

AUSTRALIAN LANDCARE COUNCIL

SUBMISSION TO INFORM DEVELOPMENT OF A NATIONAL FOOD PLAN

September 2011

Background on the Australian Landcare Council

The Australian Landcare Council (the Council) is the Australian Government's key advisory body on Landcare. The Council, with the Landcare community, including farmers and Indigenous land managers, assists the government to reinvigorate Landcare, provide insight into future opportunities and ensure the Landcare movement and Australian community can meet the challenges of food security, responding to climate change, supporting volunteers and maintaining the environment.

The Australian Landcare Council is established under the *Natural Resources Management (Financial Assistance) Act 1992*. The current 19 members have been appointed by the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry from across Australia. These appointees have strong local environment, community and natural resource management skills and abilities relevant to the work of the council. The functions of the Council are:

- (a) to make recommendations to the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry and the Minister for Minister for Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities on:
 - (i) matters concerning natural resources management; and
 - (ii) priorities and strategies for natural resources management; and
- (b) to investigate and report to the Commonwealth Government on matters concerning natural resources management referred to it by either of the Ministers.

General

The Australian Landcare Council is appreciative of the opportunity to have input into the discussion on a National Food Plan as it aligns with the Council's remit to provide advice to the Minister in addressing food security issues as it relates to natural resource management.

Council notes that the 'Issues paper to inform development of a national food plan' does not appear to have given consideration to issues of environmental sustainability. For this reason Council has preferred to provide feedback as general points rather than addressing the individual questions included in the issue paper.

Landcare is a unique community-based approach that has played a major role in raising awareness, influencing farming and land management practices and delivering environmental outcomes across Australian landscapes for many years. Largely, local group involvement has been the catalyst for voluntary community engagement, understanding and action in the development and adoption of sustainable land management practices and the acknowledgement of our shared responsibility for conserving biodiversity. The Landcare approach comprises:

- a philosophy, influencing the way people live in the landscape while caring for the land
- local community action putting the philosophy into practice
- a range of knowledge generation, sharing and support mechanisms including groups, networks (from district to national levels), facilitators and coordinators, government and non-government programs and partnerships. (National Landcare Framework 2010).

The following are some of the key points identified by the Australian Landcare Council in response to the National Food Plan issues paper:

Whole of Government Approach

If the National Food Plan is going to be anything more than a government document then it will have to adopt a collaborative and complementary approach. This will mean that the Australian Government will have to lead the way. It will require a collaborative and complementary approach between agencies and departments within the tiers of government.

Further, Council considered that the issues paper needed to more fully explore options on how the Australian Government could provide leadership in identifying and resolving issues that arise from competing policy and regulations between tiers of government. Food security and production requires an integrated approach and a siloed mentality cannot be afforded if competing and conflicting government policy are to be addressed.

Land use and planning

Council considered that, the issues paper did not adequately consider issues around the prioritisation of land use. State and local governments are currently able to make decisions about the re-zoning of agricultural land for other purposes that may not be in the national interests of food security. Once made, such re-zoning decisions are difficult to reverse.

Productive agricultural lands are currently under threat, usually as a result of urbanisation and alternate resource use, for example the current conflict between mining and gas exploration and productive agricultural land. If good land is taken out of production then agriculture is forced onto a lesser class of land and requires increased inputs (eg. water, fertiliser) to generate similar productive output. Once out of production it is rare that it returns and the Australian Landcare Council highlights the need for productive agricultural lands to be protected. Land use planning needs to recognise the range of potential uses and consider agriculture in the context of long term food security.

Sustainable land management

The Australian Landcare Council has a strong commitment to fostering the capacity of farmers to address and adapt to sustainable land management challenges, including the impacts of climate change. It was considered that the issues paper did not adequately recognise the vital contribution that Landcare provides to ensuring food security and the need to adequately resource the capacity of the Landcare movement.

Council recommends that the National Food Plan provides an increased emphasis on the importance of providing encouragement and incentives for farmers to protect natural systems and natural resources, including native vegetation, soil and water resources that provide the ecosystem services necessary for sustaining food security and healthy wellbeing.

