

Submission to the
**Capital Food and
Fibre Strategy**
discussion paper

by



Slow Food[®]
Canberra Capital Country

25 February 2022

Part 1 of 2
Analysis of Goals in the Discussion Paper

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Executive Summary of Part 1

This submission is made by Slow Food Canberra in support of the development of a Capital Food and Fibre Strategy.

We consider that the production, distribution and consumption of food and fibre sits at the very heart of what it is to be human living in society. Food and fibre ought not be considered as simply tradable commodities, but rather as a 'social commons' sitting at the very centre of community life. Food and fibre are human rights issues.

We celebrate the vibrant local community food and fibre production and distribution environment that has grown considerably in the region in the last decade. Too often this has come about *despite*, rather than because of, the prevailing economic environment and public policy settings. We welcome the intention to revisit some public policy settings with community food and fibre production as a policy goal.

The ACT in particular is well placed to imagine and develop innovative and 'connected-up' approaches to food and fibre production. We have a relatively affluent population that is concerned about where its food comes from, we have committed and innovative producers who want to connect directly with their customers, we have (perhaps with a little tweaking) excellent infrastructure for the production and distribution of food and fibre. But we also have some impediments that we need to identify, recognise and address – climate change, soil and environmental degradation, corporate dominance and a dominant agricultural paradigm that privileges high-input, industrial scale 'agribusiness' over small-scale, sustainable production and distribution.

We believe some key concepts can be identified that could underpin the Strategy:

- engaging with and returning value to the local community;
- re-connecting water, soil health and biodiversity;
- valuing the role of animals;
- talking about 'scale' — 'big' or 'spread';
- vital to our social, physical and mental health.

Our submission reflects our understanding of the consultation process to date. Thus, we have included both thematic elements and some practical suggestions in our submission. We look forward to ongoing participation in the development of the Strategy, and its realisation.

Introduction

Our vision for a local food system

- 1 Our vision for a local food system involves a regional approach embracing a diverse range of activity from commercial producers able, by knowledge of their community, to operate at appropriate scale, through to co-operative/social enterprise/community initiatives that reposition food and fibre to where it should be — at the heart of social, cultural and community life.
- 2 We believe this is a realistic vision given the demonstrated interest across our region to engage in and support local food and fibre production. We see key threats to this vision arising from **climate change** and **corporate domination** of our food and fibre system.
- 3 While recognising the merits of a regional approach, we also understand that there are jurisdictional issues between the ACT and surrounding areas of NSW. Within the context of the ACT's jurisdiction, we are a relatively small (and therefore, potentially, nimble) jurisdiction uniquely placed to be innovative. We are not dominated by industrial-scale agribusiness, we have a ready market of relatively affluent consumers who have demonstrated in interest in where their food comes from and how it is produced, we have excellent infrastructure to underpin diversified food and fibre production and distribution, we can readily link producers to consumers via short supply chains and we have access to significant productive land that is probably better suited to diversified production regimes than it is to industrial-scale, broadacre, monoculture cultivation.
- 4 Given this, we believe that the Capital Food and Fibre Strategy ("the Strategy"), as well as seeking to promote activity, could also usefully focus on some key impediments to community food and fibre production (such as availability and cost of land, access to water, regulatory frameworks).

Our international obligations – the ACT as a Human Rights jurisdiction

- 5 Human rights legislation in the ACT does not appear to cover a right to access good, nutrition and sufficient food. We would argue that it should, and that would create a strong underpinning to the Strategy.
- 6 In this context, we note that In December 1966 Australia signed and ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which does create an obligation to do what we can to guarantee adequate nutrition, including legislating to that effect.¹ Relevant extracts from the 1996 Covenant, and a 2010 report by the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Olivier De Schutter are at Appendix A.

Slow Food Canberra's position

- 7 Slow Food Canberra Capital and Country Convivium ("4Cs") welcomes the ACT Government's initiative in developing the Strategy discussion paper, largely supports the concepts set out in the Strategy, and appreciates the opportunity to provide input towards the development of the Strategy.

- 8 Food and fibre are central to the human experience — we all eat and use fabrics! As such, it makes sense that a food and fibre strategy should be central to social, cultural and economic concerns and, by extension, to government policy making. The discussion paper correctly identifies the interplay between food and fibre production and key objectives around climate change, soil health, biodiversity and food security. To these, we would add physical and mental health, community cohesion, social justice and economic security.
- 9 No nation can excel if its food supply is substandard or inadequate. First get the food system right and the rest follows.
- 10 The scope for comment on the discussion paper is very broad, which is appropriate given the stage at which consultations have commenced. These comments are therefore in two streams:
 - one stream is more thematic, building on and perhaps slightly refocussing some of the key principles in the discussion paper
 - the other stream sets out a number of specific building blocks for a viable local food system based on the principles.
- 11 In this submission, we do not address issues around the contributions/role of First Nations people. As a general position, Slow Food internationally preferences First Nations' food and fibre cultures. Locally, however, no members of Slow Food Canberra have identified themselves to us as being First Nations, and we have not consulted with First Nations people or groups in preparing this submission. Given this, and in recognition of the right of First Nations peoples to determine their own futures, we do not seek to speak in the absence of such involvement. We would generally strongly support the need for First Nations people and their organisations to be closely consulted throughout the development of the Strategy.

Theme 1: Returning value to Canberrans (and our neighbours in NSW)

1. At the macro level we currently position food and fibre as commodities subject to the operation of market forces. In practice, this has privileged a small number of key players who have been able to dominate and manipulate commercial relationships within our food and fibre system. Thus we find dominance in:
 - *retail arrangements*: three or four corporations dominate food retailing,
 - *agricultural inputs*: a small number of mostly transnational corporations dominate the seed and fertiliser trade, and
 - *distribution*: large corporations dominate the packaging and transport of our food.
2. That local community concerns already exist around this market dominance by a few key players (we would argue this is actually a case of ‘market failure’) is amply demonstrated by recent strong community opposition to the replacement of a locally owned IGA supermarket in Bungendore by a proposed Woolworths development.
3. While this market dominance is often justified on the grounds of effectiveness and efficiency (and hence, allegedly, cheaper retail prices for food and fibre), we would contend that this also results in reducing value throughout the rest of the food and fibre system:
 - suppressed returns to producers²;
 - stagnant wages and insecure employment for workers³;
 - reduced diversity of food being made available (as corporate players favour high-margin and transport-friendly varieties regardless of nutritional merit)⁴;
 - over-processing/de-nutritifying of food⁵ and high levels of food waste⁶;
 - environmental destruction regarded as a mere ‘externality’ — our food and fibre production at large scale has essentially become a ‘strip mining’ operation, destroying water resources and topsoils as it goes along⁷.By positioning themselves between producers and consumers, these corporate entities also sever important community connections and degrade food knowledge and awareness⁸.
4. This in turn has serious implications for a food and fibre strategy as envisaged in the discussion paper. Producers who find their margins squeezed towards zero (or even into negative) are driven towards unsustainable, and ultimately self-defeating, practices such as
 - over-stocking (running more animals per given area of land than the land can sustainably accommodate);
 - intensive monoculture production (with associated costly biocide and fertiliser inputs); and
 - exploitative contracts⁹.
5. We hear the mantra that producers must “get big or get out” as the only possible survival strategy against slimmer and slimmer margins.
6. We would therefore argue that a food and fibre strategy for our region needs to consider how these value relationships can be re-envisioned to improve the viability of local producers, distributors and consumers. This is not just about reducing escape expenditure, ‘keeping the money in our region’ (laudable though that is), but also looking at *structures* such as co-operatives, social enterprises and circular economy initiatives that would better balance all inputs and efforts within our food and fibre systems, thereby returning value to a broader range of players.

