

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Securing the Victorian Food Supply

Bendigo – Thursday 23 May 2024

MEMBERS

Juliana Addison – Chair

Martin Cameron – Deputy Chair

Jordan Crugnale

Daniela De Martino

Martha Haylett

David Hodgett

Nicole Werner

WITNESSES

Michelle Wyatt, Manager, Climate Change and Environment, and

Sally Beer, Agribusiness Support Officer, Greater Bendigo City Council.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearing in beautiful Bendigo. I will just run through some important formalities before we begin.

All evidence taken today will be recorded by Hansard and is protected by parliamentary privilege.

You will receive a draft transcript of the evidence in the next week or so for you to check and approve. Corrected transcripts are published on the committee's website and may be quoted from in our final report.

Thank you for making the time to meet with the committee today, and we are really thrilled to be hearing from the City of Greater Bendigo. We have heard from the City of Greater Geelong and we have heard from the City of Ballarat, from Moorabool, from Hepburn and from Macedon this morning, so it is terrific to be able to hear from you as well. Could you please state your full names and titles and make any opening remarks.

Michelle WYATT: Thank you. I am Michelle Wyatt. I manage the Climate Change and Environment team at the city.

Sally BEER: I am Sally Beer. I am the Agribusiness Support Officer at the City of Greater Bendigo.

Michelle WYATT: We will make some simple remarks, but most of our submission was outlined in the written submission. You might hear some things from us that are slightly different from what you have heard from other councils in other parts of the state. The City of Greater Bendigo is a large regional centre. Although most of our land is rural, most of our population lives in the urban centre of Bendigo. As a result, we have got quite a diverse economy supported by services and manufacturing, so our agricultural sector, although super important, does not contribute as much to our economic profile compared to other rural municipalities. But as a result, we do service our rural neighbours and are a really important centre for the farmland surrounding us and in our region.

The characteristics of the municipality mean that we have attracted a lot of lifestyle farmers and hobby farmers. We already have fairly fragmented farmland, and in our written submission we provided an overview of the size of our rural land blocks. Most of them are less than 40 hectares, which is a good size to be doing some farming, but are not the sort of scale you would get in Gippsland or large-scale cropping industries further north. That means that our land prices have certainly gone up, and as a result, commercial farming is not as viable as it is elsewhere. So we have attracted the lifestyle farmers who are doing productive things on their land but are often supplementing their income through other means.

Our submission is that reversing that for our municipality is quite difficult. That does not mean that we do not want to prevent further fragmentation, and we are preparing a rural land strategy at present. It is in its early stages. That will look at how we can protect what productive agricultural land we have got and try and minimise further fragmentation in the future and land use conflicts. But we do recognise that we have got a legacy that is real, and we are not going to push against that legacy. So we put a lot of time and energy into supporting the farmers that we do have in our municipality and understanding their characteristics and supporting them to be as productive as possible. That means engaging with particularly new entrants to the farming sector, so tree changers or lifestyle property owners or hobby farmers, supporting them to understand what their obligations are, what the opportunities are for their land and how to manage it sustainably.

We do that collaboratively with our neighbouring councils who share similar characteristics, so we have a partnership with Macedon Ranges and Mount Alexander now and Hepburn and the North Central CMA. We all work together on capacity-building programs through what we call Healthy Landscapes to run workshops and short courses and really try and provide information that is relevant to our landholders, focusing on regenerative practices that might have less inputs and that are relevant for the smaller scale land that our municipality has. That has been super successful. We have had great take-up. The Macedon Ranges regenerative agriculture group that you heard from this morning to some degree grew out of that engagement program in Macedon, and we continue that on in Bendigo now.

We are a part of that partnership but also run our own programs, recognising that we have got slightly different landholders in Bendigo. We have got more cropping industries and different demographics. We always get very good take-up and engagement through all of our programs, which just indicates that there is a real appetite for information amongst the new entry landholders, the hobby farmers and small-scale producers. Some of the challenges that we hear from them are about knowledge like, 'How do I manage my property well? How do I do all the basics that maybe if you grow up in a farming family you might know?' But for people in our municipality it is all new learnings and particularly: how do I access markets that are set up for more large-scale commercial farmers? Despite having a lot of small producers in our region, our supermarkets and our markets are still stocked with produce from farther afield that is not necessarily from local producers. One of our key submissions is that we would love to see a review and further support for small-scale producers, small-scale processing, such as meat processing, that makes it accessible to people in our region.

