Ecologically Sustainable Diets

Policy Position Statement

Key messages: Ecologically sustainable diets are protective and respectful of biodiversity and ecosystems, culturally acceptable, accessible, economically fair and affordable, nutritionally adequate, safe and healthy, while optimising natural and human resources. Current food systems have contributed to environmental degradation and inequitable food distribution, overconsumption of foods in general (especially energy-dense nutrient-poor foods) and food waste.

Key policy positions:
1. An holistic and integrated Australian food and nutrition policy should be developed.
2. Ecological sustainability principles should be integrated within the Australian Dietary Guidelines (ADG).
3. Labelling should support consumer choice of a healthy and ecologically sustainable diet.
4. Food waste reduction measures, directed at retailers, food producers and consumers should be developed and implemented as part of a food and nutrition monitoring system.

Audience: Federal, State and Territory Governments, policy makers and the general public.

Responsibility: PHAA’s Food and Nutrition Special Interest Group (FANSIG) and Ecology and Environment Special Interest Group (EESIG)

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This is one of three policies focused on the bi-directional relationship between environmental change and the Australian food system, and the changes needed to ensure that the food system is ecologically sustainable, healthy, and affordable.

This policy should be read in conjunction with other PHAA policy position statements including: the Food System and Environmental Impacts; Global Warming, the Food System and Food Security; Food, Nutrition and Health; Food security for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples; GM Foods; Health Effects of Fossil Fuels; Safe Climate; Ecologically Sustainable Development.

PHAA affirms the following principles:

1. Australian food and nutrition policy should support producers to provide consumers with access to food that is both nutritious and promotes ecological sustainability.

2. Access to nutritious, safe, affordable and ecological sustainable food is vital for the future health, prosperity and wellbeing of Australians.

3. Ecological sustainability principles should be included in all food and nutrition and chronic disease guidelines. Current national dietary guidelines are not compatible with long-term climate change commitments - the USA’s would see a continued increase in greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions.¹

PHAA notes the following evidence:

4. Sustainable diets protect the climate, ecosystems and biodiversity whilst also ensuring food security and culturally acceptable, accessible, affordable nutrition for human health.² Economic growth and population increases are expected to increase GHG intensive diets.¹ ³

5. Diets that are consistent with recommendations for good health are also likely to have a lower environmental impacts compared with the current Australian diet, since they encourage plant foods, limit animal foods and energy dense, nutrient poor foods and recommend energy balance.⁴ ⁵

6. Current diets and food systems contribute to global warming and environmental degradation leading to climate change, oil, water and nutrient scarcity, land degradation, food insecurity, food waste and biodiversity loss.⁶-¹³ The global food system is failing to meet nutritional needs and is increasing pressure on planetary heath.¹

7. At the current rate of consumption, studies suggest there will need to be 70%-100% more food by 2050, so the need for sustainable food has never been greater.¹⁴

8. Overconsumption of energy dense, nutrient poor foods is a risk factor for obesity and chronic disease.¹⁵

9. The animal production sector is a major environmental threat, emitting more GHGs than transport.¹⁶

10. Only 6% of Australian adults are eating the recommended amount of fruit and vegetables¹⁷ and energy dense, nutrient poor foods account for 35% of total energy intake.¹⁸
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11. Food waste and food insecurity are both problems in Australia. Approximately 15% of food that is purchased by households is wasted (361kg per person, per year). At the same time almost four per cent (3.7%) of Australians live in a household that had run out of food and had not been able to afford to buy more.

12. Food waste also occurs at the farm level for a variety of reasons, but a large percentage of this is due to retailer specifications for produce physical attributes.

13. There is growing recognition of the need for policies and practices that foster ecologically sustainable production and consumption of food. Two complementary approaches are required. The first is to change consumer demand for a more environmentally sustainable food supply. The second is to work with primary producers, the food industry and government to lead changes in the food system to make its processes and outputs ecologically sustainable. Both require a fundamental rethink about the food system, its purpose and its operations.

14. Studies have shown that diets transitioning towards vegan, vegetarian or pescatarian would be most sustainable, although pescatarianism requires consideration of over-fishing.

15. A healthy and sustainable diet includes:
- Diversity – a wide variety of foods eaten
- Not in excess of energy requirements
- Based around: tubers and whole grains; legumes; fruits and vegetables - particularly those that are field grown and robust
- Dairy products or fortified plant-substitutes eaten in moderation and other calcium-containing plant foods also consumed
- Meat eaten sparingly – and all animal parts consumed
- Unsalted seeds and nuts
- Some fish and aquatic products sourced from sustainable fisheries
- Limited consumption of sugary and fatty sweets, chocolates, snacks and beverages
- Tap water in preference to other beverages. Tap water in preference to plastic bottled water to reduce plastic waste and further pollution of the oceans.

PHAA seeks the following actions:

16. Promotion of a diet which is in keeping with the Food Climate Research Network (FCRN) evidence based characteristics of a healthy and sustainable diet.

17. Development and adoption of ecologically sustainable healthy eating guidelines and ecological sustainability principles included in all food and nutrition and chronic disease guidelines, including the ADG. Guidelines advising further reduction of red meat could reduce health inequalities and climate disruption.

18. Better information for consumers on ecological sustainability as well as nutrition related parameters on food labels.

19. Further research on the environmental impact of specific foods in the Australian context to guide food selection for a healthy and ecologically sustainable diet.

PHAA resolves to advocate for:

20. Holistic and integrated Australian food and nutrition policy.

21. Reduction of animal product consumption via “flexitarianism”, pescatarianism, vegetarianism or veganism.
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22. Integration of sustainability principles within the ADG.

23. Labelling that supports consumer choice of a healthy and ecologically sustainable diet, such as better country of origin labelling.

24. Food waste reduction measures, directed at retailers, food producers and consumers, to be developed and implemented as part of a food and nutrition monitoring system.

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References