

REPORT ON PROCEEDINGS BEFORE

**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON
ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING**

INQUIRY INTO FOOD PRODUCTION AND SUPPLY IN NSW

At Jubilee Room, Parliament House, Sydney, on Friday 25 March 2022

The Committee met at 10:30.

PRESENT

Mr Alex Greenwich (Chair)

PRESENT VIA VIDEOCONFERENCE

Mr Anoulack Chanthivong
Mr Nathaniel Smith

* Please note:

[inaudible] is used when audio words cannot be deciphered.

[audio malfunction] is used when words are lost due to a technical malfunction.

[disorder] is used when members or witnesses speak over one another.

The CHAIR: Good morning, everyone. Before we start, I acknowledge the Gadigal people, who are the traditional custodians of this land. I pay my respects to Elders of the Eora nation, past, present and emerging, and extend that respect to other Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders who are present. This is the second hearing of the Committee's inquiry into food production and supply in New South Wales. We have witnesses taking part via videoconference and also attending in person Parliament House today. The hearing will be broadcast on Parliament's website. I thank everybody for appearing before us today. We appreciate the flexibility of everybody involved, especially those attending via videoconference.

Mr GUS DANNOUN, Executive Manager, Seafood Trading, Sydney Fish Market, before the Committee via videoconference, sworn and examined

Mr ERIK POOLE, Innovation and Technical Manager, Sydney Fish Market, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: We will now begin with our first witnesses. Before we begin, do you have any questions at all?

GUS DANNOUN: No questions at all. I extend the apologies of Greg Dyer, CEO of Sydney Fish Market. Unfortunately, he had another appointment clash, which required his urgent attention, hence the reason you have me and Erik.

The CHAIR: Would either of you like to make an introductory statement?

GUS DANNOUN: Yes, we will. Do you want to start, Erik?

ERIK POOLE: On behalf of Sydney Fish Market, as the largest business of its type in the Southern Hemisphere, we would like to thank you for inviting us along to discuss our submission. I will address the first couple of points relating to improving food security and equitable access to food. Sydney Fish Market sells over 500 species of seafood during an annual year. The point of that is a lot of these fish species—we supply a wide demographic. Pretty much every suburb in Sydney, plus some other interstate destinations, purchase their seafood through the Sydney Fish Market. We believe very strongly in our seafood sustainability principles, which dictate that supplies have to be registered. They are approved businesses. We have traceability systems in place, and the seafood sectors that we source from are all sustainably managed. This is something that is very dear to Sydney Fish Market's heart.

We also believe that by keeping seafood supply coming from the commercial sector, it is allowing equitable access for all Australians to consume the seafood. There is continuous pressure from other interest groups, which seeks to, in our view, privatise the supply of seafood. In that only people with boats, essentially, can go out and catch it. We believe that by keeping it in a commercial catching sense, every Australian can have access to seafood into the future. There has also been some media coverage around the purchase and the subsequent retirement of fishing rights by NGOs. We see this as a threat, going forward, to the seafood industry. It was in another state, but eventually the same thing could happen in New South Wales. To keep access to that seafood—and we completely believe in the science-based approach to fisheries management—the government needs to take note and, where possible, ensure the future of access to seafood in New South Wales. Sydney Fish Market absolutely appreciates the government's massive investment, which is the biggest in Australia's history, into the seafood sector. With a new fish market coming up, the continuation of supply to sustainable seafood needs to be preserved.

Regarding the preservation of productive land and water resources, as all would be aware, the recent floods have had a massive impact on the North Coast, especially, of New South Wales. Fishing sectors around Ballina, especially, with Lismore further upstream, have been devastated by these floods, and obviously we appreciate the government's help, where possible, to assist those communities. Also, regarding the food production and the environment and a reference to overfishing, as mentioned earlier, Sydney Fish Market supports strict science. We work very closely with the NSW Food Authority, as well as the DPI, regarding our access and also defence of certain fish stocks in regard to poaching of abalone and other things. I will hand over to you, Gus.

GUS DANNOUN: Thank you for the opportunity to present on behalf of the Sydney Fish Market. To expand on what Erik has had to say, in essence, Sydney Fish Market is an organisation that has been in operation—and in its previous form as a statutory authority—for nearly 80 years now. It has been such a long time. It was based on the premise that it is one marketplace where fishers and buyers can come together. But in recent years, the pressures put on a business like Sydney Fish Market, and for those opportunities for fishers and buyers to gather are becoming harder and harder. There is a lot of pressure in our industry, as we stand. Erik just touched

on what Mother Nature can do and how floodwaters can devastate an industry, and it can have such a [inaudible] and a devastating impact that often takes months to recover.

The thing that we would probably try to bring home to the Committee as much as possible is preserving access to food, and we do see the seafood industry as one of those industries that is most certainly providing a nutritional, healthy food source. The means by which we go about harvesting or producing that, by and large, has minimal impact on the environment. It has been proven over the years that most of the issues we tend to find on the coastal fringes are not as a result of fishing or overfishing; they are usually land-based operations, yet it is always the seafood industry that seems to bear the brunt of that. Quota systems are something that I can only implore the government to work further with. The experience that we have from across the ditch in New Zealand—I have visited there over many years, and quota has been first and foremost in their fisheries management. Yes, there is some pain along the way, but the long-term benefits of such an arrangement has some benefits, upstream and downstream, and it is something that can only be implored to progress further.

Having said that, as Erik touched on, we are hearing more and seeing more and more likely to see further action in this area where NGOs are going to be buying up statutory fishing rights and basically putting them on the shelf. That is not only denying opportunity for a viable operator, a commercial fisher, to continue working, but also denying Australians, particularly in New South Wales, opportunities to access their own seafood sources. This is of utmost concern to the Sydney Fish Market.

The areas around the workforce challenges, it is not very hard to see that it is not the most—it is not an industry where it is going to attract a lot of people. There is nothing glorious or glamorous about what we do in the seafood industry. It is hard work. It is long hours, it is cold, it is wet—all the things that would put you off working in the industry. But for those who see it as an opportunity, those opportunities are made even more difficult by the fact that it is hard to get into the industry. You need lots of money, you need access to quota, you need access to boats, and you need access to a fishing licence.

Banks do not really want to talk to you unless you come armed with deep pockets, with plenty of money, to actually enter the industry. Having said that, we have an aging population in terms of the commercial fishers. The average age—I do not have the exact figures but, last time I saw it, it was in excess of 55. That only tells you that it will only decline even further, with very few young people coming in behind to support those. In our submission we made the point that in the 1980s there were some 3,500 commercial fishers in New South Wales. Today it is approximately 700. With a reduction like that, it will not take much more to tip that over the edge.

The commercial fishing sector may become unviable for many. But, having said that, for those who operate, they still see opportunities, but those opportunities are being made more and more difficult, out of the fact that there are areas of fishing grounds which are closed, which is making it harder for them, so they are concentrating more on smaller areas. Oftentimes, when they go out to fish, the quota systems are set, which is a good thing—there was a bit of hurt in the beginning, but in the long run there are some benefits there. I guess it is about protecting access to all of that. And some things do not change because, at the moment, the track that it is on suggests that, at some point, there will come a critical threshold that we will reach, where it may be a crossroads that the industry cannot turn around from. Moving away from that, how do we preserve what we do catch, and how do we present it in labelling? Sydney Fish Market has also been in the forefront on this over a long period of time.

The Fishmonger Standard was a breath of fresh air as far as we were concerned. When that standard was developed and emerged in 2007, SFM was the first company to put its hand up and say, "Yes, we are going to go by and stick with this standard. We will preach it from the highest points that we can to all of our stakeholders." We brought them on this journey. By and large, the majority of the suppliers that we use conform to the standard. Where they do not, we work with them on that. We adjust and we correct. But, at the end of the day, it is a standard that needs to be more than just a standard. It needs some teeth behind it; it needs to be mandated. I know it is a conversation that is unfolding in every state, and also at the federal level. But it is something that is absolutely critical to this industry, because it is about providing confidence to the consumers.

Yes, we need to provide them with healthy opportunities, in terms of their food sources and security to that, but also they need to know that what they are eating is actually what is being labelled. All of that is absolutely essential. I know we have country of origin labelling, and that is a massive leap forward, and a good leap forward in terms of that, but it does not extend far enough. We need to think more about how we can help the industry along, and the many in it who are really struggling. There is nothing wrong with imports. SFM does support imports. At the end of the day, it is an important source of seafood—even more than what we can produce in this nation—but I think it is appropriate that we give the consuming public out there the opportunities to know, when they buy their seafood, that they not only know what they are buying, but that they also know where it is coming

from. So those are the things that I wanted to mention in my opening remarks. Thank you for the opportunity to extend those.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. Mr Poole, you flagged in your introductory remarks the recent flooding in various parts of New South Wales, particularly northern New South Wales. For the benefit of the Committee, could you let us know the impact that has had on fish supply and supply chains as you would see it from the fish market's point of view?

ERIK POOLE: The number one impact would certainly be access to the resource. A lot of those flooding events obviously impacted low-lying areas. A lot of our fishers actually operate from those areas. On top of that, while they could not go out, because there is debris in the water and there are new structures that have been washed out from upstream, it can actually be quite dangerous for fishers to go out. For example, if they are trawling a net, and it gets hooked up on some foreign matter, it could potentially sink their boats. There is that aspect of it. Bad weather is also a [inaudible] incident. On top of all of that is transport. So, roads being cut off, and lack of access to have that product delivered. The majority of what we sell on the auction floor comes in via truck. With some of those routes cut off, obviously fishers who could catch fish could not even get it to market. Yes, it has been quite a big impact on those fishers.

GUS DANNOUN: I think the other environmental impact that we see as a result of these major floods— and it happens unfortunately every time there is a major flood—is the deoxygenation of the water. It has a massive impact on the fish environment. Again, we are reading the same reports that we read 12 months earlier when similar floods went through those regions down the Richmond River. The fish kills are absolutely enormous. People think, "What is the cause of that?" We know what the cause is, and it is not a new subject or a new matter. There are people who I have known for over 30 years who have been debating this issue with their local councils, about the flood mitigation gates, and what it is actually doing long term to the health of the river systems.

These are matters that are not new matters, but these are matters that keep reminding us, year after year, or time after time, when we do have floods of this magnitude, of the impact it has on the fish populations alone. It is probably that more than any other that could devastate an industry like ours. They are the sort of impacts that floods do have, and they also have downstream impacts, on everything from freight logistics to market operations. Consumers, at the end of the day, probably suffer the most, because the fish that is out there, that is available, is going to attract a higher price. They are going to be paying a lot more in the shops as well as a result.

The CHAIR: Moving from one disaster to another, in terms of learnings from COVID when it comes to supply chains and the fish markets, what would you like to share with the Committee?

GUS DANNOUN: It is interesting. Obviously, the fact that seafood was deemed an essential service allowed us to operate as a business, and obviously it was a vital chain, in terms of providing that food. From a COVID perspective, it illustrated to us how important food security is for the population. If markets like ours were not able to operate in that situation that we found ourselves in 18 months or two years ago, and moving forward right up until the last six months—yes, sure, we were working under restricted arrangements within our operation, but that did not prevent us from continuing to operate. From the fishers' perspective, yes, they had to ensure that they conformed to the measures that they were subjected to.

At the co-op levels or the local receiving depots, everybody who conformed to the measures allowed that flow of product to continue. The learnings for SFM were that, as an industry, we adapted very well, and we pivoted extremely quickly because, literally overnight, we all remember what happened. It was literally last week two years ago when Scott Morrison stood up and said, "This is what's going to happen." Overnight, we had to transform our business, and not only us, but our industry generally in New South Wales—and credit to them. They were concerned as to what would happen with a market like ours, as did the buying sector as well, because that is how they acted. Most of the buyers who supply seafood into Sydney rely on that floor in Pyrmont to access those products, and the wholesalers that operate around our precinct as well. The COVID lesson really emphasised even further how important food security was.

ERIK POOLE: It also highlighted the importance of an open marketplace, and a physical market here. Prior to COVID, obviously a lot of seafood trades around Sydney Fish Market directly to wholesalers and restaurants. When COVID hit, all of those chains were disrupted. We actually saw an increase in the volume and value of product traded through the auction. To be honest, without that auction, it would have been very difficult for a lot of operators to move their products. We kindly remind a lot of our suppliers now that, "We actually helped you through COVID as well." It was obviously mutually beneficial. But without having this marketplace here, and the ability to operate, it would have been very difficult for fishers to offload their catch.

The CHAIR: That is extremely interesting. I apologise, but I am actually allergic to all fish and seafood. I have more questions but I will share the time with my colleagues.

Mr ANOULACK CHANTHIVONG: Thank you very much for coming in and your submission and to do this virtually as well. I am actually interested in the labelling of seafood, in particular those that are obviously coming from international waters, which does not have the same standards as what an Australian regulation [inaudible] do. I am just wondering how we can improve that in particular. I go to my local fish market, for example, and am always looking out for the Australian barramundi because I know that barramundi from other parts of the world do not have necessarily the same regulation. How do we improve that for consumers, let them know that whilst the fish might be cheaper, it is not necessarily potentially healthier or not as clean as the Australian? I am just wondering what are your thoughts on how we could improve the current labelling and sourcing system to help our consumers and also give our industry a much fairer competition.

GUS DANNOUN: The country-of-origin labelling, as it stands now, works very well - to a point. The point that it works well to is for organisations like ours, and those that are handling fresh, unadulterated seafood, if I can call it that. This is what you typically see in your fish display counter in a local fish shop. Regulation requires it actually state country-of-origin labelling. Nothing passes through a business like ours without identifying the origin of that product, even locally caught product. We still by law have to specify it is an Australian product, which is a good thing. New Zealand is our next major source, but sources like Indonesia and other parts of the Pacific—all that [inaudible] passes through, and is identified. Under the next chain, which is your local retail shop, they too are required to identify it.

But where it stops, unfortunately, are those businesses that also offer a cooked component to their business, because what goes into the cooked ingredient does not have to be specified. It does not have to even state that is a South African flathead. They could just label it as flathead, and leave it as that. But it is not only South African—it means it comes from another source—but it is a different type of flathead to what we have in Australia. That is where the weakness is, in the country-of-origin regulation. Outside of that, it is very strong. The vast majority of the industry have adapted to it, and worked solidly with it, because they understand it is quite important for their customers to know where that source product is coming from.

ERIK POOLE: To add to that, one of the issues is that with the fish name standard, it is one scientific name, using the binomial nomenclature. One scientific name is one common name. So it is absolutely clear that, if you got snapper today and went back tomorrow, you would be getting the same thing. The issue with some of the, I guess, processed products is, they tend to use generic names. So you might go to your supermarket aisle and find something that just has "snapper" on it. But that could be one of 10 species or more, because the family of snappers is used in that case. Or, like Gus mentioned, with flatheads, we would assume that it is an Australian flathead, but the fish is actually caught in South American waters, and it is not even related to the Australian flathead. I guess that is where the tricky component comes in. The fresh and wholesale sector are forced to label correctly but other sectors are not.

Mr ANOULACK CHANTHIVONG: Thank you very much. It is such an important topic.

Mr NATHANIEL SMITH: Thank you for coming online today. I know it has been a crazy two years, with everyone getting used to doing these sort of things online. As I can say, I am a lover of prawns and calamari, as you can probably tell, and I was a regular at your seafood markets as a young lad—I can see Mr Anoulack laughing his head off right now—and also a very keen fisherman and deep-sea fisherman. So I really enjoyed your presentation. I am actually keen to know about the plans you have to develop the vocational training centre and trade courses to improve education opportunities in the fishing industry. That sounds really interesting.

GUS DANNOUN: It is. Thank you, Mr Smith, for your question. It is a new initiative for the Sydney Fish Market. It is something that has literally just been put on the table. It has gone beyond the agenda stage. We have actually developed it. We have actually submitted it to our board. Thankfully, they have agreed to it. It is something that SFM recognised quite some time ago was weak in our industry. That is, whilst we have got some organisations that are involved in aspects of training [inaudible], it is not comprehensive enough. Areas where there is a lack, or significant lack, whether it is vocational training or whatever, is in this area around training to be one of those fish processors, your filleters, your shuckers. These are specialist roles, whether people think of them that way or not. It is not that easy to just grab a knife and start cutting a fish and creating a fillet out of it. I implore anyone to try it. I have been in the industry a long, long time. I can tell you, I probably leave more fish on the bone than on the fillet itself. It is areas like that, but also training in food service and catering.