Our final submission there is about the urban expansion and how it impacts on rural land. We do have a managed growth strategy that will be released next week for public comment and that does include a small area of greenfield development, but we are trying to focus our future expansion in established areas and we have got a target that 70 per cent of our growth will be in established areas. So that is a target and an aspiration. There are challenges with that. The reason that that number is not 100 per cent is largely because there is demand and a market for suburban style development whereas there is a perception that there is less of a demand for that infill development. Also, our developers are telling us that building in the inner-city centre of Bendigo is more costly due to contaminated land, the legacy of the mining industry, and the need to upgrade services like water supply and sewerage supply to the blocks, which can really escalate costs to a point where it becomes unviable.

One of our submissions is that we would really love to see some support with some of that infrastructure in established areas that can de-risk development opportunities in our city centre so that takes the pressure off our rural land. We know all the reasons to consolidate our growth, but with the barriers in place currently we recognise that it is not viable to not allow a little bit of expansion on the fringe of the urban centre.

I think they are our key points and I am happy to take questions, unless, Sally, you wanted to fill in any gaps at this point.

Sally BEER: I will wait for the questions.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much for being here. It was really interesting for me to understand that agriculture, forestry and fishing made up only 2 per cent of Greater Bendigo's economic output in 2021 despite 95 per cent of the municipality comprising rural land. So, Sally, I do not know whether this is to you or to Michelle: has it been longer, more decades that we have seen agriculture not getting supported or being a significant player in the Greater Bendigo area? We are seeing other areas perhaps more recently with expansion, particularly in our green wedges with peri-urban development. Is there a reason why, despite the huge 3000 square kilometres that make up the City of Greater Bendigo, only 2 per cent of it is forestry, fishing and agriculture?

Michelle WYATT: I can have a go at answering that quickly and Sally can chip in. One reason is because our economic profile is really dominated by other functions. In a percentage sense, we get a lot of economic activity out of construction, manufacturing, mining with the gold mines, and health services and retail. Those are some of our key sectors so proportionately, even though we have got a lot of land dedicated to agriculture, the economic output is less. That is one reason. The other reason is that I think there is a statistic in their which is a regional statistic about the number of farms –

The CHAIR: The 2000 that has gone from – hold on, I have got it here – I just did have it here, the size of farms.

Michelle WYATT: Yes, the number of productive farms.

The CHAIR: Two thousand farms on 963,000 hectares in 2006 to 985 farms across 842,000 hectares. That is a huge drop – like a halving.

Michelle WYATT: That is right. That is in the region so that is not just for our municipality. But that to me suggests that some of that rural land is coming out of commercial farming and going into the hobby lifestyle sector, so that is probably one reason. That then has a flow-on effect to reduce economic output. For the reasons

that I mentioned, some parts of municipality are relatively close to Melbourne. If you are living close to Bendigo, if you have got rural land close to Bendigo, it is a great lifestyle opportunity. The southern part of Bendigo is like an hour and a half from Melbourne, so it is again another lifestyle opportunity, and that has certainly been the effects further south, in Macedon Ranges and Hepburn and Mount Alex, which you might have heard about. I do not know if you have got other thoughts.

Sally BEER: Going back to the 2000 farms reduced back to 985, we did also discuss this paper with the agribusiness advisory committee before submitting it to you. You mentioned that some of that land has been allocated to small-scale producers, but it is also indicative that a lot of farms are consolidating; they are getting larger. When we were talking about it within the committee, we were saying we have got some really large farms and then we have got very small hobby blocks. We do not probably have that middle ground, the medium-sized family-owned farming businesses, and I think that is really what that is telling us there as well.

Michelle WYATT: They are kind of two extremes.

The CHAIR: Yes, big farms are getting bigger at the expense of medium-sized family farms and the fragmentation.