7. The alternative may, sadly, merely result in individuals being sent boldly forth — all too often to fail when they can not get to scale or achieve the levels of market manipulation open to the dominant players.
8. While probably beyond the scope of this consultation process, we would agree with the conclusions of analysts such as Richard Denniss who argue that adherence to free market thinking is more an ideological tool to discredit public policy responses than an accurate reflection of the way our very unequal economy operates¹⁰.
9. The cost of calories — food prices — is a very real issue to people on lower incomes, and a key aspect of the food and fibre strategy should be to keep food affordable. How to define “affordable” needs careful consideration, but the matter of food prices cannot be merely surrendered to market forces. It is not true that only “market forces” can make economic decisions — consider the Nordic countries which have large public sectors, high-quality services, and dynamic private sectors.¹¹ The promotion of a more local and regional food system is unlikely to succeed if required to be based entirely on market forces. For example, start-up costs of new food-related enterprises (e.g. farms) may be affordable only by the corporate exchequer, excluding small players. However, we are not suggesting some kind of price-control committee.
10. There are numerous existing examples of co-operatives and social enterprises that successfully focus on returning value to Canberrans.
11. Of our local farmers’ markets, the Canberra Region Farmers Market (EPIC) managed by the Hall Rotary Club returns profits to the community by funding local projects¹², while the Bungendore Farmers Market run by Southern Harvest,¹³ the local producers’ association, ensures market access for local producers at fair prices and acts as a resource hub for local producers. These spread value more broadly across the community, be it directly back to producers or towards community projects.
12. The long-established Food Co-op Shop in Acton returns value to its members via differential pricing and affordable lunches to members and the ANU student community and by offering an affordable meeting/event space for regional community groups¹⁴. [By way of comment, the loss of the nearby car park on the corner of Barry Drive and Watson Street has not made access to the Food Co-op easier for distant members. It is not known what effect if any this has had on the Co-op’s income.]
13. After some ACT Government ‘seed’ funding (pun intended), the Canberra Seed Savers Co-operative now has a thriving program growing and delivering seedlings to a range of community groups across the city, encouraging wider community participation in food growing — and eating!
14. In contrast, many Canberrans currently take their green waste to local collection points and ‘donate’ it to a commercial entity that converts it to compost or mulch — which is an excellent use of this material. However, this arrangement concentrates the value of that material into a single entity.
15. There is clearly a need for a nuanced approach here. The market-based, ‘for-profit’ model remains the dominant paradigm and enjoys significant popular support. At the same time, there is recognition that some service provision is not well suited to a market model (as even former Australian Consumer and Competition Commission chair Rod Sims has previously

lamented¹⁵), and community-based activities are generally well supported. We would suggest that consideration need always be given to ‘effectiveness’ rather than a narrow focus on ‘efficiency’ here. For example, the establishment of the government’s Green Bin system has greatly reduced the income of businesses such as Tom’s Trash Paks.¹⁶ However, it would seem that the Green Bin system has more *effectively* captured organic ‘waste’, with a reduced environmental impact of such material – for eg, on water quality in our lakes and rivers.

16. We would therefore urge that initiatives developed under this Strategy give preference to alternative models that produce viability while returning value to Canberrans for their contributions.
17. Another way to express this involves asking whether our goal should be *food security* or *food sovereignty*.
 - Food security, i.e. ensuring a secure food supply for all segments of society now and into the future, is a laudable goal, and would without doubt be an advance on our current situation. But food security is a frail and passive concept — it says little about how, as a community, we produce our food and fibre and misses the point that, assuming benign masters, even slaves can be ‘food secure’.
 - Food sovereignty demands an active and engaged local food and fibre production system. In fact, a large part of the Food and Fibre Strategy adheres to the principles of food sovereignty.

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Theme 2: Water, soil health, biodiversity

- 1 There are a number of references in the discussion paper to these inter-related matters, and the interconnection with climate change. We strongly welcome this focus.
- 2 Since the adoption of European-style agriculture our soils have been steadily degraded, including through:
 - compaction by farm machinery;
 - over-grazing;
 - excessive tree clearing, and
 - gradual dehydration¹⁷.
- 3 Wetlands have been drained, ploughing has damaged soil structures and depleted soil carbon, and monocultural production has reduced biodiversity¹⁸.
- 4 Bruce Pascoe cites reports from early Europeans encountering large areas of cultivated land with such a fine tilth that one could easily run one's fingers through the soils of Melbourne.¹⁹
- 5 Soil compaction increases water run-off. Faster water flow over the landscape contributes to erosion and loss of topsoil while further reducing moisture absorption and the capacity of soil to draw down atmospheric carbon (a key element of the natural carbon cycle). It contributes further to the destructive downstream flooding that is becoming increasingly prevalent under climate change.
- 6 As Walter Jehne describes in his "soil-carbon sponge" thesis,²⁰ these land-use and land-management practices greatly decrease the amount of carbon in the soil and hence the amount of water that any soil can hold. Dry, compacted soils reflect heat and energy back into the atmosphere under layers of haze — the greenhouse effect — further contributing to climate change. By contrast, the soil carbon sponge is porous, well-aggregated soil rich in plant roots, diverse life forms, nutrient availability, air, and often holding much water. Tree cover is an essential component of the hydrological system: trees transpire water vapour which carries heat energy to the upper atmosphere where it cools, radiates heat out into space, and condenses to form high-albedo clouds which shade and cool the land.
- 7 As the most prevalent greenhouse gas, the role of water vapour needs to be better understood and appreciated. The vast majority of the heat balance on our planet is governed by water. Plants manage water, and in managing water, they manage heat²¹.
- 8 As the discussion paper notes, our region is predicted under climate change to experience hotter weather along with lower rainfall, paradoxically concentrated into more intense rainfall events. Rainfall events in Canberra are growing in intensity to the point where older houses are proving unable to cope with them.²² Combining our past 'errors' (high run-off, reduced vegetation, soil compaction) with this likely future means that efforts to rehydrate our landscape are absolutely essential. While fixed water storage (dams, tanks, etc) is important, protracted drought and erratic rainfall will render these solutions decreasingly effective. Our location within the Murray Darling Basin will also render them increasingly politically fraught.
- 9 Thankfully, solutions to this downward spiral do exist, and are being practised effectively and successfully in our region, and beyond. Known by a variety of names – agroecology, regenerative agriculture, holistic management, permaculture, pasture cropping, and so on - each having a different emphasis, these approaches to food and fibre production share a focus

on *closing the nutrient loop* (and therefore, the carbon loop), enhancing biodiversity and improving soil health and hydration.