The Landcare network is well established, is well supported by food producers and is held in high regard by the public. Council would like to see all levels of government supporting the Landcare movement more effectively to ensure that the production increases that will be needed in the future to support a larger global population are not undertaken at the expense of the environment or the natural resource base that supports productive agricultural systems. Council considers that the Landcare movement could be an even more effective contributor to supporting and ensuring future food production if the Australian Government placed more emphasis on developing the partnerships necessary to integrate community, industry and government perspectives on sustainability.

Council feels that the issues paper has not adequately addressed the level of commitment that will be needed to monitor the impacts on farmers and food security resulting from the government's agenda for climate change mitigation. Unless carefully managed, the Carbon Farming Initiative may have perverse impacts on farm sustainability and on our natural resources base such as water quality and quantity.

Future challenges posed by climate and other trade factors will require an innovative and well resourced education sector able to respond to changing industry needs, including considering the impact of new technology that can improve the dissemination of information in a way that is convenient and effective to those in the food industry.

Farm viability

Farm viability, including managing the condition of environmental assets, depends on producers receiving a fair price for the food they produce. Profitable farms will underpin food security (see section on Food processing industry). There is a need to maintain diversity in our farming sector for good risk management. Maintaining the viability of small, medium and large size farms and making it easier for on farm diversity to maintain viable farms and preserve agricultural land, e.g. through value adding of primary products and on farm tourism, needs to be considered when developing government policy. The next generation of farmers will only occur in small, medium and large farms if all these sectors are able to achieve profitability.

Land ownership

The Australian Landcare Council would have liked to have seen more discussion about the future of farm ownership in Australia. Current trends suggest that by 2040, there will be less farming undertaken by owner operators. It is possible that increasing the amount of land farmed by short term tenants, share farmers or paid managers will have impact on Landcare membership, viability of rural and regional communities, commitment to stewardship principles and access to information about sustainable farming practices. The move from owner/manager dominance may have a long term impact on the attitudes to sustainability.

Water

There will be increased pressure on our water resources for food production, drinking water and the environment nationally. At present the management of our water resources appears to be focused on the Murray Darling Basin. While it is acknowledged that this system is important, it should be recognised that individual catchments across the nation are unique, are important to state, regional and local communities and should be treated accordingly.

People

There is a need to respect and acknowledge the abilities and to help build the capacity of the people responsible for managing the land. It is important to consider who are going to be the farmers of the future and what their capacity needs are. Other issues within rural and regional communities need to be considered to make these areas attractive for people to live and work in and for the agriculture industry to have an accessible and skilled work force. This will require consideration of broader infrastructure needs including health, education and law and order.

Education and skills ready

Council is concerned that the image of the food industry as a rewarding career with a future is suffering. Enrolments in most industry training courses are declining, young people are leaving regional areas for the city and those that remain suffer from a higher rate of health issues. The food plan needs to identify strategies to reverse these trends.

A new generation of farmer needs to be fostered and enrolments into agriculture related career paths have to be increased. A comprehensive tertiary system that caters for these needs is pivotal.

Education and training needs should also be considered beyond secondary and tertiary levels. Innovative measures need to be implemented to enable farmers, land managers and others involved in the food industry to continue to develop skills and knowledge throughout their life.

Biosecurity

Council raises concerns over the adequacy of existing biosecurity arrangements in Australia. Members are alarmed that at least one state has indicated that the current Hendra Virus situation has stretched their capacity to the limit. If Hendra can overstretch a jurisdiction's resources what would happen to food security in the event of a Foot and Mouth or other serious pest/disease outbreak. The Food Plan must identify mechanisms for ensuring that food security is not threatened by responsible governments having reduced capacity. The threat from weeds, pests and diseases is real and increasing.

Research and development

The role of research and development (R&D) needs to be given much more prominence and consideration within a National Food Plan. Investment now is important to secure the future. Some of the key issues identified for R&D relevant to Landcare and food security include:

- Research needs to be co-ordinated and accessible across farm systems. The current focus of aligning research to industry commodities (e.g. wheat, wool, meat and livestock etc) needs to be broadened as this is not how most farming systems operate: most farmers produce more than one commodity, but research is still siloed.
- Following the abolition of Land and Water Australia, our food industry has lost one of the few institutions that did take a landscape approach to R&D.
- Research funding is biased to production, often at the expense of public good research. It would be useful for the Food Plan to engage more with farmers to ensure that government programs can adequately fund public good research that is relevant to the sustainability needs of producers.
- The Food Plan does not address the R&D needs to increase the competitiveness of value-adding industries.
- Greater focus needs to be placed on the mechanisms to get research and development adopted by industry and implemented on-farm. This is a critical issue with declining resources into extension activities within state governments.