Sally BEER: Yes. I suppose when I am thinking about it from the work that we do, we have to work with small-scale and larger scale producers in a really different way, because they have different challenges and opportunities that they can access. For those larger scale farms, a lot of the business support and things that are being delivered by Agriculture Victoria are really fit for purpose – it can be really fit for purpose for a large-scale business. But I think that is the hole that we are filling when we are working with small-scale farmers and small-scale producers.

Martin CAMERON: You are building boundaries, so corridors where you are going to have that natural growth as you get more and more people coming in. They are obviously planned for the future. Are they encroaching onto farming land at all, or are you trying to negotiate your way around that?

Michelle WYATT: The areas identified that previously were farmed – I guess something to say about Bendigo is our agricultural land in some areas is good and productive, but it is not quite as productive as some other parts of Victoria. It is quite a dry climate. So without looking at detailed land capability assessments, I would not say it is the most productive land in Victoria. It was formerly grazing country.

Martin CAMERON: Because for a lot of the other councils and that that we have spoken to, farming land encompasses a lot of different bits and pieces that go on, from your prime agricultural to your grazing land as such. You are encroaching onto farming land, but some of it is not to be farmed on or it is hard to farm on there.

Michelle WYATT: Yes. The growth areas are currently kind of cleared grazing country to a large extent, and that is partly because we are trying to avoid highly vegetated parts of the municipality which have a bushfire risk and native vegetation conservation values. They are not huge growth corridors like you would see outside of Geelong; they are quite discrete areas. If you are so inclined, the strategy will be released next week, so you can actually see the size and location of those areas that are being proposed at this point – certainly not finalised.

Martha HAYLETT: Are you seeing a lot of land banking happening? With the amount of growth that is coming out, Bendigo has just expanded so much. Are you seeing that there are quite a few people land banking to wait a few more years?

Michelle WYATT: I would have to take that on notice to be sure. I would say it probably is something that has happened, which is why a long-term growth strategy is really important. Our growth strategy will be looking towards 2050 as the timeframe for planning for our population growth to provide certainty for landholders and for the development of industry. But I would suspect that we do have some of that occurring.

Martha HAYLETT: And that 70 per cent infill goal – is that 2050? At what point is that goal?

Michelle WYATT: Yes, by 2050 we hope that 70 per cent of our population will be in our currently established urban part of Bendigo, which does allow for some growth outside of it.

Martin CAMERON: And would you have a lot of heritage overlays in the CBD as such?

Michelle WYATT: Yes, we do have areas of heritage precincts and quite significant buildings and areas, so that is a constraint. As we have been preparing the growth strategy, we have done a good analysis of land availability within those constraints and said, 'Well, the heritage overlay areas are not likely to get developed to the same extent as others,' and we have got a proposed prioritisation of areas for different scales of infill development. That is the goal, and it is all about whether we can bring that to fruition by providing the right conditions for the development industry to actually encourage them to come to the areas that we would like them to come to. It is different to Melbourne, where they get pressure for development of areas that they might not want development in; we do want to encourage development in some of our urban centre.

Nicole WERNER: If no-one else has a question – you noted that you would recommend a review and further support for small-scale producing. Do you have any specifics on that, like what you would be looking for in terms of support?

Michelle WYATT: I might throw to Sally.

Sally BEER: Okay. When we were talking about that, Michelle mentioned the Healthy Landscapes program. That has been running for a little bit over four years, and since the Landcare grant expired it has been running with council support. We have found that that program has been really valuable for our local landholders. It is applicable on a large- and a small-scale program because it is really focusing on grazing management and how to implement it in a really practical way.

When we suggested that we should invest in capacity-building programs, it was also to encourage thinking about supporting the existing programs that are already doing some good things. I want to continue them, and I want to spread them out to other areas. I would like to be able to offer some of the services to some of our neighbours. You mentioned Loddon shire. With some of the work that we are doing, in a lot of ways the City of Greater Bendigo has a similar landscape to Loddon, so it would be really good if we could reach in and work in with them a little bit closer with some of those programs.

Michelle WYATT: In terms of what we do and what the support looks like, that program is a combination of individual on-farm advice, and that is really critical, as well as short courses, as well as individual field trips, webinars and workshops. The combination of engagement means that farmers can enter at any of those points and select the type of engagement that works for them. We also have discussion groups, so we do try and build a community, and that has been really successful. Our participants have started their own chat groups – what is it called?