These are areas that SFM believes it can play a pivotal role in. It would not have gone down this road if it did not truly believe in it. Obviously, new development will give us the opportunity to expand that even further, but we cannot wait for 2½ years, when we move into this new building. We are starting the work today. So, in the beginning, we will probably utilise our existing seafood school to commence that work. But it is really about trying to reach out to whatever training institutes are currently out there, and working with them. If they are not there, we will develop those ourselves. I have not gone into a lot of detail, Mr Smith, because, as I said, we really are just at the early stages. But these are the high-level topics, if you like, that are on our books. [Inaudible] say,

within the next three to six months, you will start hearing and seeing more about what is it that SFM are doing on the educational front.

Mr NATHANIEL SMITH: Just on that, I know this came up in our hearing on Monday, we talked about educating kids in home economics, cooking at school. It does not matter if you are male or female, everyone should learn how to cook and prepare food. I think COVID has taught us all that. Everyone at home has experimented with sourdough bread and scones and all sorts of things and home-made pizzas. Yeast has been something in demand. I remember the first lockdown. Would you be looking at getting into schools and really pushing that this is how you scale a fish, this is how you do this and that? I think it is so important for kids. I was taught as a younger man how to do it from my father and my grandfather.

One of the pleasing things, I think, in Australia is that—there was a survey done for a client many, many years ago that I worked for. One in four Australians fish. If you look at the amount of licences that is issued through Fair Trading, that tells a huge story. I think the bait industry alone in Australia is worth \$10 billion and the boating industry is worth \$30 billion. So this is an important sector in our country. I think whatever the New South Wales Parliament can do to support this industry but also teach our next generation the benefits of it and the health benefits of eating more seafood—I understand the Chair cannot eat seafood, unfortunately. But fish is a very nutritious meal and is something that should be on the menu a lot more.

GUS DANNOUN: As I mentioned earlier, obviously we are in the early stages. In fact, I think we make a note of that. It is at early stages at present, but the government's support of these plans to develop further would certainly be greatly appreciated. The schools is an interesting one. SFM believes that is lacking. Obviously, getting to children at a young age, and giving, I guess, more of a balanced viewpoint to what is happening in our industry—they hear a lot about all the negative things about fishing. We would like to think that we can play a role in actually balancing that up with all the positive things about fishing, and let them draw their own decisions. That is really what the youth is all about, giving them those opportunities. At the moment, we do not believe those opportunities are there, whether there is an understanding of what the industry is all about, or also what the potential roles that you can play, as you get into that stage, looking at workforce, or where you might want to be. But it is a stepping stone. As I said, at the moment we have no boundaries around what our education portfolio might look like, but it is certainly one that we are putting a lot of resources into. You will be seeing and hearing more about it, as I said, in the very, very near future.

The CHAIR: Are there any areas, in terms of recommendations that this committee will make, or ways in which the New South Wales government could further support the education and skills development within your industry?

GUS DANNOUN: I am not suggesting that we overhaul the complete curriculum, but I think there needs to be, whether it is at the primary level or secondary level, at some stage in that, the introduction or exposure to what the commercial fishing sector and its role in the food security space is all about. I think that is not well known. People will, unfortunately, think food, it just appears on your supermarket shelf and we go there any time of day—these days, any day of the week, any time, you are able to go and buy it. But I think it is important to government that they look at the seafood industry and say, "Okay, it is a vital player in our economy, number one, but also in our food security, more importantly". What is it that they can do as a government to help get that message across? Because I think the young are our future; there is no point in trying to explain it to people like myself, in my age bracket, because we are looking now to our youth. I think that it is just spending a bit of time, working out what they could add to the curriculum that can explain these, I think quite important, social messages that are just not there at the moment.

The CHAIR: Thanks. If there are any further areas in which you feel support could be provided please feel free to share that directly with the Committee. In terms of just for my colleagues' benefit, obviously you have referenced the new fish market site, which is extremely exciting. Could you maybe share with the Committee the work you will be able to do at the new site that you were unable to do at the existing site?

GUS DANNOUN: Sure. The new market certainly provides a lot of opportunities. Not only will it provide an opportunity for the sector to be able to see that it has a vital future—because this building, where we are right now, is literally falling down around our ears, and people lose confidence. It is not the best of places to visit; it is old, it is tattered; I think people once described it as a bulldog, and the best we can do is put a bit of lipstick on it from time to time, but it is still a bulldog at the end of the day. The new market is not only going to be a centrepiece; I say with a lot of passion that it is going to be not only Sydney's or New South Wales' but Australia's next icon. It is an opportunity for the industry, it is an opportunity for the community. It is going to provide the opportunities that we do not have now—we started talking about the education earlier—but also an opportunity for SFM to enter into events, because it is going to be a great venue for the future as well.

As far as the commercial sector is concerned, yes, there will be more opportunities for operations in food service, including restaurants, cafes, even wine bars. So I guess, from a commercial sense, there are a lot more opportunities for people to come down. It is also potentially another magnet to draw people into the city. Public transport infrastructure is very keen for this, and there is a lot happening around that sphere at the moment. So it is really about projecting what the seafood industry in New South Wales can do for the community. We already know what its contribution economically is, and we have presented those in the past, but, moving forward, it is a magnet for tourism. We know that on the current site tourism is very strong. Unfortunately, the last two years has put a bit of a damper on that, but the opportunities in the new market are going to go exponentially much higher than what we have seen. So there is that drawback for more tourism.

Sure, the new market is going to have a novelty factor about it, but that novelty factor is going to be around for many, many years, and I think people will just be excited about it. But internally, the business operators, they certainly see their opportunities. They have always been a bit concerned about what might happen on this site. This gives them a little bit more assurance, but also opportunities for new operators to come in and show their craft as well. So from a commercial fishing sector, it is an opportunity for the fishing fleet to know that they can still call Sydney their home. They were concerned that they may not have a home. And, yes, we still have, believe it or not, a viable fishing community—smaller in number than what we used to know, but certainly they see it as an opportunity, and also for visiting vessels to come into the port of Sydney more frequently than what they have been able to in the past.

So it actually ticks a lot of boxes. I can talk probably all day on this, but I am just mindful of the time[inaudible]. The new fish market, I guess, for someone like myself, who has been involved in the market for a very, very long time, this is about 25 years in the making, and that is how much we truly believe that this market location, proximity to the city, its iconic nature, its contributions, is something that we could not afford to lose. It is so unique in many, many ways, compared to other markets around the world—and I have had the benefit of visiting many of those. We truly are one of the very, very, very few that incorporates everything that you see on this site, from a tourism destination to a wholesale operation, a key supply chain operator to retail, a community interest, and that in the future, potentially, with more events and, as I said, the education opportunity, you do not see that with really many markets around the world. So the uniqueness of what we have to offer here is something that the industry knows is a legacy that we are going to leave behind for many, many years to come.

The CHAIR: If I could just ask, following on one of Mr Smith's questions, a number of witnesses have told us the need for school students to have an experiential understanding of food supply and production. Are school visits something that you think will be part of the new fish markets as well?

GUS DANNOUN: Most certainly. As I said, it is one of the things that I probably did not outline sufficiently enough, but it is bigger than understanding to these students at the end of the day is what this industry is all about, and it is not just about going out on a boat, casting a net in the water, and bringing out a haul of fish, and then hoping to sell it off to the first operator that is willing to buy it. There is more to it than that. There is a lot that happens—for starters, the sustainability aspects of our industry; why do we take the position that we do, with how often we can go to work, and when we go to work, and when we do not go to work? There is that science that is behind it. I remember when I first started here, a long time ago, people used to say fishing was a lifestyle for commercial fishers. It took them a long time to grow up, I suppose, and realise that they actually have played a pivotal role, and that role is really about that they were an important food source. So when they got their minds around it they started seeing themselves a bit different, they realised how important they were to that whole supply chain.

ERIK POOLE: Just to add to that, I guess, as a masthead of the industry here in Sydney, we already get students—not so much during COVID ,but before that there were student groups and [inaudible] tourists. There is also a cooking school, that is used as the Sydney Seafood School, that runs some of their classes. I think that is an integral part of any sort of education system, and, going into the future, if we could set something up where that is expanded. I think the biggest benefit of the new market is it is designed for purpose. This building here is an old paper store, completely unfit, and obviously is falling down around us. The new market will be completely open to the public, in terms of visibility. Most people that come to our site do not even notice there is an auction hall in there. So having those glass facades like we will have, visibility from retail areas down to the wholesale floor and auction area, I think is going to be wonderful for the industry, because it will portray what we do really well, which is catch sustainable seafood and get maximum value for it.

GUS DANNOUN: Sort of taking it out from behind a wall and just showing it to the world. It would not matter where you walked around the building, you will get to see what actually the fish market is all about.

The CHAIR: Despite my allergies, I am extremely excited about the new fish markets and really appreciate you sharing your excitement with the Committee for that. Unless my colleagues have any follow-up questions, I would just like to thank you both for appearing before us today, for your passion and for the

information you have provided us with. We may send you some further questions in writing, potentially from Ms Wilson, who is unable to join us just now. Your replies will form part of your evidence and may be made public. Would you be happy to provide a written reply to any further questions?

GUS DANNOUN: Most certainly, and welcome as many questions as you might have, Chair, from your Committee. We are happy to assist where we can.

The CHAIR: Many thanks. As you would be able to tell by the questioning, this is a committee that is looking at ways to help and support some of the great work that is done here in New South Wales, including from the Sydney Fish Market. So thank you very much.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

(Short adjournment)

Mr DAMIAN MAGANJA, Research Associate, Food Policy Division, George Institute for Global Health, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

Associate Professor ANDREW McGREGOR, Member, Macquarie University Planetary Health and Equity Research Network, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: Would either of you like to start with any introductory statements?

ANDREW McGREGOR: Sure, yes.

The CHAIR: Go ahead.

ANDREW McGREGOR: Very briefly, I am a member of the Planetary Health and Equity Research Network, which is called PHERN. It is a group of academics at Macquarie University who do human geography and public health—so we a multidisciplinary group—and we are focusing on food systems as part of our work. We see it as something that needs different sorts of skills and ideas within it. I am on the human geography side, so I can talk on that aspect of it. Just two quick points, which may not have come through as clearly in the summaries as they could have, perhaps. The first is I really appreciate the fact that this inquiry is taking place, so thank you for organising it. I think it is so important. I am really encouraged about the range of the inquiry; it is challenging, but the range is good. And I really want to emphasise the need to take a food systems approach, where you are looking at production, distribution, accessibility, insecurity, consumption, health, and waste in a very holistic way. That is where the complexity comes in, and I think it is essential that we take a systematic approach, rather than compartmentalising things. I think it is great that it is taking place.

Secondly, I just wanted to say that, because of that complexity, I think one of the things which is really vital is the structure of forums for multi-stakeholder input, ongoing forums beyond this inquiry, things like food policy councils, and having overall food plans that target food systems—so thinking at that big scale, developing opportunities for multiple people to have input into that, including very marginalised groups. That is my very brief summary at the beginning.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. Mr Maganja?

DAMIAN MAGANJA: Firstly, I would like to note that part of our submission also included the perspectives and experiences and projects of First Nations peoples of New South Wales, that was led by colleagues in our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Program in collaboration with the Dharriwaa Elders Group and the Walgett Aboriginal Medical Service. They also provided their own submission. I am not an Indigenous Australian so I will not be discussing that evidence, but I am very happy to take any of that on notice and confer with my colleagues.

Secondly, I would like to support Professor McGregor in talking about food systems. COVID-19, and all of these very recent environmental issues have highlighted the vulnerability of our current food systems to external shocks. The discussion, fundamentally, has always revolved around quantity—products lined up on shelves, products stacked up in cupboards or fridges—rather than the quality of the food that is available and accessible. This focus obscures that more insidious long-term shock to our society and economy from a food system that is fundamentally encouraging and prioritising production and consumption of the products that cause disease and early death. So we very much appreciate that this inquiry has been called. We urge the committee to adopt a more holistic understanding of food security and what our food system is in New South Wales. Thanks very much.

The CHAIR: Thank you for that. I might start with questions there. In your submissions you both talk about the need to improve monitoring and measurement. It is obviously one of the key starting points to us having a proper food security plan or establishing a food security authority of some sort. In terms of what you would like to see to measure food security in New South Wales or Australia, could you maybe both take us through the monitoring and measuring tools that you think need to be in place, and potentially examples of where that is done well?

DAMIAN MAGANJA: Professor McGregor, after you.

ANDREW MCGREGOR: Look, I think there are some pretty straightforward tools out there—the USDA's survey of food and security. There are different numbers of questions you can ask for increasing accuracy, but the basic survey is only six questions, which I think does give you a really effective way of assessing food security, and measuring that across different geographic areas. So you could look at different council areas, different parts of the state where food insecurity is going to be at different levels. I think the really important thing is to have that baseline. Foodbank already does some of that, which is really great, but I think we need government baselines that enable us to identify the areas that need support for different types of people. So we need demographic dimensions in there, for different types of people who are suffering the most and needing the most support, and then using that to set targets of where—not only to set targets, but also to track the progress of initiatives that are taking place. If we do not have that sort of measurement then, obviously, it becomes difficult to know what is working or is not working.

In terms of where it is done well, I would not be able to give you a particular case study, but I could probably consult with my colleagues and get back to you on that one. But obviously there is a lot of work on this in the United States, in particular, and Europe—those sorts of areas. If you like, I can get back to you with some good case studies that you could look into.

The CHAIR: That would be wonderful.

DAMIAN MAGANJA: I suppose a lot of the more comprehensive tools have already been applied by researchers in Australia, not by governments—although the Victorian Agency for Health Information, I think, did a really handy report that looks at different aspects of food security beyond just pure hunger. I think an important thing, when you are looking at different tools to use, is that it comprehensively looks at all of the different dimensions of food security and security paths. So beyond the availability or economic access, it also should account for the knowledge, the practices, the skills that people have to actually use healthy food to their full potential, and also about the stability, I suppose, of the long-term longevity of those kind of practices.

There is a tool that is being developed by a group up at the Queensland University of Technology. It is called the Household Food and Nutrition Security Survey, and it encompasses a lot more of these other dimensions, beyond pure availability or accessibility. That is a really handy thing that is being developed. I think it has been validated in a couple of studies across Australia. I think, moving forward, once a useful multi-item tool is being used, one really handy way that it could be used is to create, for communities, a system where they could track different indicators of food security—and water security, I suppose, as well—in their communities, so they can plan, and they can compare. They can also hold government accountable for all of those actions as well.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Yes, we know there is a problem when, as you said in your introductory remarks, there is no food on the supermarket shelves, and COVID and probably the recent floods as well have showed us some of the issues we have with food security and our supply chains. What do you think are some of the biggest learnings that the pandemic exposed about our supply chains and food security?

ANDREW MCGREGOR: Do you want to go first this time, Damian?

DAMIAN MAGANJA: Sure. One of the really interesting things that I have picked up recently, looking at the impact of COVID and the recent environmental disasters afflicting New South Wales, is that food prices have increased, which will worsen food security, obviously. They have increased because there has been a lot of panic buying. The cheapest products will always go first. There have been, obviously, disruptions to supply chains, with shortages there, and also higher operating costs, particularly with COVID. So this has really exacerbated food stress for a lot of people, not just across New South Wales, but across the country as well.

One of the salient points that has come out of our COVID-19 response across the country—the effective parts of the COVID-19 response—has been to improve food insecurity in some ways, once there actually were things on shelves, moving beyond the supply chain disruptions, where people did have extra capacity to purchase healthy products, to purchase enough food to live. That is a political choice, I suppose, to be able to do that, and that was something that was really fantastic to see. Once we got over the panic-buying stage, and the shortage stage, people could follow healthy dietary patterns.

The CHAIR: I imagine the challenge then is to sustain some of that as we move forward as well.

DAMIAN MAGANJA: Yes—moving beyond the kind of food charity approach to addressing food insecurity, where you hand out some food, or you make people go across to Foodbank or something, and addressing those kinds of deeper determinants of food insecurity, particularly relating to lack of access to nutritious food.

The CHAIR: Professor McGregor, what are the COVID learnings?

ANDREW MCGREGOR: One of the things that came out of it is, obviously, the extent of food insecurity in Australia became more well known amongst the public. Previously, only people who were food insecure knew about it, and some experts knew about it, but it was not widely spread how bad it was, or the extent of it. As more people have become food insecure as a result of COVID, that awareness has spread. There have been many more media articles, and much more concern. I think that creates the sort of space where you can actually deliver policy, because people understand that it is important, that this is not just a minority thing, and that it is an issue that is affecting huge amounts of Australians from all the different diversity in life.

I guess it highlighted some of the vulnerabilities within the food system, and the reliance that we have on food that is produced. I mean, it is always going to be the way in a big city, that food is produced in other areas, but maybe it highlighted the decline in the amount of food produced locally, in terms of resilience to shocks and those sorts of things. It also showed the reliance within the food system on third-party providers or community groups in particular. There is a huge amount of work going on from community groups to fill the gaps that have arisen and been shown and made very stark through the COVID crisis. I guess there is a concern there, that maybe there is not enough government action and government support in that space.

