

To the Productivity Commission

Re Review of the Murray Darling Basin Plan

Dear Chair, Committee, and Secretariat

I take this opportunity to make a submission to your review.

By way of background, I am a social anthropologist and have been conducting research for the past eighteen months with farmers and irrigated growers in the Millewa-Mallee region of north-west Victoria, centring on and around the regional city of Mildura. My research focuses on transformations in intergenerational farming and specifically seeks to make visible the multiple challenges growers face in the present, understand the ways growers see and respond to those challenges, how they think about the future, and more broadly examine the future of agricultural production in this 'Food Bowl' of national and global significance.

The paper I submit is the written version of a public lecture, the Murray Talk, which I developed as the 2023 Mildura Writers Festival writer in residence. It was delivered to a public audience in Mildura in July 2023. This submission is a working draft that will be further developed for publication with references, but is provided in early form to meet your submissions timeframe.

The terms of reference for the Review include a request to consider the operation of the plan and water resource plans, "particularly their ability to address future challenges". The material I present, which is drawn from recent interviews and ongoing discussions with multiple growers indicates that significant and rapid transformations in agriculture have been occurring in this region and that the availability and cost of water is a central factor in that change. The material presented also indicates a more complex intersection between farming and environmental concerns than is often recognised in public debate over water issues.

I am aware that related issues have been raised in past reviews of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan including by the Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists. My aim in providing this perspective is to bring very contemporary 'post-Covid' perspectives to your attention as you undertake your challenging review process. I would be happy to assist further if my perspective is deemed of value.

Yours sincerely

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Farming futures: Views from the Millewa-Mallee

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I respectfully acknowledge the Latje Latje, Barkandji and their neighbours. The violent dispossession of First Nations communities is the foundational fact for the wicked problems I am here to explore with you today.

I begin, as seems appropriate, with a poem:

Asparagus Bones

Thirstland talc light
haunted the bush horizons
all day. As it softened
into blusher we drove out
through gardens that are farms
past steeped sultana frames
to a red-earth dune
flicked all over with water
to keep it tightly knitted
in orange and avocado trees
black-green and silver green
above trickling dust. My friend
fetched a box of fossil bones
from the unlocked half-million of the coolroom there:
asparagus for his banquet kitchen,
no-one around, no dog,
then we drove where biceps
of river water swelled
through a culvert, and bulges
of turbulence hunted swirls
just under their moon skin,
and we mentioned again unsecured farm doors, open
verandahs, separate houses,
emblems of a good society. (Les Murray, from *Conscious and Verbal*, 1999)

Les Murray's poem is an ode to the rooting of food in place. This place. Yet this celebration of the rural as nourishment and model of the good society catches itself twice. The 'half-million of the coolroom' signals a global export market awaiting those boxes of green spears. And the man helping himself to this high-end home-grown produce for a writer's festival banquet has an exceptional entitlement. There is nothing transactional about Stefano and Les's provisioning excursion. Nothing that indicates the normal business of food as we ordinary consumers know it. Yet, there is something in this scene and its special arrangements that helps us imagine a different set of conditions for the growing and sharing of food than those that currently rule our world.

Mildura's food bowl is hermetically sealed. The food grown here is largely inaccessible to the folk who reside among the bounty-producing blocks. Food is contracted before it is grown. It is harvested, packed, and spirited out of this place on endless convoys of road trains that thunder down the highway, destined for distribution centres, supermarkets, or onto ports, ships, and onwards to SE Asia and further afield.

Thanks to the wonders of refrigeration, a small portion of the food grown here does return. It lands on the shelves of Coles and Woolies, priced competitively to outsell any remnant fresh fruit and veg you might find at local roadside stands. The two dollars I pay for an avocado at a Redcliffs stall costs me 80 cents more than at Coles on the same day.

Co-located with the food bowl is a food desert. Large areas of Mildura's concreted suburbs boast Maccas, KFC, pizza and kebab shops, but no outlets selling fresh fruit and vegetables. In 2018 a population health survey found that more than 50% of people living in Mildura did not eat sufficient fruit and vegetables. More than 50% of the adult population were reported as overweight or obese. Lurking behind these figures are a cluster of related poor wellbeing indicators pointing to stark social inequalities.