Sally BEER: WhatsApp.

Michelle WYATT: WhatsApp groups. And they are very active actually and have built connections and self-support, peer support. To me the combination of those opportunities is really what makes it work, because AgVic do a few workshops here and there and you can pay for some advice from an agronomist or something, but to have a package where you can come and go and you start to meet the same people and learn from each other – especially for new landholders, it is a nice environment to ask all the questions that feel stupid, and it is a safe space. So that has been really successful.

We would really love to see that model expand, but it would need funding support. What we notice, as Sally said, is that a lot of funding opportunities are looking for innovation, looking for technological solutions, which are probably needed and are great, but sometimes it is hard just to continue with some of the good stuff that you are doing. This relies on the councils with a bit more resources to put in their money; your Loddons, Central Goldfields and Campaspes generally cannot afford it.

Martha HAYLETT: What type of advice are you seeing that farmers are really hungry for in this Healthy Landscapes project?

Michelle WYATT: We pitch it as regenerative farming, so we are getting people who are already interested in regenerative practices. They are interested in knowing how to get the most out of their land without having to spend a lot on fertilisers and tractors and everything that we talk a lot about, the rotational grazing. It is largely a grazing course and a grazing area. They are interested in some of the basics around property management, like weed control and how to improve the biodiversity on their properties. They are interested in how to set up reticulated water systems so that they can take their stock off their dams. It is simple, but kind of practical

things like that. We have actually had really great engagement as well outside of that course where we have run a few sessions with Agriculture Victoria on –

Sally BEER: Animal health.

Michelle WYATT: animal health and biosecurity. Biosecurity is actually the main dish, but we put it on the side because no-one comes to workshops about biosecurity. Basics about animal health and what to feed different types of animals – all of that is really useful for our new landholders. We have got one coming up around animal handling.

Sally BEER: Yes, so we will be doing one on buying and selling, what your obligations are as a small-scale producer. I actually spoke to some of the reps from Elders and Nutrien, and they said this is something that they really want because often people will come to them and they do not understand some of the details around having a pick number before you buy and sell animals, or how they can reach out and how they can use some of those resources like Elders and Nutrien. How can they use them because it might not be fit-for-purpose for a small-scale producer. But even if you are buying sheep from Facebook or some of those other alternative routes, what are some of your obligations and what is some of the paperwork and who is there to support you to get those things finished.

Martha HAYLETT: What are the age groups? Are you seeing that, with a project like this, more young farmers are being drawn to it or is it just farmers of all ages?

Michelle WYATT: It is actually farmers of all ages, I would say. We have got some younger participants who are relatively new to the land with young families, and we have also got some tree changers who are a little bit older. Yes, it is quite diverse.

Sally BEER: If you were going to say like young farmers from that 18 to 30 sort of mark, we are not getting the really young farmers.

Michelle WYATT: No, that is true.

Sally BEER: The value of it is once people are on their own properties, we can come out and we can talk to you. Although we had a couple of people in the last course that had just come along from the TAFE and they are interested in the content. They are aspiring to have a farm later or to work on a farm so they are picking up that information and they are going out to visit other farms and sort of seeing the champions in the region.

The CHAIR: Hodgey?

David HODGETT: Three things, if I can, just following on from what you just said. Michelle, in your opening comments you talked about engaging. I did just want to learn more about that engagement process. How do you connect? Are people coming to you? Do you advertise? Are they receptive or do they think it is local government interfering? How is it?

Michelle WYATT: We use our council communications channels that we have, so Facebook, media releases, all the usual ways to promote the program. We have an e-newsletter that we promote it through as well. We use the Landcare groups as well to try and promote the program and the opportunities, so the partnership with Landcare is quite important.

David HODGETT: Is it them coming to you?

Michelle WYATT: We have the programs and then we ask our Landcare groups to promote them and then, yes, we get good registrations. We get a lot of people coming. A lot of our courses are fully subscribed or close to. We have not had a lot of criticism about the program or anything like that; generally it is very positive feedback. We do struggle to engage the larger commercial farmers. They are getting their information often through other places and that is okay. We have identified what sort of information is needed for different types of farmers, so a lot of our programs are more relevant to the small-scale producers, who make up a lot of our farmers.

