

Regional Food Security Alliance (RFSA) submission to the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee for the Inquiry into food security in Victoria

27 June 2024



Regional Food Security Alliance (RFSA) Incorporated

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BACKGROUND

The Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee will inquire into, consider and report on the impacts, drivers of and solutions for food security in Victoria including the impact of food insecurity on physical and mental health and poverty and hardship and the options available to lower the cost of food and improve access to affordable, nutritious and culturally appropriate food.

On 29 November 2023, the Legislative Council agreed to the following motion:

That this House requires the Legal and Social Issues Committee to inquire into, consider and report, by 14 November 2024, on the impacts and drivers of, and solutions for, food security in Victoria, including but not limited to -

(1) the impact of food insecurity in Victoria, on -

- (a) physical and mental health;
- (b) poverty and hardship; and

(2) options available to lower the cost of food and improve access to affordable, nutritious and culturally appropriate food.

RFSA SUBMISSION

1 The impacts and drivers of, and solutions for, food security in Victoria on physical and mental health

Food security is essential for the good health of every individual in our society. Food insecurity reduces the ability to focus on learning and working. A recent study by D Fang et al (2021) found that food insecurity is associated with a 257% higher risk of anxiety and a 253% higher risk of depression. A systematic review of the literature by Arenas et al in (2018) showed a significant link between food insecurity and increased risks of depression, anxiety, and sleep disorders¹.

Cheap access to highly processed food leads food insecure people to eat a reduced variety and less nutritional food. A review by PROOF research group in Canada² found that adults living in food-insecure households are more likely to also experience infectious diseases, poor oral health, injury, and chronic conditions, like depression and anxiety disorders, heart disease,

¹ Arenas DJ, Thomas A, Wang J, DeLisser HM. A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis of Depression, Anxiety, and Sleep Disorders in US Adults with Food Insecurity. *Journal of general internal medicine*. 2019. doi: 10.1007/s11606-019-05202-4. [PMC free article] [PubMed] [CrossRef] [Google Scholar]

² <https://proof.utoronto.ca/food-insecurity/what-are-the-implications-of-food-insecurity-for-health-and-health-care/#1>

hypertension, arthritis, back problems, and chronic pain. They are also more likely to be diagnosed with multiple chronic conditions and are more likely to die prematurely from all causes except cancer. They also concluded that the negative implications for health are greatest for those living in severely food-insecure households.

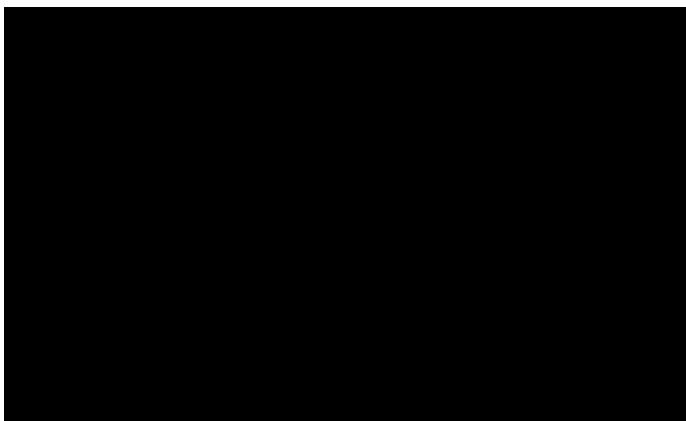
The impacts for our children are particularly severe. This same PROOF review found that there was evidence that experiencing food insecurity at an early age is associated with childhood mental health problems, such as hyperactivity and inattention. Exposure to severe food insecurity (measured as child hunger) has been linked to increased risk of developing depression and suicidal ideation in adolescence and early adulthood.

The cost of food insecurity to our society is evident, contributing to many chronic conditions which impact on our ability to work productively, to care for our children, to learn and to play.

1.1 Food Insecurity in Regional Victoria

Local community action has been shown to be very strong, effective and efficient for reducing food insecurity. In regional Victoria six communities clustered around Wodonga, Shepparton, Bendigo, Mildura, Warrnambool and Geelong have developed Food Hubs that are community owned, and community, Local and State Government supported, with 18.7 staff and 840 active volunteers. In response to community need, these Hubs:

- source and distribute food to people in need both directly and through charities and schools;
- are primary responders during disasters;
- undertake preventative health work through the development of education, cooking and growing programs;
- divert healthy food from being wasted; and
- have come together in the last two years as the Regional Food Security Alliance (RFSA³) to more effectively and efficiently reduce food poverty.



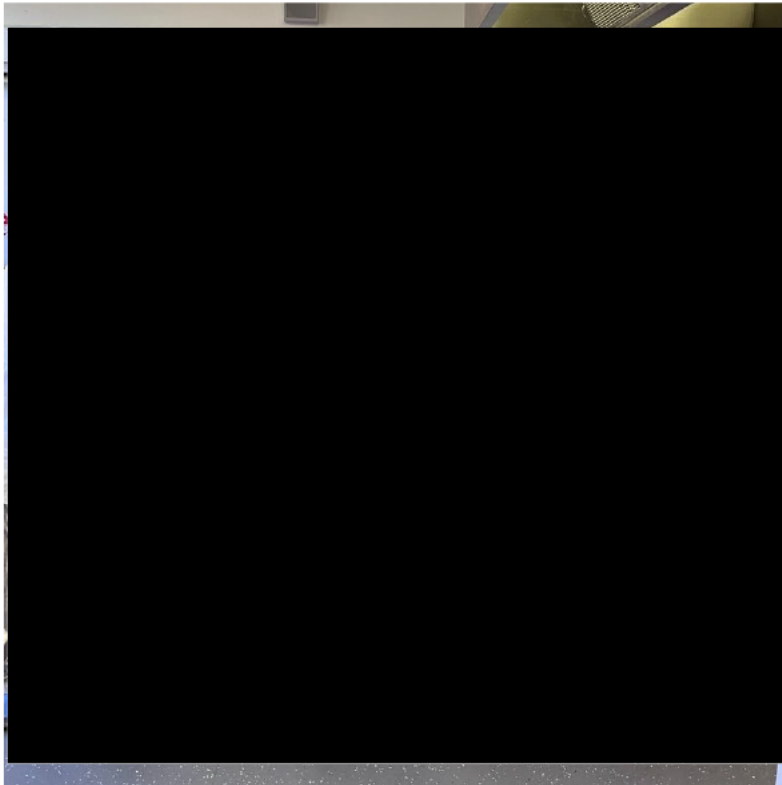
Specialised food warehouses at the regional Food Hubs are essential for food safety and volunteer work.