The CHAIR: I do have additional questions, but I might hand over to my colleagues. Mr Smith?

Mr NATHANIEL SMITH: I have no further questions.

The CHAIR: Mr Chanthivong?

Mr ANOULACK CHANTHIVONG: I am really interested in your submission, Professor McGregor, around the labelling and how you can better label for health components and also the source. I am wondering what more we could do to improve that and to give consumers more informed choice about products A and B—that if you buy this product, then this is how much impact it has had on its own or how healthy it is. I know there has been a lot of talk in the past about traffic-light systems and stuff like that. I am wondering how we could expand on that and improve the labelling process.

ANDREW MCGREGOR: There is huge demand, and growing demand, in the community, around the environmental impacts of food. It is part of the public conversation now, and the stats suggest there is a huge percentage of people who are interested in changing their diets, or who are actually changing their diets, in ways that are shaped by environmental considerations. Currently, it is not clear to consumers who want to take that action what the best thing to do is, in terms of environmental and sustainability issues. What I think is missing at the moment is government regulation in that area. There are lots of different sorts of eco-labels out there, but they are not consistent. Some are produced by industries. There is concern about how accurate some of these might be. So the outcome is just a level of confusion, a level of greenwashing taking place. Some foods are claimed to be sustainable, but are not. I just think there needs to be some sort of clear labelling or certification system that is done by the government.

You could look at some of the health star labelling, for example. People contest it, but at least it has been accepted that there is—again, I do not want to underestimate the contestation around the health label. But something that people can rely upon; they get a quick hit of "This has this sort of sustainability." It is very difficult to work out how to do that, because there is so much variability within production systems themselves. But if you wanted to focus on climate change or something, you could look at relative carbon emissions, or you could do something to do with water. There might be different sorts of labelling that you can produce. There is all sorts of action going on around the world, about the types of labels, and different institutions providing different ones. But it is just this lack of reliance, lack of certainty or trust in labelling systems at the moment that prevents people from taking action.

Alongside that, the government can do a little bit more about promoting healthy and sustainable diets. There is work, obviously, in promoting healthy diets; there is less work in promoting sustainable diets. We need government messaging about the broader diets that people can understand are generally going to be better for the environment than ones that are going to be less good for the environment, alongside more specific product-based labelling, which is more specific to that particular product. That then rewards growers who are producing good

food sustainably. It provides an incentive for them. There may be price signals for that as well. There are all sorts of things that can be done in that space.

Mr ANOULACK CHANTHIVONG: Thank you. Of course the food industry will resist these sorts of changes. From your research and maybe in consultation with the industry, is there any way we can try to bring them on board? Maybe better labelling might also impact the demand for some of their products, for example. I am wondering how we bring industry together and whether, based on your research, there has been any experience, or experiences from other jurisdictions, where improved labelling—whether sustainability- or health-wise—has actually looked at industry and government, I suppose, and not-for-profits coming together to produce a really productive outcome.

ANDREW McGREGOR: It is a good question: how you bring industry on board with some of these things. Obviously, different parts of the food industry will be supportive, and others will be less supportive. It will depend on the environmental impacts to some degree, because the industries that are having less impacts get rewarded, they get highlighted, and they will increase their market share, most likely, by that. How you bring industry together with some of these policies—I guess there are the learnings from what happens through the healthy star system. From overseas, again, I would probably have to do a little bit more research to give you some feedback on where that might have happened in a more productive way. But, yes, I am more than happy to do that.

DAMIAN MAGANJA: If I might jump in there quickly, at the George Institute we are currently developing a sustainability star rating, functioning much the same way as the health star rating for products. We are doing that independent of industry, kind of noting some of the complications that have arisen with the development of the health star rating system. Our sustainability star rating, planetary health star rating—I do not know if it has been settled yet—will drill down on carbon emissions, sustainability of packaging, and a few other bits and pieces. That is currently in the works. I am not sure if there is much that is publicly available just yet, but there is some work going on there on our own.

The CHAIR: Anything you could provide to us on that, even if not immediately, would be welcomed. When industry talks about mandated labelling, they refer to an increase in cost of food which then further impacts accessibility of that food. What would you say to push back on that to sort of counter that argument we will inevitably get throughout this inquiry?

DAMIAN MAGANJA: You can change product labelling to highlight the winners of the last NRL or AFL premierships pretty readily, but apparently putting warning labels on alcohol is going to take X amount of years and X amount of millions of dollars. I do not know how I feel about those arguments.

ANDREW McGREGOR: I guess there is the cost of certifying the product as well, to put the label on, but that could be subsidised, perhaps by government, if it is seen in the public interest to do so. Then, if people do not want to certify, they could get a label for the type of food that it is. If it is red meat, it gets a certain label, which is the average for that industry or something like that, but then if there are particular innovative farmers who do interesting things to lower the emissions in beef or whatever it may be, then they can apply for certification to get a higher star compared to the other ones. Yes, there are costs involved, but they can be subsidised or minimised in some way, so that all it is is a change in the label. For those who do not want to engage, they still have to put the score on, but they do not have huge costs involved. Just like Damien was saying, it is just the packaging price for those people.

The CHAIR: I was going to ask about consumer behaviour when it comes to labelling and any trends that have emerged and how consumers may be more interested to know what they are eating and where it comes from. What do you see as further education works, beyond labelling, that need to occur in this space?

ANDREW McGREGOR: I guess there are different sorts of ways you can influence consumption patterns. I guess that is what we are talking about here. Having informed consumers is obviously the most important thing, in terms of their decision-making skills. I think there are different ways of doing that, so through the Australian health guidelines, for example, which currently focus only on the health side of things, that could much more engage with a sustainable environment as well. It makes complete sense, because you have to have a healthy environment to have a healthy body, not just thinking about the food that is going in, but the environment that supports healthy bodies. Talking about sustainability in those guidelines—I know there is a bit of a push for that. I think that is a really good idea. There is education for schoolchildren that can take place; that is another way of trying to influence those sorts of things.

More generally, we are already seeing lots of different initiatives to reduce meat consumption, which I think is a really important component of this discussion, if we are talking about sustainability. In that space, there are lots of apps, lots of different sorts of tools—online tools people use to try to assess their emissions and

make informed decisions based on that. The promotion of different sorts of diets as well as—there are different sorts of subjectivities now. It is not like everyone is going to be a vegan or a vegetarian. There are now flexitarians, climatarians. There are all sorts of different identities out there, and just legitimising those identities, and making them part of the public conversation is important, because people can then step into this space and start changing their diets in line with their politics, and in line with their ethics, and their concerns about the environment. Whatever sort of information you can put out there through education, with all sorts of tools, I think, is really valuable. I think the state government having very clear statements about what they consider healthy and environmentally friendly is part of that.

DAMIAN MAGANJA: I was about to make that point as well. The New South Wales government has opportunities to really change the environment, so that it is not simply a matter of consumers having to go through all of their work, and digging out what is right, and what they want to consume. Say for canteens, there are already canteen guidelines around health that could incorporate sustainability. In NSW Health settings there are opportunities there to influence what is made available and what is promoted there. There are all these other avenues to change environments, more so than just relying on the consumer to make an informed decision.

The CHAIR: In this space, would you recommend any, or would you like to see this Committee recommend any, changes to regulatory frameworks or laws and, if so, could you go into some detail on what you would like to see?

DAMIAN MAGANJA: Sure. I am not a lawyer and I am not totally up to date on all of those New South Wales regulatory frameworks. I do know that there is the New South Wales Food Act, which has been modified in the past to really focus on public health, such as mandating the application of kilojoule labelling when you go to Maccas, and things like that. There is probably opportunity there to require certain labelling and certain changes to environments. Even if you wanted to go down the route, you could mandate composition limits on foods potentially, and also other kinds of strategies that rely planning frameworks.

There is the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act in New South Wales, which could change processes around how little communities engage with anybody who wants to install a second or third or fourth fast food outlet on the same street. That has, traditionally, been something that people expressed some discontent about, where these things get imposed upon their communities. There are probably opportunities there as well to strengthen engagement and make it a more meaningful engagement. Anything that goes down that route where communities can have a greater say in what actually comes into their communities is probably a good thing.

ANDREW MCGREGOR: Yes, I agree with those points. Going back to the opening statements, the development of a food plan by the New South Wales government would be a real step forward. That would be a multi-stakeholder developed plan, which could then lead to different sorts of regulations, but provide a voice for the different groups to have a say in that plan moving forward. Some of the things you could think about are around labelling and the requirement for that. You could send economic signals, through provision of subsidies or tax breaks or something like that, to make healthy food more competitive. Sometimes, it is easier to get a burger at McDonald's and it is cheaper than broccoli, and that is just not the way it should be. I am not sure how you could engage with that, but certainly making it cheaper and more easy for people to get access to good, healthy, nutritious, low-impact food would be a priority I imagine. Then there are public procurement policies. When government or different agencies of government are purchasing food, it can be informed by particular considerations around health and environment as well [audio malfunction].

DAMIAN MAGANJA: I think all jurisdictions in Australia are party to our national food regulatory system. There are also opportunities there to influence the national agenda. At the moment there is a review of the Food Standards Act, and it will apply to every jurisdiction in Australia, and also New Zealand. There has been some rumblings there that a lot of the public health objectives are being slightly undermined. So there is an opportunity for New South Wales to kind of really stand up in those discussions, not only departmental, but also at the ministerial level, to say that public health must continue to be a core objective of this, and it should not simply rely upon trade as an objective of our food standards.

The CHAIR: If my colleagues do not have any other questions, I would like to thank you both for your very detailed submissions. They have been of great assistance to us in our deliberations, as has the session we have had today. If you do have any further research or items which you have flagged that you would like to share with the Committee to further inform our deliberations, we would really encourage you to do so and to send those. The Committee may have some additional questions for you—particularly Ms Wilson, because she has been unable to attend. Your replies would form part of your evidence and be made public. Would you be happy to provide a written reply to any further questions?

ANDREW MCGREGOR: Yes, certainly.

DAMIAN MAGANJA: Yes, absolutely.

The CHAIR: Excellent. Thank you both very much for your time and your expertise. The Committee will now take a short break until 12 noon.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

(Short adjournment)

Mr YUSEPH DEEN, Chief Executive Officer, NSW Aboriginal Land Council, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for joining us today. I am in the New South Wales Parliament. I am Alex Greenwich, the Chair of this Committee. We are joined via videoconference by Mr Nathaniel Smith, who is the member for Wollondilly, and Mr Anoulack Chanthivong, who is member for Macquarie Fields. Before we start, do you have any questions at all about the hearing process?

YUSEPH DEEN: No, not particularly.

The CHAIR: Before we begin, would you like to make any opening statement or introductory remarks?

YUSEPH DEEN: Yes. I thank the Chair, the Deputy Chair, and Committee members for your time and the opportunity to speak today. My name is Yuseph Deen. I am the CEO of the New South Wales Aboriginal Land Council. I am representing the Land Council at the hearing today. I want to acknowledge country and pay my respects to ancestors, traditional owners, and Elders of the lands from which we are all participating in this meeting today. Just as a bit of context, the New South Wales Aboriginal Land Council is the peak body representing Aboriginal people across New South Wales. We have over 23,000 members, making us the largest Aboriginal member-based organisation in Australia.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. We will move to some questions now. Feel free throughout this process to take anything on notice or provide further information down the track. In the Aboriginal Land Council's submission, you suggest the Government could "assist Aboriginal people's food sovereignty and access to traditional foods by returning land to Aboriginal peoples and recognising customary rights". Could you maybe elaborate on that a bit for us?

YUSEPH DEEN: Yes. I will just go to my notes, if I may.

The CHAIR: Yes, please. Take your time.

YUSEPH DEEN: Our particular focus around that, or our point, is that the bush food market is currently growing at \$20 million annually, but it is estimated that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make up only 1 to 2 per cent of the market. Bush foods operations require the inclusion of legislative and policy reform to recognise, respect, and protect legal rights to country and knowledge. We know that Sydney University researchers concluded that specific traditional food production systems have the potential to provide a valuable way of using the environment in a productive and balanced way, if Aboriginal people are supported with the necessary resources—i.e. land, equipment, and market connections—to participate in the industry as it grows. Government support of traditional food markets will provide socio-economically sustainable means for Aboriginal peoples to further engage with culture, enhance food security, and potentially improve environmental outcomes.

The CHAIR: Thank you. In the Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council's submission, they spoke about issues around the supply of food to Aboriginal communities being "unaffordable and unstable" due to high food costs in regional and remote areas, insufficient infrastructure and food security issues. Could you share anything in that and any improvements that you would particularly like to see made?

YUSEPH DEEN: Yes. That goes to food security, by and large. Our point of view, and I guess that of everyone—citizens of Australia—is that it is a fundamental right. Despite this, many Aboriginal peoples in Australia, especially those living in rural and remote areas, do not have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs. There are numerous barriers to reliable access to affordable and healthy food. However, two significant barriers for Aboriginal peoples in remote New South Wales are the availability of stores, and the higher price of groceries in those stores that operate. Distance, lack of competition, and lack of locally sourced perishable produce drastically heighten the cost and availability of foods in regional and remote areas. The cost that is available is reported to be 15 to 20 per cent higher in remote areas, in comparison to major cities.

We know, and we have experienced it throughout the COVID pandemic, that the pandemic itself impacted supply chains, and panic buying deepened the inaccessibility and unaffordability of food in rural New South Wales. Aboriginal households, which are already forced to travel long distances to reach food stores, were particularly impacted by costs of travel, as stores ran out of stock. Supplies of emergency food relief are only temporary measures, and do not address the systemic issues underpinning food insecurity in these towns. Longer term food security solutions need to be developed that take into account structural inequities throughout New South Wales. There is strong evidence that locally based community-designed solutions to food insecurity are more successful than top-down government-controlled approaches.

Community ownership is important, because it provides a mixture of autonomy and accountability, and it helps to ensure commitment and buying from community members, as well as contributing to community capacity, so that communities can address their own needs. There is also an interrelation between food unavailability and other key human rights issues that impact the Aboriginal people in New South Wales, such as health, housing, transportation, education, employment, and training. What we are asking the government to consider is, when attempting to address food insecurity and engage with Aboriginal community-controlled organisations, to improve workforce retainment and skills development of Aboriginal employees through culturally supportive employment and training methods, governments can seek to build prospective collaborations and genuine and meaningful partnerships between Aboriginal peoples and governments.

The CHAIR: Your submission talks about the outback stores model for Aboriginal communities. Could you talk to that a bit?

YUSEPH DEEN: Successful community stores have been established by some remote communities throughout Australia. The Arnhem Land Progress Aboriginal Corporation has been successfully operating for over 40 years, and its range, pricing, and operational standards have been reported as the blueprint for Outback Stores models. Goodooga, which is in the north-west part of New South Wales, was without any fresh food for more than a decade, after its only general store shut down, forcing residents to make a 150-kilometre round trip to buy their groceries. Through our business enterprise program, the NSW Aboriginal Land Council worked with the National Indigenous Affairs Agency and other stakeholders, including North West Land Trust and Murdi Paaki Regional Enterprise Corporation, to secure funding to open a community store in Goodooga.

The partnership instilled government confidence in the prospect of the store, and in 2019 the Australian Government announced that it would contribute to the cost of building the store. The store is currently being built on land owned by the Goodooga Local Aboriginal Land Council. The Government, NSWALC, the ILSC, Outback Stores, and the Regional Enterprise Development Institute all contributed to the \$2.8 million needed to build the store. Besides food security, a focus on the employment and training of local Aboriginal people, and the fact that the majority of net profits go into improving the store infrastructure and services has been integral to the success of the community store model. This type of partnership presents a potential way forward for remote Aboriginal communities.

Mr NATHANIEL SMITH: Thank you for joining us today. I mentioned this with some of the other witnesses on Monday. One of the things that I have been pushing very hard in my electorate, and other regions have been pushing, at the present moment is for the New South Wales planning department to change the planning instrument to make it a lot easier for landholders in regional areas—and this probably includes the Aboriginal land councils—to have a lot more capability of what they can do on their land in terms of agritourism. That means holding events like market days, farmers' day, a whole range of things, which is now sometimes restricted to local government LEP rules. How do you feel about that? I know in my area, for instance, the Aboriginal Land Council has quite a bit of land holdings. Would that assist with your bush markets and other things and even educating people about some of the wonderful traditions in the traditional Aboriginal food approach?

YUSEPH DEEN: I guess the use of Aboriginal Land Council land has been a vexed sort of issue for the land rights network, since the inception of the Land Rights Act. What I mean by that is, when land comes across, it is transferred as freehold title, so it is subject to the same planning laws as other sections of society. The unfortunate trend we noticed in the nearly 40 years of the Act was that, when those lands were transferred, because they were transferred to Aboriginal ownership, they always seemed to be categorised as high environmental values to tick the box on that element of the LEP.