I guess one of the things that we have not mentioned is that we actually have started a small grant program. We call it the rural regeneration grant, which is a small incentive for any farmer to undertake some sustainable land

management practice on their property, so it could be revegetation or weed control, or it could be setting up their off-stream watering or something like that. It is not a lot of money, but it is a small incentive to try to bring forward that decision to do something that they might not have done. That has had engagement from all sectors of our farming community. That has been quite positive. We have had quite large scale farmers engage with that as well as smaller ones – we had someone from the wine industry. That is a nice way for us to not only help support them to do something positive on their property but also bring them into the community a little bit so we have got the capacity to see what else we can do to support them.

Sally BEER: If I can add to that, I think the key difference is that my role is not necessarily a compliance role, so people do need to opt in before they meet up with us. That has been really good.

Michelle WYATT: Yes.

Sally BEER: That has been a really positive part of it. We have got some talented people in the council. So depending on what people are interested in learning about or hearing more about, we can sort of change who goes out onto the farms. You know, if somebody is particularly interested in building biodiversity corridors and things like that, we do have a biodiversity officer that can help them with that. We have also used our water officers – when we were talking to somebody about a creek line on their property, we used one of our water officers. So people can take on what we say or they do not have to, but generally speaking they will take on what we say.

Michelle WYATT: At least we offer it; you know, we are giving them some advice. But we are lucky that we have got such resources. The smaller councils around us cannot offer that sort of service.

David HODGETT: That sounds good. Secondly, your submission talks about your managed growth strategy and that the City of Greater Bendigo hopes that much of the growth will be achieved through urban infill. I just wanted to get your thoughts on how you are trying to achieve that.

Michelle WYATT: That is through proposed zones and overlays. Primarily it is a planning strategy. The strategy is proposing a suite of urban zones, like the urban growth zone and the general residential zone, in areas where we want different levels of growth, and then the neighbourhood residential zone in areas that are not suitable for that scale of development. That is the primary way to signal to the development industry where we want development to be occurring. Then obviously with the growth areas, we will be facilitating rezonings where that is appropriate.

David HODGETT: Finally, just by way of clarification, I missed it, but you said something was going out for public comment next week. Was that your rural land strategy?

Michelle WYATT: No, that is the managed growth strategy.

David HODGETT: So then my question is in relation to the rural land strategy. I am just wondering – you are currently preparing that – what was the timeframe for that?

Michelle WYATT: That is an excellent question. It is currently getting prepared; our strategic planning department are developing that. I am assuming they would have a draft by the end of the year. Whether it is ready for consultation then –

David HODGETT: Yes, it could be 12 months.

Michelle WYATT: Yes.

David HODGETT: That is all right. We will keep an eye out for that. Thank you.

The CHAIR: I have got a bit of a gladbag of questions. Are your traditional owners playing any role in the growth strategy in terms of caring for country and cultural heritage management plans? Is that an issue at the City of Greater Bendigo?

Michelle WYATT: I am not sure what input they have had into the actual managed growth strategy itself, but we have pretty strong relationships with Djaara in particular and increasingly Taungurung – the municipality covers both countries. Where there is a need for cultural heritage management plans, we require

them from developers and we undertake them ourselves as needed. So in terms of their involvement in the managed growth, I would have to take that on notice and find out what input they have had. We do engage with them quite proactively on our strategies and try to get them involved in providing input in the early stages. So I would only assume that that occurred.

The CHAIR: Terrific. Another question: yesterday we heard from the Central Highlands saleyards in Ballarat and the work that they are doing, and we talked about Pakenham's saleyards having closed down. What is the status of the Bendigo saleyards, or is it further afield? Sally, can you help me with that?

