

Food Security amid COVID-19

By the Hon. DAVID LITTLEPROUD, Minister for Agriculture, Drought and Emergency Management

Maintaining Australia's food security is one of the Government's top priorities and it's a key part of our \$320 billion of measures to deal with the economic impacts of COVID-19.

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken Australia and the world by surprise. Coming after severe drought and the bushfires earlier this year concerns have been raised about Australian food security. These concerns are understandable, but misplaced.

We know the importance of our agriculture sectors. Feeding our nation is an essential service. We want to ensure high-quality produce can reach domestic and overseas markets.

Australia is one of the most food secure countries in the world, for several reasons. We consistently produce far more than we consume. This means we can also contribute to the food security of other nations through exports. We export 70 per cent of our agricultural production.

According to the Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics the seasonal outlook for autumn 2020 is positive, providing the basis of a recovery in Australian crop production and allowing for rebuilding of sheep flocks and cattle herds.



We're grateful to our farmers and all who work across the food supply chain to ensure our food security even in times of crisis, and we will continue to back our farmers and fishers to ensure they have the support they need during and after the pandemic.

The Australian Government has changed visa arrangements to allow Pacific seasonal workers, working holiday makers and a range of other visa holders to continue working (with strict health and hygiene protocols) to maintain food security through COVID-19. There are about 100,000 working holiday makers and 8,000 Pacific Island workers in Australia.

The Australian Government is also working closely with supermarkets and their brokers to fast-track border clearance of imported groceries during the COVID-19 crisis.

Uncertainties around the impacts of COVID-19 triggered a sudden increase in purchasing by consumers of a range of items, resulting in disruption to stocks of some basic food items in supermarkets. This disruption is not an indication of food shortages. Rather, it is a result of logistics taking time to adapt to the large unexpected surge in purchasing.

These impacts are already abating, while Australia's sophisticated supply chains are rapidly adapting. State-imposed border shutdowns will not affect agricultural supply chains. The trucks carrying food and produce will continue to get through to the shops. Feed, hay, fertiliser and other agriculture products will continue being delivered to farms.

We do not produce everything we like to eat however, and imports account for around 11 per cent of food consumption by value or 16 per cent of household consumption. These imports provide access to manufactured food and beverages, different varieties of some items, and out of season fresh produce. Streamlining the import processes for items such as frozen processed foods will help ensure supermarkets remain fully stocked.

The Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment has placed dedicated people within its import assessment, bookings and inspection functions to enable critical supplies to be cleared faster without deviating from our strict biosecurity and imported food controls. This has been developed through close consultations with the major retailers as part of the Australian Government's Supermarkets Taskforce.

Maintaining productivity in our agricultural and fisheries sectors is one of our government's top priorities, and we will continue to explore ways to provide further assistance. We can take great comfort that this lucky country produces enough food to guarantee we will continue to enjoy the best produced products anywhere in the world.

COVID-19 has had a huge impact on everyone, but we will continue to back our agriculture and seafood sectors and ensure Australians and the globe can continue to enjoy our clean, green and sustainable produce. The government's \$110 million International Freight Assistance Mechanism is one of the initiatives to help exporters get their high-value produce into key overseas markets during this crisis.

In March I announced Mark Tucker as our Senior Agriculture Industry Engagement Officer to be the key liaison between my department and agriculture, fisheries and forestry stakeholders affected by COVID-19.

Mark has already been busy working with Commonwealth Departments and State Governments to ensure agriculture industry perspectives inform our decision-making. The position will give us regular status updates on key issues in this sector and it'll help us respond exactly where we need to.

I thank our farmers and all those working across the food supply chain for performing a great service to the community to ensure our food security remains as strong as ever. It's the agriculture sector that will lead our recovery.