

Food security ministerial roundtable – Ministerial statement

Legislative Assembly for the ACT: 2015 Week 2 Hansard (17 February)

MR RATTENBURY (Molonglo—Minister for Territory and Municipal Services, Minister for Justice, Minister for Sport and Recreation and Minister assisting the Chief Minister on Transport Reform) (10.56), by leave: On Thursday, 22 May 2014 I hosted a roundtable on food security in the ACT. The key focus of the roundtable was to explore ways the ACT government can facilitate increasing the amount of food consumed in the ACT region that is produced and processed locally.

Food security is an important issue nationally, and for Canberrans. It is a global issue, essential for livelihoods, economies and environmental protection. It is also a local issue, from regional food production through to community gardens. Canberra has a tradition in this regard, particularly with the earlier suburbs providing larger blocks that were designed to integrate food growing in backyards.

Agriculture should be sustainable within the local context, taking into account climate variability, water availability, soil fertility and wider emerging issues such as climate change and peak oil. Land and water should be valued as scarce and precious resources, and with ecological communities and ecosystem services being protected.

The roundtable was keen to see an increase in locally produced food, less food wastage and organic matter being diverted from landfill and instead being composted for local food production. Issues around valuing the skills of food producers and researchers were also raised. Attendees were keen to foster networking between local and regional growers to enhance their resilience to changing conditions and cooperate with neighbouring regions to enhance food security. The roundtable was an example of this type of networking.

A broad range of stakeholders attended, including primary producers and urban food producers; distributors and retailers, including farmers markets; consumers, such as restaurants and caterers; relevant policy and advocacy organisations; food production and food security academics; and ACT government representatives. The roundtable agreed that in the context of increasing threats of climate change and peak oil, food security is an ever growing and significant issue. We agreed on the importance of reliable local food supply to help develop resilience in relation to ACT and regional food security.

The United Nations publishes an annual food report and every year it shows a decline in food quality, highlighting the importance of funding for agricultural research, especially into food quality. It is important to note the role of food production systems to people's health and that, sadly, only 68 per cent of people eat enough vegetables.

The roundtable first held a plenary session where people raised both obstacles to and opportunities for increased food production in the ACT. Small groups were then formed to further explore particular issues. The roundtable explored a broad range of policies and initiatives that could be used to support food production, including exploring improvements that could be made to the planning system for rural use, such as introducing agricultural zoning into the territory plan so that productive agricultural land is protected and utilised, and improving policies that facilitate the use of private land and public open space for food production within urban areas, whether they be domestic, community, market or commercial gardens.

Together, the roundtable explored how the ACT government's strategies and policies could deliver practical food security outcomes. I will provide a general overview of the ideas and comments that participants contributed on the day, both through the plenary and the smaller group sessions. As you will hear, this is a

very diverse list—some simple, some rather more complex—but I believe they are worth sharing in this place so that all members might hear the ideas. It also highlights many opportunities to improve the use of our land that do not particularly need government funding but may be facilitated through policy change.

The key issue of land use for primary production was raised on the day, with a range of suggested actions, such as creating specific zoning for agricultural use in the territory plan; identifying high quality agricultural land in the ACT and applying agricultural zoning; ensuring water security for agricultural use and reducing obstacles to the reuse of water; ensuring continued and accessible, affordable, arable land—lack of security of tenure is an issue for many farmers: it is hard to be a responsible land manager and plan for the longer term when you only have a short to medium-term lease—exploring food security legislation, including requirements for food security impact statements for development, including assessment of soil and water, and secure leases for designated agricultural land; master planning for rural areas; better integration of agriculture into other land uses, such as the use of surplus land around vineyards; investigating communal farming opportunities, including finding out whether rural leaseholders in urban fringe areas would be interested in land share arrangements for market gardens; and, finally, identifying underutilised agricultural grade land such as the Molonglo River flats. Given the water and nutrients available there, perhaps the area could be used for market gardens.

