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Chair  
Environment and Planning Committee  
Legislative Assembly, Parliament of Victoria

**RE: Inquiry into securing Victoria's food supply**

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to this Inquiry.

As we are advised, the terms of reference for this submission are as follows:

- *the impacts of urban sprawl and population growth on arable land and the farming industry in Victoria*
- *the use of planning controls to protect agricultural land in green wedge and peri-urban areas*
- *the resilience of the Victorian food system, including the production of food, its transportation and sale.*

The Australian Chicken Growers' Council represents the interests of all contracted meat chicken and turkey farmers in Australia. It is a federation of State Farming Organisations or their equivalents and was formed in the late 1970s. The current acting CEO, and many of the current Board, have been in the industry for more than 25 years and we can readily draw on the expertise of some farming families going back to the formation of the industry in the late 1950's.

Chicken meat is the most consumed and least cost animal protein in Australia, with more than 50kg of chicken meat consumed per capita per year. ([ACMF](#)). Meat chicken farms are the most efficient producers of animal meat protein per year, on a kg/ha farmed basis.

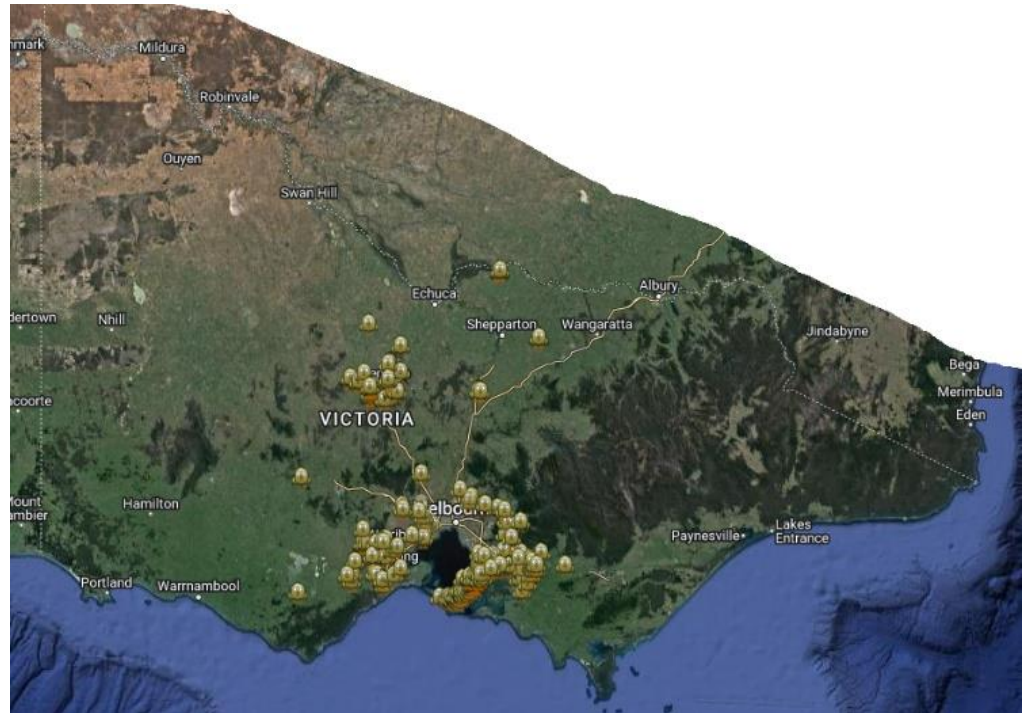
Chicken meat is the least carbon intensive form of animal meat protein production; and meat chicken production is a highly efficient user of feed and precious water, with a feed conversion ratio of around 1.75kg feed per kg of meat produced and water use (including for cooling) of around ¼ of that of beef.

Nearly 75% of meat chicken is sold as fresh product. Therefore, it cannot be transported for long periods and still retain a good shelf life for consumers because, with the exception of seafood, chicken is the most labile of all animal meats in terms of potential for spoilage.