The tempo of seasonal food production gives Mildura its seductive groove. The race is on to get food to market when prices are high and before it wilts and rots. But really, this race is only incidentally about food and all about finance.

When markets fail, or supply chains are disrupted, harvests are bitter. Watermelons, zucchinis, lettuces are ploughed back into the ground. Grapes are left hanging on vines, sitting in cool rooms, rotting in shipping containers grounded at ports. Along with the astonishing amount of waste, the people who have spent months nurturing a crop with all the hours of toil, water, and input costs, are left emotionally jangled and financially distressed.

Farming demands huge commitments and steady nerves. It is, they say, like going to the casino every day. There is luck and the unknown.

2022 was a particularly challenging year. The record rainfall created chaotic conditions not witnessed in seven decades. Grape growers lost tonnes of fruit to downy mildew. There was a condition called 'restricted Spring growth' which agronomists still cannot explain. Mountains of late ripening fruit missed its precious market window and was left on vines or in cool rooms with no buyer. The unrelenting rain caused albedo in citrus, a condition in which the skin breaks down. Grain growers fared better on the back of international demand created by the war in Ukraine, but battled outbreaks of disease, loss of crops to hailstorms, and unprecedented cases of harvesters catching fire.

The asparagus of Les Murray's poem is not out of place in this picture. Three years ago, the farmer whose cool room offered up the celebrated ingredient for Stefano's banquet put the bulldozer through his 300 acres of asparagus plants. His family had been growing the prized vegetable since the 1920s. A century later, after a series of bad years, the farmer read the writing on the wall. So too did the other producers in the district. This farmer had apparently been doing everything right. He had diversified his crops. He had taken on more debt and scaled up his operations. In his own

words, he had transformed his farm into a business, with rolling harvests calculated to continue across the calendar year. He tells me it all worked well in the 1980s, but not now.

This farmer's great grandfather first planted asparagus in response to a local doctor's assessment that the Mildura community diet was lacking in iron. He planted asparagus between rows of sultana grapes. It became a vehicle of entrepreneurial extension, topping up the income earned from the production of dried fruit. Asparagus funded farm expansion across the decades. Until it no longer did.

Asparagus is expensive. It must be hand-picked, piece by piece, every day. In summer it needs to be picked twice daily. After decades of growing the plant, you think you know it. You think you can guess when the flush will come, but then it doesn't come. You need to have pickers ready to work seven days a week. At the scale this farmer was growing, that equates to 200 workers at peak harvest. Rising wages and costs of fertilizer on either side of covid meant the cost of producing asparagus doubled. When Mexico and California brought asparagus onto the market at a price Australian growers could not compete with, Australian production collapsed.

Around the same time Mexico undercut Australia's asparagus, California's pre-eminence as the world's largest almond exporter teetered as a result of drought and new legislation protecting dwindling ground water reserves. California's loss was Australia's gain.

Between 2009 and 2019, almonds became the dominant crop in the Victorian Mallee, covering more than 25,000 hectares.

The almond boom rides a wave of shifting consumer fashion. Nuts are in. From the perspective of farmers, nuts also have a natural advantage over fruit and vegetables. Their shells are like bullet proof armour, giving protection from extreme weather events as well as disrupted supply chains. If a market fails, almonds can pile high for weeks in packing sheds. They can withstand bureaucratic hold ups. When it comes to labour, the 200 workers required to tend 300 acres of asparagus drops to just 20 to harvest the same area of almonds.

But while almonds may be well buffed to compete in the food wars, they are not fail proof. The Australian Almond Board estimates a 25% lower than expected return for 2022. Poor pollination due to the varroa mite outbreak in bees, poor water quality due to flooding, and more generally unfavourable weather are contributing factors.

Of course, extreme weather events and surges and collapses in global trade are nothing new. They go all the way back to the first years of Mildura. The first global supply chain disruption was experienced here in 1893, when on the eve of a fabulous harvest, the river dropped. Barge loads of fruit was left rotting and stranded, waiting for the river to rise to allow its transportation. A century of boom-and-bust cycles followed.