One of the fixes to that has been obviously this focus on the ability to change, influence, or manage the change of local planning laws. To be able to have what we call in the land rights network a pathway to activate land in a more efficient and timely manner would result in being able to move into that space of testing the highest and best use of land in Aboriginal ownership. If that relates to food production, then obviously that is for the local Aboriginal Land Councils to determine, because they are independent legal entities in their own right. But the precursors or the prerequisites to that, in terms of those barriers around planning, if they were addressed, whether it be through a SEPP or other means, will facilitate better use of land, I suppose.

Mr NATHANIEL SMITH: So are you finding that the E2 zonings, and possibly E3, are inhibiting those individual Aboriginal land councils on progressing or getting the best out of that lot of land they have in that region? One of the intentions of this change is to obviously help with drought. Farmers, people in food production—whatever their farm—primary producers and dairy farms, they cannot control the amount of rain they get each year, but if they had other sources of passive income coming in through farmstays, market stalls or through weddings—currently, depending on the LEP, it does not allow for that, and that probably assists the individual Aboriginal land councils throughout New South Wales.

YUSEPH DEEN: Yes, that is correct. It may not necessarily be a majority view, but there is a fallacy that Aboriginal people only want land to preserve that cultural heritage side of things. We want to be fulsome participants in the economy. Like any other landowner, if there are income streams, and if there is an opportunity to diversify in terms of those income streams, and there is a barrier to that through the planning laws, then the local Aboriginal Land Council will obviously be in favour of looking at ways to create pathways to be more efficient around that.

The CHAIR: Just following on from Mr Smith's questions, throughout a number of submissions that we have received and witnesses who have appeared before us, two key things have been the need for greater learnings of Indigenous food security practices and also the need for younger people to have more of an experiential education when it comes to food production, food supply, feed security and food practices. Following on from Mr Smith's question, do you also see that there could be an educational value, particularly for young people, in that as well?

YUSEPH DEEN: Yes, we are in that age of greater access to information, whether it be the positives or the negatives of social media, and so on and so forth. We always say that an important piece of the jigsaw puzzle is around education and information. It makes sense that the focal point should actually be on our youth, because they are obviously going to be the people in the offices, the people in manufacturing sector, and the people in the shops into the future, and our leaders of the future. The idea that a key element should be around education resonates with our overall continuum of uplifting the rights and the health and wellbeing of our Aboriginal people, because it is just not logical that we can progress without that key piece in play.

The CHAIR: You may need to take this on notice, but in terms of Mr Smith's questions again, any particular recommendations that the Aboriginal Land Council would like to see in terms of planning control changes that could help facilitate being able to really fully participate in the land, without limitations, in a way which is appropriate for the various different land councils would really be appreciated. This Committee is an opportunity to make those specific recommendations.

YUSEPH DEEN: I will take that on notice, noting that we have been doing work in the background around trying to mitigate or make the planning laws a little more user friendly, I suppose, in terms of activating land.

The CHAIR: In terms of anything that you would like to see on increasing the opportunities or access for Aboriginal land business ventures when it comes to food production supply and food security, are there any other recommendations that you would have for the Committee?

YUSEPH DEEN: At the NSW Aboriginal Land Council I would suggest that it has always been on our agenda, but it became more of an important issue, because of not only COVID, but also the impact of floods, and that downstream impact on supply of food to rural and remote communities, but also in regional and urban communities as well. We saw it through the panic buying, and the impact on the supply chain. But the key for food security from our perspective is the tyranny of distance. People are remote, so they do not have a corner store down the road. If they do, the prices are extreme. I have even witnessed that or experienced that myself, not only in New South Wales, but in other parts of Australia, where you walk into a store and the cheapest food is the most unhealthy food in the store. The fresh fruit and vegetables seem to be the highest priced items in the store. That does not promote healthy eating, and that does not promote healthy living, and so on and so forth.

It is a longwinded response or answer, in the sense that our focus is on a couple of prongs. One, is it viable for not only Aboriginal landowners, but the general economy, to have food production closer to populations? And also, the need to have stores in place that will promote that healthy living, as well as food security. If there are none, what are the other options? Those options might be the services that either the big chains can deploy, through delivery of food, or boutique, or even Aboriginal land enterprises, in being able to supply not only Aboriginal people, but the broader population. Because that is essentially what the focus is. It is not just Aboriginal people who suffer food insecurity in rural and remote areas; it is everybody. It is just that some people have the means to circumvent that, through income and wealth—for want of a better term. From an enterprise point of view, there is a need to work in partnership with government, and particularly from a NSWALC perspective because the funds that we operate off—we are self-funded, if people are not aware of that—were

established for the dispossession of New South Wales. To be able to provide those citizenship rights around access to food, we need a consortium or a partnership. It is really a partnership approach with the government around how we solve that food security problem.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for appearing before us today and also for the great submission that was provided with lots of learnings for us. I gave you that question on notice about the planning controls, but we may also send you some further questions in writing. Your replies will form part of your evidence and be made public. Would you be happy to provide a written reply to further questions?

YUSEPH DEEN: Absolutely.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for your time today and for your submission. We greatly appreciate it. We will now take a break. We will be back at 1.45 p.m.

(The witness withdrew.)

(Luncheon adjournment)

Dr NICK ROSE, Executive Director, Sustain: The Australian Food Network, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

Mrs AMORELLE DEMPSTER, Member of the Slow Food International Council, Slow Food Australia, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: We would like to invite both of you to make any introductory remarks. Mr Rose, we might begin with you if you have any prepared remarks you would like to provide us with.

NICK ROSE: Indeed. Mr Chair, and honourable members of the Committee, I am delighted to attend the hearing today, representing my organisation, Sustain: The Australian Food Network. I wish to begin by acknowledging that I live and work on the un-ceded lands of the Wurundjeri and Bunurong peoples of the Kulin nation, and pay my respects to their Elders, past, present, and emerging, and to any First Nations persons who may be in attendance today, or subsequently watching this testimony. Our mission is to design and build better food systems. Our vision is of an Australia where no-one is hungry or food-insecure, where our diets enable us all to live full and happy lives in radiant health, and where our agricultural and land management practices restore our river catchments and ecosystems to states of flourishing abundance.

Sadly, as we and many others have documented, we are far from that vision today. I have said and written previously that our food system is not merely dysfunctional, but rather that it is killing us and the life systems on which we depend. I could cite any number of statistics to support that statement; however, here is one of the most important: Since colonisation, 100 species have become extinct in Australia and a further 1,900 are now threatened with extinction. Land use change and agriculture are primary causes. We humans are part of nature, not separate from it. Meaningful proposals for food system reform in this country must proceed from that fundamental fact of ecological science.

This inquiry is taking place in a period of great uncertainty, threats, and disruptions to our food supply, and to household food security, especially for the most vulnerable members of our communities. While the supply chain disruptions of COVID are still with us, they have been overshadowed in recent weeks with the devastating floods in northern New South Wales and south-east Queensland, and now the Russia-Ukraine war. For vulnerable populations in New South Wales and across Australia, these events mean much higher food prices and cost-of-living pressures and, therefore, substantially greater risks of food insecurity. The Committee's work could therefore not be more timely or important. I commend this initiative and urge Committee members to take this opportunity to embrace and articulate a bold vision and reform program for a healthy, sustainable, fair, and resilient food future for all New South Wales residents. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Rose. Mrs Dempster.

AMORELLE DEMPSTER: Mr Chairman and the honourable members, I am here representing the global slow food movement, and the affiliated groups in Australia. We are a grassroots, volunteer organisation working to preserve food biodiversity, advocating on behalf of small-scale farmers for rights to water, land, and market opportunities, and educating customers as to the value of biodiversity in their diets for health and wellbeing. We are pretty much grassroots. All our work is designed to bring food security and affordable, good, clean, and fair food to all. Our projects are building sustainable regional food systems—we concentrate purely in the regions, certainly looking at all the various regions in New South Wales—that improve local food security, reduce food waste at the farm gate, converts fresh food waste into nutritious food for the disadvantaged from the

farm gate, because there is a lot of waste there, create local markets that preserve and encourage biodiversity, incubate new farmers, and mentor young farmers with more experienced farmers to share knowledge and experience that can be passed on.

The catalyst for our work in the lower Hunter is a blueprint for the work that we do around New South Wales, and a lot of groups in New South Wales. In the lower Hunter was the 2016 flood that destroyed a local farmer's crop of pumpkins. The agents' rejection, and the control of the food system, due to mud was catastrophic for this farmer. Leave aside the rest of the crops that were destroyed by the farm. With community support, 20 tonne of pumpkin was sold in one day. Now this farm is a thriving, biodiverse farm, because much was learnt. The pumpkins were seen as a commodity. But now, with biodiversity, fresh food is seen in a different light. The community then insisted on local food grown for local people. The resultant Earth Market, now operating over five years in Maitland, is a transformative example of what can happen to an entire regional food system when access to market happens.

With good policy from this committee, we believe that regional food security for New South Wales can be achieved. Some of the changes we would like to see is education for farmers, the introduction of technology, the education in technology for farmers as well, and planning as to where farms are located. With climate change and other disasters pending in the future, we would like to see some planning as to where we locate those farmers, and farmers' access to water as important elements from this committee. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Mrs Dempster. I might start with a few questions to you. That example you gave was a really important one, particularly when it comes to tackling food waste. We know that farms produce a great amount of food waste, which also was an issue raised with us directly by the NSW Farmers Association. Could you talk to us about recommendations or advice about what could be done to reduce food waste, from your experience or research, particularly when it comes to that produced at farms?

AMORELLE DEMPSTER: The farmers really are beholden to the agents. Farmers grow food that they can sell, obviously, because there is no access to markets, directly to the consumers. So the agents control what price is paid, where they get their produce from. With transportation becoming easier, the local, regional markets became non-existent, because agents could get produce from anywhere around the country, and overseas as well. We use that as an example or as a catalyst to make a change, to bring it to people's awareness. This farmer had nowhere to sell his food, unless the agent took it. There was no way you could polish off 20 tonne of pumpkin. There is no way. We tried, but we know it is impossible. It means that the local community does not get access to that food, because it just goes out to the agents, and to the wholesale suppliers. When that demand cannot be supplied, then the farmer just simply ploughs it in, and it is wasted. Unless there is some media campaign, like we did, to promote that this is happening, people are not aware that so much food is being wasted.

There is a lot of need, with disadvantaged people in the community, with socio-economic—people do not have access to fresh food. This is a good way to harness some of that excess produce as well, for food security for disadvantaged people in the community. So I think deal with that waste, make the supply chain much shorter, by creating local markets within regional communities, so that there are markets at all times. Every day of the week there should be a market where the local farmer can sell any excess produce he has, or produce that is biodiverse, that is not just the simple staples, that is good—as Nick said—for the food system, so they do not go into extinction. We need these local markets created. In our instance, Maitland City Council has been extremely supportive of these initiatives and have promoted, encouraged, financially supported us to create these markets, and to create the opportunities for the farmers, because they have seen the change in the food system. We are completely food secure.

The CHAIR: You talk about the need for local markets in urban areas as well. What do you see as the connection between those two?

AMORELLE DEMPSTER: I see a more technological way to deal with the markets in urban areas because of the distance that farmers need to travel. If there is a way to create supply chains through technology—currently there are small groups of farmers selling direct, but they are driving to all the different customers. They do not have the technological resources to be able to connect with all the urban farmers as well. I think that, going forward, technology would be a way to connect urban consumers with farmers. Because the land is so expensive around urban cities—I think it is really valuable to plan to have farms around urban areas as well, but to be able to use technology to connect those farmers together.

The CHAIR: The example you gave of Maitland City Council being supportive, is that for ongoing, permanent markets or is that more short-term or pop-up markets?

AMORELLE DEMPSTER: No, ongoing. Absolutely ongoing.

The CHAIR: That is obviously critically important in terms of the supply chain and reliability of food.

AMORELLE DEMPSTER: Correct. It has seen tourism—you see all the benefits that flow on. Jobs, young farmers. We started with three farmers; we have got 22 farmers now. People who never would have considered—there are lots of young people who are coming back on the farm, because they see now that there is opportunity, because there is access to markets, and they can be more biodiverse, rather than create commodities. Most of our local farmers are growing five crops a year, and if one of them was destroyed, then of course there is no opportunity. That just destroys their livelihood, basically. Our work is mainly working with those small-scale farmers to develop their farming system.

The CHAIR: Dr Rose, a lot of your submission talks about work that needs to be done to help empower the role of local government when it comes to food security. Could you talk to that and what changes you would like to see.

NICK ROSE: Absolutely. Just for the record, and for your information, our work in this area has taken a number of forms. Notably, we have been working with Dr Belinda Reeve of the Law School of Sydney University, and Professor Karen Charlton in the Faculty of Health at the University of Wollongong since 2019 on an Australian Research Council discovery project on strengthening food systems governance to the local level. I believe you have received submissions from Dr Reeve and Professor Charlton and others that detail some of the findings of that research. That is Australia-first research, comprehensively mapping the food systems policies and strategies at the local government level, across every council in New South Wales and Victoria, in order to understand leading practice at the local government level, and to propose a series of reforms and recommendations for local governments to work with stakeholders across the food system—their local communities, their local producers, and with the state government and others—to strengthen and improve local food systems. There is an extensive body of work and ongoing research outputs that speak to all of that.

Here in Victoria we have been working very closely with Cardinia Shire Council—which is in one of Melbourne's growth areas in the outer south-east, the outer suburban belt—since 2016 on the Cardinia Food Circles project. The centrepiece of that work in 2018 was the participatory creation by over 500 local residents of that shire's first community food strategy—articulating a vision for a healthy, delicious, fair, and resilient food future for all Cardinia Shire residents—as part of the ongoing long-term food systems change work that we and other stakeholders have been engaged in with Cardinia Shire Council.

There are many councils in Victoria. The ARC project documented 11 in total that have actually developed comprehensive whole-of-system approaches to these questions—food system strategies. Only two so far in New South Wales, so that is an immediate area of focus. We suggest that the food and agricultural system, being a system, it needs a systemic response, and an appropriate policy or strategy development process that involves all stakeholders in a participatory and deliberative process, working together to understand the strengths and weaknesses and opportunities and threats to their local food system, and to develop appropriate responses and action plans and priorities accordingly. That would be our principal recommendation, for a policy development process, and that is something that the state government can support.

I would also highlight that in Victoria this work has been well supported for many years by VicHealth, the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation. For the benefit of Committee members who may not be aware, that was created in the 1980s through hypothecated taxation, using revenue from tobacco taxation to create a dedicated health promotion foundation, with a budget of around \$40 million, of which \$28 million is disbursed annually in grants programs. They supported a flagship food security program, working with local governments—eight councils from 2005 to 2010—the Food for All project, building capacity across council and community, and supporting many innovative projects and policy development processes.

Now they have returned to that with their latest flagship, which is the local government partnership with VicHealth, directly funding a staff role inside 17 high-priority mainly regional and rural councils in Victoria to build capacity in food systems. That is supported by a learning module process. Ourselves and a number of other food system experts were involved in writing those modules. We focus on local government action for strengthening food systems through local government policy, as well as other initiatives and recommendations, including through holding an event, and through developing a food policy alliance or coalition or network at the local level.

We see local government as playing an important connecting role—networking, facilitation, enabling—and that can all be reinforced, and should be reinforced, through a strategy development process. Of course, policies are no good if they are simply paper sitting on a server somewhere; they need to be resourced with staff. That has been the experience in councils like Bendigo, which have really been leaders here, as well as Cardinia and others. The policies are accompanied by a dedicated staff role that has that responsibility for the implementation. Those would be some of my recommendations. I should also say, South Australia are working in this space. We have been working with nine councils across Adelaide in a citywide food system resilience project for South Australia—helping local government develop a shared vision for a stronger, more resilient food

system for Adelaide and for South Australia, and creating resources for those councils to take that forward. This is an emerging area of activity in many places around Australia.

The CHAIR: I have additional questions, but I will share some of the time with my colleagues.

Mr NATHANIEL SMITH: Thank you both for joining us today, in person and via video link. I was very interested in what you had to say about local government areas. I come from a regional council area: Wingecarribee and Wollondilly and the Southern Highlands and Wollombi shires. One of the things that our councils have been pushing, and we have been working with them with my neighbouring MPs, is changing the planning instrument to make it more desirable, to have passive incomes come from farms. As you know with smaller farms, sometimes they are not commercially viable. If they were to have green and red tape cut, they could have more functions and markets on their properties—without going through expensive DAs—and farm stays. Basically it would allow them to have a lot more versatility on their farm. We have seen in other industries around New South Wales and around the country—we see bowling clubs going broke, we see golf courses going broke, because it is not becoming a commercially viable concept. It is not a pub or a club where any public turn up. We are working on that with the planning department at the moment, and that should be finalised by the end of July. What are your views on that? It is mainly for agritourism; that is, where it is in the bush. It will allow those farms to continue rather than being bought up by a large landholder that will want to put homes there in the future.

