

Food Security in the South East

We need our own secure fresh food supply for domestic use and export in the South East but in striving for food sustainability we are facing new challenges yet we have the elements of success within our grasp to deal with the issues.

The Problems

Clear trends in global warming indicate we are heading towards climate problems and while it's hard to predict how bad it will get, we already see world-wide evidence such as an increasing number and intensity of floods, droughts and storms. For us in the South East a drier period is predicted but it will probably be interspersed with dramatic wet and windy weather events.

Drought Crisis

We have a national drought crisis now and the capacity of the Nation to sustain or manage the national food crop is already dramatically reduced and there is no real 'national' solution. We simply cannot make it rain.

Major Weather Events

If any major weather events such as cyclones or floods occur in production areas, whole regions can cease production immediately with no alternative in place and no ready, skilled labour force to provide emergency support to farmers. We saw this with the 'banana cyclone' last year.

Energy Supply

However the most serious situation we face is dwindling global energy supply which is already raising food prices and forcing changes to our existing lifestyle. The end of our high energy era will arrive faster than we expect as energy hungry giants like China, America, India and Europe will take a very long time to adjust to the energy problem because their economies, like ours, are based on expansion and high energy inputs.

Food Transport

Food transport (food miles) over large distances is prone to many external threat factors such as weather, fuel cost and fuel availability as well as other problems such as economic tightening due to external influences like share market instability and global warming events which place deep stress on the national economy.

Seed Access

Viable seed production is not embedded in our community culture because we have become used to supermarket supply even in a regional area where we could be growing our own food. Social support structures and a shared labour culture that used to exist decades ago have dissolved in all but the most remote communities.

Government Response

Government response, at all levels, to these food supply factors appears to be slow and reactive rather than one of leadership which is another continuing trend we should expect regardless of who holds office in the future.

High Exposure to Food Scarcity

We are highly exposed to food scarcity in the future. Solutions can

be found and implemented at the local level and local solutions are probably the only sure solution.



The Solutions

As a community we find ourselves with some stark choices for the future in terms of our food security. In the South East we need to initiate this discussion and action immediately because of the extended time it takes to create sustainable food production in a region that imports almost all of its food.

We need to build local food security to survive into the future by creating community gardens on a large scale. Community gardens provide a social structure, a labour force, access to seed stock, a distribution network and a range of other benefits.

Obviously food security is not critical in 2007 yet, but it probably will be in 2010 or 2015. In building social programmes of this size, 5 or 10 years is not a long time - especially given that there is a community education component that may take a generation to develop. The next generation in our community will have even less energy available and they will need a supportive culture on which they can build. For these reasons we must start now.

What are the components of food security we should look to first?

Seed stock

<http://thebegavalley.org.au/seedsavers.html>

Seeds are a central factor in sustainable agriculture.

There are many commercial suppliers of heritage, open-pollinated seed stocks (seeds that generate plants which will make viable seed). More importantly there is a Bega Valley local seed savers network and they are always looking for people to grow specific varieties 'true to form' and can help with how to gather and store the seed required. As a seed grower you also get access to free seed in the future.

Success in viable seed management will rely on individuals not companies.

The primary objective is to get a garden started whatever it takes - and the methods of agriculture will vary. Here are a few methods that are gaining attention as drought beaters.

Agricultural Methods - Permaculture

<http://permaculturedesign.com.au>

In creating food security start with Permaculture (ie permanent agriculture) because it represents an ecological design system that is constantly being improved, it is open to all, is low input cost, widely accepted and has an international network. There are 12 Permaculture design principles and the reader would be advised to go through a Permaculture Design course as a starter.

Agriculture Methods - Aquaponics

<http://www.backyardaquaponics.com>

New techniques for growing also include low input technology such as aquaponics where fish and vegetables live in a virtually closed system. As printed in The Producer Summer 2006/2007, Joel Malcolm has demonstrated a relatively low entry cost technique for using bacteria to convert ammonia, a by-product of

Community Gardens

<http://communitygardens.org.au>



fish culture, to nitrites and then nitrates which can be fed to plants in a gravel bed growing medium. Small areas of land can readily produce high quantities of vegetables and fish in a sustainable system.

Agriculture Methods - Organic and Bio-dynamic Growing

<http://www.bfa.com.au> & <http://www.biodynamics.net.au/>

Both organic and bio-dynamic methods are low external input methods of agriculture which are under-utilised in the South East. While labour inputs are relatively high the returns are a premium quality product for export markets.

It is regrettable there is so much misinformation about these proven agricultural methods demonstrating the demonisation of 'soft culture' advances in understanding that many people choose not to investigate.

Labour Force

One problem facing many people wanting to grow their own food now is not having time to build and manage a local garden or other food production systems (eg small animal species). Two options to solve the labour issue are available to us now.

Labour Force - Community Gardens

<http://communitygardens.org.au>

The first labour solution is to work at the local level with neighbours to develop small, localised community gardens. This is a great solution because it enhances community co-operation and develops problem solving, skills sharing and it means a ready labour force is available to work on projects one person might struggle to complete.

Labour Force - LETS

<http://bvlets.org.au>

The second solution to labour problems is to use the Local Exchange (Energy) Trading System (LETS) to exchange local, experienced labour for a nominal currency.

LETS enables groups and individuals to source labour for development projects such as harvesting without spending cash money. LETS is an excellent solution to a climate change economy downturn or for people who want to grow in quantity but cannot afford the labour. Some people have built houses using LETS as their payment method with willing builders. LETS transactions can be mixed with dollars.

Transport

<http://tripmeeter.org>

Garden surplus is best processed within the community to value add or preserve for later use - but on occasion shipping surplus around the region will be cost and time prohibitive. A co-ordinated shared transport model could help solve transport costs. Web technology now allows us to manage these journeys for very low cost. Tripmeeter is a new idea pioneered in the Bega Valley - look for new advances in this website.

SCPA

<http://sapphirecoastproducers.com.au>

Clearly a co-ordinating local food production information and education group is required. The Sapphire Coast Producer's

Association is now well positioned within the community to implement the transition process to community based food in association with Clean Energy for Eternity - <http://cleanenergyforeternity.net.au> - and The Bega Valley community website - <http://thebegavalley.org.au> - and their managing team at Austcom in Bega - <http://australiancommunities.org.au> and SCPA's project partners in the Far South Coast Community College <http://www.learningworks.org.au/> and SERTEC <http://www.sertec.com.au>

SCPA has many facets and by promoting more local growers, champions will arise who can develop viable industries in food production, value-add opportunities and other relevant projects.



Conclusion

Food security requires a change in the way we think because grants, companies or government bodies cannot sit across the many disciplines required to achieve the goal of thousands of community gardens throughout the South East region.

How Many Gardens?

A community garden or aquaponics installation on a suburban block may be generous enough to feed 10 people full time. With a population in the South East nearing 90,000 residents (not counting visitors)- basic 'back of the envelope' maths means we to create at least 9,000 community gardens! If a garden will only feed 5 people with all their needs, which is more realistic in the short term, 18,000 gardens will be needed.

Only a whole of community approach to the solution will solve the problem. Community gardens will need to be everywhere and education and information sharing will be the critical control element required for success.

How to get food security in your community.

All you do is get a few friends and start growing food together.

Do register your garden via <http://communitygardens.org.au> - to take advantage of the seed savers, machinery access, knowledge and seedling access from local groups. We help each other.

Start small, get a few successful seasons going and then make it bigger. It will take years to get your production up to levels that reliably compete with your weekly purchases at supermarkets.



For more information...

To act as a point of contact...

Go to <http://communitygardens.org.au>

Or call us on: 6492 5000