

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into Securing the Victorian Food Supply**

Melbourne – Friday 3 May 2024

#### **MEMBERS**

Juliana Addison – Chair

Martin Cameron – Deputy Chair

Jordan Crugnale

Daniela De Martino

Martha Haylett

David Hodgett

Nicole Werner

## WITNESSES

Dr Nick Rose, Executive Director and Co-Founder, and

Dr Kelly Donati, Vice-Chair and Co-Founder, Sustain: The Australian Food Network.

**The CHAIR:** Welcome back to the public hearing today into Victoria's food security. We will just go through the formalities before we start with our next lot of evidence.

All evidence taken today will be recorded by Hansard and is protected by parliamentary privilege. This means that you can speak freely without fear of legal action in relation to the evidence you give. However, it is important to remember that parliamentary privilege does not apply to comments made outside the hearing even if you are restating what you said during the hearing.

You will receive a draft transcript of your 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 in our final report.

Thank you for making the time to meet with the committee today and also making your submission. Would you please state your full names and titles and make any opening remarks that you wish to.

**Nick ROSE:** Thanks very much, Madam Chair and members of the committee. It is wonderful to be with you this morning. My name is Nick Rose. I am a Co-Founder and the Executive Director of Sustain: The Australian Food Network. That is a registered health promotion charity and accredited social enterprise. I am also a senior lecturer in the Bachelor of Food Studies at William Angliss Institute of TAFE and a Churchill Fellow investigating innovative models of urban agriculture in addressing urban food security and livelihoods in low socio-economic areas of the United States Midwest, Toronto and Argentina.

**Kelly DONATI:** My name is Kelly Donati, and I am also a Co-Founder of Sustain. I am also a senior lecturer at William Angliss Institute, where I led the development of the Bachelor of Food Studies and the Master of Food Systems and Gastronomy with my colleague Nick. My PhD, just by way of background, was in geography at the University of Melbourne in the area of small-scale agriculture, with a bit of a focus on central Victoria but also a little bit more broadly looking at the relationships between small-scale agriculture and gastronomy. Some of the work that Sustain has done has actually been also with Agriculture Victoria on their small-scale artisan craft, understanding the needs of that sector, as well as the urban agriculture sector in Victoria. I guess we have a bit of a rural/urban focus.

**Nick ROSE:** To commence we acknowledge the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation as the traditional custodians of these lands and pay our respects to their elders past and present and to all First Nations persons who may be with us today. For us it is an honour to attend the hearing this morning to speak to our submission, and we very much hope that our contributions will aid in your deliberations on matters which are of vital importance to the people and ecosystems of Victoria now and in the future. I want to start by stating that, as you just heard, we are speaking to you as experts in sustainable food systems, food security, food policy and governance frameworks, urban agriculture and gastronomy. In the years since Sustain's establishment, we have built a reputation for thought and practice leadership in these fields. Our expertise has been recognised through the provision of research, community engagement and strategy development services to more than 20 local and state government institutions, including Cardinia Shire Council and the City of Ballarat, as well as not-for-profit and private sector clients, with most of that work taking place in the last two years. We are not experts in planning legislation and policy, on which we defer to the leading professionals who will give evidence after us – namely, Michael Buxton, Andrew Butt and Linda Martin-Chew, who is with us now. We have collaborated with all three, and we endorse their views and recommendations regarding the changes required in planning frameworks to achieve the shared goal of a healthy, sustainable, resilient, equitable and secure food system for Victoria.

I now wish to make three high-level points before passing to Kelly. First is the need for the Committee to ask itself: what kind of food supply do we as Victorians want? In our view it is vital for this Committee to recognise and acknowledge that Victoria's food supply is not value neutral. We do not want just any food. We want food and we need food that is healthy and good for Victorians, and that also means food produced in ways that are good for our soils, waterways and ecosystems.

Secondly, the Committee needs to define with clarity and precision what is meant by resilience in the context of Victoria's food system. In systems theory, a resilient system is one that can withstand shocks and stresses, maintain its essential characteristics and continue to perform its critical functions even during times of great stress. The basic function of a food system is to provide food security for all – that is, to generate and make available to all Victorians adequate amounts of healthy, affordable, nutritious and culturally appropriate food. So a resilient food system has two basic and related characteristics. It is diverse in all its elements, and it is designed for redundancy. Diversity across the system means diverse forms and scales of production, processing, distribution and retail. A resilient food system includes diversity of species, from microbial diversity in living and healthy soils to animal breeds and plant varieties. It includes diversity amongst producers so that they reflect the broader Victorian community, which means creating pathways into agriculture for young people and women as well as those from First Nations and CALD communities. A resilient food system includes diverse market channels for farmers, supported by diversity of processing and distribution infrastructure.