In relation to urban land use, the roundtable explored rights and responsibilities that could be given to the community to help increase opportunities for local food production. These opportunities include exploring the increased use of urban unleased land for food production, such as setting aside land for more intensive production such as greenhouses, hydroponics and aquaponics, with participants noting that 700 hectares would be enough to produce enough food for around a third of the ACT population; better use of unleased land near creeks, cycle paths, road easements and power line easements; relaxing public-residential restrictions on the use of public unleased land and nature strips for home gardening, provided that residents take responsibility for controlling fruit tree pests; identifying more productive areas—one suggestion was that areas that need mowing more often would indicate higher water and nutrient levels and, where appropriate, dedicating these areas to community gardens or market gardens; increasing community gardens above the current 3.65 hectares across the ACT—ideally these sites should be on transport routes with access to water, electricity and toilets and land should be reserved at the outset of suburban planning; supporting the Canberra City Farm; using grass from TAMS mowing, as it could be baled and used as stock feed—this was apparently done in the past during the last drought; better water collection, including more use of swales and reed beds; better use of building walls and roofs for food production; honey bee security, which includes registration of beekeepers, reducing pesticide use, increasing bee-friendly plants, especially in new suburbs, reducing monocultures and bee biosecurity; inviting business cases for agricultural land; and investigating the creation of "agri-hoods" or neighbourhood agricultural production areas.

The roundtable also explored better capture and use of water and nutrients, including using organic matter from food and waste streams; composting solids; using liquids as fertilisers and removing organics from the waste stream, instead using it for worm food or soil conditioner—this could be through a project similar to the groundswell project across our borders, in regional councils, or by creating large-scale composting for use by community gardeners; using effluent for agriculture, recognising the potential health issues; providing water for agricultural purposes, incorporating an allocation of water for agriculture in the water policy; managing urban and stormwater run-off, including a revegetation strategy to retain water in situ before it becomes run-off; and reducing chemical use at a household or garden level and setting targets for this.

The roundtable looked at issues around regional food processing and market access, noting that the ACT cannot provide for all of our food needs; thus it is important to plan regionally. Potential opportunities identified included improved opportunities for regional production, perhaps by introducing local or regional food production or purchasing targets towards self-sufficiency; a local label to help distinguish between local and imported foods; improving paddock to market opportunities, including support for farmers markets, noting that 15 per cent of stallholders are from the ACT and the other 85 per cent are from the region; developing local food processing options, such as an abattoir for meat and poultry, as well as facilities for winemakers; and, finally, establishing more cooperative production and distribution.

The roundtable also discussed agriculture's role in diversifying the ACT economy. Agriculture should be part of ACT economic planning. It would be useful to have a business case to show the benefits of a large-scale agricultural proposal, with one suggestion that 10,000 to 12,000 people could be employed in the sector. One group focused on red tape reduction and there was discussion about issues that would be better explained to producers and retailers through fact sheets and check lists, for example, on relevant rules and regulations. There was also examination of some areas which are perhaps over-regulated, such as requirements for weighing individual eggs, the size of hand washing sinks and requirements for selling food. Creating a single point of contact with ACT government on food production issues was also raised.

Opportunities for food-based education were also a key issue at the roundtable. As well as residents simply wanting to know what they can grow and where, there is also a need for consumers, caterers, schools and retailers to understand the availability and nutritional value of fresh and high quality food, as well as opportunities to be involved in food production.

There was ample discussion about how to promote the region, and also how to support and invest in demonstration gardens similar to CERES in Melbourne. This provides people with practical education about food while having a pleasant visit, thus supporting increased tourism and creating jobs. Supporting champions to drive school gardens is important, and schools need to be resourced to do this work. This could also be replicated to support food production for Canberra's most vulnerable.

I would like to thank all the people who attended the roundtable. As you have heard, there was a considerable amount of interesting input. I would also like to acknowledge the work that is already being undertaken by the ACT government. TAMS continues to support existing community gardens and will continue work to support new, similar arrangements, such as the City Farm, and plant waste from Floriade being composted at Mugga Lane and then made available to the public. The Health Directorate has a number of programs that support growing and harvesting food, including building the capacity in schools to establish and maintain kitchen gardens. ACT Health has funded the University of Canberra to develop an interactive map of community gardens to facilitate connections between gardeners and sites with benefits including food, exercise and social inclusion.

The Environment and Planning Directorate has developed the ACT water strategy "Striking the balance" and is reviewing the water sensitive urban design code, which addresses some of the water issues raised at the roundtable. It is also implementing Canberra's integrated urban waterways program, which allows for stormwater reuse within the Sullivans Creek catchment.

All these initiatives are a great start, but there is more to be done. I look forward to continuing to work with TAMS and my government colleagues to improve policies and work towards food security for the ACT. I see a bright future with an expansion in regional production, including regional food tourism focused on

sustainably produced food and wine, and an ongoing growth in community gardens. It is worth noting that sustainably produced food and wine, and an ongoing growth in community gardens. It is worth noting that on 12 November last year I launched the Canberra City Farm in Turner, which will provide great opportunities for education and community engagement in food production. I think this is an excellent example of where targeted government support and facilitation can help unleash an enormous amount of community interest and goodwill. This is something I would like to see more of. I present the following paper:

2014 Food Security Round Table—Ministerial statement, 17 February 2015.

I move:

That the Assembly takes note of the paper.