- 10 A recent Facebook post by the Southern Harvest Association marvelled at how farming is, at its heart, really just about combining solar energy, water and carbon to produce 'stuff'²³.
- 11 Charles Massy talks about the "millions of solar collectors," i.e. blades of grass, in his healthy paddocks. His presentation to the WA Department of Agriculture in 2018²⁴ gives an excellent summary of the agricultural state of the nation. It outlines the problems we face, scientific, economic and political, and suggests practical and realistic ways forward.
- 12 Producing food and fibre is all about recognising the essential loops in our natural systems — carbon cycles, water cycles and nitrogen cycles being prominent ones. Monocultures (with their reliance on chemical inputs), intensive grazing/feedlotting and promoting water run-off, all disrupt these natural cycles.
- 13 A sustainable food and fibre production system requires that we re-connect the broken strands of these vital loops.
- 14 Increasing soil carbon levels removes carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. One estimate is that an increase of 0.4% or 4‰ per year in the top 30-40 cm of soils globally would stop the annual annual increase of CO₂.²⁵ Another quantification is that for each 1% increase in soil organic matter achieved on the world's 5 billion hectares of grasslands, 64 ppm of carbon dioxide would be removed from atmospheric circulation.²⁶ These solutions may be practically unrealistic owing to the needs for nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium and other minerals, and economic and political barriers are likely to get in the way, but we have a metric.²⁷
- 15 Managed holistic grazing, for example, can dramatically increase biodiversity, assist water retention and re-connect the nutrient cycle, as demonstrated, for example, by Martin Royds' management of 'Jillamatong' near Braidwood.²⁸ Multi-cropping, in concert with composting/mulching, can build organic soil health and discourage accumulation of 'pest' insects, reducing the need for biocides. Increased microbial activity in the soils can also help extend the growing season further into our regional winters (as demonstrated, for example, by the former Wynlen House village farm at Braidwood)²⁹.
- 16 An operation does not necessarily need to acquire more and more land to be productive.
- 17 Some of the above techniques do find some resistance within the farming community. In part, this arises from the unhealthily close connection between agriculture extension workers and large-scale agribusiness interests. But it is also fair and reasonable to say that when livelihoods are very much on the line, farmers will need some convincing to depart from doing 'what we have always done'. To convert to organic methods is not easy. The experience of Alan Druse of 'Green Grove' farm near Ardlethan is instructive. In 1962 he decided to defy conventional farming practice and conventional wisdom. He decided to shun the use of the much-vaunted new chemicals on the market and farm organically. The community doubted his sanity and it was hard going, but persistence paid off. Today the Junee Licorice and Chocolate Factory uses grain from 'Green Grove' and is a great example of value-adding.³⁰
- 18 On the other hand, if we are establishing new farming operations with new farmers, especially within the ACT, then traditional thinking may be less of a problem, different ways of working should be more easily established. The educational strategy will be very important.

- 19 It is really important, therefore, that initiatives under the Strategy place a significant emphasis on genuine ‘farmer-to-farmer’ learning — preferably ‘out in the paddock’. Internationally, this ‘farmer-to-farmer’ peer education underpins many ‘grass-roots’ producer organisations, such as La Via Campesina. It has been recognised as effective by our own Australian Government³¹. As mentioned in the discussion paper, Landcare and related groups have a lot to offer here. It would also be very useful to engage in a process of identifying those food and fibre producers who are achieving environmental and financial success through these regenerative techniques and encouraging their participation and their voices.

Theme 3: The vexed issue of meat—in support of mixed farming

- 1 Building on from the previous theme, we would urge a nuanced approach to the involvement of livestock grazing/meat production within the Strategy.
- 2 Our regional climate and soils are well suited to livestock grazing (whether for meat or fibre or both), especially away from relatively more fertile riparian zones. Re-wilding' is often presented as an alternative to animal-based grazing, and we are aware that many food and fibre producers have beneficially 're-wilded' parcels of land within the farm footprint³². We welcome and support farmers who are prepared to take what appears to be a risk, but which is actually often reported as a net benefit. We would argue that this need not be dichotomous — a food and fibre strategy should ensure that farmers are encouraged and supported in these endeavours, but that there remains a recognition of the central role of well-managed grazing of animals in our region.
- 3 We are also well aware and cognisant of the vigorous debate around the contribution of livestock (especially cattle) to greenhouse gases, especially methane, and to the consumption of water within livestock systems. However, the CSIRO has found that small quantities of the common Australian red seaweed (*Asparagopsis taxiformis* and *A. armata*) as 1% or less of their diet virtually eliminates methane emissions in cattle and sheep.³³ While seaweed growing is unlikely to be a viable industry in the ACT — although arguably it could be done using aquaculture methods —, its use in our region would help reduce greenhouse gas emissions.
- 4 We would contend, however, that this debate is too often expressed in simplistic terms, and fails to recognise the significant contributions that livestock can make to 're-joining' the natural loops mentioned above. As one example, Alan Savory has found that it's not the livestock *per se* that create deserts, but it is how those livestock are managed. Holistic Management and its underlying framework can be used to manage any situation that involves a web of social, economic and environmental complexity.³⁴
- 5 In this context, we also recognise the work of Alan Lauder in distinguishing between carbon stocks and carbon flows within agricultural systems.^{35 36} At risk of oversimplifying Lauder's thesis, the carbon stock is the total carbon available at any point in any system — in comprises atmospheric carbon, soil carbon and 'short term' carbon within plants, animals, etc. Carbon flow relates to the movement of carbon between these elements — and is the driving engine of food and fibre production. Production occurs precisely and only because plants (directly) and animals (directly, and indirectly through their feed) take up this carbon and turn it into useful 'stuff' for us. It then cycles back into the system when plants die and decompose, animals create manure and are consumed or, indeed, when cows 'do what they do'. It is the very epitome of a 'circular economy' !
- 6 An analogy might be water contained in a lake or dam, and water in a river. Each contributes to our 'stock' of water. One, however, is 'locked up' and largely inert until released. The 'flow' of the river enables its energy to be made more broadly available — provided, of course, that not so much is released that it overloads the system ! The key difference is that, unlike water in a river, carbon can and does immediately loop back around — flow back upstream, if you like !
- 7 In this scenario, grazing animals promote carbon flow rather than increase carbon stocks — certainly when compared to the extraction and burning of fossil fuels which increases carbon

stocks by releasing previously 'locked away' carbon into the system with no countermeasure means of flowing it through the system. Even if we don't eat the animals, they are still beneficial for the environment.

- 8 Pasture Cropping developed by Colin Seis is very relevant to our purposes. This system is revolutionary because it does not use tillage to prepare seed beds. Tillage and other soil disturbance ruins soil structure and damages the soil biome. Planting cash crops into dormant pasture without tillage mimics the natural balance of cool and warm season grasses and fobs found in healthy grasslands. There is no need to destroy pasture with herbicides to make way for crops, and then re-establish pasture after each cropping phase. The method is proving highly profitable and excellent at regenerating soils, and is gaining wide acceptance in the farming community.³⁷
- 9 We would therefore suggest that there is a significant difference between open, holistically managed grazing for food and fibre production that returns manure to the soil, promotes biodiversity of grasses and other vegetation and can be accommodated within a mixed farming system, as against intensive feedlotting which demands 'off farm' input (feed, chemicals, energy), concentrates and alienates animal by-product (sometimes to toxic levels) and often results in animal welfare concerns. Open holistic grazing is key to building soil microbial activity, which in turn can draw down carbon from the immediate surface cycle, helping to rebalance some of the soil carbon loss that has occurred through previous over-grazing via the standard stocking rate approach, and the destruction of soil carbon that can occur through, for example, regular ploughing for annual crops.
- 10 While seen as less problematic for their role in the carbon cycle, chickens are frequently incorporated into mixed farming systems, both for their ability to return nutrients to the soil and predation on 'pest' species. Close to home, the recent highlighting of Kambah's Amberley Eggs by Soils for Life as one of their "Chooks for Change" case studies enhances this broader point.³⁸
- 11 Re-aligning our meat production system in this way may indeed mean that a given quantity of meat product is more expensive at point of purchase compared to conventional/industrial meat production (though, we would argue, this is so only because industrial meat production is able to hide environmental and related costs as externalities). This may require, as is often advocated, that we accept some reduction in our meat consumption patterns.
- 12 But we believe there needs to be a more nuanced message — "it's not the cow, it's the how" — and an acknowledgement of the essential role animals have in our food and fibre systems.

Theme 4: Scale up or scale out ?

