

Food policy in Australia

The food system

Food System Horizons is helping governments across Australia explore the benefits of more coherent and interconnected approaches to food policy.

Interactions between components of food systems can make it difficult to define the goals of food policy, establish who is affected by changes in policy and manage the uncertainties surrounding outcomes.

The broad scope of food systems from inputs (such as fertiliser) and natural resources (such as soils) through to human health can mean that food policy can be directly or indirectly linked to most other major areas of policy (see Box 1). Governments can act directly on components of the food system, or less directly via interactions with corporate and industry policy. The diffuse nature of the food system, coupled with the lack of coordinated food portfolios, makes it difficult to map food policy interactions across Australia’s three tiers of government.

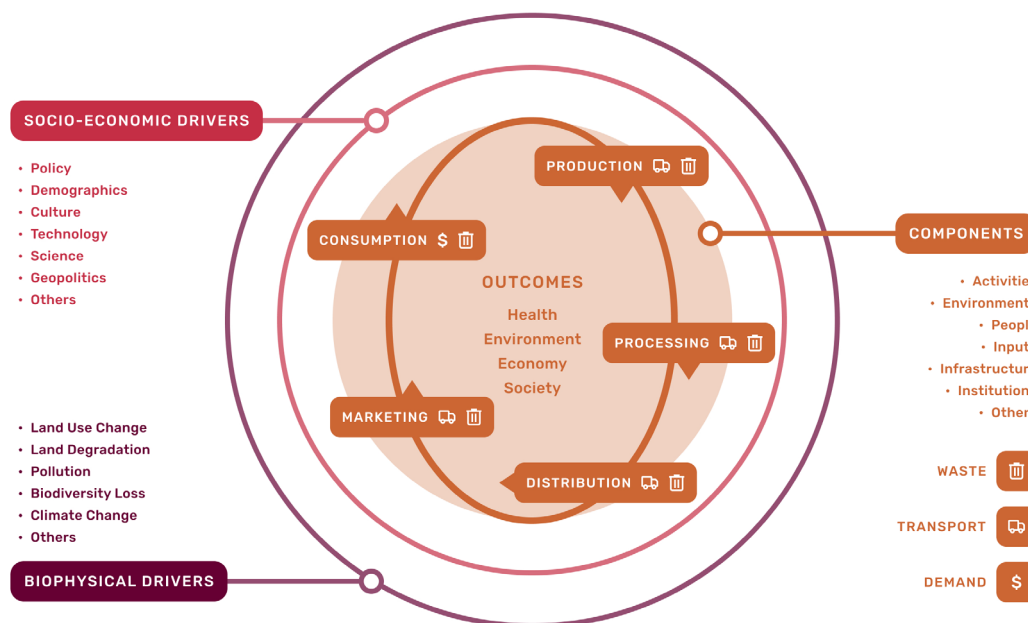


Figure 1 The food system showing individual components (e.g., production), outcomes and drivers.

Federal Government

In Australia, federal and state governments have concurrent powers to create laws and policy that often require cooperation and broader policy alignment to create nested layers of authority and responsibility.

Australia’s Federal Government plays a leading role in managing food systems and ensuring the continuity and sustainability of Australia’s food supply. This involves representing Australia’s interests through international forums, agreements, and treaties. Key among these are trade and market access, import and export controls, and food safety standards and regulation. The Federal Government is responsible for national coordination of

research and development, biosecurity, nutrition policies and guidelines, and emergency response capability to maintain food supply.

The Federal Government also sets standards for fair trading in food-related markets via the *Competition and Consumer Act 2010* (Cwlth) and industry codes of conduct administered by the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission.

The Federal Government sets policy in other areas that are part of food systems but often fall outside of the portfolios responsible for food and agriculture. These include areas such as housing, social welfare, environmental policies, infrastructure, labour relations and education (see Box 1).

Australia's Federal Government provides funding to state governments for the implementation of policies and programs relating to food such as drought relief, water management, biosecurity initiatives and natural resource management programs such as the Reef 2050 Plan for protecting the Great Barrier Reef.

Box 1

Food policy can be complicated

A [parliamentary inquiry released in November 2023](#) revealed the potential complexity of food policy. It found that an increasing number of Australians are food insecure, raising concerns about the health of Australia's food system. Multiple causes of food insecurity were identified in the report including:

Increases in the cost of housing and energy have reduced the amount of household income available to spend on food.