In regional Victoria, our experience is that teachers are very concerned that children who are not eating well have more difficulty at school. In response to teachers telling us that they were personally buying food for children in need, our regional food hubs have over the last 10 years or so, developed programs to provide food to 113 schools and kinders across regional Victoria. Our regional hubs develop close relationships with the educational settings and encourage

³ Regional Food Security Alliance (RFSA) www.regionalfoodsecurity.org.au

them to allow all children to access the food so that no children feel singled out or different. The very hungry ones just eat more.

The Regional Food Hubs develop programs for particular groups based on their specific needs. Bendigo has a high level of food insecurity amongst youth, so cooking and engagement programs have been developed to support those at risk and to provide a destigmatised, soft referral to where food relief can be accessed while building skills and capacity.. The student's attendance is high and the teachers like that their curriculum objectives are met.



NETschool students at [redacted] worked hard one Friday morning to produce over 50 meals in under two hours. The kitchen was abuzz with excited chatter as students honed their cooking skills and pulled together as a team to create healthy and delicious meals of both vegetarian and meat based Pasta Bolognese.

However, even our schools programs are fragmented. Some schools have free food provided by their local Food Hub and Department of Education funded food is also provided from Melbourne for many school breakfast programs. Some have Stephanie Alexander programs, some cover the gamut from teaching growing and cooking to reduce food insecurity in their communities. Some have no food security programs at all. Schools know what best they need and how they can integrate it into their programs, so a localised purchasing system rather than the current centralised system of food into schools should be implemented. Rather than the current approach, if money was given to the schools with overarching goals requiring them to implement healthy food programs for their pupils, they could best make decisions as to their skill and resource base, and the environment they live and work in. This would include supporting local businesses which in turn would increase community engagement and support for the school programs.

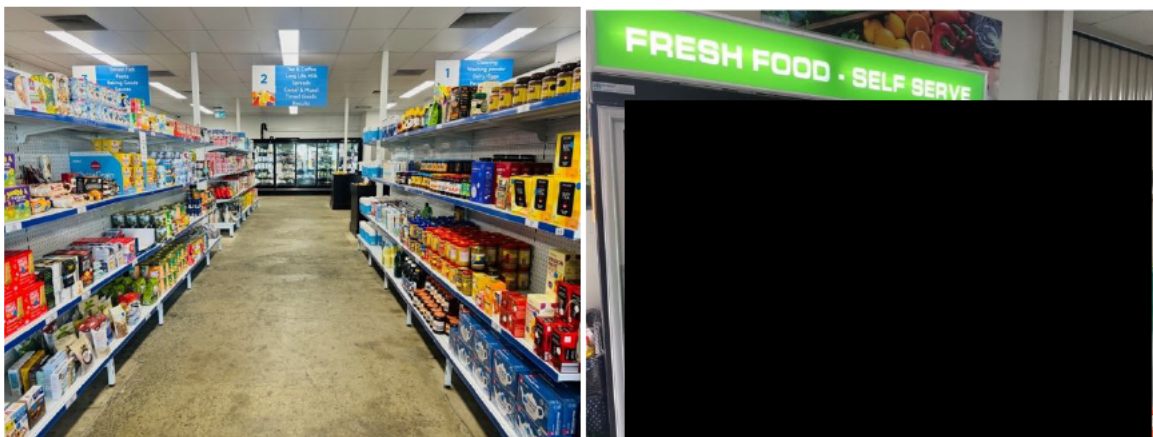
Mooroopna Park Primary School is a good example of how everyone gets behind local community programs to increase healthy food for children at school. With the support of Shepparton Foodshare, and Statewide food charities, they provide breakfast, morning tea, lunch and afternoon tea and run a gardening club for their students, significantly improving the wellbeing and attendance of their students. Direct funding for their food programs, would

strengthen their community resilience further and enable them to support more of their local businesses⁴.

Recommendation 1. That schools are funded directly to enable them to source food locally or centrally for school breakfast, lunch and emergency relief to ensure health equity for children. This will support the children, the local businesses and enable the schools to develop services where there are local needs and gaps.

There are many reasons for people becoming food insecure and we thus need a whole of government approach to finding solutions. By working together we can improve food security for young people leaving home, families having tough times due to the cost of living or business difficulties, people exiting the Justice System, refugees and new migrants, people experiencing climate related disasters and people whose basic costs of living outstrip their income.

Front line staff in local food security systems need to be local and to understand what services and supports are available and how to access them. For example, a \$25 voucher for a local supermarket does not go far when you are feeding a family of four. However, for the same cost, the charity providing the voucher could give their client a voucher to attend a social supermarket at Albury Wodonga Regional Foodshare or Geelong Food Relief Centre where they can choose at least \$150 worth of food and other essentials.



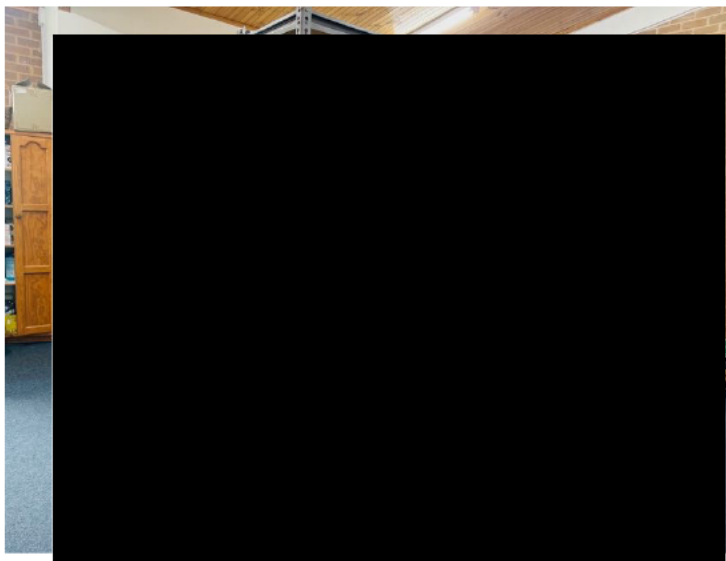
Clients use vouchers to shop with dignity and choice in accessible social supermarkets at Geelong and Wodonga. At Geelong between 70-100 individuals use the service each day. They present as regular supermarkets with choice and the freshest produce. These mini-marts are fully stocked including meat, dairy, fruit, vegetables, pantry staples, cleaning products and pet food.