Food processing industry

The issues paper is largely silent on the future of food manufacturing in Australia. The strength of the local food manufacturing industry is likely to have a significant impact on sustainability of local producers and the price, quality, safety and availability of products to consumers. The following points on this matter are made:

- Farm sustainability, including the condition of environmental assets, depends on producers receiving a fair price for the food they produce. The absence of a strong domestic manufacturing or value-adding industry limits the avenues available to producers to secure markets for their produce. A robust food processing sector should include small, medium and large operations and should include local and niche processing as well as mainstream processing. Currently most mainstream processing is done offshore.
- Australia is heading towards being an exporter of raw food commodities only. This is a significant risk to food security as there is no guarantee that processed or value-added products will be imported back to us in times of shortage.
- There is also an increasing and significant risk of Australia losing its food manufacturing industry with many finding it increasingly hard to justify their level of investment in Australia.

Food efficiency and public education

Council considers the high level of food waste in Australia is an issue that needs to be addressed. It is ironic that while consumers complain about the cost of purchasing food we throw out the equivalent of several hundreds of dollars per person per year. Consumer education, combined with research into better food storage options should be considered.

A major education component needs to be directed at urban communities who have become disconnected with their rural cousins. The broader community needs to understand the nation's food production systems.

Most food consumers live in urban areas, and often have no concept of what is involved to produce food. Landcare is well positioned to assist in the promotion of initiatives that could assist consumers to understand more about the food they eat. For example, initiatives aimed at increasing the backyard production of food will give consumers a better concept of food seasonality and growing requirements, and may provide a buffer against food shortages. Most urban centres have access to good quality soil and available water, unlike the conditions faced by many food producers.

Food surplus

Council is concerned about comments provided in the issues paper about the net global food surplus. It is felt that this did not adequately address some key points raised at the recent Australian Grains Industry Conference that identified some very real risks to global food security, namely that worldwide reserves of staple foods are alarmingly short. For example:

- Corn – 40 days supply
- Soya – 30 days supply
- Wheat – 100 days supply.

Diversity in the supply chain

Council considers the issues paper needs to provide more emphasis on the importance of the condition of Australia's food supply chain, including food manufacturing. It is important to maintain diversity in our supply chain and retail sector. The current supply chain is considered to pose an increasing risk to food security and farm viability and this will increase over time.

Greater R&D investment is needed to examine all of the links in the supply chain, as weak elements of this chain will continue to add to the costs of production and impact on the affordability of food for consumers. Issues that the Council considered were affecting the supply chain include:

- The deteriorating condition of infrastructure affecting the viability of rural and regional centres where much of the food is grown,
- Availability and cost of farm inputs (e.g. fertiliser availability and affordability),
- The condition of road and rail infrastructure
- Often competing policy or regulatory agendas between tiers of government.

- The impact of regulation where Australian products must meet higher health standards than many imported products, but are expected to compete on price.
- Local government regulations restricting the ability of farmers to include value adding, manufacturing or processing on-farm. These restrictions are directly opposed to advice provided to farmers that they need to pursue value adding opportunities to remain viable.
- The issues paper focussed mainly on impacts within the Murray Darling Basin, however, the Council considered the implications were much wider than this.
- Council also identified that the development or regulation of Environmental Quality Assurance standards is an emerging issue that could have significant supply chain implications for local producers.
- Risks of the retail duopoly eg milk, was also identified as an issue that could affect supply chain diversity.

Reliance on oil based inputs

The rapid growth in food production as a result of the Green Revolution (both in Australia and internationally) was in large part dependent on oil based inputs associated with fertiliser and herbicides. Australian agriculture is also highly dependent on oil based transport systems to transport product to domestic and international markets and bring inputs back into local communities. The reliance on oil based inputs and predicted price increases possess not only an economic threat but has environmental and food security consequences. The rapidly increasing price of oil (and flow on to fertiliser, herbicide and transport prices) is perhaps the most immediate threat to food security and finding solutions should form a key base of any national food plan. Finding solutions and strategies to address this issue would have major economic and environmental benefits.