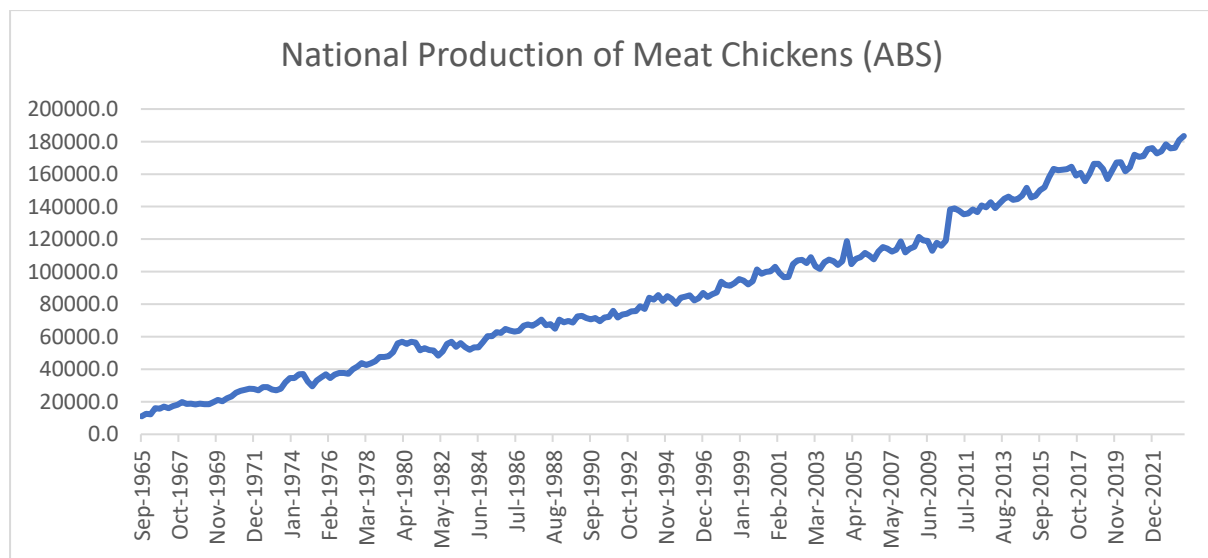
Victoria is a major producer of meat chickens, and meat chicken farms are generally located in close distance to processing plants for animal welfare reasons.

The map shows the location of meat chicken farms in Vic (Farm Transparency Project website) – note the proximity to Melbourne CBD.

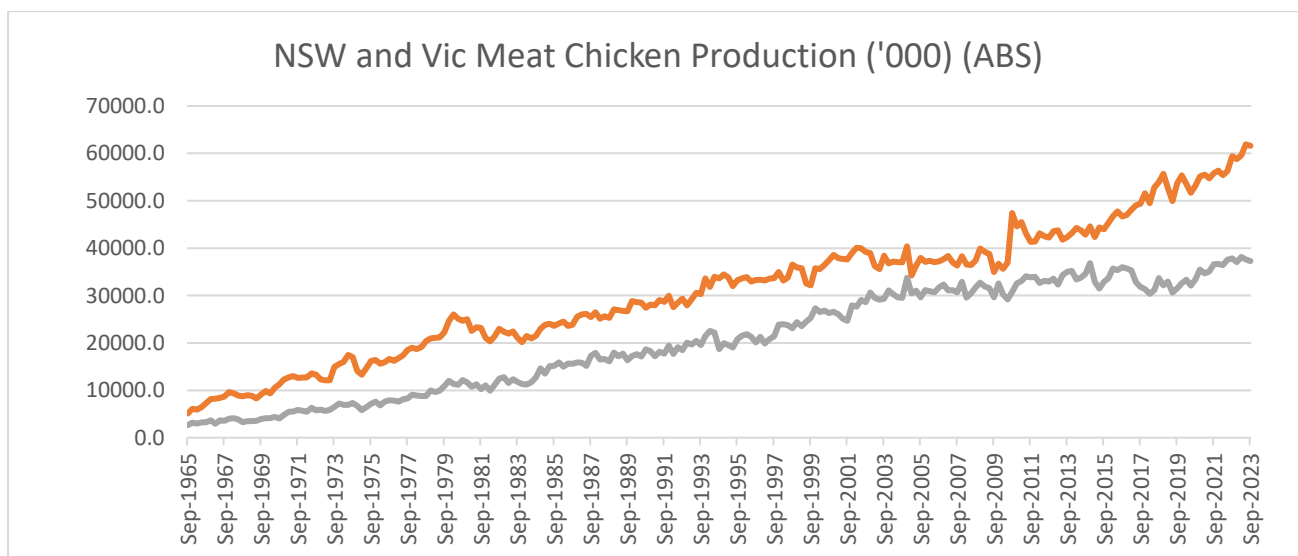
Note turkeys are not grown in Vic except for a tiny number of “niche” farms and are not represented on this map.