My third point is that monocultures, whether in agriculture or retail, are not resilient. Concentrated supermarket power is a threat to diversity, as these corporate actors shape the food system from field to fork and have become the default model for food provisioning in precinct and urban planning. I will now pass over to Kelly, who will speak to this in more detail.

**Kelly DONATI:** Thank you, Nick. I would also like to acknowledge Country and pay my respects to any First Nations people here in the room or joining us online, and I would like to extend my gratitude to the Chair and to the committee for undertaking this really critically important work. I would like to make two key points that build on Nick's opening remarks about the need for food system diversity and for bringing food systems thinking into public policy planning and investment. I will support my discussion, I guess, with a couple of illustrative examples as a way of joining the dots between the macro issues and the micro issues.

The first point is that the food system as we know it today, which is fragile, inequitable and unhealthy, has not emerged by chance. Decades of public policy and planning decisions – or inaction, as the case may be – have left our food system in the hands of powerful corporate players who are answerable primarily to their shareholders and to whatever weak regulatory frameworks they might be subject to. Where the food system does appear in public policy, such as in the Victorian Health and Wellbeing Plan, it is only mentioned in passing. If you look at the health and wellbeing plan, there is a mention of the challenges to the food system for the health and wellbeing of Victorians. There are a number of underpinning strategies within that document; none of them have to do with the food system. There is condom use, there is oral health, there is biosecurity and a number of important issues, but there is actually no strategic framework for the food system itself.

The complexity of the food system, as we have heard from a number of presenters today, is broken up into components that are treated in policy silos by different government departments, often with limited food system expertise. We have also heard that planners lack the necessary training to make decisions that account for not only agriculture but food systems and how that fits into the bigger picture. I think James's comments are a real testament to the difference that understanding makes in terms of food system thinking. Given that, I think it is not surprising that food systems and public health in particular are actually absent from the planning framework. The planning framework deals with agriculture, but it does not actually deal with the broader food system.

This has not always been the case. Until the mid-20th century the question of how a city should feed itself was a primary concern of city governments and urban planners. Understanding the importance of the food system in sustaining a growing urban population is why local councils in Melbourne invested in municipal markets at the turn of the 19th century. The Gleadell Street Market and Preston Market are excellent examples of the indisputable cultural and economic value of investing in markets as part of the public realm. The Gleadell Street pop-up market in Richmond was established almost 150 years before the term 'pop-up' entered the public lexicon, and I think it is a best practice example of a council-supported market that provides affordable, fresh, culturally diverse produce at different price points. Everybody can shop in the same place. There is something affordable for everybody. But it also provides a market channel for a diverse range of food system actors, including wholesalers, farmers and artisans. Today municipal markets are expected to function like for-profit businesses rather than as public infrastructure. To my knowledge, and Linda can perhaps say more about this, they are not protected in the planning framework. Markets are more valued for their potential for tourism development or in some cases housing development, rather than being recognised as the beating heart of a

neighbourhood food system. The loss of the now precarious Preston Market would, for example, reverberate across the local economy. Not only would residents lose access to a culinary and cultural institution and access to fresh and affordable food but local hospitality businesses would be forced to source their food from a small number of more expensive fresh produce suppliers. Given the cost-of-living crisis for businesses as well as residents this would likely be a tipping point for many hospitality businesses and inexpensive eateries that make Preston a great place to eat and live and that also provide local jobs. Municipal markets, greengrocers, butchers and independent food retailers are what give neighbourhoods their sense of community. And yet, as Nick mentioned, the supermarkets are often the assumed anchor retailer within precinct planning processes, and we think this is a huge problem. In reality, food is actually barely considered in precinct planning. We think this is failing Victorians on almost every front and we are happy to elaborate on that later.

Our food system is not resilient if our cities, towns and neighbourhoods are dominated by an economic monoculture of fast-food outlets and other unhealthy food retailers, and I include the supermarket duopoly amongst those. This brings me to my second and final point: we can only have a truly resilient food system by understanding food and farming as intrinsically connected to human and ecological health. I will just offer a couple of small examples: we cannot expect Victorians to eat the recommended daily intake of fresh fruits and vegetables if the farming communities that grow that food are in the grips of a mental health crisis, which in fact they are, and we cannot have nutrient-dense food if farming businesses are so financially marginal that they must always prioritise profitability over soil health, which is the foundation of any food system.