But the pressures on farming have been intensifying in recent decades. Climate change and expanding agri-business loom large. When mentioned by farmers, "the corporates" signals a particular kind of threat.

“When it’s your money it is worth more than a 7-8% return on investment”, I’m told by a young, second-generation farmer whose family pulled back from financial disaster at the height of the drought when they sold their almond orchard to a corporate buyer. “I would not do this for 7-8%”, he tells me as he shakes his head.

I want to unpack what I think this farmer means and what I think is at stake in this claim.

I have been talking to food growers in this region about how they are responding to the challenges of the present and thinking about the future. At human scale I am learning about how farmers wrestle with their relationships to their farms, markets, weather, technology, bank managers, accountants, insurance brokers, families, non-human companions, as well as to the food that they grow, as they strive to make a livelihood and a life worth living.

My talk today has significant absences. These include the rich but little-known history of local Aboriginal people’s participation in food production through the twentieth century, emergent trials in growing indigenous crops and harvesting seed, as well as the work being undertaken to restore lands and waterways. Nor will I speak to the “hidden society” of farm labour, the reliance on Pacific workers that is as vital as it is problematic in the local horticulture industry.

I want to suggest that through the prism of farmers’ responses to the challenges of our times we not only learn a lot about the crisis of our food system; we glimpse a set of arrangements that entangles us all. Through the experiences of farmers, we face fundamental questions about the relationship between growing food, feeding, and what it means to be human and live a good life in the present.

Reading Les Murray’s poem today, the fossil bones he conjures call to mind for me not asparagus spears, but the patchwork of abandoned blocks of vines you will encounter if you take a drive through old Mildura or Merbein. Some of these blocks have the feel of battlefields or graveyards, with thigh-thick gnarled trunks standing skewed like sentinels or tombstones, signalling a bygone age.

One quarter of Mildura’s irrigated blocks are currently “dried off” or “retired”. They have been put out of production by growers who have sold their water entitlement—some out of opportunism, many more out of desperation.

Water today is not only in diminishing supply. With the legislative decoupling of water from land from 2004, water became a tradeable resource with fluctuating value. It became an unstable, volatile asset. It is common now to hear farmers speak not of harvest returns per acre but returns per megalitre, and for water holdings to be invoked as superannuation, or insurance, or debt relief.

In Australia, as elsewhere, as journalist Tom Philpott shows in his book *Perilous Bounty: The Looming Collapse of American Farming and How We Can Prevent it*, as water has become scarcer its tendency to flow towards money has only increased. Right now in this region that flow is in the direction of the thirstiest of crops, almonds, followed by table grapes.

At the height of the millennium drought, irrigators were paying \$1,000/megalitre for temporary water. For some, that equated to a debt of hundreds of thousands of dollars. On the other side of the drought, whose impact was compounded by the global financial crisis, approximately a third of Merbein fruit growers went broke or got out. The closure of the CSIRO office followed—marking the end of an era for an institution that had been a vital source of support and expertise for local growers since it was established in the 1920s.

The spectre of “the corporates” that hangs over these developments also looms large in conversations with farmers. And as the example of asparagus makes clear, it is not so easy these days to distinguish a farmer from a corporate. The processes that are remaking primary production run through the entire sector. The global food system has its own culture, and like any culture, it demands certain ways of acting by all who participate in it. Yet its domination is not complete. What I am going to do now is take us briefly across some themes that shine a light on the workings of our food system, as well as some human-scale practices and commitments that are defying its logics. And here, at this human end of the supply chain, I want to suggest, lies hope.

Scaling up

When the first generation of settlers took up growing fruit in the Chaffeys’ Mildura irrigated district in the late 1880s they purchased blocks of 10 or 20 acres. It was possible to make a livelihood, to support a family, on blocks of that size until the 1960s.

