Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Agriculture and Industry

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Dear Sir / Madam

Innovation for our long-term future

We are concerned that the focus of this inquiry loses sight of Australian agriculture's prime purpose: that of growing food for the nation's diet We suggest that growing a wide variety of nourishing foods in a sustainable manner, for the purpose of feeding the Australian population, should be of critical, primary concern. Unfortunately recognition of this imperative seems entirely absent. Does "agriculture" include food? Does **food production** take care of itself within, or outside, the context of "agriculture" in Australia?

Poor diet is responsible for a burgeoning healthcare cost to the nation. Simplistic, productivist agricultural production has freighted Australia with long-term, irreparable environmental costs which the nation struggles to manage and pay for. The long-term focus of Australian governance on "agriculture" rather than "food" has delivered these outcomes and we will continue to pay for these heavy costs until policy is refocused.

We acknowledge that export dollars earned from agricultural exports is of significant economic benefit to our nation. We further recognise that without a clear primary focus on national social and environmental health, as well as long-term and broad-based, equitable economic development, these agricultural export dollars are not sustainable. The current model of agricultural production is, by default, delivering a food

system that fails at many levels: physically, mentally, rurally, environmentally, and sustainably, in all senses of the word. Thousands of small Australian farmers continue to produce with a complete absence of government support or broader community recognition and acknowledgement. It is no wonder that so many of them suffer poor physical and mental health outcomes, along with their rural communities[1].

With attention apparently completely focussed on expensive, high-tech, "gung-ho solutions" that fail to address the primary concerns of food production, our national food system is crumbling under the weight of ill-health, concentration of market power and an undemocratic focus solely on narrowly defined economic outcomes: big operators over smaller farmers, mega-national and multi-national corporations over small to medium sized and locally owned businesses, which are the lifeblood of our regional and rural communities. This narrow and misaligned focus is paid for in rural inequity, shrinking rural communities, a lack of investment in infrastructure and significantly poorer social and mental health outcomes[2].

A simplistic message of 'ramp up production and export more' is not good enough – nor is it feasible. Australian agriculture is being asked to adapt quickly to variable climate changes that happen in months and years, not decades[3]. In addition, increasing the demand on farmers to produce more with the focus on chemical fertilisers and genetically modified crops does not lead to a sustainable system. Alternative, **proven and high-yielding methodologies** such as agro-ecology, regenerative agriculture and permaculture should be the focus on agricultural research and development in Australia.

We take the view that while we need to support our farmers with access to markets, encouraging more monocultural, large-scale, productivist and export-focused farming is not the solution to long-term food security and food sovereignty in Australia.

Our local food systems instead require **investment in research into regenerative practices to create viable food economies** of the future. This is especially important if Australia's projected population base doubles by natural increase over the next 40 years[4].

[1] http://ruralhealth.org.au/factsheets/thumbs
[2] http://www.crrmh.com.au/index.php/our-work/research-projects/armhs
[3] Stokes C & Howden M. (Eds.) 2010. Adapting Agriculture to Climate Change: Preparing Australian Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries for the Future. CSIRO PUBLISHING.
[4] ABS data: 3222.0 – Population Projections, Australia, 2012 (base) to 2101, December 2013

Our current distribution systems are also resource intensive, requiring significant food miles via road transport to supply both our overseas export markets and our domestic markets. The health and wellbeing of Australians is also at risk with **more than 9 in 10 people aged 16 and over not consuming sufficient servings of vegetables and fruit**[5].

Farmers committed to producing healthy, sustainable food for their local communities should have assistance, support and training for the continual necessary transition to genuinely sustainable forms of production. Small-scale farmers across Australia are already engaged in sustainable practices to provide nutritious food for their communities while caring for the soil they grow on.

Agroecological farming is the application of ecology to the design and management of sustainable agroecosystems[6]. It is a whole-systems approach to agriculture and food systems development based on local food system experiences. It links human and ecological health, culture, economics and social wellbeing in an effort to **sustain agricultural production, healthy environments, and viable food and farming communities**.

For example, this is achieved through using renewable resources such as biological nitrogen fixation, using on-farm resources as much as possible and recycling on-farm nutrients. Agroecology aims to minimise toxins and **conserve soils** by using perennials, no-till or reduced tillage methods and mulching.

Water is a critical resource is Australia and agro-ecological farmers are committed to preserving water by implementing **efficient irrigation systems** where they are needed. Preserving genetic resources is achieved through saving seed, maintaining local landraces and using heirloom varieties as well as raising rare breed livestock. But the most important factor of agroecology is to **re-establish ecological relationships** that can occur naturally on the farm instead of mono-culture farming's simplistic, reductionist paradigm. Pests, diseases and weeds are managed instead of 'controlling' them with harsh chemicals. Intercropping and cover cropping draw in beneficial insects and keep moisture in the soil. Integrated livestock ensures a symbiotic relationship between soils and animals.

[5] AIHW 2012. Australia's food and nutrition 2012. Cat. No. PHE 163. Canberra: AIHW

[6] http://www.agroecology.org/

Cropping patterns are matched with the productive potential and physical limitations of the local farm landscape. Efforts are made to adapt plants and animals to the ecological conditions of the farm rather than modifying the farm to meet the needs of the crops and animals.

From an economic view, agroecological farmers aim to avoid dependence on a single crop or products. They seek out alternative markets and many rely on Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), farmers' markets, 'pick your own' marketing, value added products, processing on-farm and agro-tourism. They often build resilience by using multiple crops to diversify seasonal timing of production over the year.

The above approaches seek to **maximise intergenerational benefits**, not just annual profits. They maximise livelihoods and quality of life in rural areas and facilitate generational transfers. They use long-term strategies in developing plans that are flexible and can be adjusted and re-evaluated through time to respond appropriately to climate change and thereby ensure resilient agricultural production and **secure rural livelihoods**.

Building resilience and providing access to food can be achieved by facilitating shorter supply chains in the form of CSA models. These models ensure financial security for farmers to produce food in sufficient quantities to meet local demands. This practice minimises waste and provides a fair price for consumers as well as farmers while also reducing food miles. CSA models are diverse and different production systems will require variations.

Having access to research on CSA models would be highly beneficial to farmers looking to participate in a direct to consumer model for their farm. So too would access to farm information and extension services aimed at smaller farms to enable adaptation to changing social and economic circumstances. These could advise on scaled technologies appropriate to smaller growers, offering improved economic and social wellbeing outcomes.

We are submitting the **People's Food Plan** and respectfully request your genuine consideration of this well-researched model of food production. The provision of policy "space" to allow alternate models to develop does not have to be an "either-or" choice. We believe that alternate models have long-term benefits that must be allowed their fair share of exploration and resources.

We call on the committee:

- to recommend a policy refocussing that acknowledges the primacy of food production
- to support the funding of scientific research into "world's best practice" holistic, sustainable agricultural models of food production, including agroecology
- to support the widespread implementation of ecological alternatives to current agricultural models through funded, model research farms that represent the diversity of Australian farming landscapes
- to support local agricultural extension services for small farmers to enable them to access this information and allow them to educate themselves on best practice models

We are willing to provide further information if required, and attend briefings and consultations.

Sincerely

Tammi Jonas

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