Victorian farmers provide what we consider to be an essential public service to the entire Victorian community and economy, and there is no food system without them. I think we all know that, but that is not always reflected in policy. The food system should also be regarded as vital infrastructure and attract significant public investment on par with clean water, sewers, roads, schools, libraries and open spaces. We have some preliminary thoughts that we can elaborate on later about how this potentially might be financed. We understand that state government has a lot of competing priorities around resourcing. In regional areas this might look like community-led processing facilities, abattoirs and food hubs for farmers, value-adders and distributors. In cities and towns this might be municipal markets but also greengrocers, bulk food retailers, community kitchens and even urban farms. While some of these are private businesses, the fact that they support access to fresh, healthy food and not ultraprocessed foods means that we think they should be considered as health facilities and services in precinct planning, alongside pharmacies, GP clinics and hospitals. They are also essential to realising the Victorian government's vision for 20-minute neighbourhoods.

We cannot continue to regard food as simply another commodity. Food is like water; food is life. It is what nourishes, sustains and connects us socially, culturally, economically, ecologically and metabolically. We support many of the VFF comments and recommendations that we heard today and also many of the recommendations made by the MAV. I will hand back to Nick before we wrap up.

**Nick ROSE:** Thanks, Kelly. Again, echoing what you heard from the VFF, our central recommendation to you and to the Victorian government is that Victoria needs an overarching framework to tackle the food system and food security challenges that we face. Effective food system governance requires an integrated whole-of-government and whole-of-system approach. Such governance is premised on the recognition that the food system impacts, and is impacted by, so many areas of government policy including agriculture, health, planning, sustainability and environment, climate change, education and finance. As we stated in our submission, the food system needs to be understood and governed as a system, which means overcoming the fragmented and siloed approach that has characterised policy in this field up until now. The need for such an integrated and comprehensive approach has been recognised both at the federal level, in the *Australian Food Story* report of the House Standing Committee on Agriculture published in December last year, and by the New South Wales Environment and Planning Committee in their 2022 report into food production and supply in New South Wales. It has been done with powerful effect in Vermont in the United States, with its Farm to Plate plan, which has created thousands of new food and farming businesses and jobs over the last 15 years through a whole-of-state, whole-of-system collaborative framework. On page 13 of our submission you can see some graphics and particularly the table at the bottom, figure 2, which shows the impact of a coordinated, resourced, legislated, state-led approach to food and agriculture – a trebling in spend by Vermonters on food produced in that state just in 10 years, which shows what a difference actual coordinated intervention makes in this area. And I am sure you would be familiar with the multiplier effect that that local economic spend would have on ancillary and allied businesses and industries. So we urge this Committee to follow their lead and take the same approach.

As recognised by both those Committees, federally and New South Wales, as well as many of the submissions made to your Committee, we need to recognise that business as usual in the food system is failing Victorians and is not an option. To achieve a truly food-secure Victoria requires a bold and visionary approach. This requires leadership, political will, a willingness to do things differently and to take risks. It will mean having the courage to take on powerful private sector actors in the interests of all Victorians, particularly the most disadvantaged and vulnerable. Fundamentally, we see this as a moral and political challenge and not primarily an economic or technological one. Thank you. We are happy to take questions.

**The CHAIR:** Terrific. Thank you so much, Nick and Dr Kelly. Thank you very much. Who would like to lead off with the questions? Martin, would you like to start?

**Martin CAMERON:** Yes. There is a lot to unpack there.

**The CHAIR:** There is so much.

**Martin CAMERON:** Absolutely. Can you just elaborate on your last point, with the graph with Vermont, how you envisage that coming to fruition here and what it actually means for us?

**Nick ROSE:** We have done that ourselves with Cardinia Shire Council, with the community food strategy. That is one of a number of councils that are leading the way in coordinated policy and governance frameworks to food system change in Victoria. Cardinia Shire Council approached us in 2015, wanting us to work with them and with stakeholders across Cardinia to develop a coordinated approach to the food system in Cardinia Shire, using what is called a collective impact methodology. I am not sure if that means anything. I am happy to send more information subsequently. Basically, it means a coordinated, collaborative, whole-of-system, multi-stakeholder approach to dealing with what are called 'wicked' problems in society – conundrums around food and agriculture, as you have heard today and as no doubt you will hear from other submissions as you go forward in this inquiry. It is premised on an acknowledgement that no one actor has got all the solutions to this. It is going to take a long period of time to resolve these issues, and it is going to require collaboration and coordination, and it is going to need an umbrella backbone approach.

