

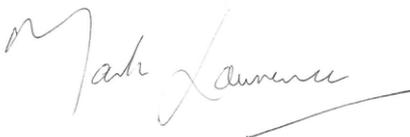
Submission to the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into Environmental Design and Public Health

Environment and Planning References Committee

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Introduction

The Food Alliance welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into Environmental Design and Public Health.

The Food Alliance is an organisation funded by VicHealth (the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation) and auspiced by the WHO Collaborating Centre for Obesity Prevention at Deakin University. The Food Alliance aims to identify, analyse and advocate for evidence-informed policies and regulatory reform to enable sustainable food security and healthy eating in the Victorian population.

The links between environmental design and public health are varied and complex, as outlined in the submission from VicHealth to this Inquiry. The Food Alliance supports the conclusions and recommendations of VicHealth's submission to the Inquiry. In this submission, we wish to draw the Committee's attention specifically to **the importance of planning for food production to the promotion of health and well-being in Victoria.**

Food production, environmental design and public health

The importance of considering food production in environmental planning has been highlighted in a number of recent research reports, such as the Food Sensitive Planning and Urban Design (FSPUD) framework, commissioned by the Heart Foundation and part-funded by VicHealth [1], and by a review of 'Urban Planning for Physical Activity and Nutrition', undertaken by the Urban Research Program at Griffiths University in Queensland [2]. It was also recognized recently in the National Urban Policy, which includes 'Improving water, energy and food security' as a priority area for future planning of Australia's cities [3].

The **National Urban Policy** recognizes that Australia's future food security¹ is likely to be affected by a number of **emerging environmental challenges**, including the loss of productive agricultural land, water scarcity and the rising cost of transportation [3]. The Food Alliance is concerned that **these environmental challenges could particularly impact**

¹ Food security is understood according to the UN FAO definition that, "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" - FAO, 2011, Glossary. Global Forum on Food Security and Nutrition. Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations. Available on line at: <http://km.fao.org/fsn/resources/glossary0/en/>

Victoria's fruit and vegetable supply, leading to increasing fruit and vegetable prices and adverse impacts on public health.

The importance of fruit and vegetable consumption to public health

Research suggests that **adequate consumption of fruit and vegetables is important to disease prevention**. It reduces the risk of developing cardio-vascular disease and has an indirect role in reducing the risk of some cancers [4]. However, less than half of Victorian adults eat the recommended number of serves of fruit daily and less than 10% eat the recommended number of serves of vegetables.

Crop losses due to drought and floods over the last decade have led to **spikes in fruit and vegetable prices**. During the 2005-7 drought, vegetable prices in Australia increased by 33% and fruit prices by 43%, compared to an overall increase in food prices of 12% [5]. The impact of these price increases on fruit and vegetable consumption is unclear due to lack of data. However, the evidence suggests that consumers are likely to reduce their consumption of fresh foods as prices rise [6]².

Why can't Victoria just import fruit and vegetables?

To increase fruit and vegetable consumption in Victoria, the state needs an adequate fruit and vegetable supply. The ability to import fruit and vegetables from interstate and overseas is important to a resilient food supply. However, it is equally important to maintain a robust local supply of fruit and vegetables, particularly in view of **emerging challenges such as peak oil and climate change**.

World oil supplies are approaching their 'peak' (or may already have peaked) and global demand for oil is likely to exceed supply within the next 20 years, leading to increases in oil prices [7-8]. Like other food supply chains, the fruit and vegetable supply chain is dependent on oil [9]. As oil prices rise, the cost of imported fruit and vegetables will rise to reflect higher transportation and refrigeration costs. The transportation and refrigeration of fruit and vegetables is also a source of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. Local sourcing of food, that minimizes transportation and refrigerated storage, is likely to be a key strategy in the re-orienting of food supply chains in the shift to a low carbon economy [10].

² Inadequate fruit and vegetable intake is estimated to 'cost' Australia around \$232 million (this figure represents the 'opportunity and cost savings' related to health sector costs and work, leisure and household production effects over the lifetime of the 2008 Australian population). In Cadilhac, D et al (2009) *The Health and Economic Benefits of Reducing Disease Risk Factors: Research Report*. A report prepared for VicHealth. July 2009.

The impacts of land use planning on Victoria's future fruit and vegetable supply

Over half of Victoria's vegetables and 17% of Victoria's fruit are grown in 'peri-urban' areas within 100 km of Melbourne [11]. Some of these 'peri-urban' areas are highly significant production areas in terms of the national fruit and vegetable supply [12-13], because they provide the ideal soil and climate conditions for particular crops. Yet many of these areas are now earmarked for development to meet Melbourne's housing needs.