Even with support from charities purchasing vouchers and using volunteer labour, social supermarkets around Victoria cannot fully cover their costs whilst giving food away. Yet they cannot charge for food under the Victorian Wrongs Act for protection of food donors. Work is needed at a policy level to enable more sustainable models to be developed whilst meeting all

⁴ Healthy meals and a gardening club at Mooropna West Primary School
<https://www.facebook.com/MooropnaParkPrimarySchool>

legislative requirements. The further development of social supermarkets will help many people to improve their food security in culturally and socially appropriate ways.

More and more we are seeing people new to the system, who haven't needed support in the past, seeking additional food. They are often reluctant to seek help and so services need to be careful to be inclusive, effective and non-judgemental. The colocation of outreach services or referrals to Emergency Relief providers for financial crises or other wrap around services, at Food Hubs, further reduces stress, fosters access to other services and helps people to be more food secure in the long term.



This is [REDACTED] from Drysdale Family Support, one of 55 agency partners of Geelong Food Relief (GFRC). GFRC supplies 80% of their food. They provide food for an average of 38 families per week. Their wrap around services include four counsellors freely available at their foodbank on Tuesdays. They assist with financial literacy, employment, and domestic violence situations. Drysdale Family Support with the help of Geelong Food Relief are working towards long-term social change.

Recommendation 2. That policy framework is developed further to support the effective and sustainable operation of community owned social supermarkets.

Recommendation 3. That colocation of social supermarkets and Emergency Relief workers is supported.

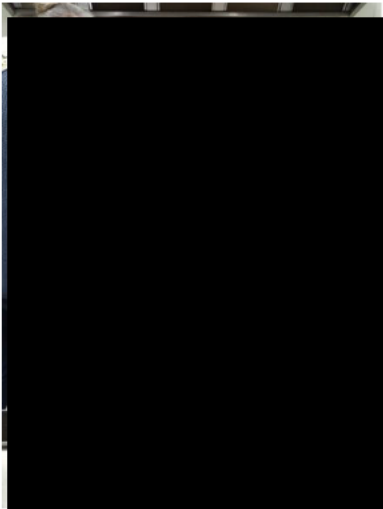
Yet these strategies are only part of the solution. We need to reenvision the whole food system so that healthy, seasonal and culturally appropriate foods are available for all through local values driven supply chains. This needs to be done in a way that is sustainable from an environmental perspective and that provides benefit to everyone involved whether they be farmers, producers, retailers or consumers.

Food brings people together. Food engages and is an ice-breaker and supports the development of relationships. This is true both on personal and on provider levels. As community members develop relationships with service providers when they seek food or join in meals programs or participate in cooking or growing programs, the wrap around services that help them out of food poverty are more easily introduced and worked through.

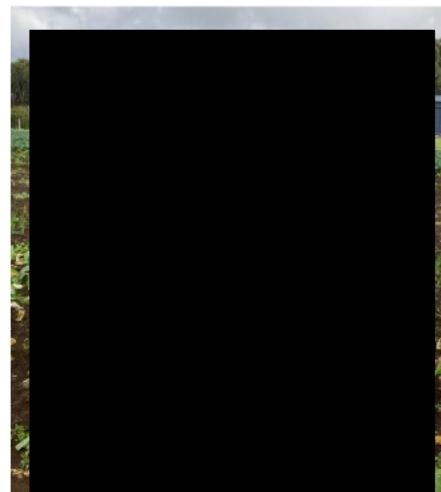
In regional communities many approaches to more ecological farming practices and a closer connection from farm to plate are being established. A good example is the Flourish strategy in the Loddon Campaspe region of Central Victoria⁵. There are also shining examples as to how

⁵ Flourish Regional Food System Framework (2024) https://www.healthyloddoncampaspe.au/sites/default/files/2024-06/Flourish%20Regional%20Food%20System%20Framework_digital_0.pdf

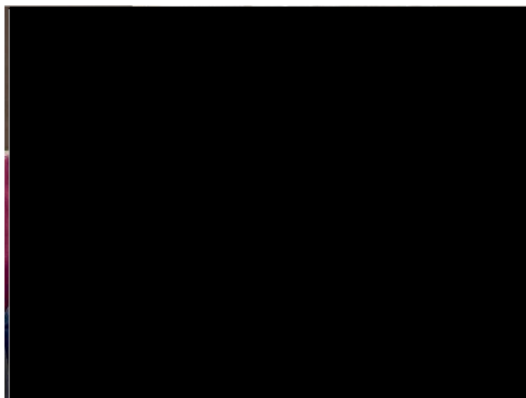
various groups use food to foster harmony, improve work skills, generate friendships, and improve mental health. For example:



At SMECC in Mildura, cooking classes engage people from many nations. People come together to learn and in doing so, also make connections and friends. The looks of joy on people's faces when they try something new is inspiring. Pasta has been a great hit recently both in classes and at home with families.



St Pats Koroit Hands on Learning students help to harvest vegetables grown by Volcano Produce for Western District Food Share



Bendigo Foodshare works closely with schools, community health, Bendigo City Council and Loddon Campaspe Multicultural Services to provide Cooking for Change and Café for a Day sessions together with school volunteering and school engagement sessions. They tailor each session to the needs of the individuals, be they cultural or learning needs and have engaged over 2,500 students. Students have fun, become more linked to their communities and food systems and learn to cook.

Each community needs to be able to support and further develop good examples and programs that are meeting their specific needs.

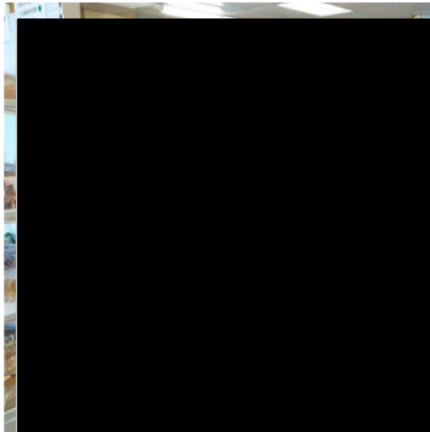
Recommendation 4. That communities be supported to develop values led food chains that support sustainable ecological practices, diversity and resilience as well as equity of access.