That is what Vermont has done. The state government passed legislation in 2009 to resource this. They collaborated with philanthropy to fund a backbone organisation called the Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund. It is an economic development strategy helping Vermont transition away from dairy to a more diversified food and agricultural economy, and they have resourced it. They partner with over 350 different organisations – with universities, with farmers and with community organisations and others. They have got all kinds of different working groups. It is very well monitored, it is very transparent, it is well resourced, it is long term and the proof is in the pudding, as you can see there from those figures.

**Kelly DONATI:** And it is also tied to state government procurement programs.

**Nick ROSE:** Right, yes. This is one of the most powerful levers that government, and state government in particular, has available to influence food system change. As you said, it is using the role of institutional procurement. We work in the TAFE sector. We buy a lot of food. William Angliss has – I do not know how many commercial kitchens there are, but huge amounts of food come in every week. If the state government set a policy directive that that food needed to be sourced from local producers who are farming sustainably, that would make a huge difference to many Victorian producers and rural communities.

**Martha HAYLETT:** You have used Vermont as a key example, but are there any other examples from around the world as to who is best practice beyond Vermont that you can share with us?

**Kelly DONATI:** I think actually Vermont is probably the best example, because of the scale of the state. I think Victoria is quite a small state compared to WA and New South Wales. These are much bigger states. I think that the scale of Victoria lends itself to the kind of approach that Vermont has taken. I do not know if you have come across –

**Nick ROSE:** In the context of planning there are two world-leading examples in North America that I think would be well worth you investigating. One is in British Columbia, the Agricultural Land Reserve, which was created in 1971, that protects 50 per cent of the lower British Columbia mainland around Vancouver and supports thousands of farming businesses. That has been a hard protection. We had an academic, Dr Lenore

Newman, who came out for our second national Urban Agriculture Forum in 2018 and spoke to the impacts of the Agricultural Land Reserve at William Angliss Institute. The other one, also in Canada, is the Greenbelt around Toronto, which protects I think 2 million acres around Toronto, again supporting thousands of farming and food businesses. So those are two really excellent examples in terms of long-term secure planning provisions.

**Kelly DONATI:** I think it is also worth mentioning – this is sort of not to do with agriculture – if you think about the role of the state government’s tobacco tax in 1987 and the amount of money that that brought in to the health system to resource things like VicHealth and the work that it is doing now on food systems, one of our recommendations would be for the state government to look at a similar state government tax around ultraprocessed foods and beverages so that the health consequences of the consumption of ultraprocessed foods – and I think at the moment 40 per cent of the dietary intake of Australians is ultraprocessed foods, right? That is huge, and the health implications of that are huge and therefore the costs of that are huge. It is just that they are externalised to the health system rather than to, say, agriculture, right? So we think that there is real value in investing in the development of a taxation system that brings in revenue to resource a lot of the investments that we think need to happen but also to reduce costs in other parts of the health system. There is some really interesting work – Nick, I do not know if you want to talk about the health economics work that Deakin University is doing – looking at what the impact is of even just small changes in that shift from ultraprocessed foods to fresh produce.

**Nick ROSE:** I guess the point we are making here is that, you know, having effective change in this area is going to require investment; we cannot get away from that. We know the state government is currently in a difficult financial situation – we are all expecting a pretty tough budget next week – so where is the money going to come from? Well, we are a health promotion charity. We are very interested in expenditure on health. Currently we are spending, between federal, state and territory governments, somewhere in the order of \$175 billion – you know, direct public expenditure on health. Victoria spent \$21 billion in 2022–23. But as a country, only \$2 billion of all of that expenditure is actually on prevention. We underspend massively and have done for years and years and years on preventative health – and that is how we frame our work. In terms of action on these issues we would see it as a long overdue investment in preventative health for Victoria.

To pick up on what Kelly was saying, the Deakin health economics team have done some excellent modelling on these issues. Diet is now the leading cause of disease and early death in this country; it has overtaken smoking. That is partly testament to the effectiveness of the Victorian government in actually tackling the smoking question, but now it has been overtaken by unhealthy food and beverages, ultraprocessed foods in particular. Thirty-eight per cent of the total disease burden in this country is due to modifiable risk factors, and that accounts for \$24 billion in savings. That is money that we are spending that if we actually invested in keeping Australians and Victorians healthy we would not need to be spending at the end of the process when people are sick and in hospitals and needing to go to GPs and have prescriptions.

