

April 30, 2021

By email to: [supplychains@pc.gov.au](mailto:supplychains@pc.gov.au)

**Re: comments on the Productivity Commission Vulnerable Supply Chains interim report**

Thanks for the opportunity to comment.

We are surprised and dissatisfied that the Productivity Commission's interim report says, on the flimsiest of pretexts, that:

"Food, while essential, is excluded from the analysis because Australia is a major and diversified producer of food. While food products may have vulnerable supply chains, food as a category is much less so. ... in Australia no disruptions to global supply chains are likely to affect access to food within the six month time frame under consideration so the remainder of the report excludes food."

The evidence that food supply chains, from seed and sperm to spoon, are vulnerable to chronic or periodic critical disruption and dysfunction is overwhelming. Many Australian families are hungry, malnourished and dependent on charity, either chronically or in times of crisis.

The availability of an ample, affordable and accessible supply of fresh and nutritious food to feed families is far from assured, even in short time frames.

**We therefore call on the Productivity Commission to either include food supply chains in the current review or to commission a separate study on the insecurity, ineffectiveness and instability of many food supply chains.**

We agree with the Right to Food Coalition that:

"food security is a basic human right as it is vital to everyone's physical and mental health and wellbeing. Despite Australia being one of the richest countries, the right to food in Australia still hasn't been realised. To achieve food security for all will require action from government, non-government and community stakeholders. ... Australians have the right to eat well no matter where they live, what their income is, or what community they belong to."<sup>1</sup>

Numerous food supply chain disruptions and accessibility issues already leave many Australians food insecure, during crises or chronically hungry.

For instance, the Foodbank Hunger Report 2017 found that 3.6 million Australians (15%) had experienced food insecurity at least once in the previous year, while 3 in 5 experienced food insecurity at least once a month. Foodbank was then giving food assistance to over 652,000 Australians each month, and 27% of those dependent on the food charity were children. Food charities also turned away 65,000 people each month as their supplies of surplus food ran out.

Foodbank also notes that its "model engenders multi-stakeholder partnerships throughout the entire food and grocery supply chain," and that "Sustainable consumption and production is key to

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<sup>1</sup> Our mission, right to Food. <https://righttofood.org.au/mission/>

reducing future economic, environmental and social costs and strengthening economic competitiveness.”<sup>2</sup>

These matters are clearly within the Productivity Commission’s brief to explore, report and act on.

The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) – of which Australia is a party - defined food security as:

“[A situation] when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.”<sup>3</sup>

Nonetheless, some Australian politicians and institutions deny that our national food supply system has problems. A Productivity Commission report may help to dispel some of their illusions.

RMIT ABC Fact Check investigated the veracity of Agriculture Minister David Littleproud’s claim that Australia has the highest and best food security in the world.<sup>4</sup> Though they assert that “Littleproud’s claim is in the ballpark,” the many complexities of food and food supply chains show we are not the most food secure and there are some risks and threats to food supply chain security and integrity.

There is no room for complacency. We cannot afford to ignore the warnings that events like panic buying during the COVID pandemic signal to us all. The Fact Check quotes Bill Bellotti, food systems program director for the Global Change Institute at the University of Queensland:

“The pandemic is forcing a rethink on the resilience of these global connections and the ‘just-in-time’ food supply chains. A take-home message is that this shock to the food system provides a time for all food actors [the people along the supply chain] to reflect on the impact of the coronavirus on their role.”

Some research was done on very serious long-term existential challenges to the integrity of the food supply, as the interim report notes:

“The Australian Department of Agriculture funded work by the CSIRO and academics to investigate how climate change might impact different agrifood supply chains in Australia, and how they can adapt.”

Such research, on trenchant existential environmental threats to our food supply, economy and everything, is crucially important. However, what is most needed from the Productivity Commission and other institutions is a concerted action plan to sustainably and equitably resolve all food supply chain, hunger and malnutrition issues in Australia.

We urge the Productivity Commission to investigate Vulnerable Food Supply Chains.

Yours sincerely,

Bob Phelps  
Executive Director

Cc: Minister Frydenberg

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<sup>2</sup> Food Insecurity in Australia, Foodbank 2017. <https://mccrindle.com.au/insights/blogarchive/food-insecurity-in-australia/>

<sup>3</sup> Rome Declaration on World Food Security, 13-17 November, 1996. <http://www.fao.org/3/w3613e/w3613e00.htm>

<sup>4</sup> Fact Check. Does Australia have the highest food security in the world? RMIT ABC Fact Check unit, May 19, 2020. <https://www.crikey.com.au/2020/05/19/fact-check-food-security/>