Submission No 30

FOOD PRODUCTION AND SUPPLY IN NSW

Organisation: Northern Beaches Council

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northern beaches council

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Committee on Environment and Planning
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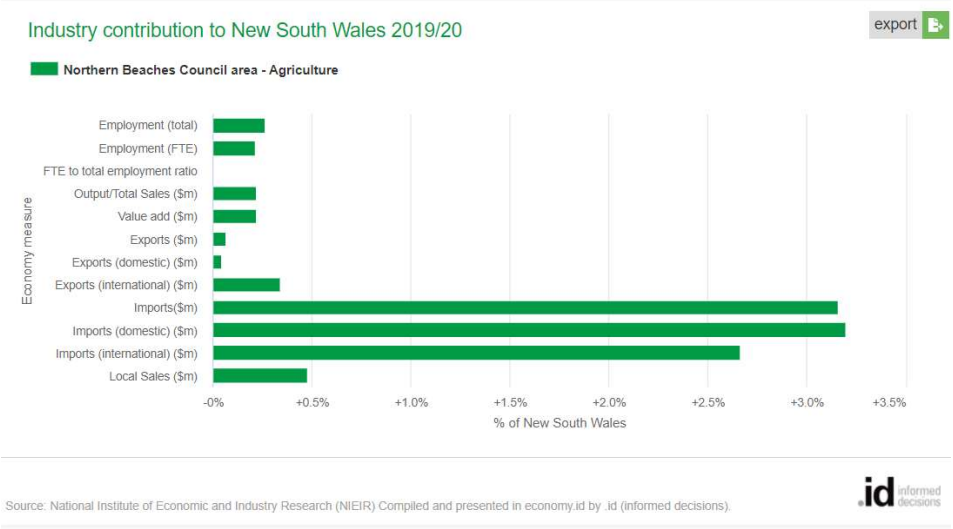
Inquiry into Food Production and Supply in NSW – Northern Beaches Council submission

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission for the Committee's consideration as part of the Inquiry into Food Production and Supply in NSW.

The Northern Beaches Local Government Area extends over 254km² stretching from Sydney Harbour to Pittwater, Middle Harbour and Cowan Creek to the west. It consists of 56 suburbs and is home to around 270,000 residents. In addition, its bushland and coastal environments attract many visitors and tourists.

Given the high socio-economic demographic of the LGA, the economic value of food consumption per capita would be higher than the NSW average. Despite the relative affluence, pockets of disadvantage and challenges particular to the ageing population also need to be considered in assessing food security for the LGA.

The population is highly reliant on food supply chains from outside the LGA, with only 5.6% of the area zoned rural and less than 1% zoned industrial. The LGA is a significant importer of food to support our community, hospitality industry and product manufacturing, rather than being a food producer. We import much more than we export.



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1. Improving food security and equitable access to food.

Food security also has far-reaching impacts on social cohesion and community wellbeing of any community including ours. Growing community food services on the Northern Beaches point to the fact that there is increasing demand for access to food. There is potential to develop channels on more specific data for this, but it is known that there has been increased demand from local charity food services for vulnerable populations during the pandemic, which points us to an underlying issue of food security for less visible, disadvantaged groups in the LGA.

The Northern Beaches LGA also has a significant ageing demographic with census data indicating that the population aged 70 and over is significantly higher than the Greater Sydney average. The pandemic has highlighted issues of food access for isolated, frail and aged people. For example, a consequence of moving to internet grocery shopping rather than 'traditional' phone-based home service delivery, has meant that many older people without internet access or technical knowledge must rely on other ways to source their food. The significantly greater risk of severe illness and death from Covid for older age groups, has also limited their access to supermarkets and heightened the health risks of accessing food in those contexts. Special consideration for the needs of this age group should be included in policy responses and practical logistical support programs.

More information is required on how supply chain weakness affects the LGA and it is part of broader city resilience discussions and Council is currently developing a Resilience Strategy.

Fresh fruit and vegetable markets throughout the local area are also important as a place of social capital and healthy eating. They promote more sustainable local food industries and potentially the reduced use of non-biodegradable packaging through enabling buying directly from the producer and the purchase of less processed food.