Deakin – and we went to a presentation by Western Public Health Unit on this earlier this week – have done some excellent modelling, and we would encourage this Committee to engage with them if you have the opportunity. Looking at the savings to the public purse for investing in people staying healthy, one example they gave us was looking at the catchment of the Western Public Health Unit, which is the City of Melbourne and the seven adjoining local governments going out to the west. One extra serve of vegetables per day for 51,000 children in that catchment would result in savings of \$182 million. That is the kind of impact that we can have if we actually invest in prevention and keeping Victorians healthy, which is not the way, unfortunately, we are going at the moment. The state government’s health department in their annual report asked Victorians how many of them actually felt they were in good health. Only 40 per cent said they were actually in good or excellent health, which is not a really good outcome.

**Kelly DONATI:** And only 5.7 per cent are eating the daily recommended intake of vegetables. So if you start to think about the connection between the farming sector and what people are actually eating, we can actually better support the farming sector by shifting our purchasing patterns away from ultraprocessed foods, where money is basically going into the pockets of multinational corporations, and actually putting them in the pockets of Victorian farmers, which is where we think they belong.

**Nick ROSE:** To come back specifically to your terms of reference, this is why it is so important to protect the peri-urban farmland, because as you have seen in the submissions, as you have heard this morning and as

Foodprint Melbourne have documented well over many years, this is where most of our vegetables come from – from Werribee South, from Koo Wee Rup, from the Mornington Peninsula and from Yarra Ranges shire. Large quantities of our horticulture – our healthy food – come from all these areas around Melbourne, which is why it is so vital to protect them for the long term.

**The CHAIR:** I will draw you on that, but I also want to say that the Victorian economy is looking good. We are just addressing some COVID stuff, so –

**Kelly DONATI:** We understand.

**The CHAIR:** I want the record to know that.

**Nick ROSE:** Maybe it is not going to be such a tough budget, then.

**The CHAIR:** I think it is going to be a tough budget, but only because we need to look after all our COVID stuff so we can get on with doing good things after that. You just mentioned green wedges. Why do you think it is so important in the peri-urban locations to have food production, and how can these sectors be strengthened?

**Nick ROSE:** We speak about the multifunctionality of peri-urban and urban agriculture. It is why we say this should not simply be seen through an economic lens, and I think Emma from VFF also made that point to you very effectively. Agriculture close to the city provides so many other benefits and functions, from landscape, creating habitat and biodiversity to the connection between consumers and producers. We heard about that in terms of the lack of connectivity between people living in cities and farmers. There is the urban heat island effect and dealing with climate change. It is a risk mitigation strategy in terms of disruptions to food supply. If we are just relying on trucking food all around the country from very long distances, what happens if a war breaks out in the Middle East, which is not a fanciful suggestion? It is pretty close, the way things are looking. The last time that happened in a major way, in the 1970s, there was rationing of petrol. What happens if the petrol price doubles? What is that going to do for our food supply? I think in terms of serious risk mitigation and dealing with shocks and stresses that are close on the horizon, having food close to where we are makes a lot of sense. I am not sure if you want to add to that.

**Kelly DONATI:** I will just add that there was a reason, I suppose, why farms ended up there. If you think about how cities develop, the farms were always on the best agricultural land, and that is what sustained the growth of cities all around the world, not just Melbourne. I think also recognising the importance of the soil in those areas is really essential. I think soil health has to be the foundation of this system, and we need to be also thinking about where the best soils are. If they are in the peri-urban area, then we need to be protecting them however we can, acknowledging of course that there are a whole lot of complexities around that, which the VFF touched upon, in terms of a lot of conflicting land uses.

But we also think that we should be thinking about not just the peri-urban but also the urban. We have done a lot of research around urban agriculture, and I think there is the potential for urban agriculture to be the gateway drug to farming and creating that next generation of farmers that we really need in regional areas. It is really hard for them to get that farming experience without leaving the city. We think that there are a lot of opportunities to be using urban agriculture as a way of, I guess, giving people a different impression of what a career in farming looks like. I think what people see now, particularly the children of existing farmers, is that it is really, really hard – and it is. But I think that there are other ways to think about what a farm is and what a farmer is as well.

**David HODGETT:** In your submission, if I recall, you talked about investment in educating planning and agricultural professionals. I was going to ask you how you envisioned that was going to work or what you meant by that, but is that an example?