Today a successful dried fruit grower is likely to be pushing 80 acres to make a viable income from grapes alone. Table grapes are much more labour intensive and get traded on more volatile markets. The special varieties grown to ship to China, Indonesia, Sri Lanka sell at a price Australian consumers would balk at. When a market fails or a variety goes out of favour, vines are ripped out and replaced. Risk mitigation demands larger acreage.

Out in the Millewa, from the 1920s the first generation of settler-farmers were granted a square mile, or 640 acres. When drought hit, coinciding with the Great Depression, many walked off. Farming out in the drylands was brutal. Some of these settler-farmers attempted to enlist in WWII — soldiering, they imagined, would give them a break from farming, as well as a new pair of boots. They were sent back to their farms to continue their essential national service. Three disastrous years followed. In the subsequent reallocation of land, just a quarter of the initial 800 dryland farmers remained.

Between the 1980s and 2000s, driven by new technologies, chemicals, and economies of scale, the number of broadacre farms in Australia halved as the size of farms expanded. This process has intensified since the 2008 global financial crisis, with Australian agriculture becoming a landing place for global investment and speculation. Encouraged by successive federal govts, foreign private equity firms and giant super funds are drawn to Australia’s political stability and the availability of large acreage. These entities have no interest in food, they are chasing strong returns for their shareholders. The exchange value of farmland, water, and farming products is now tied to innumerable and untraceable financial transactions around the world.

This financialised global arena displaced arrangements that had governed agriculture until the 1980s when the deregulation of the Australian economy was set in train. Farming may always

have been lonely work, but it has also become individualised since the demise of growers' cooperatives and single desks for marketing agricultural exports. Farmers today must carry risk, they must shoulder more debt, they must go in search of their own markets. The pressure is on to scale up. In the last five years, seven out of 10 properties in one district of the Millewa have changed hands. Many of these farms have been acquired not by foreign interests, but by neighbours scaling up and others hoping to capitalise on the agri-land rush by "land banking". Family farmers scaling up their operations must bring in farm managers and contract workers with a different more distanced relationship to the place and the work at hand. In the process the character of farming shifts.

Despite the pressure to grow or get out, some small growers forge on, determined to keep farming at human scale. Driven by an ethos of doing as much as they can themselves, they are committed to farming as a holistic process and, if possible, a way of life. They supplement farming income with off-farm work. They are contractors for neighbours and further afield. They work as mechanics, they sit on regional councils, they have partners in fulltime jobs with more steady incomes.

Grounding

The spectre of "the corporates" that haunts human scale farming is not just a fear of flighty finance. It is about distance. Corporate farming is the antithesis of grounded knowledge. It knows no commitment to local conditions or local people. Farm managers are beholden to the same spreadsheet bottom lines as the companies who employ them. The workers of one farming family complain about the easy life they observe of the managers contracted to run the orchard next door. They watch on as shiny utes cruise the rows of almond trees, the drivers rarely setting feet on the ground.

Is there such a thing as a "local knowledge" of farming, and if so, what does it look like today? To answer this question, we need to remember that Mildura was global from the get-go. Globalisation is not simply about predatory market opportunities. Global migration made and continues to make Mildura as it does Australia at large. The people who came from Italy, Europe, Asia, India, and Africa and made this place home brought with them cultured ways of growing and sharing food, and particular ways of cooperating with each other.

In turn, Mildura growers went out to the world seeking the best means to tackle the challenges they faced. They brought back the latest techniques in wine making, cooling, irrigation, and harvesting equipment. Export markets sometimes delivered deeper forms of friendship and exchange, such as the German bakers who imported Merbein raisins and in turn shared lessons from their approach to cooperative enterprise.

Local knowledge turns on a heightened sense of place—an attitude and a set of practices migrant peasant farmers brought with them and applied to the environment they now call home. It involves respect and reverence for nature. It requires alertness to change over time. It involves a long view. It demands deep commitment, love, for the place in which one lives and works. Old blockies who gained an intimate understanding of the structure of their soil and the problems of salinity, and who brought about revolutionary changes in irrigation techniques, also learned early about the relationship between what they did on their blocks and the health of the river. In

their retirement some of these growers have become passionate activists for environmental repair. Some carry deep grief for the brutalities of colonial dispossession. They long for reconciliation with local Aboriginal people.

