

The People's Food Plan

"[W]hat happens in the food system is of no concern to you if you're never going to eat again. But if you're intending to have breakfast, lunch or dinner, what happens to [family] farmers, what happens to seeds, what happens to water, matters to you, because your lunch depends on it."

Nettie Wiebe, former President of the National Farmers Union of Canada
Founding member, La Via Campesina

It's just common sense, isn't it? Food – along with water, and air – is the essence of life, it's what sustains us, day by day, minute by minute. For it to do this, to maintain our good health, we rely on a healthy food system. But what is that?

Let's define it this way – a healthy food system is one that:

- Provides us with good food
- Provides a good livelihood for the people producing the food, and
- Looks after the land and water with which the food is produced

That's the common sense we mentioned above, and it's something everyone can understand.

But it's so easy when we say it like that, because the challenge to produce enough food has, for most of settled human history, been exactly that: a challenge. Then along came the discovery of fossil fuels, and the Haber-Bosch process for fixing nitrogen, and the Green Revolution...and everything changed. The result of those discoveries is that, over the last 80 years, food systems have become so productive that we've increased our population, worldwide, by more than 300 per cent.

Now everything's changing again. This started when agriculture – the work of producing food – became industrialised. When what we call 'factory farming' swept the globe. Farmers now produce huge grain surpluses that feed people, but increasingly also feed the expanding biofuels industry, and farm animals in huge feedlots. Some of those grains are also used to make the sweeteners and emulsifiers that underpin the processed and fast food industries. Every year, more land is cleared, and more rural communities dispossessed, in what has become a rampant global 'land-grab'. Family farmers everywhere are squeezed and their viability threatened. It's 'get big or get out'.

This was always going to have consequences, and now we're seeing, very clearly, what they are:

- Farmers have become marginalised price takers with no way to protect their interests
- Up to a billion people, mostly women in rural areas, suffer malnourishment
- A global obesity pandemic affecting 400 million people, with the numbers increasing yearly
- Agriculture and food production account for as much as 33 percent of all greenhouse gas emissions
- Industrialised agriculture is a major factor behind a dramatic loss of biodiversity
- The industrialisation of the food system means most consumers don't know where their food comes from or how it's produced

It's becoming obvious that we can't go on like this. 'Business-as-usual' is not an option in a world in which the global food supply is anything like 'usual'.

But 'business-as-usual' is exactly what our federal government, in its proposed National Food Plan, intends to do. The government has lost sight of the big picture, and is only focused on the short-term goals of making more money by 'seizing new market opportunities', 'raising productivity and

competitiveness', and, as they put it, boosting exports. It urges the more widespread adoption of expensive new technologies like genetic modification, yet after twenty years these technologies, which most of the public rejects, have failed to boost yields, whilst creating major problems like superweeds and super-pests. It urges the greater acquisition of Australian farmland by sovereign wealth funds and financial institutions in the name of 'foreign investment', to the growing disquiet of Australians who feel our food security is being compromised as a result.

It's not secret why these are the main priorities. You just have to look at the main players shaping the National Food Plan: corporate agri-business and the big retailers. Is it mere coincidence that they're the main beneficiaries of keeping the food system going the way it is? Their profits have increased handsomely, even as human well-being and ecosystem integrity are being dangerously compromised.

That's why we say, it's time for the Australian people to stand up, stand together, and send our politicians a very clear message. They've listened – and are listening – to the corporates. Now they need to listen to us. There are literally millions of Australians who grow some of their own food; keep some chooks or a beehive; shop at a farmers' market; help at a community or school garden; and, most of all, who want to buy, with confidence, Australian-grown, safe and healthy produce.

The vast majority of Australians, in other words, want a fair, sustainable and resilient food system; and a great many are taking steps right now in our own lives to bring that goal closer to reality.

The consultation process for a National Food Plan offered by the Federal Government has not been accessible for most Australians. The documents are long, and the language obtuse and technical. Most of all though is the fact that the government, working closely with industry chieftains, has pre-set the agenda...it has determined which questions to ask, and it's already arrived at many of the answers, even before hearing the views of ordinary Australians. Now, you have to ask what kind of inquiry acts this way? Where's the rigour in the government's approach? It looks more and more like a put-up job. Fundamentally, the National Food Plan proceeds on the basis that food is above all a commodity for money-making and export, rather than something that is the main contributor to the nation's health.

The People's Food Plan process, facilitated by the Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance together with our allies and supporters around the country, starts from a very different set of principles.

These are human-centred, not profit-centred principles, and they include:

- Food as a basic human need and right
- Thriving rural communities and viable family farms as essential components of a healthy food system
- Supporting farmers in their stewardship of the land because agriculture relies on healthy land and waterways
- Protecting our prime agricultural lands from urban sprawl and mining
- Basing the sustainable agriculture of the future around agro-ecological approaches that have boosted yields, reduced chemical inputs, increased soil health and created jobs, and investing research money in these approaches
- Diversification in our food distribution and retail sectors, to break the destructive, anti-competitive stranglehold the supermarket duopoly has over the food system and the dietary choices of Australians

- The use of health-oriented public policy to counter the proven and evident threat to public health of junk food and fast food, which is becoming as great a threat to public health as tobacco;
- Renegotiation of the international trade agreements that are undermining farmers and food production capacity in Australia and among our trading partners, while filling the coffers of agrifood corporations

Food is a basic human right. To make it real, we have the right and responsibility, as a people and as communities, to work together to decide how our food and agricultural systems can be designed to be fair, sustainable and resilient. We call this food sovereignty – the freedom to choose the type of food we want, produced in ways we approve of and distributed fairly so that all of us in this nation, regardless of who we are, where we come from or how much money we have, can freely choose our own diets.

The People's Food Plan process is about us exercising our basic rights as citizens, to hold a democratic and inclusive conversation on issues of fundamental importance to our own well-being, and that of future generations. It involves ordinary Australians, family farmers, social and community enterprise and small to medium food businesses discussing, together, what our values and priorities are for our food system. These issues are far too important to simply 'let the market decide' and to leave to the government.

Public forums are being held around the country. For more information, contact: Nick Rose, nick@foodsovereigntyalliance.org; Claire Parfitt, claireparfitt@gmail.com; or Michael Croft, michael@mountaincreekfarm.com.au