

MEDIA BRIEF

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Paddock to plate – time to re-think food and farming

These are challenging times for Victorian food and farming: Cutting carbon pollution, readying farmers for a rapidly changing climate, getting off the oil drip, raising farm returns, keeping food affordable, restoring rivers, soils and bushland, improving public health, and building a world-leading clean, green brand for Victorian food and farming. On the other hand, we have opportunities and options. A sustainable food and farm sector is possible. What is more, Victoria is not starting from scratch. But delay will see choices slip away, a lack of vision will see us fall behind the world and business-as-usual will end in crisis.

ACF is calling on the Premier to build on the state's legacy of leadership and show Australia the way with a Sustainable Food & Farming Strategy; ensuring government – as one – rises to the challenge. A new report – *Paddock to Plate: Food, Farming & Victoria's Progress to Sustainability* – explores the future of Victoria's food system. *Paddock to Plate* has been prepared by Andrew Campbell, an experienced and passionate leader in the field of sustainable food, farming and environmental management, and formerly Executive Director of Land and Water Australia. Rich in information and fresh ideas, *Paddock to Plate* makes the case for a new approach. In the coming months, ACF's Food & Farm Project will deliver a comprehensive set of recommendations for government and industry policy and strategy.

What is ACF's Future Food & Farm Project?

ACF's Future Food & Farm Project aims to inspire a step-change towards food and farming systems that are genuinely sustainable and that contribute to a sustainable world. For the first time in Australia, ACF is exploring the role of governments – and all of us - in shaping a sustainable future for our whole food value chain, from paddock to plate. The Project draws on the experience of many people from diverse backgrounds - including leading farmers, policy specialists, corporate managers, restaurateurs, retailers, scientists, community activists and consumer advocates. The Project is made possible by funding from the William Buckland Foundation.

Why is a fresh approach to food and farming needed?

More and more Australians are feeling the strain of prolonged drought, an end to cheap oil and declining catchment health. Prices have spiralled at the pump and at the checkout in the last year, and farm fertiliser and fuel costs have skyrocketed. Without urgent and sustained action, the situation will get worse. If we're smart though, we can turn crisis into opportunity.

Paddock to Plate finds that the story of food and farming in Victoria is a mixed one:

- Victoria leads the country in the production of top quality produce, with food and farming playing a vital role in the lives and livelihoods of communities around the state. Around 26 per cent of Australia's food and fibre exports, worth more than \$6 billion in 2007, are produced here from just three per cent of the country's agricultural land.
- Food manufacturers, wholesalers and retailers collectively turn over around \$50 billion per year. This doesn't include thousands of clubs, pubs, restaurants and cafés.
- The food and farm sector generates around 20 per cent of Gross State Product and employs more than 14 per cent of all Victorians, in the bush as well as the city.

But these figures mask the full impact of the food and farm sector, and the challenges we all face. The way we currently produce and consume food leaves a heavy footprint on our rivers, soils, wildlife and the climate, as well as the social fabric:

- Historically, farming is the single biggest cause of environmental degradation. Upwards of 90 per cent of private land – most of it farmland - has been cleared of native wildlife habitat. More than 40 per cent of Victoria's native plants and more than 30 per cent of animal species are already either extinct or threatened with extinction.
- Victoria's catchments and rivers are amongst the most stressed in the country, despite many landholders' good efforts. Nearly half of the state's sub-regions are classified as being in poor landscape condition and suffering stress – the highest proportion of any state or territory. In cleared farmland, only a very small fraction of rivers meet state water quality goals.
- The single largest impact that Australians have on water resources is through the food we consume – about half of total household water use compared to 11 per cent used directly in washing, cleaning and gardens.
- Unless there are fast and deep cuts in global emissions, even the more alarming predictions for a future climate begin to look like underestimates. Regions with a Mediterranean climate, like Victoria, are set to be among the worst affected parts of the world. In the decades ahead, southern Australia is likely to suffer drought conditions over a much greater area and much more often. The Garnaut Report found that irrigated agriculture in the Murray-Darling Basin could fall by as much as 49 per cent in 2050 and all but disappear by 2100 without strong action.
- Agriculture contributes as much as 16 per cent of Australia's greenhouse gas emissions load – with most of this from cattle and sheep. Australians, on average, eat more than their own body weight in meat every year - around 300g per person per day – one of the highest rates of meat consumption in the world.
- The way our food is hauled, packaged, processed, manufactured, stored, prepared and consumed - not just farmed – adds to its real environmental cost. Food is directly responsible for 23 per cent of household carbon pollution in Australia.
- And then there is the fuel we use to till paddocks, synthesise farm chemicals and freight food around the country, around the globe and to our homes. The just-in-time food supply we have come to depend on has been sustained by a steady stream of cheap oil. But world oil production appears to have peaked, even as demand rises. Recent CSIRO research suggests that petrol could reach \$8 per litre in ten years. The era of cheap oil is over.
- According to a recent study for the group CERES, the ingredients in a typical Melbournian's weekly shopping basket (excluding packaging) have travelled the equivalent of two round-

the-world trips or three times the length of the Australian coastline. This means 11,000 tonnes of CO₂-e pumped into the air – or the equivalent of almost 3,000 cars on the road for a year¹.