Although not a significant source of food supply for the local population, Council runs six community gardens on Council owned or managed land (with four additional proposals under review). These are supported by Council's Community Gardens Policy and Guidelines. In addition to supplying fresh organic produce to participants, they also provide a crucial educational role in teaching the local community about growing food. This is pertinent in an era where many urban residents have little connection or awareness of where the food they consume comes from and what's required to grow and supply it. The food gardens also partner with local schools to educate students on aspects of the NSW Government's 'Learning across the Curriculum' subject 'Kitchen Gardens'. They also reduce social isolation, encourage physical activity and foster social capital. The groups are not-for-profit and charge minimal membership fees, allowing low-cost access to healthy fresh food for participants, throughout the year.

Council also runs a number of food events each year including the Taste of the Beaches Program, World Food Markets and Food Truck Party. Around 2,000 people attend each event and a significant proportion (a third to a half) of stall holders are local suppliers.

2. Reducing food waste and destruction.

Food waste is among the key waste minimisation considerations for Council. The embodied energy and production effort is lost along with the food value when there is excessive food waste. In this respect, we focus on minimising food waste at the consumption end of the process.

We note that the *NSW Waste and Sustainable Materials Strategy 2041* requires food waste to be separately collected by 2030. As a result, the NSW Government also needs to facilitate and financially support collection systems and infrastructure to process the significant volumes of food waste which will still be produced.

We would support the NSW State government:

1. Facilitating local circular economy networks to foster initiatives such as food donations and options for imperfect, edible foods. The benefits include that commercial food waste is recovered in accordance with waste hierarchy.
2. Developing a Verge Garden Policy and local waste education campaign to engage residents in local food organics processing such as composting, worm farms and subsequently growing their own food. The benefits of this include reduced food waste transport and reduced dependency on food supply in crisis.
3. Providing significant funding to enable:
   (a) onsite worm farms/composting for houses
   (b) Councils to establish and run food organics collection systems, including trials, for residents that prioritise higher order recovery
   (b) local offsite organics equipment and processing for commercial and large-scale multi-unit dwellings (e.g. https://wastemanagementreview.com.au/wa-govt-allocates-almost-100k-to-fly-farm-organic-waste-project/). The benefits include reduced transport and higher order recovery, such as animal feed and at-home use.
4. Facilitating innovative, urban, commercial-scale agriculture (e.g. http://sproutstack.co/how/ and https://feedbackorganic.com.au/). Local food waste generated could be used for soil improvement at these locations. The benefits include less water usage, reduced transport and higher order recovery such as animal feed and at-home use.
5. Developing a local waste education campaign to continuously engage businesses along their journey of food waste reduction with action plans to optimise the supply chain and promote higher order recovery.

Food waste policy could also consider advocating for programs that support lower paid staff (often essential workers), in benefits from unnecessary food waste. E.g. supermarkets allowing their lower paid staff to take home foods that are about to expire, so these food items are not discarded. While supermarkets have come a long way with labelling and discounting, there would still be wastage. This could also support improving food security and equitable access to food.

Organisations such as OzHarvest also contribute a lot in reducing food wastage through connecting business with charities and moving excess supplies from wastage to providing food security for low income and homeless residents. Further funding support could directly allow for these programs to increase their impact.

The reliance on takeaway food and food deliveries in the recent pandemic context also has significant implications for increased packaging waste. Government programs should try and increase the use of biodegradable containers and packaging, (e.g. providing subsidised biodegradable takeaway containers for restaurants and food delivery outlets).

Council's community gardens also run programs on composting food waste and work in partnership with the Kimbriki waste facility to educate residents.

3. Developing technologies to bring food production into cities.

Council is considering whether to permit horticulture in all Industrial zones for the future LEP, noting changing technology such as in indoor hydroponic and vertical gardens. This recommendation is particularly consistent with the Inquiry considerations of how technological advancements are changing the way we produce food.

4. Preserving productive land and water resources.

The Northern Beaches Land Use Planning Zoning Framework provides for certain land uses for food production by permitting a range of agriculture land uses, particularly in its rural zones within the Greater Sydney Metropolitan Rural Area (MRA) in a rural setting amongst bushland, farms and other rural industries. A range of agricultural land uses will be protected in this rural setting with the future Northern Beaches Local Environmental Plan supporting productive, sustainable and secure food production, including small scale crop, livestock or bee keeping), livestock agriculture (feedlots, poultry) and plant agriculture (horticulture). The protection of the MRA, including consideration of other lands identified in Council's Local Strategic Planning Statement as MRA 'Investigation Areas,' seeks to limit urban development that may be inconsistent with the values of this land.

