

Ms McCONNELL — I do not know whether I am going to answer your question exactly.

Mr SCHEFFER — I did not ask it exactly.

Ms McCONNELL — We, in part, chose to focus on fruit and vegetables because these modelling studies were showing that of all of the food groups, fruit and vegetables, continually in three separate independent studies, were the most vulnerable; and that is in part why we have focused on it. We have focused on fruit and vegetables again because the consumption is so poor, so low that we can make, we know, enormous health benefits, and we should be — —

Mr SCHEFFER — And that is why I am asking the question from the other end.

Ms McCONNELL — Yes, we should be. And then thirdly, we focused on fruit and veg too because as far as the environment goes, it is less likely — I know what you are saying as far as the mainstream — for the most part to cause as much environmental damage as some of the other food groups. That is in part why our focus has been around fruit and veg. Now, are you asking me more than that?

Mr SCHEFFER — I was just asking you a broad question about whether you have got evidence, and I think you are probably going to say 'no' because you are not looking at it, about the relative effectiveness in terms of public health around beef growing and vegetables.

Ms McCONNELL — There is data, and the Netherlands has just come up with a wonderful report which looks at both the food and dietary guidelines, as well as the environmental food guidelines. One of two things they recommended was that we change our diet to more of a plant-based diet — not omit meat but eat less meat, dairy et cetera. That brings benefits both for health and the environment. There is pretty strong evidence

supporting that, and we know that we will get both health and environmental outcomes should we follow that advice.

Dr CAREY — I was going to add that in relation to looking at the issue from the point of view of meat that in terms of public health one of the things that we do know is that on average most Australians probably eat about three times more meat than the current dietary guidelines would advise people to eat, so we are not very worried about increasing their consumption. If anything, it is probably a good idea, from a public health point of view, to reduce our consumption a little bit.

And in terms of the supply of meat, we have a very good supply we have a big surplus that we are currently exporting, so again we are less concerned about the supply of beef and lamb and those sort of products than we would be about the supply of vegetables and fruit, which we know is, as Kathy said, potentially a little low and vulnerable, so we want people to be eating more of them.

The CHAIR — Can you forward the source for the Netherlands report?

Ms McCONNELL — I am sure I can, yes.

Mr ELSBURY — I was wondering what information you had on the practical uses of recycled water, especially in irrigation districts. What information were you using in advocating the increased use of recycled water?

Dr CAREY — We are advocating the use of some recycled water that has been improved to what we call class A treated water — water that is appropriate for putting on fruit and vegetables from a public health point of view. We know that there is a lot more use of that water occurring, particularly down in the Werribee area, although there are issues with how saline that water is currently, so that has been causing some concern obviously.

Mr ELSBURY — There were major issues.

Dr CAREY — There were major issues.

Mr ELSBURY — As in they were promised a certain part-per-million account of salt in that water and it could not be achieved at all. It was impossible. We have had several farmers in that area refuse to use that water, even during the drought times, because they said that they just did not want it on their land. Unless we are going to have a major investment in those plants again — and we are not talking a few hundred thousand dollars here; we are talking millions — recycled water is not going to be a viable option. We are still going to need to use reservoir-captured water.

Dr CAREY — We are aware of the long-term issues that have occurred there, but it is still an ongoing problem that is being dealt with. I guess we would say that from the point of view of the fruit and vegetables and the plants, it is worth looking at whether or not we can address those issues and, especially, whether we can look at those issues in relation to the eastern treatment plant as well, because those two areas around Werribee — so around the western treatment plant — and around the eastern treatment plant are potentially two drought-proof food bowls on the fringe of the city.

Now we are in a very wet period so many of us have forgotten a bit of what happened during the drought, but I was aware that there were farmers who stopped coming to farmers markets because they had run out of water to grow vegetables. There was a period when it looked like Bacchus Marsh might be in difficulty because of inadequate supplies of water, and there is climate change modelling which tells us we are likely in the longer term to have longer dry periods. I think it is really important from a public health perspective that we look at the potential, seriously, of addressing the recycled water and perhaps bringing the grade of that water up to sufficient levels, because I do not think there are too many other options in terms of drought-proof food bowls for the area.

Mr ELSBURY — Just on another matter to do with areas like Werribee, you have some of the larger growers who are doing quite well; they are able to get massive amounts of their produce out without much of a problem. However, if you have anyone under 30 acres, they have some major problems in terms of being able to compete in the marketplace. Then you have the problem where, if they are no longer viable as a farm, they

seek to be bought out. None of the neighbours can actually afford to buy them out, and the big players cannot afford to buy them out. You end up having them bought by a company which may not have an interest in the farm until it gets to a certain size for them to be able to produce, so then you have this land sitting there not producing anything. It becomes thistles. I see it happen in Werribee South all the time. I actually live in Werribee; I know what is going on. We have this additional problem of smaller producers who just cannot do the job anymore. They are tired, and most of them are quite old. The kids have decided not to take on the family business — and why would they if they are not going to make a living?

Dr CAREY — I think, again, we are very aware of those issues. It is a real problem, like you say. There is some data that shows that it is the smaller fruit and vegetable farms that are less profitable at the moment, and it is very difficult for them to compete in the traditional, mainstream food system.

One of the issues that we think more attention should be given to is how to increase farm gate prices that those farmers receive. One of the ways that they are looking at this in the United States, as Kathy said before, is the development of what are called food hubs, which have multiple benefits. One is to re-localise some of that food distribution and supply to provide a shared infrastructure that smaller producers can then access, whether it be shared warehouse space, shared refrigeration space or shared front support and packaging space. It allows them to come together and sell on to bigger suppliers as well as selling on to people in that local area, so we would really like to see attention given to how to create an environment that is more profitable for those producers as well as able to get food — fresh, healthy food — to people in those local areas that currently are not connected with those farmers.

Mrs PEULICH — Is that sort of cooperative farming viable here in Australia? I remember communist Yugoslavia really being the model, but even then it was not positively successful.

Mr ELSBURY — I have to say, Inga, that there are examples of it in Werribee, so they are doing it to an extent, but they are still not making a buck.

The CHAIR — Sue has one last question, and I am mindful that Hansard really needs a break too.

Ms PENNICUIK — It was just on that recommendation there, given our conversation about the vulnerability of fruit and vegetable growing, as opposed to — —

Mr SCHEFFER — Meat. Say it.

Ms PENNICUIK — Whether that recommendation should mention that — as in food production of particular fruit and vegetables or something like that. That is all.

Ms McCONNELL — It is.

The CHAIR — Thanks, Kathy.

Mrs PEULICH — Could we just have one clarification?

Mr ELSBURY — I was just asking about the mainstream food system. You said ‘mainstream food system’. Is that the marketplace as it currently stands? Is that the current purchasing and delivery of food in the marketplace?

Dr CAREY — That is right. I guess it is the common channels that are used now to get food from producers to consumers who buy the food, so the traditional retail channels — supermarkets that currently sell at least 55 per cent of the fruit and vegetables that people buy and perhaps more than that. We are talking about those sorts of channels, yes.

Mr ELSBURY — Okay.

The CHAIR — Thank you, and thank you for today’s presentation and for answering our questions and of course for your excellent submission. Well done, and we look forward to ongoing interaction while there are some inquiries taking place. Thank you.

Dr CAREY — Thank you very much.

Ms McCONNELL — Yes, thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.

