

Submission to the ACT Government on the Capital Food and Fibre Strategy: Discussion Paper

Executive Summary

Regional Development Australia (ACT)

The Canberra Region Food Collaborative

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Executive Summary:

Regional Development Australia (RDA) ACT is an independent NFP with a Board/Committee of nine local leaders, focused on economic development. We are part of a national network of 52 Regional Development Australia organisations, largely funded by the Australian Government through the Department of Infrastructure, Regional Development and Cities. Our charter is to secure more investment and jobs for our region aligning our work with the ACT Government priorities. Our industry focus is on the agrifood industry.

We have launched a new initiative called the Canberra Region Food Collaborative (CRFC) <https://www.agrifood-hub.com/>. The CRFC will be an independent information broker and coordinating body responsible for helping establish an integrated, sustainable, inclusive local food system. We also have developed the highly successful Food in the Capital Event Program – now Australia’s only national event focusing City-Region food systems. The CRFC is mentioned in the current Government Agreement for action this parliamentary term subject to funding.

RDA (ACT) welcomes the ACT Government’s decision to develop the Capital Food and Fibre Strategy. Its development is crucial for helping our Territory improve its food security and achieve many of the ACT’s economic and wellbeing objectives. Taking advantage of its natural and built advantages, we have an unprecedented opportunity to be Australia’s leading Urban Food City and to ride a social movement and a technological/design-based wave sweeping the world.

The ACT Government has been taking some important steps in the urban food sector in recent years – from facilitation of community gardens and support for farmers markets through to the more recent focus on food waste. While individually important, evidence from other jurisdictions, both in Australia and overseas, shows that a systematic approach is needed to maximise benefits. There are complex feedback loops within the food system and the broader community. These include everything from water and energy, business competitiveness, sustainability, investment, social disadvantage, health, nutrition and liveability.

The strong potential of this sector is supported by the presence of a highly motivated, socially conscious, well-educated, and relatively high-income population.

The economic, health and environmental arguments are strong for well-conceived government and private investment in local sustainable food systems. In reviewing the experience of leading world ‘food’ cities it is evident that building up of local and easily accessible regional high quality food buffers with a shorter supply chain is strategically essential. We need much more local food to support our traditional supply chains to prevent food shortages and to smooth out further periods of disruption.

There is very strong investment interest in sustainable food production – from micro-local enterprises and concepts through to large projects. To realise the opportunity will require policy certainty, active investment attraction and a low-cost, predictable, facilitative regulatory environment.

We estimate the potential of creating 3000 local job and providing food security for the city as whole and better access for our most disadvantaged groups.

Summary of recommendations:

- That 4-5 larger locations be identified and set aside as food precincts be they for the purposes of production, agrifood tourism, social enterprise, or training. These would become centres of gravity and scale for urban food. In addition, allow collateralisation of all types and locations of small plots for food production.
- Setting well defined procurement targets for local, regional and sustainable food sourcing into government, institutional care, hospitals, schools and aged care. Encourage corporates and the private sector to do the same.
- Set an ACT target or objective for the percentage of local food sourcing the Government wants to achieve over five and ten years.
- Create a vision for the leaders in the built environment targeting developers, architects, and landscape architects to integrate urban sustainable food opportunities inside new developments. Encourage innovation in the latest urban food technologies and approaches.
- Create a strong relationship in food with NSW producers, State and local governments and RDAs as the 'heavy lifters' for local food provision for the ACT into the decades to come.
- Enhanced support for Farmers markets especially in terms of infrastructure and parking
- Give policy certainty and direct support for ACT-based food enterprises and decide on where long-term farming can be guaranteed. Provide broad spectrum support through investment facilitation, skilling, water planning and transport & logistics.
- Support a major research effort in multiple convergent fields including sustainability, food hub formation, system performance measurement and health & nutrition.
- Join the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact and consider membership of the Future Food Systems CRC.
- Funding of the Canberra Region Food Collaborative to help government coordinate the wide range of stakeholder interests, support investment attraction and local projects, measure performance, run events, training and advise and help coordinate government support through time.

Our core premise is that in urban food, sustainability, good business and social impact can operate in a productive harmony. The timing is right for a concerted approach to building a local and regional food production system. Food is the forgotten part of the Water, Renewable Energy Soil nexus necessary for creating a truly sustainable City. Done well, sustainable food will not only good for business, tourism, exports and jobs but will directly address the ACTs liveability, human health and inclusion policy objectives.

Across the world, City, Urban and Rural food strategies are being developed to accommodate community-based farming, food business incubation through to striking vertical farms, high-tech green houses, aquaculture, food waste capture/reduction and clean energy integration.

Food production and consumption is ubiquitous in all human society. It feeds, connects, and employs. The national and local food system is impressive in its ability deliver enough food to feed Canberra and those who rely on our supermarkets, farmers markets and grocers and the food service sector. Tens of thousands of people are employed around Australia and within the Canberra region to provide the food and meals we need to keep the city functioning. This an extremely complex task and challenging particularly when our very long supply chains are disrupted. Of the 40,000 people involved in that task across Australia we believe we can bring 3000 jobs here by shortening the supply chain.

RDA developed the *Proposal for Sustainable Urban Food in the ACT (2019)* with the assistance of a wide range of organisations in Canberra who had been involved in urban sustainable food space for many years. This report and our subsequent submission *Proposal for Establishing a City-Region Food System¹ (February 2021)* have highlighted several issues and concepts that need to be factored into developing and implementation of a sustainable city-region food system.

While the economic arguments are strong in terms of ROI for well-conceived government and private investment – the need to position food in public policy considerations as an essential service, alongside water and energy, is the most decisive argument in its favour. In reviewing what leading ‘food’ cities are already doing in this sphere – it is evident that building up of local and easily accessible regional high quality food buffers with a short supply chain is now becoming strategically essential.

There is very strong investment interest with more than \$100 m in project opportunities for the ACT. Much of this is driven by mobile capital for which we are competing with other destinations, including NSW.

Huge differences in scale, approaches and technology means that policy needs to open up enough to encourage all manner of food projects. The harsh climate in Canberra, its market characteristics and geography all mean that the strategy needs to be flexible enough to allow a process of discovery over time about what suits Canberra best in terms of products, our inclusion objectives and consumer demand.

For a full copy of the submission please email: Michael.claessens@rdaact.org.au

¹ That submission includes a detailed policy alignment analysis.