Beyond the MRA, food production also remains significant in land use planning more broadly across the Northern Beaches. In particular, horticulture is a permitted use for a number of zones, defined in in the Standard Instrument (LEP) Order 2017 as meaning 'the cultivation of fruits, vegetables, mushrooms, nuts, cut flowers and foliage and nursery products for commercial purposes, but does not include a plant nursery, turf farming or viticulture'. Council seeks to retain land for food production by permitting horticulture in strategically determined land use zones across the Northern Beaches, particularly in rural, recreational and industrial zones.

Council's Discussion Paper 'Planning our Sustainable Future 2021' raised important strategic land use issues for the new LEP and DCP. It proposed to permit horticulture not just in a rural context but also in recreational zones. This approach is proposed to promote a healthy and socially connected community under Priority 12 of the Northern Beaches Local Strategic Planning Statement.

Industrial zoned land also plays a role in local food production and innovation, with examples of vertical horticulture in Brookvale, which is also home to many food manufacturing and wholesale businesses. Another illustration of the value of local food production on the Northern Beaches has come through the recently adopted Destination Management Plan (tourism strategy) which identified the food and beverage sector as an important part of the visitor economy, from micro-breweries in Brookvale to hobby farm stays as part of a 'hinterland experience'.

5. Managing the impact of climate change.

Climate change profoundly impacts agriculture through increasing erratic rainfall and other climatic regimes and the increasing probability and extent of extreme weather events such as droughts and floods. Pest species and pollinators are also affected by these climatic changes. There are numerous examples, both globally and locally of climate change having profound impacts on agricultural production.

Furthermore, the dependence of industrial agriculture on fossil fuel-based fertilisers and intensive farming methods, as well as extensive 'food miles' in transporting produce to

global markets, contributes significantly to global warming. Methane from animal-based agriculture is a key contributor to the phenomena. Related deforestation also greatly reduces the availability of carbon sinks to mitigate and buffer the effects and the release of carbon from burning and other land clearing activities clearing is also a significant source of carbon emissions nationally (Australian Conservation Foundation).

Increases in extreme weather events are also likely to have profound food supply chain impacts e.g. disrupting transportation, thereby heightening the urgency and imperative for increasing resilience in food supply and promoting local and decentralised production. There is no significant food production within the Northern Beaches LGA or adjoining waters that caters for NSW. Due to this, this is a heavy reliance on supply chain activities including food transport, packaging, processing, and retailing, which creates substantial carbon emissions with its associated flow on effects to climate change impacts.

6. Limiting the impact food production has on the environment, including overfishing.

Land clearing for agriculture and urban development is a significant contributor to biodiversity loss and climate change. Land clearing remains the single biggest driver of habitat loss and biodiversity decline in Australia. It is one of the leading causes and contributors to wildlife decline and extinction.

There is no significant food production within the Northern Beaches LGA or adjoining waters that caters for NSW. Due to this, this is a heavy reliance on supply chain activities including food transport, packaging, processing, and retailing, which creates substantial carbon emissions with its associated flow on effects to climate change impacts.

It is pertinent to also identify and address barriers to decreasing meat consumption and increasing acceptance of meat substitutes. Vegetarian diets are often touted as the “single biggest way” of reducing an individual’s environmental impact on earth. More work could be done to support consumers, business and events to eat and cater for, less meat. In addition to the methane emissions, intensive farming practices, fossil fuel reliance and relatively extensive land clearing mentioned earlier, animal-based food production also has significant water pollution impacts from the production of animal waste.

Clear labelling, subsidies and regulatory support for ecologically sensitive farming practices such as organic or biodynamic farming, should also be explored and implemented. Greater monitoring of the ecological impacts of intensive industrial agricultural practices e.g. on water quality, should also be implemented.

Localised, low impact food production and supply such as backyard and community gardening, permaculture gardens, small scale growers, food cooperatives etc should be substantially supported with education and training, material, labour, infrastructure, and other resources. Schools could play a role through further education on nutrition, healthy meal preparation, home composting, home food preservation and backyard food production/ school food gardens.

Minimising food waste and packaging, particularly the use of plastic, styrofoam and other fossil fuel based, slow to degrade materials that cause global pollution issues, is also imperative to reducing environmental impacts. Alternatives to fossil fuel-based fertiliser should also be prioritised.

7. Addressing complex challenges to food production including declining pollinating species and productive fertilisers.

The great majority of NSW's food crops are pollinated by the European honeybee (*Apis mellifera*). Reliance upon a single pollinator species poses a risk to food security due to vulnerabilities associated with pests and diseases such as varroa mite, which has decimated honeybee populations overseas and has the potential to reduce Australia's healthy honeybee population by 90-100% (Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment, 2022).

