A FUTURE
FOR FOOD
HEALTHY. SUSTAINABLE. FAIR.
A safe, nutritious, affordable, secure and environmentally sustainable food system that is accessible to all Australians for health, wellbeing and prosperity now and into the future.

*Public Health Association of Australia, 2011*

**INTRODUCTION**

In 2009, the PHAA launched *A Future for Food*. The document called on all sectors related to food – including the government, public health, industry, agriculture, environment, education and communities – to work together to establish an integrated food policy that would address the issues of chronic disease, environmental sustainability, social equity and the economy, to protect and promote the health, wellbeing and prosperity of Australians now and into the future.

*A Future for Food 2* is an update of the original *A Future for Food*, and continues the PHAA’s call to secure Australia’s food future.

Despite some progress having been made since 2009 - including, the review of Australian Dietary Guidelines, the Food and Health Dialogue, the establishment of the Australian National Preventative Health Agency, the Labelling Logic Report and the first steps towards a National Food Plan - the Australian food and nutrition system remains in crisis with little real progress in reducing problems related to food choice.

Diet related chronic disease is one of the most preventable causes of morbidity and mortality in our community and it particularly affects the most disadvantaged. Climate change is likely to exacerbate this social discrepancy.

There is widespread recognition in all sectors including government that current policy is not working to address the challenges we face. The Australian food industry must remain viable and competitive, but not at the expense of public and planetary health.

We need to reconceptualise a food system that ticks all the boxes – human health, the environment, social justice and economic wellbeing.

“The Australian food and nutrition system remains in crisis with little real progress in reducing problems related to food choice.”

*PHAA, 2012*
Eating ourselves to death

Nearly two thirds of adults and a quarter of Australian children are overweight or obese, and this is fundamentally linked to diet. Poor diet is thought to be a factor in 56% of the all deaths annually in Australia. While the food regulation system does deliver safe food, it fails to protect against diet-related chronic disease.

The food system is skewed

Food production, processing, imports, advertising and promotion are skewed towards energy dense foods, high in fat, sugar and salt – delivering the wrong types of foods, encouraging poor dietary practices and leading to chronic disease.

Food choices exacerbating climate change

Australia’s ecological footprint is three times the world average, with food accounting for around 30%. Australians need to consume less as well as consume differently.

THE FOOD SYSTEM AND HUMAN HEALTH

The Burden of Disease

Australia is counted in the worst third of all OECD countries in its incidence of preventable chronic disease. Obesity, heart disease, stroke, type II diabetes and cancer account for approximately two thirds of the $100 billion plus expended each year on health. Three in five adults (61%) and one in four children (25%) are either overweight or obese and the burden of type II diabetes is expected to surpass cancers as the leading cause of disease burden in Australia by 2023.

Australian food policy to date has failed to address the growing prevalence of these conditions.

Diet and Chronic Disease Risk

The incidence of obesity, and of other lifestyle-related diseases, demonstrates both a commercial success and a catastrophic food system failure, which is leading to a health system failure in Australia and around the world.

There is clear evidence that diets high in fruits, vegetables, wholegrains, nuts, seeds and legumes reduce the risk of chronic disease. There is clear evidence that certain foods contribute to the burden of disease, including those high in saturated fat, salt and added sugar, and also alcoholic and sugar-sweetened drinks.

Distortion in the Food Supply

Our current food supply is distorted toward overly processed foods with an excess of energy dense, nutrient poor items. Australia produces more food than it needs; however an overall surplus of ‘food products’ is not the same as production of a nutritionally adequate food supply.

Poor dietary intakes result from the easy availability of these foods, combined with poor nutrition literacy and buyer confusion due to intense marketing and difficult to understand on-pack health and nutrition claims.

Providing a Healthy Diet

The ongoing provision of a nutritious diet must be given priority in food policy development.

In addition to motivating people to choose and eat well, policy must address the structural barriers to eating a minimally processed whole food diet. These include working with industry to reformulate existing food products by extending the remit of the Food and Health Dialogue, legislating for minimum nutrition standards in vending machines, fast food outlets and food service institutions, and addressing appropriate information about portion sizes in packaged foods.

Policy must also protect against loss of production capability – particularly in relation to foods that are critical and non-substitutable such as fruit and vegetables.

Nutrition in transition

Australia has both a high incidence of overweight and obesity, and people suffering from nutrient deficiencies.

Poor health is crippling our economy

Currently health expenditure accounts for 18% the Federal Government budget, which is predicted to rise to 26% by 2050 and to account for the entire budget of many states by 2035.

The system is unjust

In a world with enough food for everyone and over a billion people overweight, nearly two thirds of adults and a quarter of children are overweight or obese – particularly in relation to foods that are critical and non-substitutable such as fruit and vegetables.