Sally BEER: We no longer have a cattle sale anymore, and that was just because – we do not have a cattle sale, and we find that people are going to other saleyards, but we do have our regular sheep sale, which is on every Monday, and then we have our blue ribbon sale as well, which is a stud stock. In regard to them, one of the biggest projects coming out of the saleyards is they are wanting to put a roof over the saleyards, and they are looking into how we can fund that, and that just goes back to the animal welfare outcomes – and people welfare outcomes; I do not know if you have ever been in a saleyard, but in summer –

The CHAIR: It is very hot.

Sally BEER: Very hot.

The CHAIR: And dusty and stinky, yes.

Sally BEER: Yes. Can you repeat your question?

The CHAIR: I am just wondering, now that you have helped me along the way, how far from the CBD the Bendigo saleyards are? I am changing my question. It is fine. How far is it? And what we have found is that the Ballarat saleyards used to be in very central Ballarat, which is, in a growing modern city, not ideal, so we have moved ours out to Miners Rest. Is the location of yours close to the CBD, or have you already done that planning to futureproof it?

Sally BEER: Our saleyards are just out in Huntly, which is one of our satellite towns.

Michelle WYATT: I have not heard any concerns about clashes with the urban development there. I do not know if you have.

Sally BEER: One of – I believe that they are leaving a buffer around just in recognition of those land use tensions.

The CHAIR: I told you it was a gladbag. Do you have any chicken farmers in your area?

Sally BEER: We do.

The CHAIR: We heard from the peak body of chicken farmers and a farmer from Mornington about the challenges that they are facing in terms of, one, working with the EPA, but also complaints with neighbouring developments about smell, about noise, and the frustration that they have been there since the 1960s, and now these new developments have encroached on their farm but they feel like they are the problem rather than anything like that. Have you got any issues like that, whether it be with chickens or piggeries or other forms of farming?

Sally BEER: With the planning department, they do consider things like that, so they are aware of where the large-scale chicken properties are. And there is one piggery, one major one in the Bendigo region, and so when they get applications like that, they will bring it back through to us – to me as agribusiness officer and several other people – and just ask for advice on whether or not they should approve something like that. For Bendigo it may be that they will decline it if it is too close within that buffer.

Michelle WYATT: And we do not have – I guess it is more anecdotal, but we have not had that issue come up a lot through the farming and agribusiness advisory committee. So my assumption is that – we have got Hazeldenes in the municipality, so a big chicken producer and egg producer, and it has not come up as an issue, so the buffer distances must be sufficient and must be being held.

The CHAIR: Terrific. Daniela.

Daniela DE MARTINO: We heard earlier today from the Macedon Ranges Regenerative Farmers group, and I note in your submission too about microabattoirs, because they were saying they have a real issue in accessing abattoirs. What elements of the current regulatory framework make it really difficult for farmers to invest in microabattoirs, or what would you suggest we could do as a government to make it easier for them to (a) exist and (b) be utilised and not be too costly?

Sally BEER: In regard to how much they cost, I probably could not talk to that. The current model that we have locally is that people can travel to one of the major abattoirs. Which one is the one that I am thinking of in Kyneton?

The CHAIR: The huge one?

Sally BEER: Yes.

The CHAIR: I know exactly the one you mean.

Michelle WYATT: Hardwicks.

Sally BEER: Hardwicks.

The CHAIR: That is it.

Michelle WYATT: Maybe I will quickly – Hardwicks has said that they are not going to take small numbers anymore. We have heard a lot through our participants in the Healthy Landscapes program that that is going to cause a lot of difficulty for them. In setting up your own microslaughtering business there are just a lot of regulatory hoops to jump through. To be honest, I am not in the know about the detail of all of those, but from hearing some of our farmers who have explored that as a potential business opportunity to solve the problem, they just say it is too difficult. So you would probably be better off getting further information from some of those smaller producers who are going to be disadvantaged by the changes that might happen at Hardwicks.

Rightly so, there are just a lot of checks and balances and red tape. If there are opportunities to reduce that red tape, I think that would probably be what they would be looking for – or some incentives for the larger abattoirs or programs to support them to take smaller numbers, and maybe some regulatory oversight of the tracking of the animals. We have also heard that when you do send small quantities of stock to slaughter, you cannot always be guaranteed that the butcher is getting the cow that you sent them. That is, again, anecdotal, so we do not have evidence to this effect, but that is what we have heard. It would be great to have better processes to enable that tracking, because a lot of our producers are trying to get high-quality product either direct to market or to butchers, who are then selling it as premium product. They are making promises about their product that sometimes they feel they are not able to fulfil. Is that fair, Sally?