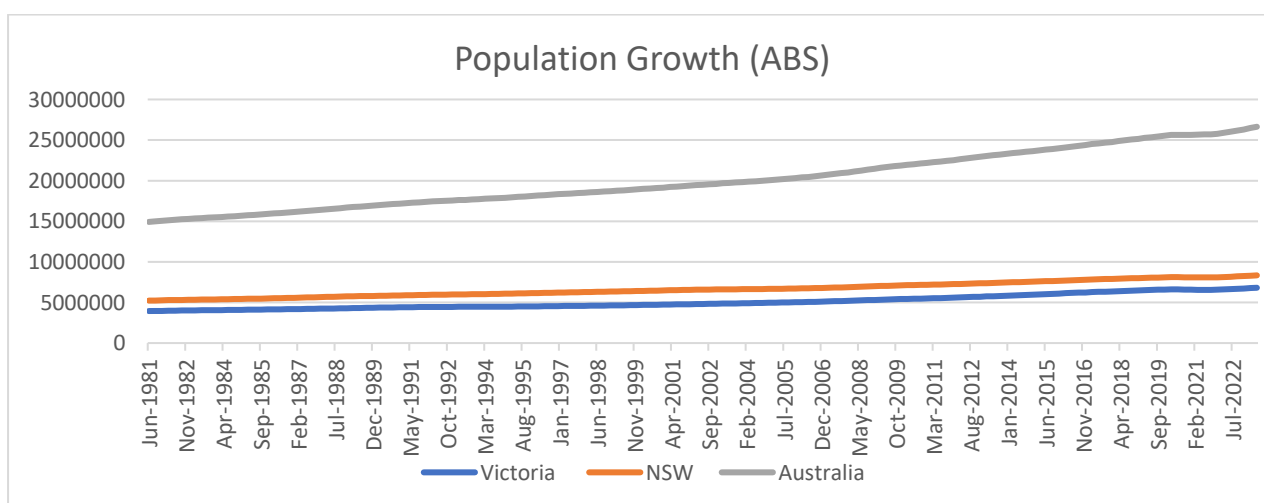
National Production of Meat Chickens has risen steadily with population – more than 97% of national production is consumed domestically (ACMF) and so production is an accurate reflection of Australian population growth and meat preferences. “Chicken production follows population” has been the norm until the last 5-10 years.



Victoria's chicken meat production growth (grey line) has been slower than NSW (orange line), even though population has been growing at approximately the same rate. This is because it is significantly easier to build a new farm in parts of NSW – and that gap is rapidly widening.

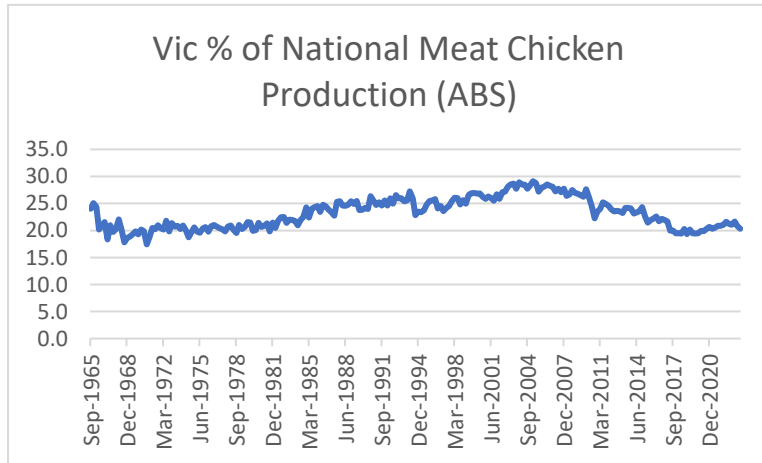


Human population growth curves illustrate that Vic food production has been largely keeping up with population growth to date, viz:



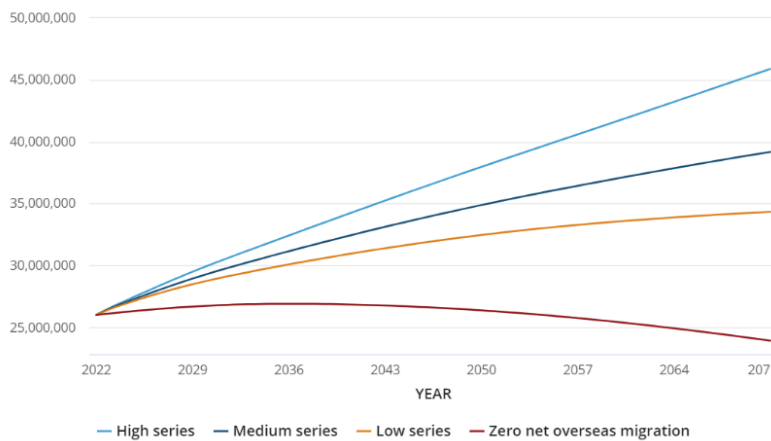
It is notable from the graphs above that NSW and Vic meat chicken farming is no longer quite matching population growth in both states. This is an illustration of constraints on Vic meat chicken farming growth that is likely to have longer term implications for food security in relation to meat chicken production in Vic.

Victoria's share of national chicken meat production is largely unchanged since the 1960's, but is now declining slowly even in the face of a rising population rate, for the reasons above.



The decline since 2009 is largely attributed to loss of farms from the Mornington Peninsula and Geelong areas, subdivision and retirement of those farmers, made up by increased density and throughput in remaining farms and some new building, largely in the Bendigo area.

Projected population, Australia

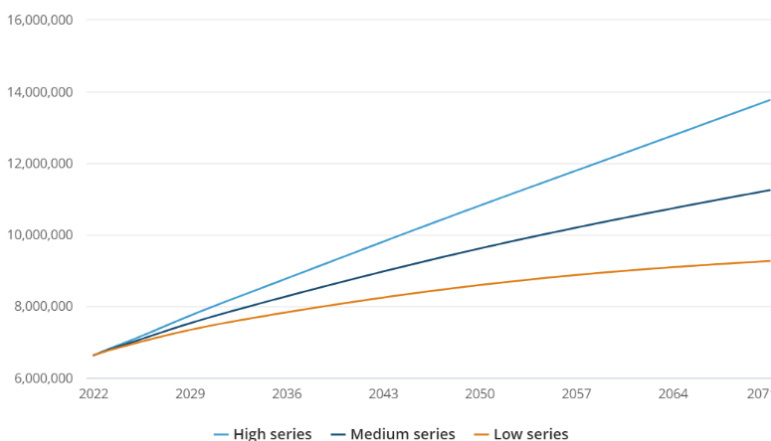


Looking at population projections, it is likely that Australia and therefore Victoria will continue to increase population at a rate which will be determined largely by the federal government, there being no practical difference between the two major parties on population policy.

On this basis, and noting the continued loss of agricultural land to population growth in Victoria, it is right to question

the longer term food security of Victorian meat chicken production.

Projected population, Victoria



**Victorian** population growth projection is at least as significant as that of Australia as a whole, and is the fastest growing state population in Australia in numeric terms. With Melbourne ranked as one of the "top 10 liveable cities" of the world this is not surprising, and Melbourne is not constrained by natural barriers to the extent of Sydney and Brisbane.

## SPECIFIC RESPONSES TO THE TERMS OF REFERENCE.

### 1. The impacts of urban sprawl and population growth on arable land and the farming industry in Victoria

Arable land in Australia is rare and precious with only 4% of the Australian land mass identified as arable ([World Bank](#)). That tiny % of arable land was first settled to produce food “on site” for the settlers, but with organic growth of built-up areas around these hubs and no planning considering soil quality; we now have the situation where that tiny % of Australian arable land is being covered by concrete slabs for housing.

There is a reason why Victorian meat chicken farms established in that tiny % area of high quality soils in Victoria: meat chickens (and their composted manure and bedding by-products) and horticulture have been intimately related except for the last 10-15 years, and even now a significant % of chicken farms also undertake concurrent horticulture or orcharding activities that feed the Victorian population.