**Kelly DONATI:** Well, I guess what I am referring to there is urban farmers. But I think that the professional development stuff is really around the fact that this food system stuff is quite complex. When different professions think about food, they tend to think about it through a particular lens: planners are thinking about agriculture and land use, people in public health are thinking about health but also often healthy choices or individual diet. But when you think across a system you start to see what the interactions actually are between those things, and as James alluded to, there is really not that much agricultural knowledge embedded in planning systems, and there is certainly not much food systems knowledge embedded in the planning

curriculum at the university level. There are exceptions – Michael Buxton and Andrew Butt, who you will be speaking to, are the exceptions that prove the rule – but that is missing from planning. Again, in public health you do have some food systems thinkers but for the most part the approach, particularly at both state and local government, is to focus on the individual choices rather than looking at, ‘Well, hold on for a second, what happens when we build cities that look like this and they’re saturated with fast food outlets and supermarkets; what are the ecological, social, health problems attached to that?’ If that systems thinking is not embedded in policy, then you end up with the siloed approach that we have heard about.

**Nick ROSE:** I would just add one thing, which I think speaks also to your point. Another challenge for the food system is the next generation of farmers, and we have heard about that as well – young people are not being adequately supported to go into agriculture for a whole variety of reasons. One of our organisation partners that we work with quite closely is Young Farmers Connect. They made a submission that spoke to that directly, and right now they are actually doing a nationwide survey of young and emerging first-generation farmers in Australia; it is called ‘Small Farms Count.’ They have already received over 500 responses to that survey and we will be helping them with the analysis of it when it is complete. We are also working with them in developing what is called a farm incubator model. There are very successful examples of this in the United States that are intentional, designed, not-for-profit, cooperative models that are actually set up to support new entrants into agriculture – things like supporting land-sharing arrangements, for example, with existing farmers.

Again, in Cardinia Shire we have supported the United African Farm. These are new migrants to Australia from various countries in Africa who entered into a land-sharing arrangement with I think a third-generation beef farmer outside Pakenham to set up a culturally appropriate farm growing food crops. That is being funded by VicHealth as part of their work. So there are lots of models, and there is a critical need for that because farmers on average now are nearing 60, the average age of the Australian farmer. That is almost 20 years older than the average Australian worker. We need the next generation of farmers. If we are serious about food security, we need the people who are going to be able to grow our food; we have to be able to support people to enter this industry. We think an important part of this Committee’s work and what the government needs to do is come up with models to address that. Mornington Peninsula Shire Council have got a dedicated program on that. That again is linked to coordinated strategy and governance. As you will see in their submission, they developed a food economy and agroecology strategy and have a food economy taskforce, which has producers from across the Shire that are working together and developing an action plan, which that we supported them with, to actually tackle these issues. We need that at the state level, is what we are saying.

**David HODGETT:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Jordan.

**Jordan CRUGNALE:** Yes. Speaking of Cardinia, what are some of the challenges for the Shire itself in the program and the strategic stuff that it is doing – the blocks or walls, or whatever it is?

**Nick ROSE:** The approach to us with Cardinia Shire in 2015–16 was about health. They were one of the Healthy Together Victoria councils that received that swathe of funding through the national preventative health care taskforce. That funding ended but the CEO, Gary McQuillan, wanted to continue that work. So that was a critical issue, the impact of dietary-related ill health they were facing. But also the questions about the urban sprawl and the loss of valuable farmland, pathways for new entrants into agriculture, food insecurity – there was a complex range of issues that came together. We worked with the council to –

**Kelly DONATI:** And just also, a saturation of fast-food outlets in that area.

**David HODGETT:** Yes, there are a lot.

**Kelly DONATI:** So there were really very few – talk about an economic monoculture, you see the same businesses opening up all around the outer suburbs of Melbourne. There is very little economic diversity, and that is one of the things that we think is a huge problem, and also a health issue.

**Nick ROSE:** That is a planning issue as well, because health is not a permissible criterion in the planning framework when local governments come to make decisions about new developments. So, yes, there were a whole range of issues. We worked with many hundreds of Cardinia residents to create that Community Food



Strategy, and the council have resourced that for a 10-year period. But health, loss of farmland, the fast-food question and education – waste was another one.

**Nicole WERNER:** You talked about culturally sensitive food. It is the first time it has been raised today. In our food supply network and in the food systems that you speak of, what is your view? How does that fit into the piece?

**Kelly DONATI:** That is a great question. I am glad you have asked it. Again this comes back to the assumption that the supermarkets are the best source of food, but actually in culturally diverse communities the research has shown that the supermarket does not speak to them in a way that is interesting in a culinary sense and does not reflect their food ways and cooking practices. When you go to places like municipal markets or you go to the Gleadell Street Market, first of all you see a culturally diverse representation of the Victorian community, and you see that reflected in the produce. You get all sorts of great Asian vegetables and herbs and things that make cooking interesting, which is what it should be, right? That is the joy of food and that is the power of food. I think the problem with the assumption that the supermarkets are the best option is actually they offer pretty much the same selection and varieties of fresh fruit and vegetables as every other supermarket. Some are worse than others, but when you go to markets you really get that diversity of Victorian farmers and the Victorian community. We think that is really, really powerful.