Price pressures

Globally, food prices are rising, driven by rapidly rising demand for meat in Asia, for wheat in Africa, for biofuels in Europe and North America. The impact of climate change is likely to exacerbate that pressure. The need for food companies to increase shareholder profits adds to this stress.

Food production demand

The world needs to feed 9 billion people by 2050 with half the present fresh water, far less land, limited and expensive fossil fuels, scarce and costly fertilisers, less technology, more drought, heat and storms. Reports suggest that climate change impact over the next 40 years may reduce food production in Australia by more than 15%.

The opportunity

Australia is a resourceful country that has the potential to set itself up as a world leader in addressing these complex problems. This requires immediate and serious attention by all levels of government, and all those with an influence on the food system.

Business as usual is not an option.
Australian Dietary Guidelines

Australia needs clear food-based, evidence-informed dietary guidelines, that emphasise the foods that Australians need to eat more, including fruits, vegetables, wholegrains, legumes, nuts, seeds and reduced fat dairy; and the foods which Australians need to eat less or limit including red and processed meat, full fat dairy, and processed and takeaway foods high in saturated fat, salt and added sugar.

Nutrients Not Enough

The selection of foods to be incorporated into dietary guidelines in Australia continues to be based on nutrition science, focussing on nutritional adequacy, and evidence of protection against disease.

This raises several concerns:

• Not all the the biologically relevant aspects of food are considered.
• Highly processed packaged foods with added nutrients may be preferred over whole foods or staples simply because they meet certain nutrient criteria and are effectively promoted by the food industry.
• There is inadequate consideration of - the way a food is sourced or of its method of production – both of which impact on nutrition and environmental sustainability; and - cultural and equity issues.

It is imperative that Australian Dietary Guidelines for health be overlayed with considerations for environmental sustainability and social equity, to create guidance that genuinely supports personal and planetary wellbeing.

Environmentally Sustainable

Fortunately, an environmentally sustainable diet intersects well with a diet that is disease protective.

Moving towards a more plant-based diet, with smaller amounts of meat from sustainable sources, reducing consumption of highly processed foods, takeaway foods, those that rely on fossil fuel use in production, and those that use excess packaging may achieve two goals - to reduce the incidence of diet related chronic disease and reduce the impact of the food system on the environment.

Energy Requirements

As part of dietary guidance, Australians need practical advice on how to eat to their energy requirements, which is dependent on life stage as well as lifestyle.

Monitoring and Surveillance

To inform food policy development and directions Australia needs a comprehensive, ongoing monitoring and surveillance system for food and nutrition. The only national nutrition surveys in the last 50 years have been a survey of adults in 1983 and one of adults and children in 1995, and one of children in 2007.

The government is currently carrying out the 2011-13 Australian Health Survey which will provide long overdue dietary intake data. However, the PHAA supports recommendations26 that a system with annual data collection be established and will continue to hold the government accountable to promises made to fund and establish such a system.

THE FOOD SYSTEM AND ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

Human health must be placed within the context of the health of the planet. This requires consideration of both the impact of climate change on food production and the impact of food production on the environment.

Impact of Climate Change on Food Production

If global development continues without effective mitigation, the mainstream science tells us that the impacts of climate change on Australia are likely to be severe. Climate change is likely to affect agricultural production through changes in water availability, water quality, soil fertility, temperatures and extreme weather events. Climate change is predicted to reduce food production in Australia by over 15%.3

Pressure on Food Production Resources

The global stock of farming land is diminishing, with 24% of the earth’s land surface seriously degraded. A FAO satellite survey has revealed that the world is losing farmland at a rate of 1% a year. Nutrients are being lost from agricultural systems into waterways and oceans, and phosphate rock for fertiliser is becoming scarce and expensive.1

Impact of Food Production on Environment

Australia’s ecological footprint is three times the world average, with food accounting for around 30%. Industrialised farming has been very effective at improving productivity and economic gain but has led to significant unintended environmental impacts. These include land degradation, soil erosion and quality, water impacts, and the impacts on biodiversity as a result of land clearing, overgrazing and monocropping.26

An estimated 15.9% of Australian greenhouse gas emissions come from agriculture and 67.4% of that is from methane produced by livestock.27

Food policy should consider methods to reduce the amount of methane released into the atmosphere. This can be achieved through:

• innovation, including carbon sequestration and abatement;27
• dietary guidance that encourages Australians to choose smaller amounts of animal proteins, to preference non-methane producing animals like kangaroo, rabbit or chicken, and to chose greater amounts of plant proteins such as nuts, legumes, seeds and wholegrains; and
• reducing reliance on animal products for trade and re-investing in more sustainable farm products.
Rethinking Agricultural Production Methods

We need renewable energy sources for agriculture and a new approach to food production that uses less land, water, energy, fertilisers and pesticides. Food policy needs to consider ways for Australia to expand its food production to include urban, peri-urban and regional food production, and to reduce waste by recycling food and water back into the system.