Melbourne's peri-urban areas of fruit and vegetable production are part of the 'Green Wedges' outside the city's Urban Growth Boundary. The Urban Growth Boundary has been expanded three times since it was introduced in 2002, and is once again under review. Some of the areas proposed for urban expansion, such as Casey, are important areas for fruit and vegetable production³.

Victoria has a relatively small amount of productive agricultural land [15-16], and land in these peri-urban areas is some of the most productive agricultural land in the state, generating around 25% of Victoria's total agricultural value [17]. **Productive peri-urban land is essential to securing Victoria's future fruit and vegetable supply and should be recognized for its public health value, as well as its value to economic production**, and protected from further urban expansion through amendments to the State Planning Policy Framework.

The impacts of water availability for fruit and vegetable production in Victoria

Fruit and vegetable production in Victoria is also limited by water availability. Less water has been available for fruit and vegetable production in recent years due to drought and the need to give water back to the Murray-Darling Basin, and over half of Victoria's vegetable farmers see the availability of irrigation water as an impediment to the future viability of their business [18]. Climate modeling also suggests that less water is likely to be available for agriculture in Victoria in coming decades [19].

One of the best options for improving water security for fruit and vegetable producers in peri-urban areas is through recycled water schemes. Fortunately, some of Melbourne's best horticultural land is located close to the city's two water treatment plants, the Eastern and Western Treatment Plants, located in Cranbourne and Werribee respectively. **Land in these areas, where optimal soil and climatic conditions co-occur with a potentially secure source of water**, should be regarded as being of the highest possible agricultural and public health value and **should be protected from housing development**. This applies to land in Casey, which is earmarked for development, but which has the potential to be developed as a 'drought proof' food bowl through the proposed 'Bunyip Food Bowl' scheme [20].

³ The expansion of the urban growth boundary in July 2010 included 4,000 hectares of highly productive market garden land in Casey [14]. Dowling, J., *Green land cut back as Melbourne grows much bigger*, in *The Age*. 2010.]

Planning for community gardens and 'edible landscapes'

Providing opportunities for people to grow their own food in backyard or community gardens can also play a role in improving food security and public health. Surveys in two areas of Melbourne suggest that between 16 and 21% of people experiencing food insecurity grow their own food [21-22]. Community gardens provide opportunities for people without their own gardens to access healthy food, develop social networks and be physically active [15]. Community gardens could also increase resilience to food insecurity during times of fruit and vegetable supply interruptions and price spikes. The planning and design of new master-planned communities in Victoria should include consideration of opportunities for residents to grow their own food.

Edible landscapes are not common in Australian cities, but are a feature of cities in other nations, where street trees and other areas of public gardens include edible plantings, so that residents can pick their own produce [2]. Planning for edible landscapes also has the potential to improve community resilience to food insecurity in Victoria.

Planning for food production in Victoria

There is currently **no explicit recognition of planning for food within the State Planning Policy Framework or the Victorian Planning and Environment Act 1987** [1]. Trevor Budge and Christine Slade's report on 'Integrating land use planning and community food security' for the Victorian Local Governance Association (VLGA) notes that Victoria's land use planning system was devised at a time when issues like peak oil, water shortages and food security were not on the policy agenda [15].

Although the Melbourne 2030 Strategy was not intended as an initiative to protect productive peri-urban land, the creation of the 'Green Wedges' around Melbourne had the effect of delivering the most significant protection measure for productive agricultural land of any state in Australia [17]. However, the frequent redrawing of the Urban Growth Boundary since has weakened the potential of this measure for protecting agricultural land.

There have been several research reports and inquiries into the issues surrounding land use planning and agriculture in Victoria in recent years [15, 23]. All investigations stress the need for long-term stabilisation of the urban growth boundary for at least 10-15 years to provide certainty for farmers, as well as the need to identify and protect productive agricultural land. These reports also highlight a number of potential mechanisms for protecting productive agricultural land in Victoria, including possible amendments to the State Planning Policy Framework.

In view of the significance of productive peri-urban land to Victoria's fruit and vegetable supply, and therefore to the population's food security, the urgency of protecting this land

from housing development should be seen in terms of promoting public health, as well as protecting the economic investment in continued agricultural production.

Some metropolitan planning strategies in other countries have been revised to include references to protecting productive agricultural land and promoting food security. These case studies are described elsewhere [15, 23], and provide examples of mechanisms that could be used to enhance Victoria's State Planning Policy Framework to include planning for food production.

Recommendations

The Food Alliance has suggested in this submission that the Committee should consider planning for food production within the terms of the Inquiry as an important aspect of the contribution of environmental design to prevention and public health in Victoria.

We 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
- Significant areas of productive agricultural land should be mapped and then protected from housing development
- The State Planning Policy Framework and the Victorian Planning and Environment Act 1987 should be amended to include specific references to planning for food production and food security

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