2 The impacts and drivers of, and solutions for, food security in Victoria on poverty and hardship

As Maslow's hierarchy shows, we all need safety, food and roof over our heads to be able to focus on other things. The right to sufficient, appropriate food is a universal right under the

United Nations Charter of Human Rights⁶. As food and housing become less affordable, the stress people are under deteriorates and their ability to productively contribute to society will reduce whether through mental health issues or other impacts of the stress.

A recent review by VicHealth found that as the cost of living and in particular the cost of fresh food rises, food insecurity will increase and people experiencing hardship may shift more towards cheaper, lower-quality food options, which can lead to obesity and poor nutrition⁷. This contributes to a vicious cycle of reduced physical and mental health, more poverty, and increasing food insecurity.



██████ is a single dad. He began visiting GFRC social supermarket in 2017 when he gave up work to look after his two daughters. With a background as a chef, ██████ knows the importance of making sure his girls eat a balanced diet. At GFRC Geelong he finds the food he needs for nutritious meals and loves the way the volunteers always have time for a chat.

2.1 Strengthening Policy and Leadership

Food security needs to be at the same level of priority for our government as housing. We need a systematic policy and program approach to planning for healthy, sustainable food access for all. The system is fragmented and lacks good direction. With investment in a whole of system approach to planning, developing, monitoring and improving food security, we have the opportunity to make significant improvements in food security.

Food systems are very complex, so an overt responsibility for food security in Victoria needs to be allocated, a body needs to be engaged to drive the policy and strategy development and to oversee the public health implementation program required. Funding needs to be made available so that whole of system and local community responses can be implemented. This needs to be done at a government or semi-government level. Options to be considered should include the formation of a new Statutory Authority or increasing the scope of a current one such as VicHealth. The latter option would require expanding the VicHealth mandate and their commensurate budget, to provide the leadership for a Public Health program using a systems approach to food security and with the responsibility to support the implementation, monitor, report and evaluate the agreed strategy.

Recommendation 5. That a food systems approach be led by a Statutory Authority with a whole of food systems mandate.

⁶ United Nations Fact Sheet 34. The right to adequate food.

<https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Publications/FactSheet34en.pdf>

⁷ Vic Health (2024) High inflation and implications for health. A framework to examine the potential pathways through which high inflation may impact on health. <https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/resources/resource-download/high-inflation-and-implications-for-health>

The change levers need to be identified based on the agreed principles and these then need to be supported. The New Zealand Public Health Committee recently released a report into rebalancing their food systems⁸. The principles they espouse resonate strongly here in Australia. These are:

- **Local** - by locals for locals, strengthening community resilience.
- **Affordable** - everyone can afford nutritious food.
- **Connected** - people are connected to each other, their food, and environment via food.
- **Healthy** - healthy food environments lead to healthy people.
- **Regenerative** - nutritious for people, protects and supports te taiao.
- **Resilient** - can withstand and recover swiftly after crises.

Developing something similar for Victoria would seem a good start in order to underpin both policy and implementation.

Policy needs to be collaboratively developed and implemented centrally and across all levels and arms of government with a focus on most cost effective and preferably evidence-based strategies to improve our food security. However, implementation needs to be local so that fresh, healthy and nutritious food is gathered, sold and shared in each community, with food not produced locally, travelling the minimal food miles to reach those communities at the most affordable prices. Australia is a continent of diverse agricultural conditions and large distances, so local conditions need to always be considered for the best food system development. Local councils do and must play a strong role in this. Their role in our changing environment needs to be better described and to be principle based as well.

The priority needs to be on the health of our people. The food needs to be healthy, available and affordable and culturally appropriate where they live, work and go to school. Australia currently produces more than sufficient food, but much goes to waste, increasing the price of the remaining food for individuals. More and more of the food available is highly processed, and covers many food miles, reducing its nutritional value. If profit is the only driver, the health of our people will continue to suffer. However, with a strong policy framework and with monitoring systems in place to measure our impact, we can develop resilient food security in Victoria.

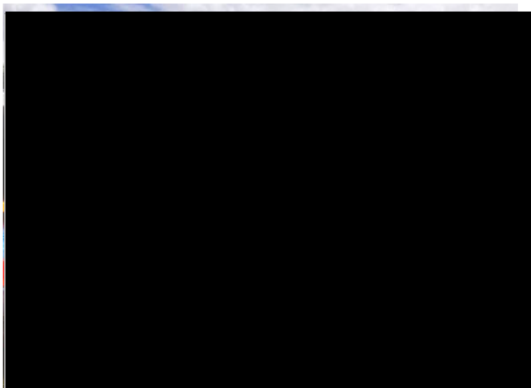
Recommendation 6. That a policy framework and principles for food system development into and equitable, sustainable and values based framework be developed and given to the appropriate Statutory Authority to implement.

2.2 Values Based, Locally Owned Food Systems

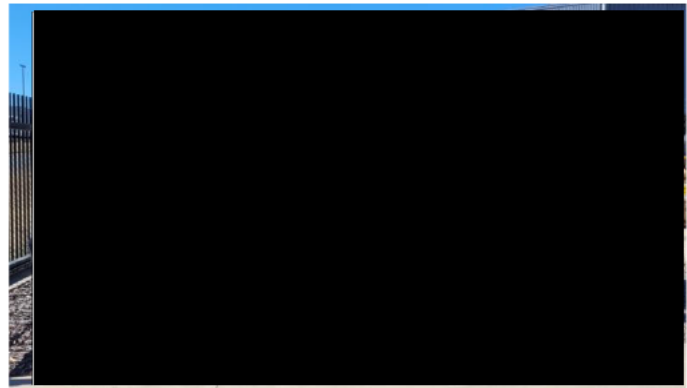
We need all players in the food system, from producers to retailers to consumers, to engage in the solution. To make significant changes, partnerships are essential so that we can develop the programs and implement them for long term, more stable food security, in the face of our changing climate and changes in the financial security of our population.