The CHAIR: You are both furiously nodding. Mrs Dempster, would you like to start?

AMORELLE DEMPSTER: Yes, I think that is a good idea, because most of us drive around, and we can see land locked up, basically. With less water available, I believe golf clubs are really worried about keeping their golf courses going, because of a lack of water resources. Water is a major issue; you cannot grow anything without water. New pipelines et cetera—for example, in the Hunter Valley vineyards, the pipeline enables that whole industry to keep going, because they have water where they need it. Using up the space that is available to grow food means that the food is really close by, the supply chains are short, and it is ideal for the local community, so it is a good way to get food security happening.

The CHAIR: Mr Rose?

NICK ROSE: Yes, it is a really good point, and there are definitely things that can be done. The key point here is to have a more integrated understanding of the value of these properties and farms, as being not simply about agriculture. Their worth is very much the contribution they make to the landscape management, to the aesthetic, to the rural values, and to the amenities of those communities. They should be preserved for those reasons, and the question is: How can they be viable as working farms and businesses? Agritourism is clearly a good route to do that, as well as looking at diversified ways of using those farms—maybe transitioning out from previous sources of agriculture, that perhaps may no longer be as financially viable and possibly even, if it is appropriate, and there is agreement, land-sharing arrangements where younger people who experience barriers to entering agriculture, first and foremost of which being the cost of accessing land, have supported, low-cost opportunities to go and set up market gardens, or other types of appropriate land uses on those properties.

Planning has a really important role to play—you are absolutely right—in terms of red tape questions, and removing those obstacles and barriers. In fact, we have also got a piece of research that we supported down here analysing the planning frameworks and the local planning schemes in the 26 peri-urban municipalities around Melbourne, with exactly this question in mind: What are the barriers and enablers to support small-scale, diversified, and financially viable agriculture in this peri-urban hinterland around Melbourne? One of the big things that came out of that was there is simply a lack of appreciation and understanding amongst planners themselves, in local government and in state government also, in terms of appreciating what the opportunities are, the challenges that producers are facing, and what the value of this land could actually be.

There is almost an educational job to be done, and an engagement and capacity-building job to be done, with the planners themselves—expanding their horizons, if you like. Again, I come back to this question of integrating that into policy and strategy, to align it with some clear priorities. Protecting, enabling, and supporting those kinds of land uses are an objective and a priority for local and state government planning schemes, for the reasons we have discussed.

I just wanted to mention a couple of other things that are relevant. A couple of years ago Agriculture Victoria, the Department of Primary Industries down here, with us and some others, developed an artisanal agriculture road map. We did a first-ever state survey actually mapping and documenting what the government here were calling the 'artisanal agriculture and premium food business sector' in Victoria, to inform the development of a targeted program, policy, and grants for that sector in particular. It was good to actually map the sector and understand it, and develop appropriate resourcing and support from state government to help it grow.

The other one that is worth mentioning at the state level, as a really good example, and I think this would have been mentioned in our submission, is in Vermont in New England, on the east coast of the United States—a statewide, state government legislated and supported farm-to-plate plan, as they call it in Vermont, which was legislated by the state government in 2009, funded by state government and philanthropy, and involved 350 stakeholders across that food system and multiple working groups, with university partnerships, and all kinds of research and metrics. It has just been renewed for a further 10 years; that legislation has been renewed and funded out to 2030.

That is the kind the whole-of-state, whole-of-system, integrated approach that is leading practice. That is very much supporting an agriculture transition. They were primarily a dairy, commodity state, and that sector was declining. The plan and the coordination was really helping farmers transition and diversify out of dairy into more viable land uses. It has been highly successful, and created thousands of net new farming businesses and jobs—first and foremost as an economic development strategy, but it has also supported the transition to more sustainable forms of production and addressed food security issues.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Mr Rose. Mr Smith, any further questions?

Mr NATHANIEL SMITH: No, that was fantastic. It is great to see that other States are doing similar things, and also other states in the US. As the economy changes, we have got to move with it.

The CHAIR: If there is any information you could send us about that Vermont example, Mr Rose, it would be really useful to send that through to committee staff.

NICK ROSE: Yes, I am happy to do that, Mr Chair. Just for your information, we had intended to bring the coordinators. The Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund is the statewide economic development agency that has been tasked with responsibility for the implementation of that plan, and we had invited them to Australia at the beginning of 2020 and then, of course, circumstances made that impossible. But we did end up having a series of webinars with them at the end of 2020, where they shared with an Australian audience the history of that farm-to-plate plan and its achievements. We looked at questions of planning and procurement. Those are recorded, public videos on our YouTube channel, which I am happy to send through as well.

The CHAIR: That would be wonderful, thank you. Mr Chanthivong, any questions?

Mr ANOULACK CHANTHIVONG: None for me, Chair. The questions I was going to ask have been responded to effectively. Thank you.

The CHAIR: I might go to the topic of education. We have heard a lot about the need for greater food education, particularly the need for students to have an experiential education, when it comes to food production and supply and understanding where food comes from. Could I ask both of you, starting with Mrs Dempster, to talk through your recommendations when it comes to improving food education in New South Wales?

AMORELLE DEMPSTER: Because we are working pretty much with the farmers, what I am finding is that there really is a lack of education. If we are asking them to diversify, and we are talking about biodiversity, the farmers we talked to had no idea what the word "biodiversity" even meant. That is a big education in language, especially, and then understanding what that actually means, and how they can transform into being a more viable business.

There is a lot of knowledge and skill within farmers. We have an older farming population, especially. But in order to transfer that, it is really important that we support colleges like Tocal in Orange, New South Wales, to have more horticulture. There is a lot of animal husbandry, but we are finding that there is no vegetable education happening in any of these colleges, because it was obviously not the thing. Large-scale farming is taught in Tocal, for example, but not small-scale farming. The organic farming course is no longer run, and has not been running for about five years, so we really need to bring that education back to those colleges in New South Wales, certainly.

I think that we need to teach farmers not just how to grow things; we need to teach them marketing, we need to teach them technology, we need to teach them about circular economies as well. All this new thinking, farmers need this stuff. I think we need, as Nick has said, to link them with the academics at the university. We have universities in New South Wales, all around, where we can link our farming communities within the regions to the universities, because they have agronomists who can help them. But the agronomists are not marketers, and agronomists do not see the whole picture. If you have got a grub on your corn, they can sort that problem, but they cannot see the bigger picture of farming as a business.

I think that the new generation needs farming as a business, and needs all of those skills that us businesspeople have to do our businesses, but farmers do not seem to have these skills to really pivot their businesses from just selling to the agents to selling direct to customers. That is a huge change. This education

needs to be given to farmers. It is simple stuff. This is not rocket science. But on a day-to-day basis, they need to have this information, because people like us are not always around to say, "Look, you know you can sell that to the local restaurant?" They go, "Really? How do we do that? How do we box it? Do we have to make a phone call?"

These are simple things that for farmers that we are dealing with really can make a huge difference to their business—simple things that we all know, but they do not know. We assume they might know, but they do not. So I think that is really important too, for education, that we do that, and then I think it is really important for children in schools. The Stephanie Alexander program has been very successful, but here in New South Wales I do not think it is funded. I think that it would be a really important thing too. Because if you are teaching children at the base level—I think it is funded in Victoria, Nick, isn't it?

NICK ROSE: Yes, there is some funding. And I think they have recently got some funding from the state government down here to, yes, expand their work, including into secondary schools. Previously, they were focused on primary.

AMORELLE DEMPSTER: Yes. So in New South Wales it would be, you know, that type of program, or encouraging farmers to do on-farm education as well—bring the schools to the farm. We have some examples of those in the Hunter Valley as well. So, funding those things. Because we expect that the local school might want to go for an excursion to the local farm, but the farmer has got to take a whole half a day. He has got to prepare the farm, he has got to mow the lawns, he has got to create parking. He has got to do all of these things, and if he is not funded to do that then I think—you know, bring to the farm agritourism, education on the farm, but facilitate that. Also, have education, food gardens, cooking. The Stephanie Alexander program I can recommend, because we have that in our area as well and it is very successful. I think that teaching children about where their food comes from is really important, so funding that.

The CHAIR: Dr Rose, anything further on education?

NICK ROSE: Yes, just a couple of points to complement what Mrs Dempster has said. With children having access to nature, to growing food, I think that is absolutely critical. That can happen at school, and there are many, many schools, I am sure, in New South Wales, and here in Victoria, that have got school gardens, whether it is with Stephanie Alexander or other programs. That is a great thing to support and encourage. Even where they do not, there can be other ways of helping children have access to those places. Where I am speaking from today, right now, is the Oakhill Food Justice Farm, which is the latest part of our urban farm network that we are seeking to establish here. I am sitting in a former vicarage of the Anglican church, St Mary's church in Preston.

The suburban garden around here, we received a bit of philanthropic funding and, with the church's permission to occupy the land, we are creating a suburban-based community garden—the Food Justice Farm, we are calling it—through raised beds and herb gardens and food foresting. The local primary school down the road, 200 metres away, which has 750 students in 30 grades, has come to us and said that they would like to bring every single one of those 750 children through here—

The CHAIR: Fantastic.

NICK ROSE: —over the next three months, to have hands-on learning experiences in the outdoors, and learning about where their food comes from, and learning about composting, and the benefits of healthy soil, and so on. So those kinds of touchpoints can be supported and enabled and are really valuable for kids. The big challenge for us, from a budgetary perspective, is health, the huge burden on the health system that poor diets is creating, the burden of chronic disease and all that goes with it. Healthy habits need to be encouraged and supported early. Helping children develop an appreciation and a taste for good food, for fresh food, a love of nature—all of these things are so important for so many reasons. They are easy to support and establish.

And just in terms of the regional question in New South Wales, I do not know if it has been mentioned to you in previous testimony, but I think an outstanding example that our city research team worked on is in the shire of Gwydir, with the Bingara Living Classroom. I think that is almost a world-leading example, really, that is in New South Wales. You can look at that at www.bingara.com.au/the-living-classroom/. It is in one of Australia's most productive agricultural and educational regions. As they say:

... [the Living Classroom] will create a visually beautiful and natural wonderland which showcases and demonstrates the future and wonder of food—from the soil up to paddock, to our plates and then back again. It aims to provide inspiration and know-how for the next generation of farmers and the regeneration of rural communities.

... 150 hectares of degraded town Common, located on the outskirts of Bingara are to be fully regenerated into a highly productive forest of food by combining a wide range of complementary agricultural activities with horticulture, aquaculture and forestry. The synergy between these activities is key to nutrition, productivity, profitability, health and the natural environment.

This work is an exercise in broad collaboration and integration, being designed and created by the collective efforts of the many participants of the modern food system as well as harnessing the best knowledge from traditional through to scientific and other contemporary farming methods.

I would strongly recommend that the Committee investigate that, if you have not already. That is an exemplary example in New South Wales of the kinds of collaborations and on-ground, practical, engaged education that really is central to your work.

The CHAIR: Thank you. In the short time we have left, could I ask some questions about recommendations to encourage and protect urban agriculture? We will start with you, Mr Rose.

NICK ROSE: Yes, absolutely. That is a subject that is very close to—

The CHAIR: I know I have probably not given you a lot of time—there is a great deal of it in your submission—so feel free if you need to take some of this on notice.

NICK ROSE: Yes, of course. I would like to do that. I am not sure of the timing of the Committee's report, and I am not sure if we made you aware of this, but we were recently commissioned by Agriculture Victoria to do a first-ever mapping of the agriculture sector in Melbourne, Ballarat, Bendigo, and Geelong, to really get a first-ever handle on what the sector looks like, who the participants are, what their needs are, the barriers they are facing. The picture that emerged is one of a young sector. The average age of sector participants is around early- to mid-forties. More than half are under the age of 45, which contrasts with the average age of Australian farmers now being close to 60. It is a dynamic sector; 80 per cent of businesses are in an establishment phase, or wanting to expand, or grow, or diversify their activities, strongly motivated by environmental and sustainability practices, and part of a huge, I think, beaconing movement in this country and internationally that really sees the opportunity and the need for urban agriculture.

Key barriers they are facing, particularly: access to land. That comes back to the planning framework. There are some key reforms that could be made. One would be to explicitly acknowledge and recognise urban agriculture in the state planning framework, and also to give out mandates and directions to local governments to similarly recognise and encourage and facilitate urban agriculture. In one of the world's hotspots of urban agriculture, in Boston, in Massachusetts in the United States, the city governments created a right to farm, essentially, in the city—the Article 89 reform to their planning framework—which encouraged and enabled this sector to grow and expand. That is a critical reform and, indeed, even if land is zoned residential, in Victoria at least—I am not sure it is any different in New South Wales—we have got the phenomenon of land banking, where there are sites in cities of various dimensions that just sit vacant, growing weeds in concrete behind fences for years and years and years.

We believe that with appropriate planning reforms, and various incentives that that may be unlocked literally and made available to people who are unemployed, people experiencing disadvantage, people from culturally diverse backgrounds, and First Nations people to grow food and satisfy their own food needs, as well as develop small businesses. But again, the planning framework needs to enable that, potentially by creating temporary land uses in appropriate conditions to support that kind of land use. We will be publishing our Agriculture Victoria study ourselves separately in a couple of months' time, so I am happy to forward that to the Committee when it is a public document. But it is a great opportunity. I notice a lot of interest in Sydney in this area as well.

The CHAIR: Mrs Dempster, is there anything you would like to highlight around urban agriculture?

AMORELLE DEMPSTER: Urban agriculture? I think the access to, say, processing plants, to abattoirs, to the infrastructure that is required. Obviously, Nick Rose has articulated, you know, the opportunity with it, but there is the infrastructure that does not exist to process this food, for example, and some of that needs to be taken into consideration with planning as well. Because I think that, if we do not have the two working together, and similarly in the regional areas as well, we need some planning, where these businesses are set up to support the farming industry that is going on.

The CHAIR: Sadly, that is all the time we have. I know we could continue talking for some time. We thank you both for your passion and your expertise that you bring to us. Dr Rose, it seems that there is some useful research that when published would help inform the Committee's deliberations. We encourage you to send that through. In addition, we may send you further questions in writing. Your replies would then form part of your evidence and be made public. Would you be happy if we sent you further written questions?

AMORELLE DEMPSTER: Yes.

NICK ROSE: Certainly.

The CHAIR: Excellent. Thank you both for your time today.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

GEOFF PARKER, Chief Executive Officer, Australian Beverages Council, affirmed and examined

CATHY COOK, Head of Corporate Affairs, Australian Beverages Council, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: We are now joined by representatives from the Australian Beverages Council, Mr Geoff Parker, who is the CEO, and Ms Cathy Cook, who is the head of Corporate Affairs. Thank you both for joining us. You are joined in person by me; my name is Alex Greenwich and I am the Chair of this Committee. We are joined via videoconference by Mr Anoulack Chanthivong, who is the member for Macquarie Fields, and Mr Nathaniel Smith, who is the member for Wollondilly. Before we begin, do you have any questions at all?

CATHY COOK: No.

GEOFF PARKER: No, thank you.

The CHAIR: Would either of you like to begin with any introductory remarks?

GEOFF PARKER: Yes. With the consent of the Committee, I am happy to read a three-minute prepared statement.

The CHAIR: Yes.

GEOFF PARKER: To the Chair and Committee members, on behalf of the peak body for the non-alcoholic drinks industry in the country, the Australian Beverages Council, we appreciate the opportunity to contribute to the deliberations of the inquiry into food production and supply in New South Wales. New South Wales, and Sydney in particular, feature prominently in the early history of non-alcoholic drinks in this country. Records indicate that it was 1814 in Chapel Row, now Castlereagh Street, that was the site of the Australia's first ginger ale production facility. By the middle of that century Sydney was well supplied with cordial makers, including at 20 and 349 Pitt Street, 57 York Street, 197 George Street, as well as in Castlereagh, Hunter, and Goulburn streets.

In 2022, New South Wales domiciled companies are the backbone of the Australian non-alcoholic drinks industry, and support an extensive ecosystem of supply and value chains. In this state alone, there are more than 70 companies employing over 17,000 direct and indirect full-time equivalent jobs, and contributing over \$2.7 billion per annum in gross state product. For each one New South Wales manufacturing job, there are another 4.9 jobs needed along the supply chain to support that one job. The timing of this inquiry is incredibly relevant, with food security being both an immediate issue, relating from current geopolitical events, but also timely over the longer term, as it relates to the incredibly important but complex concept of food systems, and how countries and governments are supporting attaining the UN Sustainable Development goals, ahead of 2030.