The reason that I brought up the Gleadell Street Market was because as part of some research that we did with the three inner-metropolitan councils on food affordability we compared fresh-food prices across supermarkets, the municipal markets, cultural grocers and the Community Grocer, and what we found was that actually the supermarkets were not the cheapest and also they were not the most culturally diverse. The municipal markets were the cheapest and the most culturally diverse, as well as some of the cultural grocers that were literally situated across the street from public housing estates. So you have to think: what do you lose when you lose that business because that business is no longer financially viable? You lose a fantastic source of fresh affordable food for a public housing estate that is located just right there.

I think all of these issues about the different types of businesses and the economic diversity are not really being thought about in our food system planning, and I think the question of culturally diverse food is really important. I mean, it is really important for those communities, but it is important for all of us who like to cook and eat, right?

**Nick ROSE:** I think it is also worth saying that it is part of the definition of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations in terms of what food security actually means. It means secure and affordable access to nutritious and culturally appropriate food. It is not just a nice idea, it is actually part of what should be an international commitment for the Victorian government.

**Nicole WERNER:** I suppose when we are looking at resilience in our supply chain when it comes to food supply, there are things that just will not grow here. I wanted to explore even that, in terms of having that accessibility to culturally appropriate food or diverse food.

**Kelly DONATI:** Yes. We advocate for food system localisation and decentralisation; however, we also acknowledge that we live in a big country and that we are really lucky because we can grow just about everything. We can get fantastic Asian herbs that grow up in Far North Queensland, and they get brought down here. We are not saying do not do that, but what we are saying is that the systems that are the foundation of how we get food from farm to plate are oriented right now towards very big players. The policies are oriented pretty much towards export and to some of the consolidation and expansion of farms that the VFF were talking about, rather than acknowledging that there are a whole set of producers out there and we could really diversify the actual farming sector and diversify the kinds of foods that are being grown here. That is not to say that we stop buying Thai basil from Far North Queensland. I am a big fan of Thai basil and want to keep it on the menu, but we do think that we need to be thinking of food system localisation and decentralisation.

**Nick ROSE:** I am conscious of time, but I just refer you to page 9 of our submission where we actually quoted recommendation 14 of the Federal House Standing Committee on Agriculture's reports, where one of their key recommendations was the development of a national food supply chain map. That map would identify where products are grown or produced and in what quantity and where food is processed, the collection and distribution centres, transport methods, major routes and vulnerabilities. We think that that would be a

necessary and appropriate step for the Victorian government to take as part of a comprehensive, long-term integrated approach to food system resilience and security.

**The CHAIR:** Nick, could you just give us some examples of the vulnerabilities?

**Nick ROSE:** The vulnerabilities – I think, well, we look at –

**The CHAIR:** Petrol prices.

**Nick ROSE:** Petrol price is one, but weather – the extremes, the floods in Shepparton, the floods in Mildura, the floods in Lismore. Lismore is a classic example. I was in Ballina at the end of last year talking about this with stakeholders there and seeing pictures of Lismore underwater. With the supermarket all you could see was the sign at Woolworths – the rest of the store was underwater. If that is a taste of what is coming, that is a huge vulnerability.

**Kelly DONATI:** I think what the pandemic showed us was that the supermarket supply chain, which is very centralised, really struggled during those supply chain disruptions, and actually what was functioning quite well and what was quite adaptable were those more agile, smaller scale distribution networks – producers and small businesses being able to shift focus. Certainly my greengrocer had absolutely no problem sourcing fantastic produce. So the issues were actually really in the supermarket. If you looked at the smaller level, they were actually functioning quite fine. It was the same thing during the Brisbane floods in 2010. There is a lot of research that shows that those more decentralised supply chains were much more responsive and able to still feed people whilst the supermarkets were not able to.

**The CHAIR:** Daniela De Martino, who is the Member for Monbulk, actually ran a fresh produce and health food shop in the Dandenong Ranges during it, so it is a shame that she was not able to be here, because she would really add value to that discussion.

**Nick ROSE:** I just want to say, that is what we mean when we say designing for resilience and designing for redundancy – that if something falls over, you are not left with nothing else; you have actually got a plan B or a plan C, as the case may be. That is a characteristic of a resilient system.

**Kelly DONATI:** I think there is often an over-emphasis on efficiency, and that drives centralisation, because it seems more efficient, but when things go wrong, we lose key components.