Urban sprawl impacts include but are not limited to:

#### ***a) Amenity based complaints around odour, dust, noise, light and transport movements by new developments.***

Rural industries create different by-products to manufacturing, and for farmers these are normal and accepted. They include animal scent, feed dust, and noise and transport movements which may be at night for animal welfare reasons. In a similar manner, in urban environments there is the normal noise of traffic, human activity at night and odour of local restaurants and other establishments; but these are *accepted* by metropolitan dwellers.

In the meat chicken industry, the preferred time that birds are “picked up” for transport to slaughter is at night for animal welfare reasons. Birds are essentially torpid or asleep and do not panic when handlers that are not their recognised people come into the sheds. Water must be lifted for a short period prior to “pick up” which is better at night because the birds are not drinking when they are asleep – this is particularly important in hot weather. Transport at night is cooler and birds travel better, and there is less traffic and noise to frighten the birds *in transit*. This requires trained pick-up crews, truck movement, appropriate lighting and normal noise – all of which seem to offend urban dwellers and particularly those in urban encroachment areas. EPA or Council receives complaints and the farm is punished – even if they were present prior to the urban encroachment. Pick-up must be moved to “daylight pickup” in these circumstances, to the direct detriment of the bird’s welfare and worker safety.

When subdivision occurs, urban blocks are pushed up against farm fences. Planners have never considered wildlife or amenity corridors between farmland and residential as necessary for development. These farm by-products are new and strange to urban dwellers and they are happy to complain, nightly.

Sadly, there has not only been no protection of farmers by the EPA, but actually laws have been developed that are physically and environmentally impossible (like laws to “keep a smell on a property”). Farmers have been victimised by newcomers to the point that some

farms have closed, farmers have struggled with mental health issues and some have simply closed the farm and left it empty, which is the ultimate waste of food producing prime arable land.

**b) Biosecurity**

When urban development is pushed up against farm fences, the new occupants own dogs, cats, and backyard chickens, and displace native wildlife including ducks. Germs move readily across fencelines and wildlife relocate to farm land. This is critically important as ducks are carriers of significant disease of chickens, including Avian Influenza.

**c) Inability to properly dispose of dead birds, manure and bedding.**

Traditionally meat poultry farmers composted manure and bedding and used the very high quality compost fertiliser to grow vegetables and fruit for city markets. Because properly used compost has a distinctive (and not unpleasant) smell, urban encroachment has resulted in odour complaints so severe that horticultural activities using meat chicken by-products have been curtailed. In some cases composting is no longer occurring and “raw” by-product is being transported off-farm with concomitant risk to biosecurity and increased carbon emissions.

Similarly many older farms in areas where the aquifer levels were not high were permitted to bury small numbers of mortalities on-farm in a natural and biologically sustainable manner. Some composted mortalities with the bedding and litter to further improve the quality of the composted material as a fertiliser. After urban encroachment mortalities are now being trucked hundreds of miles, with concomitant disease risk and rapid increase in carbon emissions.

**d) Increased risk of animal activism and other inappropriate activity**

Farms that can be seen can be and frequently are attacked. Efficient, intensive farms that produce significant food per hectare are particularly at risk, regardless of the state of the farm in relation to animal welfare. Victoria has been a particular hotbed of animal activism, which has no relationship to genuine animal welfare organisations such as the RSPCA. Urban encroachment has made farms more visible, shared fences are easier to climb, and any genuine attempt to educate the newcomers is likely to be poisoned by activism’s agenda of eliminating all animal use (while so often activists paradoxically keep pet animals for their own entertainment).

Similarly peri-urban and early urban development provides ample quiet side-roads for hoon driving, shooting practice, bonfires or farm invasion, and the urban incursion increases the local population for whom these are viable forms of entertainment. All these noisy activities can frighten birds or even result in bird death.

**e) Road and infrastructure changes**

Sadly, new developments with their concrete slab houses and run-off rooves, magnificently paved roads, drains and footpaths deposit their urban load onto country roads that were never built for the new level of traffic. Water and drainage infrastructure built for country or peri-urban living cannot cope with the load from new developments. Land coverage with concrete slabs and roads can change drainage and water tables, cause bogging, or alter streams— changing the quantities of water available and in some cases changing the quality of water that the livestock drink.