The private sector is an intrinsic and imperative part of food systems, and the non-alcoholic drinks sector continues to contribute to UN deliberations on this topic, including the recent UN Food Systems Summit held in September last year. The drinks industry in Australia emulates what the UN Food Systems Summit aspires food systems to be: resilient, healthy, and sustainable. These attributes are being reflected in the industry's practices and performance, not just over the last two years of the pandemic, but over the last two decades of seismic portfolio renovation, and aligning its products with the needs of an ever-increasingly discerning consumer base, but also an evolving suite of prevailing community standards and expectations.

Whether fire, flood, cyclone, or pandemic, the industry continues to display a resilience that is the envy of many other aisles in the supermarket, and other FMCG categories. The industry in New South Wales continues to welcome a favourable, business-friendly environment. It has benefited from government programs to enable investments that enhance domestic and global competitiveness. However, like all jurisdictions around the country, more can be done to support industry to strengthen not just food security, but jobs and livelihoods in this state for the betterment of all. Again we thank the Committee for the opportunity to be here today.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. We could start by asking questions about waste and the work done by the industry to reduce food waste and destruction. What steps are being taken? What further support from Government to encourage that would be required?

GEOFF PARKER: In regards to when we think about food waste, I guess, when we think about non-alcoholic drinks, perhaps we should be thinking about them somewhat differently, compared to traditional food and the waste that is often associated with how people buy, prepare, consume food. We would like to think that for every purchase of a non-alcoholic drink, there is a reasonable assumption that the entirety of that particular

product is going to be consumed. When it comes to food waste, we probably start to think a little bit more holistically, more broadly around manufacturing waste. What has been quite interesting over the last two years of the pandemic is this concept of just-in-time manufacturing, which has now shifted to just-in-case manufacturing.

Once upon a time just-in-time was about reducing waste, was about ensuring that input into the manufacture of a particular good arrived just in time. The frustrations and the disruption of the pandemic has, I guess, necessitated a different way of thinking about how foods, being food and beverages, are manufactured, like I said, from a just-in-time to a just-in-case perspective or approach. When we think about how non-alcoholic drinks are manufactured, we are quite proud of the minimal waste that results from the manufacturing of drinks. When we think about waste, I guess we also think of waste of water. However, we are very proud of our record here in Australia around the concept of water usage ratios. That is how much water goes into making a litre of finished product. We would like to think we have some world best in class numbers here in Australia.

Another example is when it comes to the production of juice. Quite often, we minimise the amount of waste that fruit and vegetable suppliers could potentially experience, by taking a lot of the fruit and the vegetable that is not necessarily good to be sold in supermarkets. Some of the more abnormal looking fruit and/or vegetables, that perhaps might not look good in a bowl on a table at home or, indeed, in a supermarket fresh fruit aisle, can quite often be sold to be processed into juice and/or vegetables in that regard. So I think that we have quite a good record. I guess too some of those by-products of manufacturing fruit and/or vegetable juices can also then be used. We have examples of some of our members who use orange peel to be on sold to be fodder for sheep and cattle, as an example. So we like to think that we have a relatively low-waste footprint, if I can use that term.

We are always certainly supportive of the second part of your question, around what can the government be doing. Innovative grant programs are always a great way, I guess, around tapping into that expertise that is already out there, and a desire and a want to do the right thing. Certainly, whether at a state level or at a federal level, having grant programs that allow companies and non-alcoholic drink manufacturers to minimise their footprint, minimise their waste, get better and more efficient at doing what they do, I think, is probably—without a lot more thinking in this space, I think grant programs are probably the best way, around how governments can continue to support the industry to reduce its waste.

CATHY COOK: I might just add one additional point to that too. I think the beauty of using fruit and vegetables that do not meet the standards for table fruit and table vegetables have an additional benefit, in that not only do the farmers get paid for those fruits when they go into juice, but had they not gone into juice, those farmers would have had to pay to destroy them. You are not only destroying a viable product, but also adding to carbon emissions. So I think on the sustainability side, juice tells a very good story. The tops of the pineapples are chopped off for juice. Only the pineapple goes to the manufacturer. Those tops are replanted to grow more pineapples. It is a really nice story on the lack of food waste side.

The CHAIR: Could more be done to further encourage and facilitate that? As you say, the vegetables or fruit that are not being sold in supermarkets because the chains are not selecting them from the farmers because they look slightly imperfect, to prevent them from going to waste and further encourage it to go into other products, whatever those may be, consumables or otherwise, do you see any pathways which could be further facilitated in that regard?

GEOFF PARKER: That is a good question. I think from our perspective, when it comes to consumption of fruit and vegetable juices, our position would be first and foremost—and, I guess, one of the replies to how can some of those things be encouraged from a non-alcoholic drinks perspective—everyone should be eating more fresh fruit and vegetable, full stop. But we are not. There is a problem there. Out of all of the nutritional messages that we get, eating five serves of vegetables and two serves of fruit a day, and drink more water, they are probably the simplest things. This is quite an embarrassing statistic. Ninety-seven per cent of Australians are not meeting their recommended daily intake for fruit and vegetables, in a somewhat sophisticated, developed country like Australia, with really good access to fresh fruit and vegetables. This starts to get into the problem we have around obesity and obesogenic environments.

I think that part of that problem is around people having access to fresh fruit and vegetables and—I guess too, picking up on some of the challenges that consumption of juice has—is in regards to this current demonisation of sugar that we are currently witnessing here in this country, and certainly around the world. Unfortunately, to juice's detriment, it is suffering from the fact that it does have sugar content that is related to the originating piece of fruit. There is no doubt that consumption of juice, per the Australian dietary guidelines, a small glass of juice could be treated as an occasional fruit serve. The statistics and the science when it comes to consumption of juice, and consumers consuming juice is irrefutable. People who consume juice have better quality diets overall. People who consume juice have higher fibre diets. And people who consume juice get less of their daily energy intake from discretionary food or drinks. The evidence is irrefutable. However, juice continues to suffer, I think, as a result of the current demonisation of sugar.

The CHAIR: Other groups have submitted to us that maybe in terms of that wastage that happens, the onus could be not on the farmers to then resell the stock that is not wanted but actually on the large supermarket chains to then be responsible for how that is then used, to basically encourage and facilitate the re-use, making the job of the farmer a bit easier. Do you have any thoughts on that?

GEOFF PARKER: Quite often when we talk about some of these really large problems like food waste, the retailers obviously have a significant and important role to play. We know that there are a number of organisations—whether it be Foodbank or other organisations—who we know do an exceptionally great job in taking the food that is potentially about to be wasted and then putting it to other use. I would not necessarily support this concept, or this theory, that it is potentially up to one particular part of the supply chain. One of the things that we have learnt in some of the issues that we deal with is that it does take a multi-sectoral approach to deal with a multi-factoral problem. Can farmers do more? Probably. Can processors do more? Probably. Can supermarkets do more? Probably. Can governments do more? Definitely. We have all got a right to play in that regard.

Mr ANOULACK CHANTHIVONG: Thank you for coming in today and for your submission. I want to get the industry's and the ABC's thoughts on labelling. You mentioned that fruit juice is obviously healthy, and we want to not necessarily demonise sugar as such but rather give consumers an informed choice about the different ratings of beverages. There have been discussions in the past about traffic light systems for non-alcoholic beverages. I want to know what the ABC's current thinking is on labelling and how open the industry is to changes in labelling that allow consumers to make much more informed choices about the products they are consuming.

GEOFF PARKER: Thank you very much for that question. Labelling is incredibly important, particularly when it comes to informed choices. We fully support this concept of informed choices—for people to make the right choice at the right time for the right occasion. That somewhat overarching statement implies that, from the product portfolio of the members that we represent, all drinks can make up a healthy, balanced diet, sometimes in moderation, and sometimes every single day. Labelling is incredibly important, but it is one piece of the puzzle.

We are fully supportive of the current Health Star Rating scheme. We, the Beverages Council, were part of the original project committee that developed the Health Star Rating scheme, under the auspices of the federal secretary for the Department of Health. It was actually at a time when there was a bit of division between the broader food, grocery, beverage, and retail industry and the public health advocates. The industry was backing itself into the daily intake thumbnail, and public health was very supportive of traffic light labelling. In actual fact, the Health Star Rating came out of the Blewett labelling review in 2012.

Through our international affiliations, when we look around the world, we are quite proud of the Health Star Rating labelling scheme that we have here in Australia. Is it the panacea for getting people to eat and drink more healthily? No. Is it an important piece in the puzzle? Absolutely, along with things like the healthy plate, the Australian Dietary Guidelines, healthy school canteen programs, government workplace settings and programs et cetera. The Australian Beverages Council fully supports the Health Star Rating. We support it maintaining its voluntary approach, certainly for the foreseeable future, and we are certainly supportive of the federal government departments' uptake targets, in regard to rolling that out over the next couple of years. We are already starting to see those Health Star Ratings appear on some quite popular brands of drinks right around the country.

Mr NATHANIEL SMITH: Thank you both for joining us in this public hearing. This question is a little bit out of left field. What are the Australian Beverages Council's feelings on the take-up of SodaStream? I know SodaStream has come back on to the market. There has been a huge advertising campaign for stopping plastic waste in mineral water bottles and things like that. Obviously, a lot more people now drink a lot more mineral water. What are your feelings on that? What sort of health effects will that have on people? How has that hurt production of mineral water in that production line?

GEOFF PARKER: Thank you for the question. We pride ourselves on not necessarily talking about specific companies, but we will talk broadly in regard to that portfolio renovation that I mentioned in the opening statement. What is evident is that, over the last two decades, there has been this seismic shift away from regular sugar-sweetened beverages in favour of low- and no-sugar drinks, which include water, bottled water, bottled water with bubbles in it, et cetera. That obviously includes, without necessarily speaking in specifics, some of those at-home options. When we think about the collective expanding waistline of Australians, we as a collective should all be drinking more water, from whatever source that might be—whether that is from a bubbler, from a bottle in a convenience store or petrol station, or at home, be that via an at-home carbonation system, or out of the tap. We are very lucky that most of Australia has access to very good tap water, although not all. If this inquiry was being held down in South Australia and Adelaide, we might be having a slightly different discussion.

There has been a seismic shift, as I mentioned, over the last two decades. Over that period of 20 years there has been a more than 4½ times increase in consumption of water, which from a public health perspective is a good thing. We now know that in 2022 sales of bottled water are more than sales of sugar-sweetened, carbonated soft drinks. Again, from a public health perspective, that must be good news, and those trends are certainly heading in the right direction. But to link those two questions, people are making informed choices, depending on their lifestyle and their life stage. There has certainly been the increase in the at-home carbonation concept that the Committee member mentioned, and we are fully supportive of that. We are fully supportive of people being able to make the right choice at the right time for the right occasion.

The CHAIR: Just on some trends in beverages, we have seen a fair bit in the media recently about no-alcohol wine, no-alcohol beer and no-alcohol cocktails. What have been the trends in this space? When we are talking about healthy diets, that includes a reduction in alcohol consumption.

GEOFF PARKER: Yes, we think all of those trends are extremely positive. When we think about some of the colloquial terms that we use within the sector that we represent, "soft drinks" is a term from many years ago, when they were an alternative to harder drinks. We have certainly been witnessing—even getting back to low-alcohol beers, although not necessarily within the remit of our particular charter—that low-alcohol options have been around for a very long time. That is broadly reflective of people generally wanting to do the right thing, and wanting to make the right choice. Sometimes those choices can be frustrated from other influences.

To your point, whilst the harms associated with drinking too much alcohol are well researched, as are the harms of drinking too many sugar-sweetened beverages, I guess any move where there is an increase in consumption of no- or low-alcohol spirits or wines, or where there is an increase in consumption of low- or no-sugar soft drinks has to be a good thing from a public health perspective. I guess, also, some of those trends that we are seeing, from a non-alcoholic beverage perspective, over recent years have been some of those better-for-you options—whether that be coconut water, whether that be kombucha, whether or not that be different sorts of drinks that are fortified with probiotics.

I guess that gets back to my earlier pre-prepared statement that there is a very discerning customer base out there and, certainly, manufacturers and members of ours are very good at responding to the needs of that ever-discerning customer base. But, also, more broadly around—perhaps getting back to that question around no-alcohol spirits, I think that also companies here in Australia are very good at responding to those broader societal expectations around having more choices, where people can make informed choices. If someone is wanting to, perhaps, have that experience of having what would normally be associated with an alcoholic drink without having alcohol, that must be a good thing. Equally, if someone wants to experience the option of having what would normally be a sugar-sweetened drink without having the sugar, that must also be a good thing.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Colleagues, any further questions at all? It being three o'clock, we thank you for appearing before us today. I appreciate your submission and the time that you have taken today. We may very well send you further questions, as we did run out of a bit of time here. Your replies will then form part of the evidence and be made public. Would you be happy to provide written replies to any further questions?

GEOFF PARKER: Yes, of course, we would. We have also left some information through the Committee secretariat. We are happy to also make that all available. We again would like to thank the Chair and the Committee members for the opportunity to attend here and participate in this inquiry.

The CHAIR: Great. Thank you both very much.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

(Short adjournment)

Mr GREG McFARLANE, Director, Vegan Australia, affirmed and examined

Ms LYNDIA STONER, Chief Executive Officer, Animal Liberation, before the Committee via videoconference, sworn and examined

The CHAIR: We are joined by Mr Greg McFarlane, director of Vegan Australia, and Ms Lynda Stoner, the chief executive officer of Animal Liberation. You are joined here in New South Wales Parliament by me, Alex Greenwich, the Chair of this environment and planning committee inquiry, Mr Nathaniel Smith who is the member for Wollondilly and Mr Anoulack Chanthivong who is the member for Macquarie Fields. We would like to offer both of you the opportunity to make some introductory remarks. Linda, we will start with you, if there are any introductory remarks you would like to make?

LYNDA STONER: Thank you for this opportunity. I have tried to keep it to three minutes. On behalf of Animal Liberation, I do thank the Committee for extending this invitation for us to contribute to this important and timely inquiry into food production and supply. I acknowledge the traditional owners and custodians of the unceded lands on which I live and work, the Cammeraygal people who are part of the Eora nation, and pay my respects to Indigenous Elders past, present, and emerging. Animal Liberation's comprehensive submission recognises the significance of this inquiry, and our team was delighted with the opportunity to respond to the broad terms of reference. We thank the Committee for your willingness to explore and examine all of these important issues.

We contend that we are all connected—animals, the environment, and humanity—including the direct relationship with equitable and resilient food security, public health, and the ever-increasing climate emergency which we have all, sadly, witnessed play out with the catastrophic flooding across New South Wales and notably in the Northern Rivers region. A recent report by the Australian Conservation Foundation has confirmed that in the past decade the federal government has approved the destruction of more than 200,000 hectares of threatened species habitat. The now released three-yearly New South Wales State of the Environment 2021 report also paints a damning picture, confirming land clearing has increased threefold over the past decade. Sixty-two per cent of vegetation in the state is now under pressure from fire. Land and freshwater ecosystems are also under increasing threat from habitat destruction and climate change.

The number of species in New South Wales threatened with extinction has grown by 18 to 1,043 since the previous report in 2018, and 64 per cent of mammals are now suffering long-term reductions in their habitat range. Our bird populations are declining, and so too our freshwater fish populations. We maintain that, in addition to extensive animal suffering, which impacts millions of sentient beings, animal agriculture is a leading cause of extensive environmental harm. This is now in urgent need of robust and scientific discussion. While many are now far more accepting of the environmental harm caused by coal gas and transport, we are still a very long way from including animal agriculture in the discussions about its giant footprint in the climate debate, including zoonotic diseases and human health pandemics. Animal agribusiness is now coined the "new coal"—the science contending where the connected impacts of the ongoing climate crisis, increasing rates of biodiversity loss, and the inefficient use of finite resources create an environmental catastrophe, and a major threat to food security and ecological stability.

In our submission we endeavour to demonstrate that one sector in particular contributes a disproportionate number of key threats, and that is the animal agriculture sector. In its routine activities, the threats that this sector produce include adverse environmental, public health, and animal welfare outcomes. Animal Liberation contends the following high-level points and positions: There is a range of factors that contribute to the creation of conditions that cause food insecurity, and government policy direction must provide a resilient system that is underpinned by an equitable scientific and proactive framework. At present, the dominant agriculture sectors are deeply implicated in generating conditions conducive to increasingly adverse climate consequences, and it is imperative that the government transparently consider and assess all available mitigation options, including the prioritisation of alternative protein production. This should be augmented by transparent and scientific public education that empowers the community to make transformative progress.