- 1 As noted above, the dominant ideal in 'industrial' agriculture is "get big or get out". This notion has an identifiable beginning and damaging consequences. In 1973 the Soviet Union had had bad harvests and was purchasing about a quarter of the USA's wheat crop. Global demand was high at the same time. To meet demand the Secretary of Agriculture encouraged farmers to "plant fence row to fence row"; he also told farmers to "get big or get out ... adapt or die," assuming that bigger farms were more productive farms. Demand was met, but to create the extra cropping land farmers tore down shelter belts and other conservation land uses. They went heavily into debt to pay for all of this. The US farming crisis of the late 70s and 80s led to a huge number of farmers driven into bankruptcy and their land sold to larger enterprises.³⁹
- 2 "Get big or get out" thinking privileges shrinking margins to producers, greater intensity of production and therefore stress on soils, water resources, etc., and inputs of 'off-farm' chemicals, fertilisers and biocides. One off-farm input is income from a separate job: some 70% of farmers are financially viable only because of this supplemental income.⁴⁰
- 3 It also pre-supposes large storage capacity and long distribution chains. A large amount of one thing grown in one place is only useful if it can be stored and/or moved to its market — usually using fossil fuels.
- 4 This approach further concentrates value into fewer hands — a large, corporate farmer, a distributor and an often limited range of retailers.
- 5 Finally, the "fence row to fence row" methodology overtaxes the land, destroys bioreserves at field margins, and in an ancient society would have deprived the poor of gleaning opportunities. Such a measure may be tolerable in an emergency but should not continue when the emergency abates or ends, otherwise it becomes an expression of greed or desperation or both.
- 6 Having said that, it is often envisaged that, to ensure local food and fibre producers can be made viable, they need to be supported by, or have access to, a large market which can effectively lock in returns. The temptation is then to guarantee value to producers via favourable procurement agreements between producers and large public or private entities.
- 7 While well intentioned, this approach as a stand-alone runs the risk of simply replicating the system we are trying to re-imagine.
- 8 It is claimed that only conventional or industrial agriculture is productive enough to feed the world's population. This has been true in the past, but recent studies are finding that organic or regenerative techniques have yields not greatly smaller than those of conventional agriculture, about 19% lower according to one meta-analysis.⁴¹ The researchers considered that the available studies comparing farming methods were often biased in favour of conventional agriculture, so this estimate of the yield gap is likely overestimated. They highlighted two agricultural practices, multi-cropping (growing several crops together on the same field) and crop rotation, that would substantially reduce the organic-to-conventional yield gap to 9% and 8%, respectively.
- 9 A strength of much local innovation in recent years is the growth of interconnections between small producers and their immediate community, including through local (almost micro) markets, CSA/box schemes, community gardens and informal 'buy, sell and swap'

communities. While this is not universally true, many of these producers do not seek to grow larger, but rather to further innovate within or build on their existing community connections.^{42 43 44}

- 10 Again, we believe there is a role within the Strategy to identify these producers and their communities, determine their needs (especially in terms of infrastructure) and encourage them to become knowledge hubs for aspiring small producers to replicate this model across the city and the region.
- 11 This is not to say that some adjustment to government and corporate procurement would not be of great assistance. But equally, this could occur within a more decentralised framework — for example, school lunches or hospital meals could be sourced from school gardens or a local urban farm, rather than procured at the Directorate level.
- 12 Another tactic might be to promote local food hubs as social/co-operative ventures which could take in produce from a range of local growers within a defined geographical area — for example, in the way Southern Harvest Association currently operates its food box scheme at the regional level.

Theme 5: Good for our health

- 1 The interconnection between food and good health (physical and mental) is a book in its own right, and beyond the scope of this submission. However, aspects of this relationship should form part of discussion on, and rationale for, a local food and fibre strategy.
- 2 For example, we know from emerging science that diverse, healthy food improves gut flora which in turn improves both physical and mental health⁴⁵. The quicker fresh fruits and vegetables get from farm to table, the more nutrient value they retain — thus local has the potential to be better. Commercially grown fruit and vegetables tend to preference varieties that are consistent in shape and size and that withstand storage and transport, without reference to their nutritional value. Shorter supply chains and storage permit greater variety in fruit and vegetables that can be grown and supplied.
- 3 A 2009 study by Donald Davis assessed levels of nutrients in fruits and vegetables available in the US and UK.⁴⁶ Some findings: “Recent studies of historical nutrient content data for fruits and vegetables spanning 50 to 70 years show apparent median declines of 5% to 40% or more in minerals, vitamins, and protein in groups of foods, especially in vegetables. ... the broad evidence is consistent with more definitive studies and seems difficult to dismiss.” There are several factors at work, such as ‘genetic dilution,’ a phenomenon where plants selectively bred for higher yields of, say, carbohydrate, but levels of other nutrients and thousands of phytochemicals have not necessarily increased in proportion.
- 4 One result is ‘hidden hunger,’ where people get enough calories from their food but not enough nutrients, leading to malnutrition and disease. Of course, just because fruits and vegetables aren’t as nutrient-dense as they used to be does not mean we should avoid them. They’re still the best source we have.
- 5 While this is not universally true, many food and fibre producers and their customers, appreciate the interpersonal relationships that result from direct mutual contact (such as through farmers’ market stalls, CSA/box schemes, etc). A genuine sense of community is fostered, reducing the alienation fostered when intermediaries are introduced. These relationships can be important for community cohesion and emotional wellbeing
- 6 Related to the previous point, producing food in an urban environment is recognised as a health and social good. Two recent ACT Government funding initiatives demonstrate this point:
 - as mentioned previously, some funding given to Canberra Seed Savers Co-operative to grow seedlings for community distribution has become a self-sustaining program involving over 20 ‘ordinary Canberrans’ growing thousands of seedlings for a diverse range of community organisations such as schools, disability support services, community pantries and charities. The benefits are multi-layered — a sense of pride and purpose for the growers, the good exercise and increasingly-recognised health benefits of getting hands into soil for the community groups who grow the seedlings on, and the community cohesion between the various parties;
 - funding for a Kitchen Garden program at the Australian National University, premised on the very reasonable assumption that students will find emotional connection through growing food in community, but also learn about how food is actually produced and cooked, and improve diets as a result. While this program is in its infancy, it is premised on the very successful Stephanie Alexander school gardens program for primary and secondary settings.

- 7 These are all examples of how a focus on local food and fibre production seen through a social and cultural lens can improve community wellbeing as well as physical and mental health.

Some Specific Land and Administrative Matters

The following comments have been provided by a 4Cs member with particular experience in growing food in the ACT. These comments are supported by 4Cs.

Security of Tenure

It is self-defeating to encourage urban agriculture if a farm's lease can be revoked at short or no notice. Farming is a long-term venture. Soils need to be built up and maintained. Farming practices need to be established and continued. All of this can take years, especially on Canberra soils which tend to be thin podsols on a clay substrate.

Land Management Agreements are valuable but do not address this topic.

As an example, the Canberra Organic Growers Society in its history has had to move two community gardens, one from Watson to Mitchell to make way for urban expansion, and another from beside the Cotter Road to further towards the Yarralumla Woolshed. The latter move was needed to permit the road to be widened. (Thirty years later the road was indeed widened.) The gardeners took as much of the good soil with them as they could. Because this garden is as securely established in its location as anything can be in the ACT, it has been able to thrive.

Land Preservation and Reservation

Since much urban encroachment is onto the best agricultural lands available — cities are usually founded in the most favourable and propitious areas — it seems objectionable in both principle and practice to destroy the agricultural potential of perfectly good food-producing land. As Julian Cribb observes, the word “development” must now be understood as a euphemism for the permanent loss of food production.⁴⁷

It also seems objectionable to diminish Australia's agricultural contribution to the global food supply by the unwise use of land. With current models of land use, a kind of terminal slash-and-burn mentality seems in evidence: the last crop ever gleaned from peri-urban agricultural land is housing or industry. Land is allocated for whatever use seems most profitable at the time; arguably a failure of planning.

It would be useful to take stock of all land with agricultural potential within the ACT, and reserve such land for agricultural purposes in perpetuity. This may seem a bold move, especially in a jurisdiction which gets a lot of its revenues from land sales, but it is imperative if agricultural and horticultural enterprises are to flourish.