- Food prices have risen dramatically in recent months, but in real terms remain well under half what they were in the 1960s and less than a quarter of the peak during the oil crisis of the 1970s. Even so, many more Victorians are now classed as ‘food stressed’.
- Diet is the biggest contributor to rising levels of obesity and associated chronic diseases. In 2005, an estimated 3.24 million Australians were obese, incurring direct and indirect costs to the tune of \$21 billion. At current rates, the number of obese Australians will double by 2025, placing our health system and well-being under enormous strain.
- Only the top third of Australian farms have had productivity gains (by gross value) that exceed the decline in their terms of trade, and only the top fifth generate a positive long-term return on capital. Chronic unprofitability and rising indebtedness in the farm sector is leading to increased stress and health risks – including depression and suicide - with consequences for the whole community.

If Victoria is to maintain its impressive productivity and prosperity in a rapidly changing world faced with these sorts of challenges, we need to seriously re-think food and farming.

What does Victoria need to do for sustainable food security?

Paddock to Plate outlines key challenges for Victoria. It finds:

- **Business as usual is not an option.** It is important that governments and industry don’t default to their comfort zones. There are many areas where the status quo is patently not good enough. Mere tweaks to our carbon pollution, land & water use or oil dependence will not make the grade.
- **Victoria can position itself as a world leader in the production of premium foods with trusted clean, green credentials.** This means handsome returns, innovation, green jobs, new exports and new regional development opportunities. The alternative will see us falling further behind. Many countries - most prominently the United Kingdom - are already looking again at the performance of their food systems.
- **Clear direction and commitment is needed, right from the top.** Government has a special responsibility to make change possible, and to make sure that progress isn’t disjointed or piecemeal. Success means joining the dots between food, farming, environment, planning, climate, health, innovation, energy, urban design, transport and regional development.

What are the opportunities for a sustainable food and farming future?

Paddock to Plate sees numerous opportunities:

- Beyond government, responsibility for shaping sustainable food systems must be shared more equally across the value chain. While some have made a good start, catalytic leadership can and must come from supermarkets, agribusiness, restaurants and other food businesses.

¹ NB: This reference, not cited in *Paddock to Plate*, is included here to illustrate the oil dependence and potentially large carbon footprint of modern food chains. For more information, visit: <http://www.ceres.org.au/projects/foodmiles.html> To ACF’s knowledge, there is no other comparable Australian study on ‘food miles’.

- The emergence of carbon and other environmental markets around the world means a new operating environment for agriculture and food businesses, with opportunities for smart and nimble players.
- Agriculture's impacts on land, water and wildlife are immense and ongoing. At the same time, with the right policy and price signals, Victorian farming could be the key to restoring catchment health.
- Finding ways to return a bigger slice of the food price cake back to the producer and ensuring that higher returns are reinvested in cleaner, greener farming systems will help make agriculture genuinely sustainable.
- Healthy environments, healthy farming systems and healthy people are intricately intertwined. Promoting more sustainable diets would yield big dividends for personal and public health - ultimately reducing the burden on the public purse and the hip pocket.
- We need to wean our food and farming systems off fossil fuels and synthetic fertilisers - and soon. Investment in innovative green technologies, low-input farming and energy-efficient infrastructure would drive a green jobs and green export boom.
- Managing climate change means being proactive rather than just crossing our fingers and hoping for the best. Radical changes are needed. It may mean re-thinking how and where we produce food. We have the opportunity to develop a more resilient, intrinsically Australian agriculture.
- There is considerable scope to produce more of our food in cities like Melbourne, and to redesign our transport infrastructure and urban environments to ensure everyone has access to healthy, affordable food at minimal environmental cost.
- Victoria can do much more to cultivate knowledge, innovation and leadership across the board. We also have the chance to craft a new vision and brand for agriculture – one that attracts and retains talented young people.

What are the opportunities for Victorian leadership?

Without foresight and a plan, we will end up lurching from crisis to crisis, armed only with band-aids and stop-gaps. In Britain, Prime Minister Gordon Brown has directed the Cabinet Office to devise a national strategy for sustainable food security. This means a whole-of-government response that cuts across traditional departmental boundaries around issues like obesity, regional development and climate change. There is no reason why Victoria can't meet this world's best practice. So far, no government in Australia has really applied itself to sustainable food and farming. If our kids are to enjoy good food and a healthy environment, then we need our leaders to think at least ten years ahead and commit to sustained action towards agreed milestones. Leadership and commitment is needed at both state and federal levels, with bi-partisan support to ensure a sustained effort. Victoria is well-placed to lead the country to a sustainable food and farming future.

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Andrew Campbell's report, *Paddock to Plate: Food, Farming & Victoria's Progress to Sustainability*, is available to download at <http://www.acfonline.org.au/futurefoodfarm>