Driving across his paddocks and leaping out of the ute to inspect the ground more closely, one farmer gives me a richly detailed account of the plant life before our eyes; the history of what he has been doing to hold soil in place; the mysteries of crop successes and failures; and the weighing up of the economic and environmental implications of replacing annual cropping with carbon capturing vegetation.

The pressures on place, on people's relationships to place, are at the heart of the crisis of food production. As agriculture has been financialised it has been decoupled from rural communities. As agricultural products have been celebrated in the terms of national export income, there has been a stretching of trust between growers and those who rely on their food. There is a disconnect between the experience of work on the farm and back in the town, not to mention the cities.

Disengagement, lack of interest, mutual distrust, and when resources are at stake: confrontation and conflict, are all in the mix.

Farms are increasingly places of work, not the location of farming households or social life. Untold numbers of farmhouses sit unoccupied or abandoned. These houses are surplus to requirement in the scaling up of agriculture, but also often because of the preferences of partners and children to be in town, close to entertainment and social support. The countryside is being emptied of people.

The de-coupling of farm, farming and place occurs in a dizzying array of combinations. Tree-changers chasing authentic rural experiences move into farmhouses among the vines, while the growers of those vines decamp to more urbanised locations in response to family pressures. In one happy counter movement I know of, a family of six who were at risk of becoming homeless in town were provided with on-farm housing in exchange for lending a hand with farm work. Their presence on the farm offsets the absence of the commuting farmer. Life on the farm has not only provided this family with security. It has given the children in that family life changing experiences.

Acceleration

In November, in the weeks before table grapes fully ripen, Chinese buyers cruise in shiny black Mercedes SUVs offering big cash direct to growers. They are trying to maximise profit by taking the first fruit of the season onto the market. The early fruit often comes with a lovely colour, but unresolved sugars. These 'acid bombs' have a ricochet effect through the market. They collapse consumer confidence as well as the price for growers whose fully ripened grapes are coming behind. Growers themselves chase market advantage by selecting varieties predicted to ripen early. They diversify crop choices and growing locations to expand their harvesting window. There are three different times at play on the paddocks and fruit blocks. There is the time of global supply chains and their informal- or black-market equivalents; there is the time of nature—in which crops ripen or fail, in which life and death occur; and there is the time of farming itself. These three modes of time are entangled and in tension with each other.

There is also a sense now that time itself is out of joint, that everything is accelerating. And as supply chain disruptions make devastatingly clear, acceleration can just as quickly come to a screaming halt.

One large farm in the district manages the risks of just-in-time vegetable production by farming a fleet of trucks as well as carrots. It was a perfect business model for securing domestic supply chains, until covid took out the truck drivers.

In the time of farming, jobs take as long as they take. For the farmer whose practice integrates a fifty-year-old Ford tractor and sixty-year-old Dodge truck along with his John Deere precision guided cropping machine, there is the plan for the day versus the day that evolves. There is preparation, fixing, starting machinery, clearing fuel lines, checking engine oil, pumping tyres, moving trucks and tractors around, the search for this and that. This kind of farm time is at odds with the 9 to 5 of urban time, adding additional stress to geographically dispersed families.

Not so long ago a different set of principles were in play. Up until the 1980s irrigated growers could not just turn on a tap to water their plants when they liked. The delivery of five pre-harvest irrigations was decided by local committee. A group of blokes (yes, always blokes) would assemble in a room in front of a government issued calendar. They would argue and debate and finally agree upon the most suitable dates for the sequencing of the district's water allocations. If it rained, they would meet again and revise their dates. The delivery of irrigated water in this way turned not only on the industrialisation of the river. It was determined by *social agreement*.

Picture the water bailiff through this period, travelling from farm to farm on his 60 cc motor bike, yelling out across the vines to a farmer that the water was about to be passed to his neighbour. This was heads up that the farmer had four days to clear his open channels in preparation for the water to arrive.

These images are far removed from the micro-second hyper-volatility of distant water markets, and digital soil moisture probes that individual farmers now navigate from the screens of their mobile phones and laptops. They allow us to glimpse a differently organised social world.