⁸ New Zealand Public Health Advisory Committee. Rebalancing our food system. May 2024
<https://www.health.govt.nz/system/files/documents/publications/rebalancing-our-food-system-may2024.pdf>

Victoria has a distinct advantage over many other areas of Australia, as our regional Food Hubs already develop and maintain strong relationships with many people in the food system in their regions and this could be built on to enhance food security. Staffed by over 840 volunteers, they work with food producers, processors, retailers, other local businesses, local, state and federal government and government departments, and over 650 charities, schools and kinders to assist people experiencing food insecurity. They do this in many ways, from rescuing food that would otherwise go to waste, warehousing, storing and distributing food to local charities and schools, emergency food relief during floods and fires to growing food and cooking food. Already owned and strongly supported by their communities, they engage all ages and all cultures in skill development and community resilience. Leveraging established local community resources and networks, will give the biggest impact on food security, and develop the strongest community resilience.

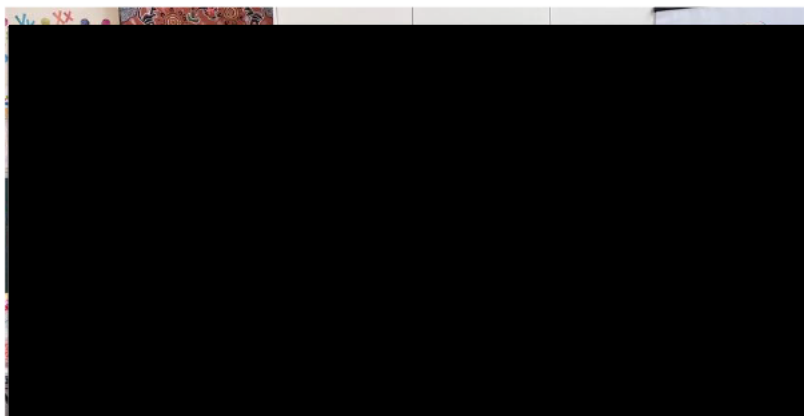


Western District Food Share Volunteers help harvest vegetables grown in kind by Volcano Produce - seedlings donated by Boomaroo Nurseries Lara

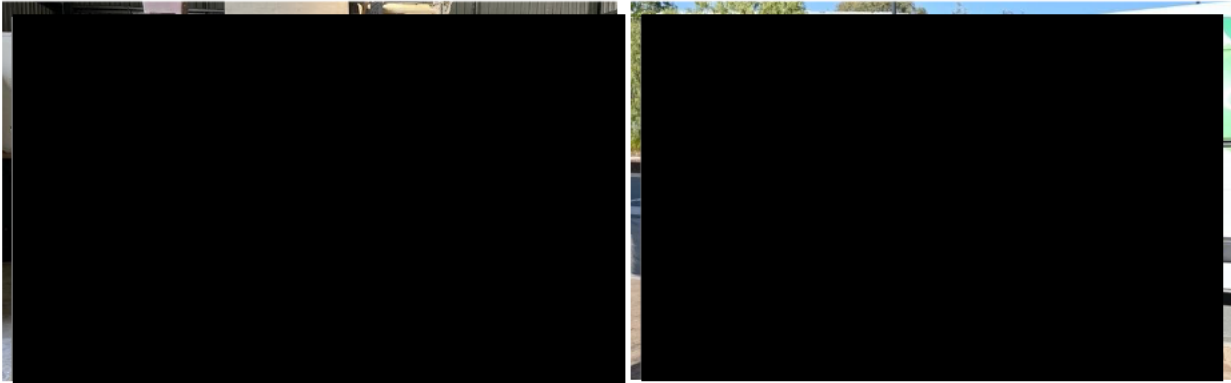


Managers from Woolworths Corowa, Bright, Benalla, Albury and Wodonga assisted in the Albury Wodonga Regional FoodShare warehouse repacking pallets.

There is a need for lower cost, local food to meet the need of people who are unable to access, afford or grow their own food. The Regional Food Hubs and other charities are supporting local community gardens to assist more people to access healthy fresh food. Making these community gardens more available to those in need or at risk of poverty is just one more way we can improve food security. However, the decisions as to which strategy to use in each community needs to be community owned and community driven within the agreed principles and funding guidelines developed.



Local community partnerships create friendships and fun whilst Cooking for Change



Local community ownership means businesses get involved, and school children do too

Recommendation 7. That the principles for policy include local community ownership and community partnerships to strengthen and support a values driven food chain

The RFSA is owned and operated by the regional Food Hubs in Victoria. It supports them by:

- sourcing and distributing more food donations;
- cost-effective bulk purchasing;
- coordinating whole of system projects or services such as the shared volunteer management system;
- advocacy; and
- the sharing of resources such as governance, management, education and training.

Regional services can thus focus on the services to their communities whilst coordinating with other regional food hubs and food services as needed. This improves the efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability of their services.

Around the world there are many examples of the expanded roles local food hubs can play in local food security. Many are great examples of Community Wealth Building as described by the Centre for Local Economic Strategies in the UK ⁹. These range from supply aggregation for food contracts in local anchor institutions such as hospitals, supporting local community markets and providing food warehousing access for small businesses, to developing retail cooperatives providing lower cost food, and to running social supermarkets.

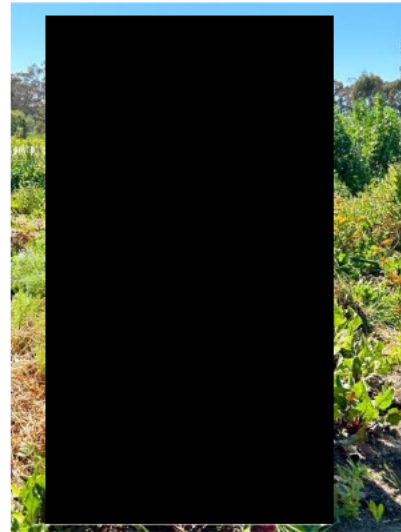
The existing Regional Food Hubs in Victoria are extremely well placed to take on more of these roles in their own communities. There is a need for coordination across regional Victoria and at a higher level, across Victoria as a whole.

Recommendation 8. That regional community owned Food Hubs and the RFSA be supported to further drive food security and community wealth building through local values based food supply chains.

⁹ Community Wealth Building <https://cles.org.uk/what-is-community-wealth-building/>



Volunteers deliver food in Wodonga and Meg is growing fresh healthy food for Bendigo and Central Victoria.



