

Transforming the Public Plate



A Menu of Options for Public Food Procurement That Nourishes People, Place and Planet

Glossary of Terms

Anchor Institutions – Large, stable organisations (hospitals, universities, schools, aged care facilities) with significant purchasing power that can influence local food systems through their procurement practices.

Connection Infrastructure – Systems, networks, and intermediaries that facilitate relationships and transactions between food producers, processors, distributors, and institutional buyers.

Food Security – A state where all people have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets dietary needs. Includes six dimensions: availability, access, stability, utilisation, sustainability, and agency.

Food Systems – The entire range of actors and interlinked activities involved in production, aggregation, processing, distribution, consumption and disposal of food products, and the broader environments in which they operate.

Indigenous Food Sovereignty – Indigenous peoples' right to define, control, and protect their own food systems, including traditional foods, farming practices, and food-related knowledge.

Leverage Points – Strategic places in a system where a small intervention can produce significant, lasting changes with disproportionate impact.

Local Procurement – Sourcing food from nearby or regional producers, typically defined by geographic proximity (such as bioregions) or state/territory boundaries.

Planetary Health Diet – Eating pattern developed by the EAT-Lancet Commission emphasising plant-based foods (fruits, vegetables, wholegrains, legumes, nuts) with minimal animal-source foods to support both human health and environmental sustainability.

Public Food Procurement – Government spending (direct or indirect) on food for publicly-funded institutions and programs including hospitals, schools, aged care, prisons, childcare, and defense.

Sustainable Agriculture – Farming practices that restore and enhance ecosystem health, prioritising soil health, biodiversity, and carbon sequestration while producing food.

Social Procurement – Purchasing practices that deliver economic, social and environmental benefits beyond the goods and services being procured, such as supporting Indigenous businesses, SMEs, and local employment.

Sustainable Food Procurement – Procurement approaches considering what food is purchased (healthy, local), where it comes from (including diverse producers), and how it is produced (climate and biodiversity protective production systems).

Sustainable Healthy Diets – Eating patterns promoting health and wellbeing with low environmental impact that are accessible, affordable, safe, equitable, and culturally acceptable.



The Project Team



Leah Galvin

PROJECT LEAD

Churchill Fellow, Leah Galvin Consulting

[LinkedIn](#)



Emma-Kate Rose

PROJECT MANAGER

Co-CEO, Food Connect Foundation

[LinkedIn](#)



Dr Stephanie Godrich

POLICY LEAD

Senior Lecturer, Public Health (Nutrition), Edith Cowan University

[LinkedIn](#)



Dheepa Jeyapalan

DESIGN & ANALYSIS LEAD

Lead Convenor, Food Systems, Regen Melbourne

[LinkedIn](#)



Dr Joanna Horton

MAPPING LEAD

Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Centre for Policy Futures, University of Queensland

[LinkedIn](#)



Dr Rachel Carey

PEER REVIEWER & PROJECT ADVISOR

Senior Lecturer, Food Systems, University of Melbourne

[LinkedIn](#)



Holley Jones

PEER REVIEWER

Public Health Nutritionist, Nutrition and Climate Policy

[LinkedIn](#)



About this Report

This report is designed as both a practical evidence base and a call to action for those shaping Australia's food system. It is for policy makers across all levels of government, sustainable food system allies, investors, food system actors, and partners from the paddock to the food service kitchen and community. It provides insights, data, and stories that demonstrate what's possible when procurement, policy, and partnerships align toward a more sustainable, resilient, and equitable food future.

We invite readers to use this report as a springboard for collaboration and investment: to start conversations with potential partners, inform new strategies and funding programs, and strengthen existing implementation approaches. It offers:

- A baseline for action,
- A snapshot of opportunities, challenges, and our modest progress,
- Examples and mechanisms for success from an international scan, and
- Highlights of where and how targeted investment and effort can deliver real system-wide change.

Our goal is to inspire and equip decision-makers to embed sustainable food procurement within their everyday work, their strategies, their policies, their goals/targets and their budgets. In Australia the momentum, goodwill, and interest already exist. We are ready. What's needed now is investment in coordinated, courageous action.

The vision is clear and optimistic: we have the people and momentum to act now. This report offers a practical foundation for collaboration – helping policymakers, funders, and food system actors turn goodwill into coordinated, lasting change.

WHAT IS SUSTAINABLE PUBLIC FOOD PROCUREMENT?