Experience suggests that it is not enough to solely rely on making urban agriculture a ‘permissible’ use in other zones, e.g. residential. If it is considered to be a subsidiary land use, then it will be treated as subsidiary, especially when a more profit-making opportunity comes along.

Habitat shrinkage

As well as residential encroachment, roads have cut up the environment into fragments generally too small to support significant biodiversity – agricultural land-use needs to accommodate endemic wildlife, grazing animals and cropping. Roads sever laterally in proportion as they connect longitudinally — i.e., the more major the road, the bigger the barrier it creates. Planning for and education around the multiple and far-reaching impacts of roads is critical.

Insurance Burden

The role of liability insurance in curtailing the operation of community organisations may be beyond the jurisdictional scope of the ACT, but it needs to be recognised as an impediment in the context of community food and fibre production.

In 1977 when Canberra Organic Growers Society started, insurance of any sort was not necessary nor deemed necessary. People simply banded together and built a community garden — with the tacit support of the government of the day. As we know, society has steadily and sadly grown more risk-averse and litigious. All community organisations must now carry very expensive multi-million dollar insurance policies. These policies often require community organisations to foresee and detail all proposed activities for the coming year, effectively putting the organisation in a 'straightjacket'. A small NGO cannot rent a hall for small-scale meetings unless it can find an insurer

A final reflection

For the past two decades, the rate of global food production has increased faster than the rate of global population growth. Hunger is caused by poverty and inequality, not scarcity.

Recommendations:

We appreciate that by offering a contribution structured around themes, some of the practical elements get a bit lost. In this section, therefore, we have extracted these from the more narrative approach — and added a couple that, while not referred to above, we see as related and important.

Suggestion 1

Promote co-operatives, social enterprises and community based approaches

From Theme 1, paras 3 —7 — that the ACT Government, in the development of the Strategy, identify, support and legitimise co-operative, social enterprise and community-based approaches to food and fibre production, and not simply apply single provider, commercial solutions.

Suggestion 2

Adopt food sovereignty

From Theme 1, para 17 — that the Strategy explicitly includes the concept of ‘food sovereignty’ as an aim of the Strategy

Suggestion 3

Soil rehydration

From Theme 2, paras 2-8 — that the Strategy commits the ACT (and to the extent possible, the broader region) to a focus on soil rehydration as both a food and fibre production strategy and a climate change mitigation strategy

Suggestion 4

Promote agroecology/regenerative agriculture

From Theme 2, paras 9-13— that the Strategy include a commitment to the promotion of ‘regenerative agriculture/agroecological’ principles in the management of food and fibre production, including by measures such as supporting producers to acquire relevant infrastructure (eg, portable fencing), identify and promote successful enterprises, identify and engage successful practitioners to provide ‘farmer-to-farmer’ ‘in the paddock’ support

Suggestion 5

Promote mixed farming

From Theme 3 — that the Strategy promote a mixed farming approach that also provides support to producers to consider both a broader range of on-farm activities and strategic ‘re-wilding’ to promote biodiversity and land productivity

Suggestion 6

A small-scale local abattoir/meat processing facility

While not mentioned above, we would also strongly encourage the ACT Government, perhaps in consultation with surrounding regional government and local producers, to explore options for viable small scale meat processing. Many local producers find that commercial abattoirs (especially those focused on export markets) are unable or unwilling to handle small consignments of animals, do not necessarily comply with what producers consider to be the ethical treatment of animals, and do not necessarily return to the producer the carcass matching the animals sent — we are aware of at least one instance where a local Galloway beef producer has Angus beef returned from a commercial abattoir. The only alternative for many small-scale local producers is to journey further afield (for eg, to Canowindra) to find an ethically-run facility prepared to accept small consignments. This adds significantly to cost, ‘food miles’ and time (the producer will usually take the live animals, leave them there and then need to return some days later for the carcasses).

Suggestion 7

Consult with community producers around their infrastructure needs

From Theme 4, paras 11, 12 — that, in implementing the Strategy and on an on-going basis, the ACT Government open dialogue with existing urban agriculture and community-level producers (including community gardens) to determine activities under the Strategy that would assist in them both conducting their own enterprises, but also enable them to act as replicable models across the region. While these should be developed in consultation, initiatives that would seem relevant could include assistance with water infrastructure (especially water tanks in an urban setting), cool storage options, carbon-neutral transport, physical and virtual food-hub infrastructure, sheds, etc

Suggestion 8

Promote the health (community, mental and physical) health benefits of food and fibre production

From Theme 5 — that the Strategy explicitly promotes, supported by some program funding, socially cohesive approaches to small scale local food and fibre production that focuses not just on actual food and fibre production, but also on the social, cultural and health benefits of food and fibre produced in community

Suggestion 9

Develop pathways for new/young/emerging farmers

Again, not specifically referenced above but, we would argue, a key element in a local food and fibre strategy is the capacity of young or new entrants to food and fibre production to access land. As is well known, land is prohibitively expensive in the ACT and much of the surrounding region — a situation that becomes even more problematic as land suitable for agricultural purposes is often the same land sought for residential development, whether (sub)urban residential or peri-urban 'lifestyle' properties. Some of the urban agriculture initiatives envisaged in the Strategy may go some way to addressing this issue (we note, for example, the initiative of the Patchwork Urban Farm⁴⁸ to access under-utilised residential blocks in the inner North to create productive food gardens) — a project that could well be replicated across other parts of the city and region. We believe, however, that a diverse range of approaches may be required here. One that comes to mind would be the identification of unleased land within the urban footprint that could be allocated to young and emerging producers as 'farmer incubators'. The Canberra City Farm has played this role successfully at times but it has limited space, is comparatively remote and not readily accessible — in particular, it is not on a public transport route.

International Human Rights Framework Referencing Food

Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights states:

1. The States Parties to the present Covenant recognise the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions. The States Parties will take appropriate steps to ensure the realisation of this right, recognising to this effect the essential importance of international co-operation based on free consent.
2. The States Parties to the present Covenant, recognising the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger, shall take, individually and through international co-operation, the measures, including specific programmes, which are needed:
 - (a) To improve methods of production, conservation and distribution of food by making full use of technical and scientific knowledge, by disseminating knowledge of the principles of nutrition and by developing or reforming agrarian systems in such a way as to achieve the most efficient development and utilisation of natural resources;
 - (b) Taking into account the problems of both food-importing and food-exporting countries, to ensure an equitable distribution of world food supplies in relation to need.

In December 2010 the Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Olivier De Schutter, submitted a report to the Human Rights Council⁴⁹. It states, in summary (emphasis added):

The reinvestment in agriculture, triggered by the 2008 food price crisis, is essential to the concrete realisation of the right to food. However, in a context of ecological, food and energy crises, **the most pressing issue regarding reinvestment is not how much, but how**. This report explores how States can and must achieve a reorientation of their agricultural systems towards modes of production that are **highly productive, highly sustainable and that contribute to the progressive realisation of the human right to adequate food**.

Drawing on an extensive review of the scientific literature published in the last five years, the Special Rapporteur identifies agroecology as a mode of agricultural development which not only shows strong conceptual connections with the right to food, but has proven results for fast progress in the concretisation of this human right for many vulnerable groups in various countries and environments. Moreover, **agroecology delivers advantages that are complementary to better known conventional approaches such as breeding high-yielding varieties. And it strongly contributes to the broader economic development**.

The report argues that the scaling up of these experiences is the main challenge today. **Appropriate public policies can create an enabling environment for such sustainable modes of production**. These policies include:

- prioritising the procurement of public goods in public spending rather than solely providing input subsidies;
- investing in knowledge by reinvesting in agricultural research and extension services;
- investing in forms of social organisation that encourage partnerships, including farmer field schools and farmers' movements innovation networks;
- investing in agricultural research and extension systems;
- empowering women; and
- creating a macro-economic enabling environment, including connecting sustainable farms to fair markets.