Measuring and monitoring need to be part of any public health intervention to improve food security. Data is needed to allow us to determine the impact of our intervention and studies are needed to help focus interventions on the most effective strategies. For example, in 2021 a randomised controlled trial in 11 regional IGAs showed that with collaborative design, interventions to preferentially increase the sale of healthy food can be successful¹⁰. However food prices and distances to mainstream supermarkets may not make them accessible and affordable for all and more research is needed to put this into the context of food insecurity as well.

In 2021, four of our regional food hubs were funded by RDV to undertake an evaluation of their impact. The independent research undertaken using internationally recognised methodology, found that on average the **return to our regional communities for every \$1 invested was \$66.44**. This significant finding demonstrates the value of Regional Food Hubs in our community. Such studies need to be continued and replicated, so that they can inform future planning for food security in Victoria.

Recommendation 9. That statewide systems be implemented to monitor and evaluate our food security and that evaluations be undertaken to develop our evidence base for food security

3 Options available to lower the cost of food and improve access to affordable, nutritious and culturally appropriate food.

Only some of the options to improve access to affordable, nutritious and culturally appropriate food are discussed in this paper. None of them are sufficient on their own. They each need to be taken in context and will need to be used in conjunction with other interventions. The

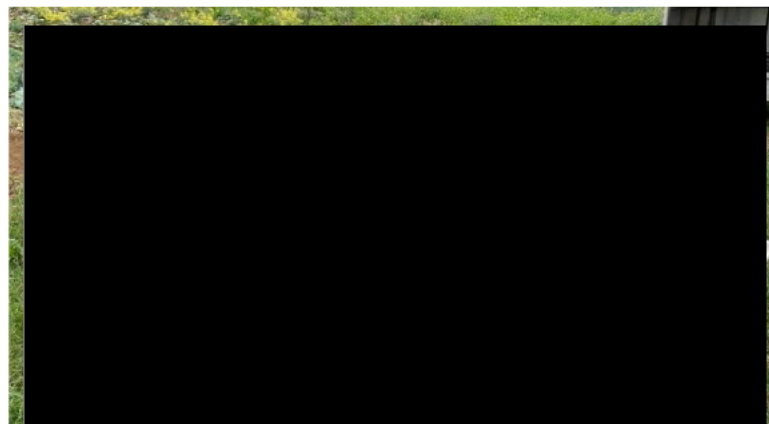
¹⁰Blake et al (2021) Eat Well @ IGA study <https://ijbnpa.biomedcentral.com/counter/pdf/10.1186/s12966-021-01104-z.pdf#:~:text=Briefly%2C%20theEat%20Well%20%40%20IGAproject%20began%20in%202015.agreed%20to%20partici pate%20in%20the%20inter-vention%20and%20evaluation.>

development of a Food Systems Strategy for Victoria should include a range of these and other strategies to meet the principles and objectives of food security for all Victorians.

3.1 Provide school meals and teach growing, cooking and basic nutrition at schools starting in primary schools

- Whilst this option would be a significant cost, it would help ensure that no child goes without adequate food. However, as the school meals program in the UK found, there is a tendency for school meals to reflect the cheap food available in the community and this is often the least nutritious food. Standards and principles to guide the system would need to be put in place.
- The UK Lets Get Cooking program supported 5000 Cooking Clubs for at least two years with over 1.7 Million participants and benefits extending beyond the life of the program¹¹.
- The UK also found that Community cooking clubs were an effective means of reducing food insecurity
- Bendigo Foodshare has developed a range of food skills programs in schools. They have found that by meeting the students where they are at in physical social and emotional terms, the engagement and learning of the students has been particularly strong. A group of young mothers may want to learn to cook for their children's birthday parties and a group of refugees may want to cook food they love but can't readily access to show their fellow students. All students were more strongly motivated by cooking to assist others in some way, than by just learning to cook¹².

- Western District Food Share (WDFS) has partnered with Volcano Produce (grower) and Boomaroo Nurseries (seedling donor) to produce locally grown spray free vegetables for weekly donation to Food Share. The partnership has engaged local schools Hands on



Learning Programs with the students engaging in farm visits to learn about market gardening and employment pathways while harvesting the produce and contributing to their community. To build on this experience students are then able to visit the WDFS warehouse to help build emergency food orders using the fresh produce they have harvested for distribution across south west Victoria.

3.2 Develop shared resources and community networks to support community and school gardens.

- Shared resources can be centralised online across Victoria, but support for networks needs to be local. Where local groups or Councils have taken a role in supporting such

¹¹ Rob Rees 2011 Lets Get Cooking Evaluation Report Children's Food Trust and School Food Trust, UK

¹² Cooking for Change with Bendigo Foodshare <https://bendigofoodshare.org.au/cooking-for-change/>

networks, the growth of community resilience and the sustainability of the gardens is stronger^{13,14,15}.

- investment in local communities is easily leveraged as was found with the 7:1 leveraging from initial grant funding in the Sustainable Food Cities work in the UK.¹⁶

3.3 Provide funds to local communities to fill in the gaps and build on local needs and skills

- Each regional area has a different climate and different manufacturing base and thus varies in the food it produces. Eg dry land farming and chickens are produced around Bendigo and fruit and dairy are found more in the Shepparton area. There needs to be support for logistics to move food to ensure that peoples' needs are met in the most efficient manner. Collaboration and shared logistics are needed for the food relief system to be more effective. A good example of how well this works is shown by the work undertaken by the RFSA with SecondBite and OzHarvest during the recent Victorian floods. All three groups were able to effectively coordinate the logistics required to move the food to the regions based on their need and real time capacity to accept the food. The RFSA works on a 'Pull' system where food available is notified to each region and they order the amount they need and can manage, The RFSA coordinates pickup and delivery at cost price with one of their partner logistic companies, and each Food Hub pays for the transport for their order. In this way costs are minimised.
- Local partnerships create value to strengthen food systems in our communities. This is knowledge that we share broadly. For example the Western District Foodshare has partnered with the health promotion teams at South West Healthcare & Portland District Health to design recipe cards + videos that are being distributed in their emergency food hampers across the region - the "Easy Eats" recipe cards & videos support people to create quick, easy & nutritious meals¹⁷. In Central Victoria, the Bendigo Foodshare Grow Cook Share Food Hub has engaged over 2500 young people in schools, cooking and growing programs. Working in cafes and growing food on a local farm and in community and local gardens teaches food literacy, resilience and knowledge of food systems as well as engaging and providing community service to strengthen food systems¹⁸.
- Since commencing operations 2 years ago, the RFSA has coordinated additional donations of 295,000 kgs food worth over \$3.6M for regional Victorians and has saved its members over \$167K through bulk purchasing of food during emergencies.
- All three statewide food relief providers currently transport food directly to the regions in different trucks. Current charity freight funding for chilled food transport to regional