Waste

Research suggests that Australians discard around 20% of the food they buy, or up to 150kg/food/person/year which is costing families between $5-6 billion. That waste embodies lost energy, water and other resources. Rotting food also produces methane.

In the retail sector, tens of millions of kilograms of safe, edible fresh food and groceries are discarded every year as a result of changed labelling regulations, end of season excess stock, production line changeover items, out-dated packaging, discontinued product, as well as slight label or weight inaccuracies.

Food waste in Australia is responsible for 11.4 million tons of CO₂ equivalent emissions every year with some estimates suggesting this may be as high as 15.4 million tonnes across the food chain.

A sophisticated and strategic approach to resource allocation is urgently required if the multiple objectives of food security, energy security, greenhouse emissions reductions, sustainable resource use, a healthy environment and a viable economy are to be achieved.

Food Security

Food security is achieved when all people at all times have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. [FAO 1996]

Individual & Household Food Security

Running out of food affects more than 5% of Australians and is significantly higher in some groups – for example single parent households and older persons.

It is increasingly more expensive to eat a variety of nutritious foods, yet energy dense foods, which are often low in nutritional value are cheaper and more accessible than ever. Healthier diets can cost more and there is a well-proven relationship between individual food security and obesity.

Despite the fact that at least 5% of Australians are experiencing food insecurity, it is not currently being addressed by government policy. This must change.

National Food Security

While Australia currently produces much more food than we consume, access to that food is not fair and food distribution systems need to be improved.

While there is no immediate threat to the domestic food supply in terms of quantity, the impacts of climate change, diminishing water, soil degradation, labour shortages and declining agricultural productivity are likely to impact supply over the longer term.

Another threat to Australia’s food security is the global response to the issue of diminished food production, with countries leasing cropping land in other countries, including Australia. This will have implications for Australia’s food security.

Global Food Security

The most food insecure in the world are also frequently the victims of floods, droughts, other natural disasters and armed conflicts. A sustained increase in temperature of one degree in the next four decades – which is lower than predicted by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change - could cause grain prices to rise between 30 to 100% from current levels.

Failing to address the challenge of global food insecurity poses political, social and security risks with potential conflict over arable land, food resources and security. Such a situation can destabilise governments and increase environmental refugees.

Australia has a role as a donor country contributing to global food security in relation to the ability of all people to access healthy foods.

Social Costs

Even for the food secure, the competitive nature of the current food system weakens relationships between farmers, processors and retailers, and many farmers are finding it increasingly difficult to stay viable, which has impacts on the vitality of rural communities. In addition, the increasingly globalised food system means urban communities are disconnected from the source of their food and how it is produced.

Addressing the issue of national and global food security requires more than a faith in markets and current planning policies. It is a legitimate question of national interest and ethical responsibility.

**Education**

Food literacy can be defined as the ability to understand where food comes from and how it is produced, appreciate the cultural significance of food, make healthy decisions, and recognize the implications – social, environmental, political, cultural and economic – of the food we eat.36

Addressing food literacy as part of food policy must be a priority to create a culture that respects and values our food, its source and production. Most Australians are currently physically, socially and emotionally removed from our food supply. Australians need the knowledge, skills and motivation to select, prepare and consume a high quality diet.

“Education plays an important role in reconnecting us with how and where our food is produced, and in knowing how to cook and prepare healthy, nutritious food.”

Food 2030, UK Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, 2010

**Children and Families**

The development of the new national curriculum for schools provides an opportunity for Australia to address the issue of food literacy in children. While there are good programs available to schools - including kitchen garden and healthy activity programs - the approach to food literacy in schools is largely uncoordinated and inconsistent.

A better understanding of food, through gardening, cooking and eating healthily may positively address the current health crisis in young people and provide constructive strategies to engage students in learning.36

Greater coordination between existing school programs and the national curriculum is required to increase consistency of education messages that can link healthy food choices and sustainable food production.

**Across the Lifespan**

In addition to specific initiatives targeting children, Food Policy must address the issue of food literacy in adult populations to combat the declining ability of most adults to prepare meals from affordable and seasonable produce. Knowledge of the significance of healthy food choices at different life stages, such as pregnancy and older years,37 requires targeted attention. Dietary guidelines for different life stages are a key education tool to provide practical advice specific to food requirements.

**THE FOOD SYSTEM AND ECONOMIC WELLBEING**

“Obesity is a predictable outcome of market economies predicated on consumption-based growth.”