Moreover, increased density may result in reduction in aquifer levels, particularly for lifestyle developments, reducing water available for stock.

**f) *Fragmentation***

Urban encroachment is not uniform. Plots of land in the middle of farm land may be sold and subdivided, resulting in an urban “island” in a farmland area – particularly in the early stages of urbanisation. Farmers may lose the ability to communicate and work closely for the common good, some may be victimised by complaints over EPA issues while others are not. Some wish to continue to provide food for Victorians while others sell their farms as “superannuation” to developers who have every incentive to force farmers out. In the absence of any logical, long term planning to protect agricultural land, it’s a free-for-all, particularly in Victoria where this arable land is right in the development corridors.

**g) *Labour availability***

In spite of a higher number of persons of working age, urban encroachment tends to bring with it a higher % of “clean hands” workers – middle class office, professional and knowledge workers – and perhaps paradoxically labour availability for the production of food decreases. Already a problem right across Australia, the “gentrification” associated with urbanisation results in exacerbation of the current farm labour shortage.

**h) *Dramatically increased “chook miles”***

“Food miles” is a term widely used to identify how far food travels before it reaches the consumer. The advantage of low “food miles” is reduced carbon emissions, better freshness, lower levels of bacterial contamination due to reduced storage time prior to reaching the supermarket and more efficient use of resources (natural and economic). Encroaching urbanisation immediately increases “chook miles” by forcing farmers to move further from processing plants and from the consumer – this is a particular problem for diversified chicken meat/horticultural businesses who may have also had a thriving local market for their horticultural produce. Truck movements also significantly increase, particularly when combined with having to move bedding/manure rather than composting it and using it on-site.

**i) *Diminished farm investment***

We consistently identify farms who believe that urbanisation may encroach immediately ceasing farm investment, sometimes 20-30 years in advance of rezoning and particularly if rezoning is expected but is delayed eg by infrastructure development. This results in poorer quality farms with no investment in emissions management, reduction in diversification, and loss of community.

**j) *Further decoupling of food production from food consumers***

Consumers have become decoupled from where their food comes from. From the days of slaughtering the backyard chicken and roasting it on a Sunday with vegetables grown in the composted manure/bedding; many children in Australia genuinely do not know how food arrives at the table other than from a plastic display pack in the supermarket.

As urban encroachment pushes farmers further from city centres, that “Sunday drive” past the diversified meat chicken/horticultural farm disappears, and consumers have less understanding of normal agricultural production. As a result, when those same consumers buy their brick veneer 450m<sup>2</sup> block on newly developed high quality arable farm land, they



neither realise that food producing land has been lost forever nor are prepared to tolerate normal agricultural by-products.

The Mornington Peninsula is probably the most significant example in Australia of all these negative effects or urban encroachment on food supply. Traditionally rural or peri-urban with a good % of dirt roads and small holdings, with some of the best land in Australia and beautiful views and well connected with both the city and broadacre livestock areas; this highly productive food hub has been eroded first by lifestyle blocks and now by dense urbanisation. In essence, we are replacing the food production with the food eaters. Sadly, concrete has a depressingly poor nutritional value and while the issue hasn't been noticeable until now due to increasingly efficient farming methods, the sudden rapid and ongoing rise in population finally has planners and farmers questioning longer term food security. Planning for food security is a long term process that may look like overkill now, but the rewards will be reaped well into the future. Urbanisation is irreversible.

ACGC congratulates the Vic Government as the only government to have considered this issue so far, but it also one of the most affected.

## **2. The use of planning controls to protect agricultural land in green wedge and peri-urban areas**

To our knowledge, there have been NO planning controls that genuinely protect agricultural land, in green wedge/peri-urban or anywhere else.

Moreover, there is a form of limbo where farmers and the community are not notified of future planning in many cases, resulting in rumour and investment guesswork. Peri-urban farmers consistently report being harassed by developers to sell, have no knowledge of what the zoning future holds, and have no "right to farm" in any case. They report that logged native forests "have better protection" than they have, in spite of producing Australia's most popular, least carbon emitting and least-cost animal meat protein.