¹³ Flourish Loddon Campaspe Regional Food Systems framework.
<https://www.healthyloddoncampaspe.au/sites/default/files/2024-06/Flourish%20Regional%20Food%20System%20Framework%20digital%200.pdf>

¹⁴ North East Local Food Strategy https://gatewayhealth.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/NE_Local_Food_Strategy_2018_2022.pdf

¹⁵ Goulburn Valley Food Strategic Strategy (under development)

¹⁶ Sustainable Food Cities Phase 2 Evaluation report May 2019 <https://www.foodmatters.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/HillsandJonesSFCreport2.pdf> accessed 6/6/24

¹⁷ Western District Foodshare recipe cards project 2024
<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=479428927940385&set=a.250773194139294>

¹⁸ Bendigo Foodshare Grow Cook Share Food Hub <https://bendigofoodshare.org.au/growcooksharefoodhub/>

Victoria is only available to one of these providers. This is an historic anomaly and highly cost ineffective. Providing the funding directly to each regional Food Hub so that they could coordinate food transport from metropolitan or other regional services would be a quick way to improve the systems efficiency.

- There is a role for the Victorian State Government in advocating for tax concessions by the Federal Government for companies backloading or moving food for food relief. This would reduce the cost and allow local communities to request the food they need when they need it.

Recommendation 10. That financial support be given to local community owned programs strengthening values driven food chains.

3.4 Put a financial levy on more carbon producing foods

A financial levy on higher carbon producing foods would result in increased prices of those foods that could cross subsidise access to healthy, low cost nutritious and less carbon producing foods (which are mainly plant based). This would encourage more healthy eating as well as improving access to healthy food for those doing it tough.

3.5 Advocacy for increased base pension for all recipients, adjusted according to CPI

Whilst pensions are a Federal Government responsibility, there is a role for State Government to advocate for liveable levels of income support.

3.6 Provide recurrent funding for community owned Regional Food Hubs across the whole of regional Victoria

Recurrent rather than annual funding for the six community owned Regional Food Hubs in Victoria will provide continuity and sustainability for:

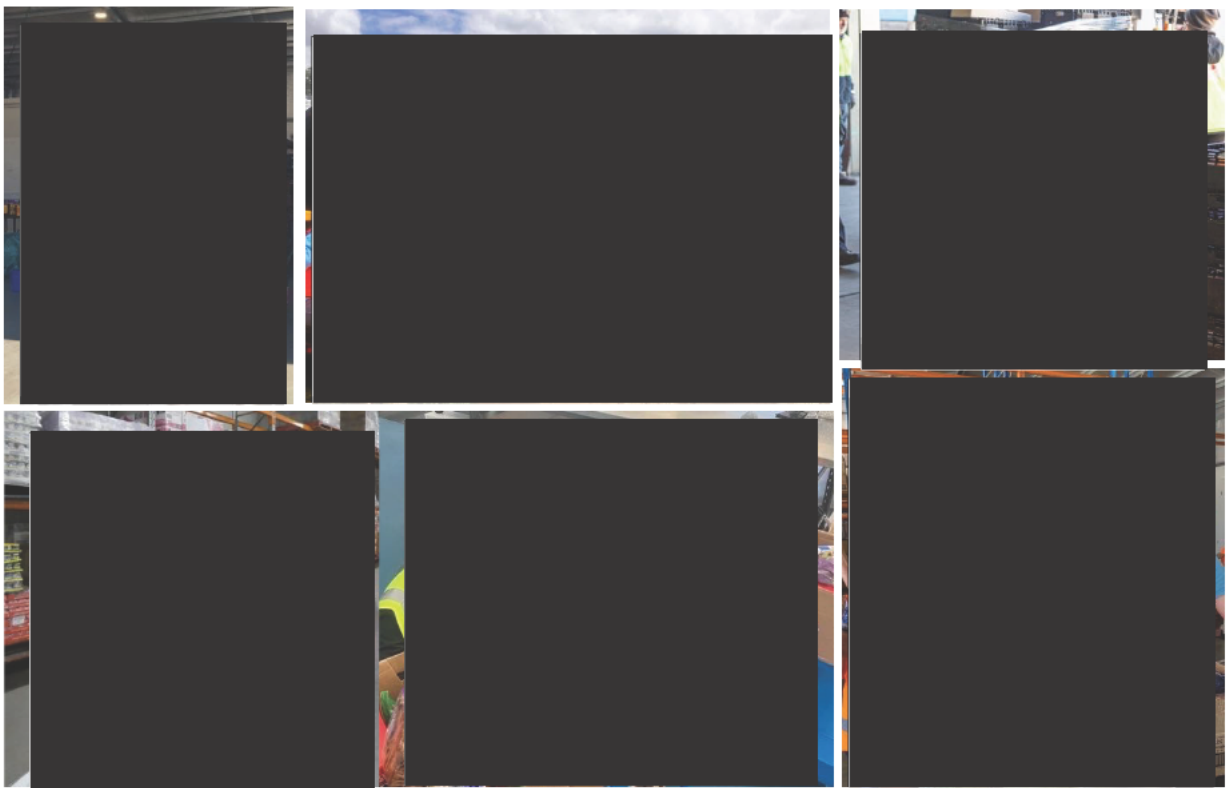
- people in need with food and other essentials whether they are experiencing financial difficulty or natural disasters ¹⁹
- quick, effective and efficient responses to changing local needs²⁰
- engagement of individuals at risk or food insecure in growing and cooking food, whilst at the same time becoming more strongly linked into their local communities
- input to local and statewide planning for food security and emergency responses
- strong channels for food systems from growers to food insecure community members who are often the most vulnerable groups in our community
- because they are local and community owned, Regional Food Hubs are already linked with local government and non-government agencies and businesses and can be responsive when immediate needs change or develop long term responses to address

¹⁹ Albury Wodonga Regional FoodShare was thanked by the community for its response to the fires in 2020 <https://www.bordermail.com.au/story/6564381/residents-quick-to-support-albury-wodonga-food-shares-fire-efforts/>

²⁰ Shepparton Foodshare responds on the day the community needed it, as waters rose. https://www.facebook.com/story.php/?story_fbid=5509104782542617&id=100024874609167&paipv=0&eav=AfZFHbErK4TSWOPFsdGwNaaEfxmCu3dB4io0rzF5qhexnzqg1ArFVylhCjtVuTYQxk&_rdr

gaps in local food security^{21,22}. All services have costs and running a food service requires paid staff to oversee and coordinate programs, warehousing, refrigeration and vans. The engagement and impact in the local communities are large.