It is essential that zoonotic disease be proactively incorporated in policies relating to food security. Though the COVID-19 pandemic represents unprecedented destruction and devastation, evidence suggests that failure to address its root cause could enable further zoonosis of equal or increased severity. More than 80 per cent of farmland is used for livestock, but it produces just 18 per cent of food calories and 30 per cent of protein. I will finish with this: The latest research shows that without meat and dairy consumption, local farmland use could be reduced by more than 75 per cent, which is an area equivalent to the US, China, the European Union, and Australia combined, and still feed the world. In relation to the loss of wild areas, agriculture is the leading cause of the current mass extinction of wildlife. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr McFarlane, are there any opening remarks you would like to make?

GREG McFARLANE: Yes. I thank the Committee for the opportunity to present today. Climate change, biodiversity loss, and other environmental crises are increasingly threatening reliable and equitable access to food for the world's population. In our written submission, Vegan Australia showed that the animal agriculture industry contributes to a number of threats under consideration by this inquiry, including food insecurity, climate change, resource waste, land degradation, water overuse, the decline in the health of ocean ecosystems, and in accelerating the biodiversity emergency.

Vegan Australia recommends that governments encourage a just transition away from the production of animal products towards plant-based agriculture and other uses of the land. Our submission also showed that meat, dairy, and eggs are not necessary for a healthy diet, and urge the Government to encourage a move towards healthy plant-based diets and to assist the development of new plant-based industries. This inquiry into the food system

in New South Wales is an opportunity for the community to reflect on the damaging impact of animal agriculture on many aspects of food security—in particular, the damage to the environment, and its contribution to biodiversity loss. The extent of the damage is huge with over half a billion farm animals bred, raised and killed for food in Australia every year. That is over one million a day.

The animal agriculture industry occupies over half of the Australian land mass, causes the majority of land clearing, and emits a significant portion of greenhouse gases. By acknowledging the impact of animal agriculture on the environment, this inquiry allows us to consider alternative ways we can obtain food and fibre, that do not involve both the suffering of farmed animals and the environmental havoc that animal agriculture causes. The key recommendation of our submission to the inquiry is that the government begin a managed phase-out of animal agriculture, to increase food security and restore damaged ecosystems. Acting quickly and in a controlled way will allow the environment to recover, while also protecting jobs and the economy. I would also like to refer the Committee to a petition signed by 436 members of the public in support of our submission. The petition asks that the Committee recommends that the Government:

1. acknowledge the many ways that animal agriculture causes damage to the planet and how this impacts food security
2. shift government food purchases to 100% plant-based
3. assist the development of new plant-based industries, particularly value-added export industries
4. support a just transition of the agricultural system away from animal production to other uses of the land
5. encourage a move towards healthy plant-based diets
6. ensure that vested interests do not influence public policy

I also refer to the several pages of comments made by the petition signatories, supporting both the recommendations from Vegan Australia, and adding their own concerns, such as the link between the use of animals for food and deadly zoonotic diseases like swine flu, sows diseases, bird flu, mad cow disease, Spanish flu, and coronavirus. Other writers were concerned about the immense suffering of animals trapped inside the animal agriculture industry, while others mentioned the health benefits of wholefood plant-based diets.

Finally, I would like to mention something that we did not include in our submission. The Australian Medical Association declared that "climate change is a health emergency". The AMA declared that climate change is real and will have the earliest and most severe health consequences on vulnerable populations around the world, including in Australia and the Pacific region. The AMA President said that:

... failure to achieve significant reductions in greenhouse gas emissions on a global basis is likely to result in significant public health concerns.

He continued:

The health effects of climate change include increased heat related illness and deaths, increased food and water borne diseases, and changing patterns of diseases. In addition to their impact on health infrastructure and services, extreme events such as droughts, flooding and storms could be responsible for death and disease.

The very sad thing about this is that those words were spoken 13 years ago. We have known for decades about the terrible cost of greenhouse gas emissions. We have also known for decades that animal agriculture is one of the most significant sources of greenhouse gases, and that in Australia, over half of the land mass is devoted to animal farming. This is a huge opportunity cost when we consider that the land could be reforested or used in other ways to draw down carbon.

In conclusion, Vegan Australia recommends a managed phase-out of animal agriculture to help reverse global warming, restore damaged ecosystems, increase food production and increase food security. Thank you for your attention. I will do my best to answer any questions the Committee may have on these matters.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Mr McFarlane. I might start with a broad question for both of you. Both of your submissions and introductory remarks made quite clear some of the dangers and negative impacts of a very animal-reliant agricultural system. Flipping that to what would be the positive benefits of a more plant-based approach to diets, a plant-forward focus on eating or non-animal based agriculture: What are the benefits of that and what do you feel needs to be done from a governmental, legislative or planning point of view to further encourage that? I might start with Ms Stoner.

LYNDA STONER: Thank you, Chair. If I could just focus my response by saying that, last year and again yesterday, military leaders and security chiefs have said that the two things that keep them awake at night are, one, is nuclear warfare, and the other is climate threat, and how we in Australia urgently have to address this. Further to your question, it is a matter of educating people. People consume things because their parents and their grandparents did so; it is just a generational thing, but you can witness, by the amount of vegan restaurants and vegan supermarkets and vegan everything that are opening up now, that there is increasing need of the public to

have all these things available to us. So, in my lifetime I never thought that I would live to see so much. I did not even know the word "vegan" back then, and now it has become so mainstream. All the large supermarkets have their vegan areas, and it is just growing and growing, which is so heart warming.

People say to me, "Ah, but you're quoting from being a vegan. Of course, it is just nonsense. It is just propaganda." If Australians increasingly turn to a plant-based diet, it would mean that land clearing would be minimised and the amount of antibiotics—I mean, we import something like 700 tonnes of antibiotics into Australia, and about a third of those are fed to stock animals. The extraordinary thing is that you need so much food. It is such a waste of resources. You have to grow food to feed animals in intensive areas and, less so, free living. They can only supply about one kilogram of food when they are slaughtered. Also, I think that something that has not been addressed is the impact of working in slaughterhouses, and working in more and more intensive places. The toll this takes on workers is immense. People turn to alcohol and drugs because it is the only way they can deal with having to work in dreadful environments.

I am very heartened because the whole thing about dairy transitioning to, say, soybean or whatever bean milk—it has become a world-wide thing. It is a matter of will. In New York City, for example, this year, they decided that every Friday would be vegan Friday. That encompasses thousands of young people. It is just a matter of getting past that. We have always done it like this, but we must move forward. The planet is in a dire situation. As we discussed, the biggest contributor to the devastation to our waterways and to our planet is the animal agribusiness.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr McFarlane, the benefits of a greater focus on promoting a plant-based diet and the agricultural structures that go to back that up.

GREG McFARLANE: In your original question you asked about what the Government could do?

The CHAIR: Yes.

GREG McFARLANE: I would like to address that. The first thing we need is for the government to listen to science, listen to the climate scientists, and realise that there is a big problem, that animal agriculture is part of that problem, that we need to address both fossil fuels and animal agriculture, not one or the other. Once the government realises that, then there are many ways that they can act on that. I think one that Lynda mentions is education of people. There will be a change in diet. There has been a huge increase in meat consumption over the last decades, to a point where, I think, the average Australian eats about three times as much protein as is recommended. The reasons for that—advertising, various other forms of promotions. The government could step in, and try to promote the promotion of plant-based foods to people, to try and stop the advertising of meat, so that people are not influenced in that way, but also educate people from the health department, health point of view, on the many downsides of eating too much animal protein—they are unequivocal—and the positive benefits to health of a wholefood, plant-based diet.

The environment department could continue that sort of education, and let people know what damage is caused by the animal agriculture industry, the amount of land it uses, the amount of water, it uses et cetera. One way, I think, talked about earlier today is environmental labelling on products. That is one way to educate consumers. We would like to see a multi-pronged approach to labelling, which would include three or four factors, one being the health aspect, which is currently handled. Another is an environmental impact of that food; another, the impact of animal suffering, to somehow quantify the suffering inherent in that product; and, possibly, the human suffering that went into it, if there is worker problems, labour problems in the production of those foods, so that people can see, on the front of the pack, all those things in a simple graphic. That is another way to educate people.

I think another important thing is often people say, "What's going to happen to all the farmers?" Vegan Australia always says we need to ensure—government and society needs to play a big part in ensuring a just transition of the whole sector. The sector is not as big as most people think. I have done this. I have asked people, "What do you think the size of the animal agricultural industry, in terms of the economy and in terms of employment, is?" People say, "About 20 per cent." It probably has not been 20 per cent for 100 years. It is about 1½ per cent, both in employment, and in economic input. So we think that a 10-year phase-out would be possible, would be economically viable, to make sure that, over those 10 years, workers, farmers, land use is changed so that no-one is left out. Boosting the new, alternative, plant-based products that are now increasingly being seen on the shelves and being supported by the governments—just recently in South Australia, there was a big plan announced, I think, supported both by the Australian and South Australian governments, to produce a plant-based protein manufacturing plant.

The CHAIR: I will have some more specific questions about that, but I might go to my colleagues.

Mr NATHANIEL SMITH: No questions.

Mr ANOULACK CHANTHIVONG: I just want to thank you for your submission in person. I am keen to hear more about the plant-based food. You see it at Hungry Jacks nowadays, of course, and you see it in Ronald McDonald's. It certainly is becoming more of an option. I am just wondering how you change people's view of plant-based food as opposed to meat-based food. How we can get that balance in trying to encourage people to have more plant-based meals as a replacement for meat-based and what sort of education programs, what sort of policy frameworks we could think of. I just wanted to hear your experience and your insights in the industry.

GREG McFARLANE: I would like to draw a couple of parallels, one with smoking and government activity in trying to solve that health issue, and the death toll on roads. In both of those cases, the government has taken a big step in dealing with both of those issues, and lots of other issues. The government should get involved when the normal functioning of the economy is working against the people. In those two cases, there was scientific evidence about the harmful nature of car accidents and smoking. They put together programs to educate people, TV advertising. I do not know if it was done—well, it was done. There was economic impacts. They increased the tax on cigarettes.

One way to start with is removing all economic support for the meat industry, and moving that across to plant-based industry. There is a lot of talk around the world about a meat tax, based on environmental issues, and other things, health issues. It is not just down to trying to convince individuals to change their diet. I think that is where the vegan movement has probably come from for the last 70, 80 years. But I think we are maturing into working out—let us look at the consumption side, which is trying to talk to people, individuals, but look at the production side as well. Look at the systemic nature of how people make those decisions. I think there is a lot the government could do.

The CHAIR: Ms Stoner, just following on from Mr Chanthivong's question and directing it to you in particular, you spoke about the rise in vegan restaurants and non-meat protein. What do you think is driving that? How can that be further encouraged?

LYNDA STONER: Thank you for the question. I believe that social media and the information that it contains has been a very big factor, particularly in young people, who are understandably so worried about what is happening to the planet. They personally want to do all that they can as individuals to help stop that and, of course, hence they become vegan or plant based. Greg mentioned taxing meat. Further to that, in the UK, there are politicians who are calling for a tax on meat in step with the cigarette, tobacco, and alcohol tax, and I think that will definitely happen.

As far as spreading the word about a plant-based diet and its benefits, it is also because of information getting out, about what happens to pigs in intensive situations, and broiler chicken, and battery hens. It is almost impossible to believe that we still have battery hen cages in Australia in 2022—it is just unbelievable. Not to say that older people cannot change, obviously, but young people are very keenly aware of these things. None of them want to buy into a system that mutilates animals, deprives them of all of their basic needs, and causes psychological as well as physiological distress. Young people are leading the vanguard on this.

A lot of groundwork went into this over the last few decades, as Greg has said. But now, with social media, it is so much easier to get information out. As I mentioned, that is happening in schools in New York City, and more and more around the world. Have a plant-based day, whatever that is, and in that way, you can get people used to cooking and utilising plant-based food. This is a change that has to happen, and it will happen. It will not happen overnight but in incremental steps, and I do believe the government has a big role to play in this.

Mr ANOULACK CHANTHIVONG: Thank you for your answers.

The CHAIR: Just building on Mr Chanthivong's question, you gave the example of South Australia in terms of non-meat meat or plant-based proteins. Do you think New South Wales and Australia are missing out on the economic benefits of further investment in this industry? Because there is a great deal of innovation happening around the world in this space, is there not?

GREG McFARLANE: Yes, the billionaires are putting their money into it, and that suggests that things are going to change, and people are going to make lots of money out of it. People have realised that, with the increasing standard of wealth in developing countries, we cannot all end up eating the same amount of meat that rich European and Australian countries do. There is just not enough land. One thing I would like to mention is we do have the support of government institutions. The National Health and Medical Research Council is independent, but it is a Commonwealth Government organisation. The Australian Dietary Guidelines clearly state that a vegan diet is adequate; you can get all your nutrients from it. The guidelines also list, for every food group, plant-based alternatives. So we do have support from the highest level. We need to take that evidence and somehow get it out to politicians and the people. Sorry, your question was about—

The CHAIR: Economic benefits to Australia—or not only economic but also social or diet benefits to us further as a country if we can innovate in the plant-based protein or non-meat meat alternatives area.

GREG McFARLANE: I cannot talk to this that much, but I did read through Food Frontier's submission, and they have covered that a lot. There is a large number of the innovative plant-based alternative companies that are in New South Wales. There is the export potential for processed foods, because Australia exports about twice as much food as it actually consumes domestically, but it is usually in the raw form. If we can value-add that, and then export the higher valued products, then that will be economically beneficial, and create new jobs in Australia, and help in environmental and biodiversity ways as well.

The CHAIR: Ms Stoner, is there anything you would like to add on the opportunities for Australia of this emerging trend?

LYNDA STONER: Just by way of example, Mr Chair, a dear friend of mine about four years ago tried to buy shares in Beyond Meat. What had started off as quite affordable shares have now just rocketed out of most of our ability to join up, so that is definitely the way forward. As Greg said, if Richard Branson and Elon Musk—to drop a few names—think that this is something they can reap a large amount of money from investing in then, happily, they are quite visionary and quite sensible, because this is the way forward.

The CHAIR: Throughout this inquiry, one of the commonalities among the various people from the differing perspectives that we are hearing is the importance of educating particularly students on healthy eating, food security and food production—letting people know where their food comes from and how it gets to them. We have heard of the need for an experiential education there. In terms of vegan or animal-free agriculture education, what would both of you like to see in this space? I will start with you, Mr McFarlane.

GREG McFARLANE: Yes, it is an interesting thing when people talk about where their food comes from. The way I interpret that is that a lot of it comes from a dead animal that was once alive. Its life was the only life he or she had. They did not want to die, and were killed without their consent, and usually lived a fairly horrible life, and were killed at a young age. That is the sort of education about where animal products come from, and that is milk, dairy, eggs, and anything else. It is all very horrific. That is probably the number one thing, and then getting people used to veggie gardens, and all of the healthy things that people do not get enough of. As a previous speaker said, 97 per cent or 93 per cent of Australians do not get enough fruit and veggies—the daily amount.

That kind of education—there is a certain idealisation of an animal farmer, someone that lives on the land; they are rough and tough and they have got herds of cattle behind them. That should be changed to an idealisation of veggie farmers, and fruit farmers, because they are the ones that are producing the food that we need. The Australian Dietary Guidelines do not say people are not getting enough meat or protein. They say they are not getting enough fruit and veggies. Some of the previous speakers have talked about classroom education, and taking them out to farms. I would not want to take children to slaughterhouses, but it is a good—no, I would not recommend that.

The CHAIR: I take your point. I understand what you are getting at. Ms Stoner?

LYNDA STONER: Yes, thanks. That is an interesting thing that Greg has just raised. I was listening to two of your speakers earlier this morning about water and doing like a healthy heart thing, but their version of it that is not constrained. I agree that clear labelling, if there really was—I mean, there is nothing that carrot growers and avocado growers have to hide about their product, and yet we are selling chunks of meat, they are highly disguised, they are in polyurethane containers, with plastic coverings, and they are as obscured from the reality of where that meat has come from as anything could possibly be. Further to that, the meat and dairy industry are complicit in trying to stop the truth getting out to the public, and hence we have ag-gag rules, ag-gag laws. You can call it biosecurity, you can call it whatever you like, it comes down to ag-gag laws. The only reason for those ag-gag laws is to stop the public seeing what happens in these places.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. In the interests of time, that concludes our questioning for today. I really appreciate the perspective that both of you have brought to us and the information contained in both of your submissions, which will add a great deal of value to our deliberations. Thank you for that. We may send you some further questions in writing. Your replies would then form part of your evidence and be made public. Would you be happy to provide written replies to any further questions?

GREG McFARLANE: Yes.

LYNDA STONER: Yes.