About Slow Food Canberra

Slow Food Canberra Capital and Country Convivium is a local volunteer group aligned with Slow Food International. We draw our members from across the ACT and the surrounding Southern Tablelands region of New South Wales.

Internationally, Slow Food is a global, grassroots, non-profit, volunteer organisation, founded in Italy in 1989 to prevent the disappearance of local food cultures and traditions. We aim to rekindle interest in the food we eat — where it comes from, is it good for us, how our food choices affect the world around us — and building community around food, to rekindle the desire to sit at table with family and friends and share the great aspects of food.

Slow Food believes food and fibre should be 'good, clean and fair for all', where:

- 'good' means quality, flavoursome, natural and healthy food as part of the local culture;
- 'clean' means production and consumption that does not harm the environment, animal welfare or our health; and
- 'fair' means affordable prices for consumers, fair conditions and income for producers

Slow Food has 100,000 members in over 1,600 local groups in 160 countries around the world. Local groups exercise significant autonomy in their 'day to day' operations while bringing the Slow Food philosophy to life through the events and activities they organise in their local communities: shared meals and tastings, visits to local producers and farms, conferences, discussions, film screenings, festivals, and more.

1 <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/commission-general/international-covenant-economic-social-and-cultural-rights-human-rights>

2 <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/lcdocs/inquiries/2487/Final%20report%20-%20Fresh%20food%20pricing.pdf> (paras 1.58 –1.64)

3 <https://www.unionsnsw.org.au/research/wage-theft-and-human-rights-abuses-on-australian-farms/>

4 <https://theconversation.com/why-bad-food-is-good-for-business-23438>

5 Ibid.

6 <https://www.fao.org/food-loss-and-food-waste/flw-data>)

7 <https://www.pc.gov.au/research/supporting/land-degradation/landdegr.pdf>

8 <https://www.smh.com.au/lifestyle/kids-still-dont-know-where-their-food-comes-from-20140526-zrmk1.html>

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Submission to the
**Capital Food and
Fibre Strategy**
discussion paper

by



Slow Food[®]
Canberra Capital Country

25 February 2022

Part 2 of 2
Responses to Questions in the Discussion Paper

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Executive Summary of Part 2

Primary recommendations, not in order of importance

- (1) Our top concerns are water, changes in soil composition (desertification), loss of tree cover.
- (2) Provide a comprehensive policy framework and financial support.
- (3) Identify and protect agricultural land in the ACT. Create a new land use zone for it. Set aside all land with good agricultural potential, regardless of pressure for other uses.
- (4) Land set aside by developers for community gardens, whether or not in accordance with government requirements, should be fit for purpose and not the dregs of the estate.
- (5) Establish security of tenure. Farming is a long-term proposition. It needs long-term tenure.
- (6) Establish more, practical enterprise incubators such as the Canberra City Farm.
- (7) Provide scholarships and traineeships at secondary and tertiary levels.
- (8) Use regenerative, organic and/or quasi-organic practices. Phase out biocides and artificial growth stimulants.

List of Acronyms:

- 4Cs the Canberra Capital and Country Convivium of Slow Food Australia
COGS Canberra Organic Growers Society
CCF Canberra City Farm

Note: this submission refers extensively to community gardens, because so far these have been the main component of urban agriculture / urban horticulture within Canberra.

Goal 1: Ecological sustainability

1. How can we best support the incorporation of First Nations land management and traditional farming expertise?

- (a) We do not address these issues in this submission. Slow Food Canberra has no members who have identified themselves as being of the First Nations, and we have not consulted with any First Nations people or groups.
- (b) However, we do strongly support the need for First Nations people and their organisations to be closely consulted throughout the development of this Strategy.

2. How do you think we can best support a thriving urban agriculture sector that is founded on ecological sustainability and community wellbeing?

- (a) Please see our responses to Q3 below.

3. What is the role of government, producers and the broader community?

(a) *Role of Government*

- (1) Protect agricultural land in the Territory Plan: create a new land use zone for it. It is not sufficient to make urban agriculture a permitted use within other zones, as this does not adequately emphasise the importance of protecting agricultural lands.
- (2) Look for and set aside all land with agricultural potential. Housing is not ineluctably the highest and best use of land, neither is commercial or light industrial. First we eat, then we work. Yes, in view of the rising price of land this seems a lot to ask, but if we fail to save food-growing land, then we can't grow food and we're back where we started.
- (3) Create a grants scheme to help set up community gardens and other community agricultural ventures.
- (4) Re-think regulations and requirements for community gardens and the like, e.g. high fencing. In the past people have objected to more community gardens because they are on public land but fenced off and denied to the public.
- (5) Another important item for community gardens and other agricultural/horticultural uses within the urban area is *toilets*. In the past COGS has lost members for lack of toilets in most of their gardens. In particular, older people and parents with young children need them. Now that composting toilets are permitted, the situation should ease.
- (6) Support the creation of courses and practical programs in high schools, colleges and universities to design aspects of the agricultural system such as soil science and marketing.
- (7) Education and publicity to reassure the public that urban agriculture is not a smelly, noisy disturbance to suburban life. By the same token, urban farming practices will need to justify this. The term "horticulture" can be less triggering than "agriculture".
- (8) Slow Food International's [*University of Gastronomic Sciences*](#) can provide ideas and examples.

(b) *Role of Producers*

- (1) Recognise that climate change is a reality and that business as usual and traditional techniques will not see us through. Learn and adopt new techniques.

- (2) Food produced should be supplied preferentially to the ACT and region.
- (3) Recognise that organic agriculture now is almost as productive as conventional.
- (4) Recognise that conventional agriculture relies heavily on expensive, external inputs such as fossil fuels, fertilisers and chemicals, and in the long term degrades the productivity of the land.

(c) Role of the broader community

- (1) Recognise that small-scale farmers are a vital part of good land management.
- (2) Adopt and support a Buy Local / Buy Regional approach.
- (3) Establish and support a *Canberra Food* Label scheme.
- (4) Accept that fruits and vegetables may not be cosmetically perfect but are still nutritious. The supermarket system has trained customers to expect perfect produce, and growers have had entire crops rejected because they weren't pretty enough. A great way to change this attitude is simply to grow it yourself and see what you get.
- (5) Educate people to cut down on food waste. [Australia wastes](#) about 7.6 million tonnes annually, of which 70% is perfectly edible. Engage with the [many organisations](#) dedicated to stopping waste.

4. What actions can farmers take to increase the ecological health of our agricultural land?

- (a) Use regenerative, organic and/or quasi-organic practices. Phase out the use of artificial fertilisers and biocides — pesticides, herbicides, fungicides. “Industrial” agriculture is in essence a form of hydroponics, where the roots are bathed in a concoction of artificial fertilisers held in a sterile matrix of mineral particles.
 - (1) While not in our region, the experience of [Peter Randall](#), organic rice grower located near Leeton, is highly instructive. He converted to organic in 1989 after losing friends to cancers because of the chemicals used in conventional agriculture. His district is a hot spot for cancers. Now he has a healthy ecology on his farm, where crustaceans, fish and birds thrive in and around the organically farmed rice. ([4Cs interviews him here.](#))
- (b) Tread carefully with genetic modification (GM). This is a controversial area, partly because it promotes seed monopolisation, and partly because the long-term quality of the plants remains unknown in spite of assurances from the industry that all is well. Most if not all organic growers will not knowingly accept GM plants.
- (c) Keep abreast of the many developments in regenerative farming.

5. What practices do we need to change, or reconsider?

- (1) Fire management on indigenous principles: engage and consult [Victor Steffensen](#) and others. This component of land management will become of ever-greater importance as climate change proceeds.
- (2) New ways of fire management are most likely to require changes in attitudes and practices among current staff. Expect this to be difficult. Engage people like [Greg Mullins](#) to advise.
- (3) Survey development areas for good agricultural land and set them aside BEFORE releasing an area and/or approving DAs. Impress upon developers — and Treasury — that this “sacrifice” is helping future-proof the city. It's all very well requiring developers to set aside

land for community garden, but it is very important to make sure that any such land is actually fit for purpose.