- There are areas of Victoria that do not yet have Regional Food Hubs (eg Swan Hill and Horsham) and some that have Hubs that are not community owned. Every effort should be made to ensure that there is equity for all regional Victorians in line with the services available in Metropolitan regions. For most impact, these services should be locally, community owned and operated. These Food Hubs with warehousing and transport capability, should be no more than around 200 km apart in Regional Victoria. The services should be supported in a similar manner to the SES or CFA with funding from government as well as local communities. This will provide the greatest resilience and food security in regional communities.



Over 840 volunteers work across the six community owned Food Hubs in regional Victoria, supporting food security and creating more resilient, connected communities

Though primarily community funded, our Regional Food Hubs have also been supported by the Victorian Government since 2020, but this relies on annual submissions. These are essential services. As with the SES and CFA, the funding needs to become recurrent so that the few key staff involved in running these amazing services have tenure and can run their businesses better for the benefit of their communities.

²¹ Albury Wodonga Foodshare examples <https://foodshare.org.au/about/our-programs>.

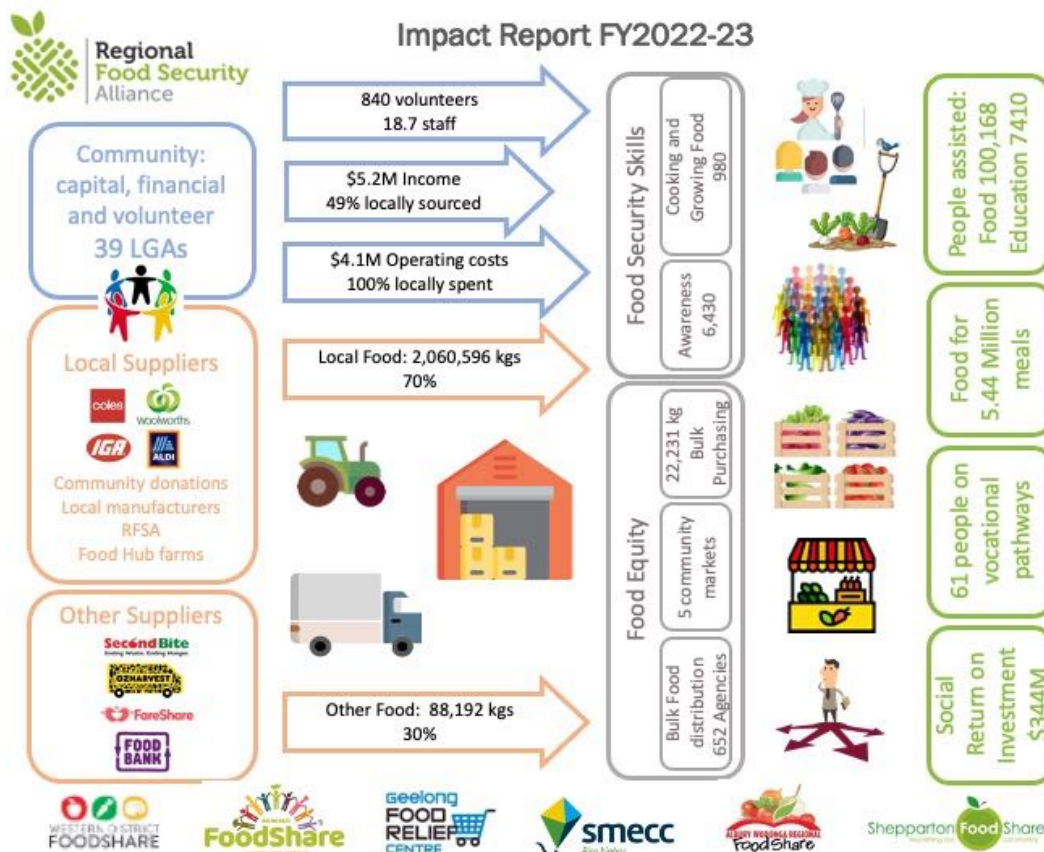
²² Bendigo Foodshare Grow Cook Share Food Hub <https://bendigofoodshare.org.au/growcooksharefoodhub/>

3.7 Sustaining the Regional Food Security Alliance and its ecosystem:

The Regional Food Security Alliance (RFSA) plays an important role to strengthen food security across regional Victoria. Over the last 2 years, non-recurrent annual funding has enabled the RFSA to:

- develop partnerships with large food relief providers, logistics providers, food wholesalers
- leverage the Vic Gov funding, securing an additional \$242K in philanthropic funding to support the employment of Trainees and to develop shared policy and information resources across the member Hubs
- facilitate collaboration and cooperation for an effective and efficient food security network.
- support knowledge sharing and co-learning of successes and failures in food security and food systems development.
- increase large scale sourcing and aggregation of procured and rescued food. From 2022-24, the RFSA sourced and redistributed over 295,000 kilograms of additional food donations.

The impact of the collective of RFSA and the regional Hubs is shown in the 2022-23 Impact report below.



A recurrent investment in RFSA will provide an optimum return on investment for the government with access to affordable, nutritious and culturally appropriate food at no cost for regional Victorians unable to access affordable, healthy food.

4 Summary

Food insecurity is increasing due to developing issues such as climate change, and a profit focus at the expense of humans and the planet. A whole of food systems approach with a focus on principles of sustainability, connection to food and equity of access, is needed to ensure sustainable food security for all. There should be a responsible Minister to drive this systems approach to policy, a Statutory Authority with a dedicated budget to coordinate and support programs and measurement, and localised community owned implementation to connect local people to healthy local food, protect our supply chains and ensure access and equity for all. The Regional Food Security Alliance and the Regional Food Hubs are vital elements of this essential program, and are key opportunities for Victoria.

Cathie Steele,
Chair of the Board,
Regional Food Security Alliance