The CHAIR: Thank you, both. Sorry for the tech issues before, Lynda, but we are so glad we got you.

LYNDA STONER: Thank you so much.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

Ms GABRIELLE CUSACK, Executive General Manager – Shareholder Relations, Murray Irrigation, before the Committee via videoconference, sworn and examined

Mr MICHAEL PISASALE, Water Policy Manager, Murray Irrigation, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: The Committee is now joined by Ms Gabrielle Cusack and Mr Michael Pisasale via videoconference. Joining you both at this inquiry into food security are Mr Anoulack Chanthivong, the member for Macquarie Fields, and Mr Nathaniel Smith, the member for Wollondilly, who we can see is out and about. We appreciate you joining us. Before we begin, do you have any questions?

GABRIELLE CUSACK: No. We will just make an opening statement, if that is okay?

The CHAIR: Please, go ahead.

GABRIELLE CUSACK: Thank you. Murray Irrigation welcomes the focus of this inquiry into our food system. Murray Irrigation is a constitutionally not-for-profit company that is located in southern New South Wales. Our company delivers reliable irrigation water to over 2,100 family-owned landholdings across 724,000 hectares in the southern Riverina, centred around the towns of Deniliquin, Finley, Berrigan, Wakool, and Moulamein. Our region produces a large proportion of New South Wales' dairy production, and around 50 per cent of rice production in Australia, along with maize, carrots, and tomatoes. We are well positioned to produce food—we are close to storage dams, close to cities, and sit in the middle of the eastern Australian highway network.

Irrigation is important for food security. It occupies a very small portion of Australia—5 per cent of tilled agricultural lands—but produces 30 per cent of all agricultural production. Over the past decade, our region has been seriously impacted by water recovery reforms. Over the last 25 years, there has been a reduction of water delivery in our region, of around 50 per cent—from 1,200 gigalitres per year to around 600 gigalitres per year. Right across the nation, our water resources are under increasing pressure from policy changes, a growing population, rapidly changing industries, and a more variable and changing climate. Our farmers' livelihoods and our local communities depend on fair and reliable access to water. Today we would like to highlight three issues from our submission: the importance of preserving productive land and water resources, the opportunities to limit the impact food production has on the environment, and the need to develop and grow the food industry.

Firstly, preserving land and water resources is a live and existential issue for us all. There are activities underway implementing the Basin Plan that need to be completed to deliver environmental outcomes and protect productive capacity. More time and flexibility is needed for Sustainable Diversion Limit Adjustment Mechanisms, known as SDLAM, to be achieved. When planning for climate change, governments have outlined that R&D, greater innovation, and technology take-up is required. We have seen little evidence of a strategic approach from the state to ensure research and planning is aligned with needs at a regional level to face this challenge.

The past 20 years has seen an increasing focus on environmental management, including watering for environmental outcomes. Our supply system can be used to reduce pressure on the choke, and achieve significant environmental outcomes, by strategically delivering water to 74,000 hectares of environmental assets across our region. There are opportunities to achieve the environmental outcomes by continuing to work with communities such as ours. Engagement with New South Wales government entities to date has been positive, but more needs to be done. For example, direct support, in the form of a more local presence, to build local knowledge and skilled people in our region would be welcomed. We would like to partner with government to focus on achieving environmental outcomes, instead of recovering more water.

Finally, we need positive change to grow food production and processing opportunities in New South Wales. Government agencies should come back into local areas, reconnect, and provide active strategic support to facilitate and establish these value-added opportunities locally. We want partnerships with governments on solutions. We have made a great start, but there is more to be done. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Pisasale, was there anything you wanted to add to the introductory statement?

MICHAEL PISASALE: No, thank you.

The CHAIR: Excellent. We might go into some questions now. Ms Cusack, in your opening remarks you talked about needing a greater strategic focus from the New South Wales Government. Where do you see the current gaps in that? And what role do you see your organisation and others similar playing in that?

GABRIELLE CUSACK: I think, Mr Greenwich, the strategic focus is—what has happened in the past is that we have lost a lot of government agencies from our region. I think the opportunity to reconnect and bring the skilled workforce back into our community would be a significant boost in regards to engagement. Instead of not being able to work strategically together, as it is in some cases at the moment, if there is more engagement at that local level, I think we can achieve and be more productive, in regards to delivering outcomes. Murray Irrigation is very conscious about not reinventing the wheel, which is a really important thing that I believe you would probably agree with. That is where we think the strategic approach could be looked at in more detail. I am not sure if Michael has any further comments.

MICHAEL PISASALE: Thanks, Gab. Just to use a couple of examples, our area has been impacted by a lot of water reform, and often agencies will come in to work on projects, but it is really they fly in from 200 kilometres away or up to 1,000 kilometres away. It is a quick visit, and then back out again, whereas it is the local communities that are most impacted, and have lots of ideas and solutions. I guess, if you had agencies more locally based, there is that sense of working together to work through natural resource matters. So, that is just an example of a couple of ones we have observed.

The CHAIR: Your submission and opening remarks also talked about growing the food production industry in New South Wales. Obviously, throughout the pandemic we saw big interruptions when it comes to supply chains. How would you like to see that growth done? What further support is needed to facilitate that?

GABRIELLE CUSACK: Michael, it is over to you.

MICHAEL PISASALE: No worries. I guess, in my area, we produce a lot of what are called staple food, such as your cereals, your milk, and your meat, and the things that are the three solid meals a day. So, we have what we call a staple food production area. In terms of growth, one of the biggest challenges we have is simply water. Add water, and we can produce staple foods. The biggest issues our businesses have is that we could have water this year, and then the following year not—there can be a lot less water—so there is a really strong connect between the availability of being able to use water to grow a crop, and how much food or production that farmer can have.

When that is uncertain, just like the stock market and other markets we know, that certainly brings an impact in investment confidence but also, I guess, it impacts on a lot of industries. So, things like, if you are able to grow food, then you can value-add locally, and that would be another shift, again, where you are value-adding to it, and of course you are creating local employment. If there is uncertainty there, then there is less confidence by industry and investment to make that leap. So, we certainly can do some things there, in terms of that improvement of certainty, which reflects business confidence in what farmers can do. They love doing what they do, and I think that more confidence in water availability can go a long way.

The CHAIR: Before I ask some additional questions, I might go to some of my colleagues. Mr Smith, any questions?

Mr NATHANIEL SMITH: Yes. Firstly, thank you both for coming to this public hearing via modern technology of WebEx—

GABRIELLE CUSACK: It is a whole new world.

MICHAEL PISASALE: He must have checked. He must have checked us out there.

Mr NATHANIEL SMITH: —I can vacate the office during the break for netball drop-offs [inaudible].

The CHAIR: Nathaniel, we cannot hear you.

Mr NATHANIEL SMITH: [Inaudible].

The CHAIR: We could not hear you then. Maybe if you turn off your screen then we will get the sound.

Mr NATHANIEL SMITH: Is that better?

The CHAIR: Much better. Sorry, if you could start again? We heard about the netball drop-off but we could not hear the question.

Mr NATHANIEL SMITH: Okay. My question is: One of the things that we have been doing, we are pushing the Department of Planning into making it a lot easier for farmers—obviously in my area, it is a pretty urban area but down in the Murray you have got much larger farms and big irrigators—is to change the planning

instruments in terms of giving farmers more versatility as to what they can do on their farms to diversify—whether that is in dairy country and having formula production plants or wedding receptions [inaudible].

The CHAIR: You have dropped out again. I think we got most of it.

Mr NATHANIEL SMITH: Can I have your thoughts on agritourism?

GABRIELLE CUSACK: Okay. So, would you like us to talk about opportunities around the changes to the planning instruments about agritourism? Is that right?

The CHAIR: Exactly right.

Mr NATHANIEL SMITH: Yes.

GABRIELLE CUSACK: Thank you very much, Mr Smith. I think in our region, there is enormous potential for investment in tourism and agritourism. I do know that a lot of people have converted shearing sheds, for example—because they do not have sheep anymore—into wedding venues, and I think that, now that we are able to travel, this opportunity exists. I think our communities are across the footprint. Murray Irrigation sits across five local government areas, and I think that we would welcome any opportunity for investment and partnerships to see the growth of agritourism, because I do think that if we can give those metro families an opportunity to see agriculture in the flesh, I suppose you could say, it is just a game changer for how people perceive sheep and cattle and crop production and things like that. So we as a company would support the initiative of the government in regards to those planning instruments, and also the diversity opportunities as well. Michael?

MICHAEL PISASALE: Thanks, Gabrielle. Yes, just to reiterate your points, our farmers are really proud of what they do. We have actually got some, really, in terms of our agricultural industry, if you compare it to the global stage, we are really at the leading edge. So, for example, some of our crops are twice as water-efficient as other crops grown around the world, so we really are leading the way in our innovation, and what we do, and our farmers are very proud of that. I guess the other thing is we have got a lot of farmland in the form of natural assets as well, like your rivers and creeks and fishing, and all of those other complementary assets, so that when someone comes up, they can look at the farming, and how that works in synergy with its environment as well.

As a company that supplies water to our farmers, we actually supply a lot of water to the environment as well, and kick a lot of environmental goals. That is just a great example of where you have got agriculture, the environment, and other things working together. It is a good opportunity for people who do not have experience of agriculture to reconnect, and find out where their food comes from.

Mr NATHANIEL SMITH: That is all I have to ask.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Mr Smith. Mr Chanthivong, any questions?

Mr ANOULACK CHANTHIVONG: Thank you very much both Ms Cusack and Mr Pisasale for coming in today. I just want to ask around the labour and skills shortages in the agricultural sector. I think part of it is due to the fact that there has not been a lot of transitory migration due to the pandemic. I am just wondering from the industry's perspective, what sort of policies and changes we should institute to attract perhaps younger Australians having their gap year, rather than gallivanting off to Europe and North America, and spending their time in country Australia to pick some fruit, see regional Australia and have a bit of fun. How do we attract that pool of labour to give them a different experience? They can still go overseas, such as to Europe, but I just wonder though, given the recent changes because of the pandemic, whether there might be an opportunity for the industry to really attract that labour pool to help with the labour shortage and also avoid food going to waste because no-one is picking it.

GABRIELLE CUSACK: You can go first, if you like, Michael.

MICHAEL PISASALE: I must say that is a really good question. I will have to take it on notice to some degree, and talk to other industries about their thoughts on the impacts. I know from a friend, who actually has a dairy farm, that often he has found that sometimes he can attract people like that to come along and help out with milking and that kind of stuff, and the biggest challenge has actually been keeping them there. It can be quite frustrating to know that when you employ someone, you train them up, and three weeks later they are off again, and then someone else comes. The biggest challenge can be, yeah, not only attracting them, but what we can actually do to keep someone there for at least six, eight, or nine months—that kind of thing at least—with some of those activities, because it can be really draining, trying to train people up every few weeks, for example, to do stuff. If you muck something up on a dairy farm, it can cost tens of thousands of dollars if something does go wrong. So, it is a really good question. I would have to get back to you on that one with a bit more.

GABRIELLE CUSACK: I think also, too, if I can just make a comment: It is around how we can encourage our region, I suppose, to enter into partnerships for those wanting to do their gap year, to come down and potentially experience different industries that we have, and have a real life experience, if I can say that. I would suggest one of the challenges that we potentially would have would be around accommodation. That would probably be something that we would need to look at, but I think from a company perspective, we could actually work as a collective with our various stakeholders to potentially, you know, shape that up as a campaign, or something like that, to get the kids to come to our region, as opposed to either going overseas, or even going to the Northern Territory to do their gap year.

MICHAEL PISASALE: Thanks, Gabrielle. I guess the other thing I want to add is, I guess, if we look at a certain cohort, we also need to think about what that cohort likes to do as well in their spare time. As you know, with the younger backpackers, working is one thing, but then what do you do on the weekend? I think, for example, if you had some of the smaller towns perhaps growing, perhaps, other industries like your nightclubs, or other things like that, that actually makes it fun for the younger people if, for example, that is our target cohort to be in that local area, I guess I would also be thinking about what are the things that can attract people there, such as—it could be any type of things that work locally. So I guess I would be thinking about all the stuff that makes stuff fun for young people, as a way of attracting them and, hopefully, retaining them.

Mr ANOULACK CHANTHIVONG: Just in addition to that, do you think also things around working conditions and pay may need to actually change? You try and compare a visa condition on an international backpacker versus a young Australian, two different groups of employees and also, normally, viewing what the workplace looks like as well. You would be sad to see perhaps some not-so-pleasant experiences some of our young packers have had. So I am just wondering whether some of that is open for change as a way to attract young Australians into the labour pool. It might cost you more, but it is going to cost you even more if the fruit is just dumped and is wasted. So I just wonder how the industry is thinking around pay and conditions.

GABRIELLE CUSACK: I think that is something that would be taken into consideration for sure because, obviously, there has been a track record of instances where that has not happened. I think, as Michael said, for our food production not to be picked or not to be harvested—that is a significant cost to our local economy. Obviously, you would have your legislative frameworks and Fair Work and all the Acts there to protect the person coming to have the gap year. But again it is us talking to our stakeholders and our partners to ensure that that is one of the key things that are on our checklist, I suppose you could say, in regards to attracting young people to the region, for example, and ensuring that they have the best life experience they can, and want to either stay or go away and come back once they have gone to uni or had life experience elsewhere.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Chanthivong. If I could just switch to ask some questions about the needs as a result of managing the impacts of climate change. Your submission says:

By 2030 the Murray/Murrumbidgee region is projected to experience an average of 8 more days above 35°C per year and continue to rise to 23 days per year by 2070.

Climate change projections do not paint a rosy picture for food production systems.

You talk about the need for greater transparency when it comes to research and support with adaptation expenditure. Could I ask you to talk to that and the support you need in terms of information, research, investment, adaptation from Government to address the challenges you face as a result of climate change.

GABRIELLE CUSACK: Mr Greenwich, I might just make a few comments. Then I might hand over to Michael. I think that, as you can appreciate, some of the issues that we have experienced in regional New South Wales, research has been done, and then it is all handed over. Then it sits on a shelf. Then all of a sudden, five years later, there is another piece of work being done. So I think, for our company, it is so important to ensure that if some research has been undertaken, we are actually engaged at the start, in regards to the process, that we ensure that the recommendations and what the deliverables are are actually implemented, if I can say that. Because we do find that people come back and they say, "We're doing another bit of research on something that we were involved with seven years ago", for example, and it is a similar thing.

So I think there needs to be a surety that what is produced is implemented and delivered. Maybe what we do is a bit of a report card a few years after, saying, "This was done". Again, it is around that key engagement that we want with government. So I would suggest that that needs to be considered in the first instance, and also value for money. Is it worth going back and doing this piece of research, for example, that we know has already been done to a certain extent a few years ago? It is just looking at that nuance. Michael might be happy, given this is his area of expertise, to talk about that as well.

MICHAEL PISASALE: Thanks, Gab. For us, as an organisation that delivers water to farmers, if the trends are that it is hotter and drier, then that obviously is a link there between water and producing food. One thing you can do about that—we do this already—is constantly look through the lens of efficiency. The more

efficiently you can move that water to achieve a productive outcome, that can improve that security, that reliability we talked about earlier, that is a really important one—not just for food; it is also for environmental outcomes as well. The more we can actually keep working on those areas, about what is the best bang for buck, in terms of that final resource, which is often water, in these cases where it is drier, for both agriculture and the environment, that can be a good thing.

I suppose the other consideration then is if you look at extremes, extremes do tend to increase. In this case, it could be warmer. For example, some crops can be more vulnerable to extreme temperatures, like annual crops. We are pretty good at R&D, in the sense of constantly growing crops as a society, to handle things like weeds and fungus and all sorts of things. I guess we would always encourage an eye for the future, about what the climate could be. Would our crops be able to handle certain temperature extremes? But also note sometimes with droughts you actually get the other extreme as well. In droughts you can actually get extreme frosts as well. As a farmer myself, I have lost 20 per cent of wheat [inaudible] a couple of years ago in extreme frosts, because of drought-related matters. So I think things are going to be more variable. Perhaps an eye looking towards the future, where things are heading, could be valuable. As an organisation that delivers water, we have infrastructure that is 100 years old. So we are constantly looking 20, 50 years ahead, where things are trending. I think some of those principles will be important ones.

The CHAIR: Thank you both for appearing before us today. We may very well have some further questions for you, including from a Committee member who was unable to attend today, Ms Felicity Wilson. Your replies would form part of your evidence and be made public. Would you be happy to provide a written reply to any further questions?

GABRIELLE CUSACK: Absolutely, yes. We would welcome that.

The CHAIR: Many thanks. Thank you very much for your detailed submission to the inquiry and for the information and expertise you bring to this inquiry. It is greatly appreciated.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

The Committee adjourned at 16:27.