Australia is home to over 1600 species of native bee species, many of which are known to pollinate food crops and orchids such as apple, pear, blueberry, lucerne, raspberry, blackberry, cherry, mango, avocado, canola, macadamia, and watermelon. For example, native bees have been found to comprise up to half of all pollinator visitors to raspberry and blackberry vines in the Yarra Valley, and up to a third of all visitors to apple flowers in the Adelaide Hills (Rader et al, 2021). Other Australian native insects such as flies, moths and beetles are also known to pollinate food crops including avocados and mangos where they have been recorded as the most abundant invertebrate visitor (Rader et al, 2021).

While the economic benefits provided by native pollinators are poorly understood, these species provide an opportunity to improve the diversity, resilience and security of food systems in NSW. Further research into and support for the use of native species in crop pollination, as well as measures to address insecticide overuse and support and expand Australian native food crops, should be considered by the Inquiry. Such measures have the potential to greatly improve the State's food security whilst also enhancing the health and biodiversity of our natural environment.

References:

Commonwealth Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment. 'Bees and Bee Pests and Diseases' (www.awe.gov.au/biosecurity-trade/pests-diseases-weeds/bees, accessed 21/01/22)

Rader R, Willcox B, Hogendoorn K, Cunningham S, Latty T, Groom S, Jones J (2021). 'A Guide to Australian Crop Pollinating Insects.' AgriFutures Securing Pollination.

8. Consideration of workforce challenges and skills development.

High costs of living and low housing affordability for essential workers on the Northern Beaches, exacerbate workforce challenges in food supply to the local area. Skill development should be considered as well as issues with skill transfer to minimise risks of supply shortages. Some staffing challenges have affected some local suppliers for Council's food-based community events.

Local "Accommodation & Food Services" jobs were especially impacted during the initial lockdown (March-June 2020) as restaurants etc were forced to close. Meetings with local chambers have previously raised ongoing issue of staff shortages for hospitality sectors (bars, clubs) which forms part of the food supply chain. This has been in relation to international working visas and though more recently would be COVID cases and isolation requirements.

11. Consideration of Indigenous food and land management practices.

The local Aboriginal Heritage Officer based in the LGA, recommends that due recognition should be given to Indigenous traditional knowledge, whether that knowledge is from a continuous oral tradition or through secondary sources written or recorded by non-

Aboriginal people. Aboriginal peoples have been largely locked out of their traditional lands and others have benefitted from their Country and knowledge, with little flowing back to the original knowledge holders.

It is recommended that any Indigenous foods that are used, developed, cultivated or promoted be managed in such a way that local Aboriginal people have input into their uses and also in any economic benefits that come from that. Aboriginal communities are still poorly placed to create business opportunities when compared with non-Aboriginal communities and individuals.

Another pertinent issue is how Indigenous foods are promoted and produced. Bush tucker was traditionally highly restricted with cultural rules and laws from how it was procured to how it was prepared and shared. Aboriginal populations were small and the resources were used by a small human population. The current global market is very large and the possibility for Aboriginal foods to become popular and for demand to exceed natural supply is obvious. Increased production can lead to overuse of wild resources and could lead to harmful farming practices, eg attempting to farm wildlife, species that have not been domesticated and suffer high stress from enclosure and harvesting practices. It is important to recognise that there may need to be a regulatory framework to protect Aboriginal people, the environment and wildlife as Indigenous foods become more popular.

This also applies to land management, such as cultural burning. If the term cultural burning is applied, then Aboriginal people should be involved in the process and it should conform to recognised traditional practices. Non-Indigenous cool burning techniques, for example, should not be termed cultural burning without significant Aboriginal input and support. There are cultural burning programs that have been developed and lead by Indigenous people, such as Firesticks (https://www.firesticks.org.au/), that could be supported to ensure land management methods are culturally and environmentally appropriate.

Education of non-indigenous people in schools, local council programs and other avenues, on indigenous traditional knowledge of environmental systems, food and medicinal plants, sustainable living and historical environmental cycles would be of substantial value for improving community environmental sensitivity, respect for and relationships with our First Nations people and our own long term survival and ability to live sustainably, in harmony with this land.

Should you require any further information, please contact my office on [redacted].

Yours faithfully

[redacted]

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