

Food supply to regions needs a rethink

THE coronavirus pandemic and scenes of panic-buying in Australian supermarkets brings the stability and reliability of our food supply system into question. A good food system delivers healthy, sustainably produced and fair food. It shouldn't cause vulnerable people to wonder where they're going to get their next meal. It doesn't leave retail store shelves empty for days at a time. And it doesn't lead to reports of bus-loads of people descending on country towns to strip rural supermarkets of essential groceries.

Federal Agriculture Minister David Littleproud tweeted on March 17 that Australia's "food security is the best in the world". He said we had "an abundant supply of top quality fresh food" and "producing enough food for 75 million people" makes Australia "one of the food bowls of the world". The PM went further, telling us panic buying "is ridiculous and "un-Australian". Government ministers need to be careful about using assumptions to explain the reliability and resilience of our food system. There are too many for us to be confident that these problems do not point to something more serious. Let's look at the minister's "75 million". The Australian Farm Institute explains this often-quoted claim is a general aggregation that expresses Australia's agricultural output. The reality is that unless your diet consists only of meat, dairy and grain, Australians do not enjoy an "abundant supply of top quality fresh food".

In *A Resilient Fruit and Vegetable Supply for a Healthy Victoria*, academics demonstrate Australia doesn't produce sufficient fresh produce for Australians to eat to recommended dietary guidelines. The production of fresh food - which we need much more of to stay healthy - continues to be challenged by seasonal labour shortages, low farmgate prices, climate change and unfettered urban growth eating up prime farmland. The notion of Australia being abundant in food is based on images of ships laden with grain, live sheep, chilled

beef and bulk dairy heading overseas. But where are Australia's overt domestic food production goals? Buses carrying city consumers arriving in country towns to strip supermarket shelves in deeply unsettling times for our communities, government and society are also likely based on another dangerous assumption: that of a food-abundant rural Australia. Ararat in rural Victoria is just one community that last week reported buses delivering shop-strippers to its streets.

Yet while these urban eaters may have left with full trolleys, they might be disappointed in normal times. Many rural communities, including ours in North East Victoria and southern NSW, could have a resilient, regional food system that's well-integrated strongly with a wider national and global network. But currently, us rural Australians largely reliant on city wholesale markets. We are the end, rather than the beginning, of long, global supply chains whose tenuous nature becomes apparent in a crisis like the one we are now experiencing.

In 2014, the Rural City of Ararat council commented on the federal Agricultural Competitiveness Green Paper - a paper designed to pinpoint industry issues and point to policy solutions and which continues to drive government thinking around agriculture. The Ararat council noted "policies need to be considered to ensure residents have access to fresh, wholesome food. In the vast majority of cases local fresh produce is shipped to [city] wholesale markets and then is purchased by large supermarket chains and returned to where it was produced. Apart from obvious inefficiencies and the cost of transportation, this process means that fresh food [in rural communities] is often tired, bruised and past prime use-by."

Colonial and post-colonial Australia has always depended on long-supply chains. Agriculture developed strongly through the 19th century. This was the Industrial Revolution, when British farmworkers were moving into towns and cities to labour in factories.

Fast new steam ships reliably crossing vast oceans, trains running on rail networks built deep into the colonial hinterland and the development of refrigeration were critical components of modern global supply chains. Australian colonies competed to sell produce and goods to Britain. Britain manufactured and Australia supplied the raw ingredients to support that. This set our present model, but is it optimal for current times? After Federation in 1901, the states continued to compete. State and Commonwealth trade offices exist across the world, often in the same cities, paid for by taxpayers. While Australia gives few supports directly to farmers, our current food system is heavily weighted towards an export model with little attention to domestic priorities.

Even before this summer's bushfires, threats to Australia's food system were being widely discussed in food policy circles and in rural communities like ours. The coronavirus pandemic now shows up flaws in our perception of agricultural abundance.

A reliable, healthy and fair food supply is critical to our health and wellbeing. Blind trust because of assumptions about its strength are not enough. More than ever we need active, transparent and apolitical thinking that takes country and urban Australians' food and social needs into account. There is no time to lose.

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