MR BARR (Molonglo—Chief Minister, Treasurer, Minister for Economic Development, Minister for Urban Renewal and Minister for Tourism and Events) (11.09): I thank Minister Rattenbury for bringing this matter forward this morning. I acknowledge the considerable work that Minister Rattenbury and his team have undertaken in pursuing a number of these issues. Recognising that they cross over portfolio responsibilities, it has been very good to have this level of leadership within the community. I am particularly interested in the tourism opportunities that Minister Rattenbury has highlighted. There is no doubt that the region's food and wine offerings are starting to get the recognition nationally and internationally that they deserve. It has been terrific to see the Canberra District Wine Industry Association, for example, and its members achieving such significant levels of recognition.

Minister Rattenbury also highlighted a number of other important ACT government initiatives in the area of community gardens, for example, that are being pursued and I think have greater opportunity. One need only see the level of community interest and support for events like the farmers market at Exhibition Park each Saturday to get a sense of what is a broader community movement towards more support for regional produce. It is very heartening to see the economic development opportunities that are emerging for high quality producers in this region. I think this opportunity today is timely to raise these issues again. I certainly look forward to working with Minister Rattenbury in those areas that cross over into the economic development and tourism portfolios because I think it is very clear that there are significant opportunities for Canberra.

The other issue that has been raised with me, and I think is a brilliant possibility, is through the Canberra brand and the "We are CBR" activation that will allow local businesses and local producers to very proudly display their connection to the Canberra region—the opportunity for that to be embraced throughout south-east New South Wales as well as the surrounding councils to adopt our city's branding as part of their approach to regional tourism. That presents a further opportunity not only to promote the good work that is already occurring but to expand upon that and look at the region's possibilities in terms of food production, which obviously encompasses a much greater land area but also, importantly, a diversity of opportunity for different products to emerge or to go to the next level.

Direct international flights out of Canberra Airport would also provide an export opportunity for fresh produce to find its way into South-East Asia in a timely manner. That would open up, again, further opportunities for the local region and for local producers. I thank Minister Rattenbury for bringing this matter before the Assembly this morning and certainly commend further work in this area.

MS BERRY (Ginninderra—Minister for Housing, Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, Minister for Community Services, Minister for Multicultural Affairs, Minister for Women and Minister assisting the Chief Minister on Social Inclusion and Equality) (11.12): I wanted to speak briefly on this statement and thank Mr Rattenbury for bringing it to the Assembly today. I have spoken before on community gardens, backyard gardens and the ways in which communities can come together—how we can do it better and educate and facilitate that in our communities. If we can work out a way where people can take responsibility for spaces, nature strips and reserves in their area—and that includes ways in which they can produce product for people to share, whether it is fruit or vegetables—it would be a great thing. I really want to see some more work done on that area.

I am not sure whether this was mentioned in Mr Rattenbury's speech—I may have missed it—but backyard chickens are extremely popular in the ACT. Perhaps how these are kept can be part of the process. I have spoken before in the chamber about bees and beekeeping and how important that is for not only the people who keep bees but also our environment, and ensuring that our native fauna is continually regenerated through the hard work of bees.

I also wanted to have a bit more of a conversation about how families who might be time poor or live in higher density housing can create balcony gardens, small places and gardens that need very little maintenance, so they are still able to provide produce for their families and their friends. In addition, I have talked about providing opportunities—again, this comes down to how we legislate or how we make it safe for people to do this—for people in their communities, in their suburbs, to be able to barter or swap produce that has been grown in their community gardens, on their nature reserves or in their own backyards.

Mr Rattenbury also talked about school gardens. These need to be resourced. Unfortunately, often they need to be resourced with volunteers and there is not too much money. We need to work out ways in which we can properly facilitate volunteering in our school communities so that our school gardens can thrive and flourish, people can swap produce and children can learn about eating healthily, and families can also learn as well.

Last year in the ACT Legislative Assembly I asked about worm farms. We produce quite a lot of green waste here. I know that there has been a reluctance for that as an idea in this place, but I still think it is something that we could investigate. Some of the small gardens that we have around this place could be fertilised through our own waste that we create in this place. It is something that I will still be investigating. I think it is an opportunity for us as a community in this building. I thank Mr Rattenbury for bringing this conversation to the Assembly today.

Question resolved in the affirmative.