Responsibility

The behemoth of the global food system is vertical integration which works as an astonishing magnetic force over all the human, animal, environmental cogs in an agri-business system. Vertical integration is perhaps easier (and more frightening) to observe in action in the US where massive corporate systems map directly onto entire regional towns, such as in the industrial scale pork factories and endless soy and corn fields that provide the building blocks of industrially produced meat and fast-food products. Australia is not immune to these logics, with growers contracted to major supermarkets required to employ on farm techniques and inputs to ensure their harvest conforms to standard specifications in size, colour and shape. These supermarkets are in turn owned by larger conglomerates that trade in fertilizers, fossil fuels and other financial interests.

Against the logic of vertical integration, one dryland farmer continually directs my attention laterally, to other kinds of relationships between things. He is fully focused on the climate crisis but sceptical about the zeal around electric vehicles and solar power—these will not provide

solutions until we find ways of dealing with the emissions, toxic waste, modern day slavery, and other dilemmas associated with their production. Relatedly, this farmer points out that we city folk load growers up with responsibility for emissions from belching and farting livestock while ignoring the emissions associated with our own consumption of those same animals. It suits our culture to silo responsibility and sheet it home to particular groups of actors, rather than recognise interconnections.

Millewa farmers have inherited responsibility for land that their forebears cleared to within an inch of its life. They were doing what governments of the time and the wider zeitgeist of nation building demanded they do. Redemption has since been folded into the work of some who have inherited these legacies. One third-generation farmer is pursuing a post-agricultural future, generating improved biodiversity for an energy market and mining limestone. Another tells me he thinks the decisions he makes on his farm should be informed by a wider dialogue about the future use of agricultural land in Australia nationally and globally. A grower of salad greens along the river makes financial sacrifices to ensure his operations are carbon neutral. This man has cornered a market and runs a successful business, but there is nothing relaxed and comfortable about his demeanour. He knows we are on the verge of a precipice and takes every opportunity to alert his more sceptical farming neighbours to the climate emergency.

Disruption

Perhaps the greatest challenge in farming, I'm told, is the gulf between city and country logics. The real hurdle to bringing about sympathetic engagement between growers and consumers of food, is that Australians collectively as a nation have never known hunger, never known systematic food shortages, not in our lifetime at least. City thinking presumes separation—of farmer from environmentalist, of food on supermarket shelves from the conditions of its production.

These are not new dilemmas. In 1946, Australian children's author, farmer, and environmentalist Elyne Mitchell made a rousing and impassioned plea for a national reimagining. In her book *Soil and Civilization*,¹² Mitchell tracks the disconnect of people from the earth via growing urbanisation, industrialised agriculture, standardised education, expanding communications technology, and growing dependence on foreign trade in food. She thinks soil fertility and health is foundational and integral to the creativity and health of a people—a binding spiritual connection that Australia destroyed at colonisation.

American poet and farmer, Wendall Berry, rallies rural communities to exert what he calls a centripetal force against urbanisation and its extractivist tendencies, to hold 'local soil and local memory in place'. How can a community know itself, Berry writes, if 'its members no longer know each other. How can they know each other if they have forgotten or have never learned each other's stories?'

Zooming out further, economic sociologist Wolfgang Streeck argues that the last four decades point to the steady unravelling of capitalism. Capitalism will end, Streeck argues, because it has undermined the regulatory conditions of its stability. *Capitalism is dying as a result of an overdose of itself.*

Somewhere along the line, human scale invention and cooperative endeavour has been overtaken by government encouraged, technology-enabled, asset stripping.

Resourcefulness

When I ask old blokes what they make of the high-tech push in farming, the robot tractors and harvesters and wider applications of AI, they shake their heads and tell me they are relieved to be out of the game. Yet, their own histories of farming are stories of ceaseless local invention and the enthusiastic adoption of new practices and technological aids that transformed their work over-time—the dip tins, the swing arm trellis, the home-made harvesters, as well as dogged and wily political lobbying that transformed irrigation and water management practices.