- (1) As one example, some years ago COGS was offered land in Forde for a community garden. Thanks, but it was a rocky outcrop with next to no soil and little water in a remote and peripheral part of the suburb. Making the site useful was well beyond COGS' resources and the offer was declined.
 - (2) Another example was a proposed garden in Coombs. Again, the land on offer was poorly located, poor soil, poor water access. Again, it was declined.
 - (3) These types of land are best described as SLOAP, space left over after planning — areas of land which tend to be small, irregular, unsuitable, or unwanted for other uses. Junk land, to be blunt.
 - (4) In complete contrast to the offerings at Forde and Coombs, the community garden created by the developer in Crace is an outstanding example of a generous and willing attitude. See Goal 5, paragraph (d) below.
- (4) Do not allow marketing monopolies to develop. For years Peter Randall was not able to sell his rice under his own label as the NSW Rice Marketing Board controlled all sales of all rice grown in NSW. In 2011 the rice marketing monopoly was at last rescinded and his sales are increasing. (Randall's rice is available in Canberra at various outlets, e.g. EPIC.)
- (5) Be willing to take a punt, a risk with both government and private investment:
- (1) For example, COGS had a community garden in Theodore, set up in 1993 funded by a \$5,000 Healthy Cities Programme grant. It had good soil, some of which may have come from the building of Parliament House, and at one stage had 20 gardeners. The garden's closure in 2011 was forced because of too much vandalism and the cost of relaying pipes for the water supply. At one stage ACTEW had moved the water meter and relaid the pipeline. They did a poor job, damaging the pipes in the process. An underground burst cost \$4,000 in spilled water, nearly bankrupting COGS, and would have cost \$10,000 in repairs. COGS would have had to pay all of this too; ACTEW declined to make good.
 - (2) A real estate agent who knew Theodore well told COGS in 2013 that over time the demographics of the neighbourhood had changed; the anti-social elements had grown up or moved away. Assuming that this situation still exists in 2022, it might augur well for re-opening the garden.
 - (3) The big question is, if we (re)build it, will they come? Not an easy or cheap experiment to conduct, and this is where some level of government funding becomes important. We could take the risk of re-opening this garden as part of a larger garden-creation project.

6. Which ones should we promote?

- (a) All of the above!

7. What are important considerations for urban agriculture to ensure it supports ecological health?

- (a) For commercial enterprises, pay producers according to the nutritional content of the food, not just its weight or volume.
- (b) Use regenerative and organic / permacultural methods.
- (c) Rebuild insect populations which are in [worldwide decline](#).
- (d) Develop a plan for the entire city with nutrition at its centre. First we eat, then we can work.

Goal 2: Drought and climate change resilience

What are your top concerns for future droughts?

- (a) Availability of water.
- (b) Change in soil biota as temperatures rise.
- (c) Loss of tree cover in both urban and rural areas. Trees are an essential part of the hydrological cycle, cooling the land and promoting rain. The old adage that “rain follows the plough” is a myth.

What direct or indirect actions that can build drought resiliency can be taken that suit our region?

- (a) Access to water is a major factor. Most if not all water rights in the ACT have already been bought out. The fact that licences are tradeable means that they will be purchased by those with the deepest pockets, be they corporate or individual. This has happened in places like the Riverina, driving out smaller producers. As rainfall decreases, water rights will become of ever greater importance. Water monopolisation must be prevented.
- (b) Start building good soils now. In particular increase soil carbon content, which in turn will increase the water content if overland flow is slowed and captured. Refer to Walter Jehne’s [soil-carbon sponge](#) thesis.
- (c) Recycle as much city water as possible, including stormwater. We note that we are part of the Murray Darling Basin and have legal obligations to send water to the Murrumbidgee.

What are the costs/benefits of those actions? Are there barriers preventing them to be taken up right now?

- (a) Costs
 - (1) Land retained for agriculture which could have been sold for (ware)housing — but this is not an opportunity cost; it’s a crucial part of food security.
 - (2) Grants and education expenses. Education is not a cost; it’s an investment.
 - (3) Landscaping to promote soil hydration and water recycling.
- (b) Benefits
 - (1) A more secure and resilient food supply while enhancing the biosphere.
 - (2) Greater community awareness of the value and origins of their food supply.
 - (3) Land used for agriculture can help moderate the climate of the city, especially if orchards are planted.

How could the ACT Government support you to build resilience?

- (a) Provide policy frameworks and some financial support.
- (b) Be flexible in permitting ancillary land uses.
 - (1) For example, the CCF has for some years and with permission hosted a number of for-profit enterprises, two of which are of great utility to the community ([Southern Harvest](#) food distribution centre; Global Worming composting). These are now threatened with removal as they do not fit within the strict purposes of the land. This should not happen.

What opportunities are there for carbon sequestration and net zero emissions farming and innovation that also increase drought resiliency?

- (a) In general, pursue organic agricultural and permacultural techniques. Encourage and assist farmers to adopt them.
- (b) Rebuild the soil-carbon sponge. This is especially important. Consult Walter Jehne (Canberra resident).
- (c) Promote conversion from industrial to biological-organic farming systems. Consult [Maarten Stapper](#) (Canberra resident).
- (d) Adopt regenerative landscape management techniques. Consult [Charles Massy](#), Fenner School of Environment and Society, ANU. Charles is also working now with Aboriginal elders on cool patch-burning.
- (e) For very practical advice on educational systems consult [Rob Fenton](#) of the National Environment Centre near Albury, a specialist campus of the Riverina TAFE. He designed the campus specifically to teach environmental science and sustainable agriculture.
- (f) Consult [Colin Seis](#), who started the widely-adopted pasture cropping system.
- (g) Use holistic management to stop desertification. Refer to [Alan Savory](#).

Goal 3: Production

What needs to happen to allow the ACT and Region's food and fibre industries continue to grow?

- (a) Identify and set aside land for agricultural uses, e.g. the land around Woolshed Creek north of Pialligo. Flat land is easy to build warehouses on but if it has agricultural potential then that use should exclude all others.
- (b) Establish an agricultural price for water. It's no use trying to promote agriculture if water is not affordable. At the same time encourage techniques to make the most efficient and effective use of water. ("Efficient" and "effective" are not the same thing.)
- (c) Encourage closed-loop systems everywhere: compost, water, equipment, land.

What do you think should be the role of government to promote more local food and fibre production and manufacture?

- (a) Provide a legislative framework to encourage urban agriculture.
- (b) Establish security of tenure. This has been a major concern for COGS in the past, given that two of its gardens have had to be relocated for urban and road widening purposes.

What are the opportunities for agri-tourism in the ACT?

- (a) Few exist at the moment but there is considerable potential for more. Canberra is already an attractive destination, with a wealthy population and good road and rail access.
- (b) Support the launch of a *Canberra Food* label tourism and marketing scheme.
- (c) [Eurobodalla's Food Trail](#) is but one example. A Canberra Food Trail could be cross-promoted with regional trails.
- (d) Internationally Slow Food runs a number of projects, most of which are entirely relevant to the objectives of the Food & Fibre Strategy. One of these is the "Snail of Approval" recognition program which aims to inspire producers, chefs, restaurant owners and food outlets to use and promote good, clean and fair ingredients from the local area. It has been very successful in the Noosa area in particular, where many restaurants and producers display their [Snail of Approval Certificate](#). Experience overseas has shown that tourists will seek out businesses with a Snail of Approval. 4Cs have not yet implemented the program in Canberra, but we have a number of candidates to approach when time permits.

Should we foster commercial opportunities for community-based enterprises to help increase access and success for new businesses?