Swinburn et al, The Lancet, August 2011

It is imperative we apply an economic lens to the health, environmental and social impacts of our food system to assess the real economic impact of food.

Overconsumption and high levels of waste may have economic benefits, especially for the food industry, but when we overlay the costs of the disease burden and the impact on carbon emissions, the overall result is an economic burden. These issues must be addressed while supporting the food industry to remain viable and competitive.

We need to send a strong price signal to farmers to stay on the land and continue to reinvest in agricultural production,9 particularly in relation to foods that are critical and non-substitutable such as fruit and vegetables.

There are economic opportunities for the food industry in reorienting it focus on the production, processing and promotion of whole nutritious foods to meet consumer demand. The challenge is to work with consumers to provide the types and amounts of foods that are consistent with dietary recommendations.

An ill society, stricken with chronic diet-related disease will eventually limit economic prosperity.

“Major structural changes, particularly in the economic system, but also the factors which affect it, such as population growth, attitudes to consumption and the behaviour of corporations, are necessary to reduce chronic disease, obesity and climate change.”

Egger & Swinburn, Planet Obesity, 2010
The current food regulation system protects food safety by providing high quality foods for consumption and aims to prevent misleading and deceptive conduct in relation to food. While the microbiological safety of food is potentially the greatest immediate risk to health, there is an opportunity to further protect public health through regulation to prevent diet-related chronic disease.

There needs to be a recognition of health (chronic disease, environment, social and economic consequences) at all decision making points within the food regulation system.

Food Labelling

Food labelling policies and laws influence the safety, availability, nutrient composition and promotion of foods, as well as ensuring appropriate and adequate information is available to shoppers.

To make wise purchase decisions for their families, shoppers need meaningful and easy-to-understand information on food packaging. Education can also be used to encourage a preference for minimally processed whole foods. 37 To assist those with varying literacy levels, an interpretive, colour-coded front of pack labelling system across all packaged foods and beverages is essential.

Food Marketing and Advertising

Food marketing and promotion shapes eating behaviours, particularly those of children. Australian children are exposed to around 22,000 unhealthy food and beverage advertisements on television each year 38 with a higher proportion of unhealthy food and beverages featured during children’s viewing times than other times 39.

A National Food Policy must tackle the issues of food marketing and advertising to children. In order to protect young children, PHAA continues to call for restrictions on all forms of marketing of junk foods to children and specifically for a ban on all television food advertising at times when children comprise the majority of the viewing audience or in shows that are popular with children. The legislation must include an effective system for enforcement and compliance.

The nation needs to upgrade the current position of Parliamentary Secretary of Health with responsibility for food to a ministerial portfolio for Food, headed by a cabinet Minister.

The Ministerial Charter

The Ministry of Food would be responsible for an overarching food policy that:

• ensures the understanding, access, consumption and enjoyment of a high quality diet made up from a safe, nutritious, affordable and environmentally sustainable food supply;

• promotes wellbeing across all life stages and reduces the incidence of diet-related ill health;

• protects and promotes food security and social equity at an individual, local, national and global level;

• ensures sufficiency and variety of production, including managing the impact of climate change, and efficient and ethical land use planning;

• reduces the impact of food production on the environment, and in particular aims to minimize carbon emissions, reliance on fossil fuels and waste;

• shapes a food system that is environmentally sustainable and economically viable.

A National Food policy must:

• be sensitive to the social and cultural practices of all Australians;

• engage the community;

• be evidence-informed and proactive in generating integrated, comprehensive and ongoing monitoring and surveillance action, including health, environmental, social and economic impact assessments; and

• set clear, measurable and time-specific objectives.

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PHAA, 2012

PHAA, 2012
CALL TO ACTION

Australians need to eat less and eat differently to address the pandemic of diet-related disease, ameliorate the impacts of climate change and to ensure fairness in the food system.

Australia needs:
• an integrated food policy that concurrently aims to reduce chronic disease, encourage environmentally sustainable food choices, and is affordable on the lowest incomes.
• a food system that ensures that minimally processed whole foods are the easiest option for Australians.
• dietary guidelines advice that emphasises the foods which Australians need to eat less or limit and the foods which Australians need to eat more, including fruits, vegetables, wholegrains, legumes, nuts, seeds and reduced fat dairy; and the foods which Australians need to eat less or limit including red and processed meat, full fat dairy, and processed and takeaway foods high in saturated fat, salt and added sugar.
• reduction in waste throughout the food system, with added sugar.

Get involved. Become a member. Visit www.phaa.net.au

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This report was prepared by the Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA) with specific input and guidance from the PHAA Food and Nutrition Special Interest Group.

It was made possible by an unencumbered educational grant from Sanitarium Health and Wellbeing.

February 2012.

ISBN 978-0-646-57336-6