Farmers are holistic problem solvers. They work with their hands and their bodies. They are systematic thinkers and practical experts across the entire process of production. French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss would describe farmers as bricoleurs, craftsmen and women of the local. They are constantly alert to small signs of change, in climate, in the conditions of the soil, in the behaviour of a plant or a piece of machinery, in the health of an animal. Farmers solve problems through close attention, through nutting things out and making do.

But they are also a dying breed. Between 2001 and 2016 employment in agriculture halved in Australia. The average age of a farmer today is 58. The costs of starting from scratch are prohibitive.

Whereas harvest time was once a celebration of intense sociability, today's conditions fuel anxiety about worker supply and labour costs, as well as dreams of seamless scaling up, technological perfectibility, of driverless tractors and robot harvesters. These shiny images are out of sync with the reality of tractors getting bogged when rainfall is high and soil has not been cared for, and of crops that fail because the bogged tractors cannot get into orchards to spray fungicide. And they are out of sync with the knowledge that after a few bad years of failing to meet shareholder expectations, large corporate entities tend to dump their run down agri-properties, sending ricochet effects through markets and local communities.

Nourishment

Against the grain of global supply chains and just in time logistics, a Mildura project sells weekly boxes of locally grown organic food on subscription. Pricing agreements are made with growers at the start of each season. In a direct rebuff to the brutal market volatilities and profit fleecing that causes farmers to plough crops back into the ground, prices are fixed and stay fixed through the season. With a current list of sixty subscribers, Out of the Box has hit the ceiling of what they can do with their existing network of growers.

One of their suppliers is Food Next Door, a project formed through a novel land sharing arrangement. The farmers working this small acreage are resettled Burundian and Congolese women and men who on arrival in Mildura aspired to grow their own culturally significant vegetable foods, especially maize. Farmers tend their plots outside the hours of their paid employment. The activity of farming, and the cooking and eating of what they grow makes them feel well, fully themselves, and at home. The project has a list of keen farmers waiting on access to farming land.

At a recent event to promote this incrementally expanding project, one of the female farmers was invited to address those assembled. She started haltingly in English, then with growing verve in her native tongue. Her passion was contagious. She ended with a flourish and an incitement to us all to celebrate the project. Food next door! Food next door! She chanted as she and another female farmer broke into a spontaneous dance.

We can also look to more distant sources for inspiration. When it comes to corporate farming, the spectre of “China” looms large over Australian agriculture. Yet we rarely look beyond our own trade relations to what is actually occurring on the ground in this nation of 1.4 billion people. Since the 1980s, China’s farmers have themselves been subject to a radical reform agenda as the government has set about dismantling collective agriculture and clearing the land for large agribusiness. In short, the Chinese government has aggressively installed its own model of capital-based vertical integration.

Yet these land reforms have sparked a quiet but determined resistance movement, especially in Southern China, with the revival of community agrarian farming. In the face of immense government-corporate pressure, small holder farmers continue to practice customary regenerative techniques. They are asserting the centripetal force that Wendell Berry writes of. They continue to work together, innovating in response to rural problems, privileging their livelihoods, their nourishment, and the health of the environment.

Here's a thought bubble: What might Mildura have looked like today if Alfred Deakin had put aside his zealous commitment to a white Australia, and gone looking for irrigation advice in southern China rather than western USA?

The impressions I have shared prompt a series of urgent and fundamental questions.

Why should endless growth in global export markets be pursued at the expense of flourishing communities, well-nourished people, and environments?

Have we reached a new tipping point, a moment to collectively reconsider how we strike the balance between local and global values, how we define national interest and security?

Might it be time for a new compact of shared responsibility between those of us who live in cities and those who live in the bush?

There is growing consensus that prioritising farming at human scale is urgently required if we are to have any chance of intervening in the climate crisis and the hollowing out of rural communities.

Mildura is a fantastic experiment in agricultural placemaking. It has a history of bold projects that exert centripetal force—drawing good people from elsewhere, taking arguments up to governments, building community. Insisting wherever possible on local control. Scheming around questions of what matters, and what makes a good life.

Plenty of food to think with.