- (a) Community-based enterprises can provide an avenue for would-be entrepreneurs to gain experience with less risk exposure.
- (b) An educational and mentoring scheme is needed. It is surprising how little many people know about growing plants of any sort, much less how to cook them. No wonder processed and take-away foods have a large market.

Goal 4: Innovation

How do we encourage the adoption of new technologies and innovations, particularly those that diversify agricultural production and ensure it is sustainable across the landscape?

- (a) This goal as expressed appears too focussed on technological innovations only. Innovations in other areas are called for also, such as land management, organic techniques, tourism, and marketing.
- (b) That said, fruit picking is very hard work. Technologies developed to help with the workload would be welcome. Engage TAFEs and universities, and provide seed funding.
- (c) The place of hydroponics in organic agriculture is controversial, with views [for](#) and [against](#).
- (d) We need more enterprise incubators. The CCF is one such, providing land for would-be market gardeners to learn how to manage an enterprise. The ACT needs more city farms of this nature and at a greater scale — something maybe like the National Environment Centre (paragraph (e), page 5).
- (e) Encourage verge gardening.
- (f) Adjust the mix of the free plant-issue scheme to promote food plants ahead of ornamentals, in order to promote verge and backyard food gardening.
- (g) Be prepared for a “Victory Garden” scenario if the need develops.
- (h) Lighten the burden of insurance.
 - (1) In 1977 when COGS started, insurance of any sort was not necessary. People simply banded together and did things, such as build a community garden (with the tacit support of the government of the day). Society since then has steadily grown risk-averse and litigious, to the extent that millions of dollars in insurance must be carried by almost any organisation to carry out almost any kind of activity. A small NGO may not even be able to rent a hall for small-scale meetings unless it can find an insurer, which can be especially difficult for the unincorporated.
 - (2) This burden has the effect of stifling small organisations and clears the field for major players — corporations usually — who can afford to purchase insurance and continue business-as-usual.
 - (3) If we really cannot function without insurance, then it should be made possible for small players to be covered easily. We do not know what remedies if any exist. Ideally the government establishes an insurance scheme, perhaps in conjunction with a for-profit insurance company, to provide cover for minor players at small premium rates.

Goal 5: Participation and opportunity

How do we enable younger generations and people from diverse cultural backgrounds to gain the skills and experience to generate new agricultural enterprises in the ACT?

- (a) Provide access to land. Younger people are finding it almost impossible to acquire rural land owing to exorbitant price increases and large-scale acquisition by agribusinesses. The ACT has an opportunity to nurture the co-operative model of agribusiness, such as the *Soil City Co-Operative Farms* organisation in formation now.
- (b) Agriculture and horticulture need to be “glamorised” somewhat, advertised and promoted as interesting and “cool” professions. Few farmers’ sons and daughters seem willing to continue running the family farm when the time comes. Too often the land is sold to a large corporation with no guarantee that it will be used sustainably.
- (c) Education at primary and secondary levels is vital:
 - (1) Merici College is an excellent example, although not every school can be expected to invest as much as Merici did in their garden and kitchen. The Stephanie Alexander gardens appear to work well. The Achilles’ Heel of school-based gardens is that often they are the province of one teacher, and when that teacher moves on, the garden dies.
 - (2) The manager of one of the colleges at the University of Canberra approached COGS some years ago to discuss setting up a small community garden for the residents. We concluded that it was unlikely to succeed unless relevant to an academic career: 1st- and 2nd-year students have varying levels of interest; 3rd- and 4th-year students much prefer the social life; 5th-year students are in thesis panic.
- (d) Provide traineeships and scholarships at late secondary or tertiary levels. Private and public funds should be sought.
- (e) Incorporate urban agriculture and horticulture into food and farming educational programs, providing both theoretical and practical training.

How can we encourage cross-cultural knowledge exchange and connection through local food?

- (a) Grow it. As one example, for some years COGS’ Kambah garden in association with Red Cross Companion House operated a scheme where plots were allocated at no charge to immigrants and refugees from non-Anglo backgrounds. These people were able to grow familiar foods which were not readily available in the stores, or at all. They found the program very beneficial and comforting, and it gave them something useful and rewarding to do while finding employment.
- (b) Share it. For example, 4Cs hosts a number of events during the year where its members and friends meet for potluck meals at long-table lunches. These are often held on farms where the visitors are given a tour of the property and learn about the challenges of growing food. They also provide an opportunity to share dishes and each others’ company. 4Cs also hosts a small number of cooking classes with various and sometimes unusual ingredients.

In what ways if any can urban agriculture contribute to community wellbeing?

- (a) A larger local and regional food economy will improve food security as supply chains will be shorter. Food will be fresher. Plant varieties could be selected for nutritional quality rather than transportability (e.g. the notorious ‘plastic tomato’).

- (b) So far disruptions to the supply chain have been minor but we need to look ahead. A major concern is our petroleum-based fuel situation: Australia has only two weeks' reserves of diesel and petrol, relying heavily as we do on imports from South-East Asia.
- (c) Escape expenditure will be reduced, leaving more money in the local economy. This in turn can generate employment opportunities and career paths.
- (d) Take lessons from the opening in August 2013 of the opening of COGS' new community garden in Crace by Simon Corbell, the-then Minister for the Environment and Sustainable Development. Jason Hodges from Channel 7's 'Better Homes & Gardens' took part.
 - (1) The designer's aim was for the Crace garden to grow into a community facility rather than just being an isolated collection of gardeners. Growing connects us with nature and helps us feel alive.
 - (2) Jason Hodges is very much in favour of community gardens. His home area is Pymble in Sydney, a comfortable, leafy suburb and the site of his first community garden. When he set it up in 2011 he thought that it was simply unnecessary, but he was wrong — people regularly stop him in the street and say how much they use it, how much it's changed what they're doing at home with their own kids.
 - (3) Jason points to verge gardens in places like Marrickville and especially the troubled suburb of Redfern: young people there who previously felt inspired only to loiter and damage property now take pride in their suburb. He reports that the transformation in attitudes and behaviours has been little short of astonishing. This kind of venture can bring people together even from the toughest suburbs. It gives people building blocks for development in later life.
 - (4) Simon Corbell said that he esteems community gardens for two reasons:
 - (i) Bringing people together from the local neighbourhoods. They build connections and community within a neighbourhood. Even in suburbs we can become very disconnected. They provide a great opportunity to reconnect with the neighbourhood and develop a sense of ownership.
 - (ii) Second, they provide an opportunity to grow some of our own food and to reconnect with food production. As residential densities increase and suburbs become more compact, into ever-larger houses with lost backyards or into flats, community gardens become an important part of the physical infrastructure of new suburbs.
- (e) Take lessons from the [Incredible Edible](#) network, which started in the Yorkshire town of Todmorden, and now has 100 groups in the UK and more worldwide. Members of the network transform their own landscapes and turn disused plots into abundant sources of healthy food. Businesses thrive when supported by local shoppers. People with disabilities (from groups such as Autism Bedfordshire) thrive by being involved in cultivating, growing and harvesting. Todmorden's experience is of improved general public health, decline in vandalism and juvenile delinquency rates, and a strengthened community.
- (f) Other benefits include sharing knowledge and skills around food production, gaining physical and mental well-being, and providing space for people to grow their own food who otherwise have no access to land.
- (g) Healthy soil contains [a natural antidepressant](#), the micro-organism *Mycobacterium vaccae*, a non-pathogenic bacterium. It seems to stimulate serotonin production. Low serotonin levels

are linked with problems such as depression, anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder and bipolar problems. Most gardeners will tell you that their garden is their 'happy place' and the physical act of gardening is a stress reducer and mood lifter. *Mycobacterium* is also being investigated for improving cognitive function, Crohn's disease and rheumatoid arthritis.

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