Sally BEER: Yes, that is absolutely fair. Yes, that is true, because I suppose the only alternative – well, it is not really an alternative – is you can get mobile abattoirs onto your property, but then you are limited in where you can sell. Going back to the small-scale producers, I think that Hardwicks has a 25-animal limit, and if you are getting that many processed all at once, it might actually be beyond the scope of some of your small-scale producers as well.

Martha HAYLETT: Sally, I have got another one for you, especially with your agribusiness cap. You must be hearing from so many different agribusinesses about the struggles that they are having or how they are going in terms of viability. What do you hear are some of the biggest challenges for small farm viability in the region?

Sally BEER: For small farm viability? It really comes back to economies of scale. If you look at it from dollars-per-hectare spend, a lot of them can be quite efficient compared to larger scale businesses, but they do have bigger costs than some of their larger neighbours because they do not have that economy of scale. They might need to hire in contractors rather than buying the machine, but when you start hiring in the contractors every year, it starts to increase the cost of that. I think that is all I have to say about that.

Michelle WYATT: Again, some of the farmers we work with talk about the difficulty in setting up on-farm stores in some of the rural zones. Again, they want to be able to provide products directly to market, particularly in areas that have a tourism flavour, like our Heathcote region, for example. In some areas it is more difficult to have a store on your farm. In rural conservation areas it is a bit more difficult. So they talk about those regulatory difficulties as well.

The CHAIR: I am conscious of the time, but I do have a big one for you, Michelle, just based on your job title. From a City of Greater Bendigo perspective, how is climate change impacting on our food supply?

Michelle WYATT: I guess my lens is the City of Greater Bendigo, so it is hard to say beyond that. We do hear about how natural disasters are impacting on crops. We do know that fires are going to disrupt supply chains. We know that floods have interrupted supply chains or interrupted production. So we are seeing that in our region, but the degree to which that flows through to local food supply I cannot say. Some of that supply goes offshore, but we know that it is impacting on our productive capacity. Just with the shocks constantly coming, farmers are starting to get tired of having to rebuild their fencing. Again, it is anecdotal, but they say that it is kind of an incentive to get out of it because they are just tired of having to deal with the next thing and the next disaster and the next disaster. We have not had drought here since I have been working in Bendigo, but that would have put a lot of strain also on our farming community. As I said, the degree to which that flows through to local supply – I mean, you would have heard that local food supply, particularly in Bendigo, is actually coming from elsewhere. We have food in Bendigo; it is just our farming economy is interrupted by some of these climatic changes. That does not necessarily directly flow through to our food supply, but it does impact on our economy and the wellbeing of our community.

Martin CAMERON: With the urban growth, probably a new player that is coming onto the scene is renewables, and I talk about solar farms. Is that coming into the planning of where Bendigo expands out to? Are you seeing that you are having to keep pockets of certain places for future solar farms?

Michelle WYATT: It has not had a great impact to date. We were conscious of that when the transmission lines were proposed closer to Bendigo city, but now the VNI West transmission line is actually proposed a lot further west, so that will mean that Bendigo is less attractive for large-scale renewables. We have not had any massive influx in really large scale solar farms. The few that we have had have been at a slightly smaller scale and have been in locations that have been quite suitable – on the transmission line to Shepparton, that way. So at this point we have not seen a great impact here in the city, but that is not to say that our neighbours are not feeling the impact, because I think the demand is going to be more so the further north and west you go from us.

Martin CAMERON: You have a lovely environment. It is damn well hot here in summer.

Michelle WYATT: Yes, we do have a lot of sun, and so we have been thinking a lot about how we encourage rooftop solar for our community and about how we can have essentially a solar farm on every rooftop, because that is one of the best ways to power our communities. It is a different issue, though.

The CHAIR: Any final questions?

Well, thank you so much to you both for coming in and talking to us about a range of issues. We certainly covered many, many issues. Thank you very much.

Witnesses withdrew.