Councils have a fragmented and in many cases hostile approach to farmers and farming, including normal rural by-products. "Green wedge" is often used by Councils to describe wildlife corridors and not farmland. Moreover, farms must re-invest to survive and increase the food production needed by a hungry population, and Councils consistently put barriers in the way of normal farm development including new or replacement shedding, increased shed density, or even change of agricultural use. The recent case of the Mt Alexander Shire Council, while it was specific to a horse farming business, is characteristic of the barriers apparently randomly put up by some Councils to stop normal agricultural business – noting that modern farming business often includes diversification into "service" business activities. We have seen similar idiocy in EPA fining farming businesses for not keeping "odour"[normal agricultural smells] inside their boundary – something that is patently and physically impossible.

Farmers would truly welcome foresight and consistent planning across the whole state; "Agricultural" zoning similar to France or the UK; and an EPA that respects and understands "right to farm" with normal farm by-products and regulates quantity/severity rather than identity.

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### **3. The resilience of the Victorian food system, including the production of food, its transportation and sale.**

The Victorian food system has been becoming systematically and measurably less resilient over at least the last 20 years, but increasingly in the last decade, due to:

- urban encroachment on prime agricultural land diminishing the overall ability to produce food,
- climate change increasing the number of days per year that may result in bird death due to heatstroke, reducing production,
- climate change increasing the likelihood and severity of storms and other natural disasters that can halt production including for an entire season,
- rapid population rise unaccompanied by ongoing rapid rise in volume of farm production (due to loss of prime agricultural land, poor planning and poor regulation),
- increased “chook miles” and other food miles resulting in increased risk of food damage or loss in transport,
- increased “chook miles” resulting in higher carbon emissions for both the food products and management of the by-products of farming,
- increased “barrier” regulation (including the puerile) stopping or significantly inhibiting farms from reinvesting for greater food production or increased animal welfare, or changing to more productive operations, or for better by-product management,
- increased regulatory activity resulting in farmers being penalised for what are normal and usual by-products that are as harmless to human health as those by-products found in the city,
- rapidly increasing Council and other rates and charges, that in concert with the above, are increasingly making farming unviable,
- loss of, and failure of government to support farm labour (including farm labour training) in agriculture generally and the meat chicken industry in particular,
- loss of, and eternal “catch up” funding without future consideration, of road, rail and water infrastructure
- failure of any current or past state government to enact “right to farm” legislation
- failure of any current or past state or federal government to protect arable land, including from urban expansion, but also including high tension power lines (no farming allowed beneath or in exclusion zones), mining and other encroachments,
- failure of any current or past state government to develop established agricultural areas with no change to zoning over time,



- failure of any current or past state governments to rein in EPA laws, Council regulation and other instruments that fail to recognise normal farming by-products and restrict farm investment.
- the lack of protection for farming for food production has resulted in a cultural war against farmers generally and efficient, high intensity farmers in particular, in some cases actively assisted by Councils and the EPA.

## CONCLUSION

Australia is a large country with only 4% arable farming land. Australian farmers do a magnificent job of turning non-arable land into food by way of grazing and some grain cropping industries. Because of this, it has been easy for governments and others to think that activities which reduce access to arable farming land “don’t matter” because Australia has a lot of it. This is patently and completely untrue.

It is by now apparent that while Australia remains a net exporter of food, *perishable* food supply in Australia including chicken meat production is under threat in the medium-longer term and food security will be the price. Managing this issue requires enlightened and long term decision making now, something not common in a 4-year election cycle.

ACGC recommendations include:

- ✓ Establishment of “right to farm” legislation with concomitant agricultural zoning to give farmers surety of tenure and ability to invest,
- ✓ Genuine commitment to maintaining arable land for food production now and into the future,
- ✓ Development of controls over Councils and EPA which includes repeal of some elements of current laws and consultative development of new ones as part of state planning for agricultural enterprises,
- ✓ Oversight and removal of Council restrictions on use of agricultural land for food production, which may include an appellant court against “right to farm” legislation,
- ✓ State government providing further investment in the state's road and freight infrastructure
- ✓ Support of, and investment in, training courses for agricultural workers.

Please feel free to contact this office at any time if you have further questions.

Yours Faithfully

*(by email)*

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