Recommendations

The Australian Landcare Council supports the development of a National Food Plan as food security in its broadest sense has previously been identified as one of the three pillars of Landcare by the Australian Government, along with the environment and climate. The Australian Landcare Council considers that the document could make stronger reference to the interrelated nature of our food systems with what happens in the environment and climate as these issues cannot be considered in isolation from each other. While the issues paper is an important start, Council considers that it does not give sufficient consideration of the impact of growing domestic and international populations and factors associated with climate change in the context of domestic food security, particularly the cost of food as a growing issue for increasing parts of the Australian population.

While all of the issues raised in the draft document are valid, the Australian Landcare Council would like to make the following specific recommendations that relate more closely to its operations:

- 1) ***Specific programs for community engagement*** – finding solutions to the various factors that contribute to food security require community engagement and support. Therefore the outcomes of a National Food plan should include specific activities that increase community awareness of the issues both nationally and internationally that impact on food security and community participation in and support for various solutions. Landcare has over 21 years history in increasing community awareness of issues relating to our land and involving the community in finding innovative solutions. Landcare, which is a social movement has already identified issues associated with food as an emerging issue. Government is unable to implement the scale of change necessary without community support and engagement.

Over twenty years ago, Landcare was a way to mobilise landholders to improve their land management. Fifteen years ago, Landcare took up the priority of biodiversity protection and enhancement. Today Landcare remains a facilitator of community action and learning. Landcare's emerging roles are a platform to future landscapes that can take on circuital issues such as climate change and food security. It is recommended that the governments consider greater utilisation of Landcare as a means of increasing community awareness and engagement.

In recent times there has been a growing interest on food related issues within the Landcare movement in line with growing community interest. This has included a wide range of activity, but one of the most successful has been junior Landcare which has focused on primary schools and involving students in growing vegetable gardens as a way of increasing their interest and participation in appreciating where their food comes from, how it is produced and how to do this in a sustainable way.

Community engagement around food related issues also provides an ideal platform to engage on related issues such as climate and the environment as they are intrinsically linked. Food is an easier touch point for many people than climate or the environment as it is a 'here and now' for everyone. Issues associated with drought and natural disasters have increased consumer and media attention to this area. It is important that the government establish a proactive community engagement process and Landcare could play an important role in this.

It is also suggested that the Australian Government examine the "Know Your Farmer Know Your Food" program which is being run by the USDA as a specific activity which has been undertaken by the United States Government to increasing community awareness and engagement in the various issues outlined in the issues paper. This approach would need to be adapted to an Australian context, but could work well with the Landcare approach.

The role that the Landcare movement has played in extending research to on-farm applications should also be recognised and further utilised. Not all groups have performed this function but if we consider the farming systems groups in particular, they have been responsible, together with Research and Development Cooperations of taking the research and development to an on-farm level.

- 2) ***Integrated response by government and finding solutions with multiple benefits*** – Landcare has become synonymous with finding solutions that provide multiple benefits, such as minimum tillage, which benefits the environment through reduced soil loss, increases profitability/productivity and assist with fighting climate change by increasing carbon sequestration in the soil. On ground solutions often require a more holistic approach and the Australian Landcare Council strongly urges an integrated response across government agencies in pursuing solutions that help address issues such as food security, the environment and climate rather than just a single issue focus. Traditional government responses have been single issue based and solutions to one issue can often aggravate another. For any National Food Plan to be successful and to maximise the benefits of limited resources, it will require a whole of government response. Tentative steps have already been taken through programs such as the Carbon Farming Initiative and the Australian Landcare Council urges further progress.
- 3) ***Land use planning*** – While not a Australian Government responsibility, the Australian Landcare Council suggests that this issue needs to be incorporated in any National Food Plan given the current conflict over land use between the resources sector (and urban expansion) and agriculture. This includes the current conflict over mining and gas exploration in areas of productive agricultural land and water resources. This uncertainty and conflict is damaging both sectors and it is essential that State governments under a National Food Plan be urged to institute land use planning arrangements that protect strategically important agriculture lands from permanent alienation.

The Australian Landcare Council is supportive of the National Food Plan and is appreciative of the opportunity to have input into the initial consultations associated with the issues paper. The Council recognises and supports the need for strong leadership at the national level and encourages the Australian Government to take on this role. Council has particularly sought to highlight the importance of the sustainable management of our natural resources and the role that Landcare can have in advancing this objective to ensure food security for Australia into the future.