**The CHAIR:** The time is flying. What other questions do we have with our last few minutes left?

**David HODGETT:** It is a bit separate to this, but I was fascinated when you were talking, Nick, about some of the benefits of improving food. You gave an example of \$182 million. I would be interested if you have done any work – and you can take it on notice if you like – around changing behaviour. I know I should probably eat better or drink less or exercise more, and doctors will tell you they keep telling that to their patients, but how do we actually change human behaviour? I just wonder if you have done any work around that, even if you want to take that on notice.

**Nick ROSE:** We can speak to it a little bit, but it might be good to take it on notice and get back to you with some actual references. But yes, it is critical, because that is ultimately what we are talking about here, a cultural change, if we are actually interested in a healthy Victorian population, which I think we should be. We have grown up in the last 50 or 60 years in a convenience culture, from TV meals through to fast food and now to Uber apps. Everything is on notice, and that is what is marketed and that is what is promoted. As anyone knows that goes into a supermarket and into the aisles, what is on discount, what is on special, what is in line of sight and what is near the check-out is not fruit and veg. So yes, it is a huge challenge. That is why we say, and Kelly mentioned this, that there is great value in changing what people experience when they walk around their streets and their suburbs, seeing what used to be commonplace, which was veggie gardens and fruit actually growing – the living tree with fruit, the living veggie patch with herbs.

**Kelly DONATI:** Also, just to add to that, people used to walk around their neighbourhoods and have little strips of shops with a butcher, with a greengrocer, with that sort of thing. If you are, say, a kid and you are walking around your neighbourhood and you see McDonald's, Burger King, Hungry Jack's and Pizza Hut, or you go into the supermarket and you see Coca-Cola half price – you see everything has been marketed cheap –

**The CHAIR:** Slurpees for \$1.

**Kelly DONATI:** That is why people eat the way they do. It is not because they are just bad decision-makers. It is because the supermarket system and the fast food system is cultivating that demand. That is how they work; that is how they make their profits.

**Nick ROSE:** One of the projects we are doing is in Preston on the site of a disused vicarage that belongs to the Melbourne Anglican Trust Corporation – the Oakhill Food Justice Farm it is called. We had a partnership with Preston Primary School, which is like a 5-minute walk down the road. The school approached us and said, ‘Love what you’re doing here. This was a vandalised vacant site for the last 10 years. Great that you’ve turned it into growing healthy food. Can the kids come along?’ We designed a hands-on outdoor living program. All 700 kids at that school came through three times over one year. The ones that loved it most were the grade 1s and grade 2s. They ran around and they picked different leaves, because everything is edible, and actually had that experience of food. So I think if you are talking about culture change, it has got to start young, right? You have got a change what kids are experiencing and how they are interacting with the world around them –

**Kelly DONATI:** Through the built environment.

**Nick ROSE:** Access to places like that has so many benefits. One thing we have not touched on is mental health – another huge problem for this state and the country. The research we did during the pandemic was the pandemic gardening survey. We had over 3600 Victorians responding – 9000 Australians in total. The major finding was the mental health and psychological benefits of people having access to space to garden and grow food during that time of high stress.

**Kelly DONATI:** But also how much more cooking people were doing as a result of the gardening, right – eating fresh fruit and vegetables.

**Nick ROSE:** If you grow some of your own food, you are more likely to cook it. It is creating those opportunities and programs. Again, it is kind of like intervening in the system intentionally to start shaping it in the direction that we want, rather than just kind of like hands off the steering wheel and letting it chug along as it has been. That is why we are where we are today.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much, Nick and Kelly, for your very detailed submission and also answering our questions today. I am sure we could have slotted in 3 hours for you and we would still have more –

**Nick ROSE:** We are lecturers, so yes –

**The CHAIR:** to talk about. Your discussions have probably raised more questions, so we might be in touch with follow-up stuff. But thank you very much for the work that you do. It is really, really interesting. Food Is Free is another example like the Preston stuff.

**Nick ROSE:** Absolutely.

**The CHAIR:** My kids have loved going there with their schools as well, so thank you so much.

**Nick ROSE:** Thank you. We wish you all the very best with the rest of your inquiry and the other organisations.

**Kelly DONATI:** Actually, we just wanted to hand this out because this is probably one of the best illustrations of what a food system is that we could find on the internet. We thought we just leave it with you because it really sort of disabuses the idea that supply is about a chain, and in fact it is about a set of circles.

**The CHAIR:** We might just end the transmission there.

**Witnesses withdrew.**