The war in Ukraine has reduced global grain supply leading to increased prices.

Increases in fuel and energy prices have driven up costs across the supply chain including fertiliser, processing, and freight.

Inadequate infrastructure and extreme weather such as droughts and floods exacerbate access for remote communities.

These drivers demonstrate how food security, and the general health of food systems, rely on their links with many other systems, and the feedback effects generated between these systems. Policymaking to address these diverse issues in the Australian context does not sit within a single portfolio or under a single tier of government.

State and Territory Governments

State and territory governments have responsibility for implementing Federal Government policies alongside policies of their own. For example, food safety has historically been a primary focus of food policy for Australia's state and territory governments. While policy relating to food standards and labelling is set through Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ), a federal statutory authority, states and territories create their own legislation for food handling, storage, labelling and hygiene standards, however, these generally conform to FSANZ guidelines.

Over recent decades a number of policies have emerged supporting nutritional standards in public institutions and for addressing food waste via strategies working towards a more circular economy.

As with the Federal Government, many aspects of state food policy span multiple portfolios and departments. For example, the Queensland Government is seeking to improve food security in northern Queensland and the Torres Strait via the *Gather + Grow 2023–2032 Queensland Remote Food Security Strategy*¹. This strategy brings together the departments of Health; Housing; Transport and Main Roads, Agriculture and Fisheries; as well as the department of Treaty, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships, Communities, and the Arts.

Local Government

Local governments carry much of the responsibility for the day-to-day monitoring of food safety and management of waste. They also work with federal and state governments to design and implement local food programs, food education campaigns, appropriate planning and zoning of land uses and waste management.

The University of Sydney maintains a database of local government policy across Australia, more than 7000 of which referred to food, in February 2024.

Towards greater coordination

Food System Horizons is helping governments explore ways of complementing existing arrangements to meet increasingly complex sustainability and social goals. These efforts are being guided by systems thinking and collaboration between departments, and policies and programs that have been successful in the past².

The complex nature of Australia's food system and the distribution of policy responsibilities across three tiers of government, means that cooperation is needed to make improvements and solve problems effectively. For example, costs of living in relation to housing and energy have reduced discretionary spending on food, and this has been linked to poorer dietary choices³. Addressing this kind of issue is likely to require input from diverse departments, which for food-housing could include:

- The Department of Social Services (housing)
- The Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (energy prices)
- The Department of Health and Aged Care (health outcomes linked to poor diets)
- State and local governments to implement actions (food regulation).

Health and Wellbeing Queensland offers a recent example of coordinated policymaking at state and local level that cuts across different state government departments. A challenge is developing processes to identify shared policy objectives while developing coherent policy options across the food system.

Australian governments have a range of mechanisms for coordinating policy between tiers of government including ministerial councils. There is currently no dedicated institutional mechanism for building coherent food policy between jurisdictions or portfolios across Australian governments. A national food systems strategy is one option that could assist with cross-government coordination, providing a common framework to guide policy development, consultation, risk management and impact assessment. Foreshadowing this, a recent inquiry by the Standing Committee on Agriculture of the Australian Parliament recommended the appointment of a federal Minister for Food, and the development of a national food plan.

References and further reading

- 1 Health and Wellbeing Queensland. **GATHER + GROW: Making healthy food and drinks accessible in remote Queensland** (2020).
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- 3 Lewis, M., McNaughton, S. A., Rychetnik, L., Chatfield, M. D., & Lee, A. J. Dietary Intake, Cost, and Affordability by Socioeconomic Group in Australia. *Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health* **18**(24), 13315 (2021).
- 4 Commonwealth of Australia. **Australian Food Story: Feeding the Nation and Beyond** (2023).
- 5 Naudiyal, P., Reeve, B., Jones, A. & McDonald, S. Food policy in Australia: The role of different Federal Government organisations. The University of Sydney, Sydney, New South Wales (2021).
- 6 Reeve B, Carrad A, Rose N, Charlton K & Aguirre-Bielschowsky I. **Australian Local Food System Policy Database** (2021).



Food System Horizons – Catalysing a sustainable, nutritious, and equitable food system future
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