Public food procurement – the money the government spends directly or indirectly on food for institutions and programs – has substantial potential to drive positive changes across our regional and state food systems. By using a values-based approach and giving more strategic consideration to the impacts of public spending, food procurement can influence food systems resilience and sustainability. Public procurement can create public good by considering:

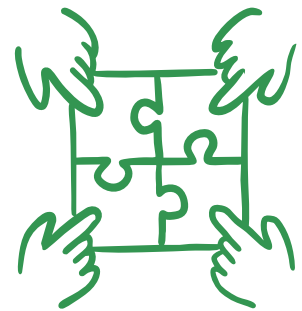
- What food is purchased and consumed (e.g. healthy and local),
- Where it is coming from (e.g. including all scales of producers, Indigenous businesses and women’s enterprises), and
- How it is produced (e.g. production systems that offer environmental protections).¹

The 2025 Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)² report emphasises the urgent need to transform food systems in order to address persistent hunger, malnutrition, environmental degradation, and inequitable access to healthy foods. Current systems are failing to deliver on multiple fronts: they contribute to climate change, biodiversity loss, and unsustainable resource use, while leaving large populations food insecure. Public food procurement represents a significant and untapped opportunity to shift towards more sustainable practices.

Team reflections

This report represents the first collaboration of a national team of food systems experts across multiple organisations exploring public food procurement. The team brings together high-level skills, networks, and insights from across Australia’s food system, united around a shared goal: to demonstrate that a sustainable approach to public food procurement is not only doable but essential.

Through this rapid 10-week project, the team uncovered evidence of success from inspiring global examples and the emerging and/ or untapped opportunities in Australia. We were struck by how far other countries have advanced comparatively, through embedding and investing in sustainability, health, and local economic goals using coherent policy and procurement practices. We now understand how much potential exists for these approaches to be adapted and contextualised in Australia.



The process

This project, and this report that emerged from it, was a truly collaborative effort. Each team member took responsibility for researching and drafting a specific section, drawing on their expertise and helping join the dots by tapping into their networks from across Australia’s food system. We met weekly during the research phase to share insights, test ideas, and troubleshoot challenges, creating a dynamic space for learning and collective sensemaking.

Along the way, we invited additional contributors to share their expertise and showcase their existing work. We also met and interviewed practitioners and policymakers from different sectors. We have captured these diverse voices to build momentum, and ensure the recommendations are grounded, actionable, and nationally relevant. This process establishes the report as authoritative, credible and practical.



Executive Summary

Purpose and Ambition

Public food procurement stands as one of the most powerful, yet chronically under-utilised, policy levers available to Australian governments. Every day, publicly funded institutions – hospitals, residential aged care facilities, long day care, prisons, schools, defence facilities and community food programs – purchase and serve food to millions of Australians. These are not simply transactions. Collectively, these purchasing decisions shape production systems, supply chains, diets, livelihoods and environmental outcomes. They determine who thrives within our food system and who is left behind.

Transforming the Public Plate is an Australian first. It provides the most comprehensive national picture to date of public food procurement – mapping its scale, structure, constraints and transformative potential. Drawing on expenditure analysis, policy research, procurement practice, community perspectives, international evidence and scenario modelling, this report demonstrates that sustainable public food procurement is both feasible and achievable within existing government systems. What it requires is coordinated action and sustained investment to bridge the gap between intent and impact.

Why This Work Matters

This report is guided by an integrated vision of what sustainable public food procurement can achieve. It is not an end in itself, but a powerful mechanism to deliver tangible public value:

- Improving health and nutrition through greater access to fresh, healthy, culturally appropriate food in public settings
- Strengthening food security across all six dimensions – availability, access, stability, utilisation, sustainability and agency – while building resilience against future food-related shocks
- Reducing environmental and climate impacts across the food system, including emissions and biodiversity loss
- Supporting resilient regional and local economies, from farmers and processors to social enterprises and small businesses
- Advancing equity and inclusion, including First Nations food sovereignty, meaningful community participation and fair livelihoods throughout the supply chain
- Delivering long-term value for public expenditure by recognising and avoiding the hidden health, environmental and economic costs that burden future generations

These goals align closely with emerging national priorities, including *Feeding Australia: A National Food Security Strategy*, national nutrition and preventive health agendas, climate commitments and regional development objectives.

The Case for Urgent Action

Australia's current food system delivers abundance for some, but extracts a steep and largely invisible price from health, equity, the environment and the economy. The evidence is stark:

- The food system contributes approximately one-third of Australia's greenhouse gas emissions
- An estimated \$274 billion per year in hidden health, environmental and economic costs
- 1.3 million households experiencing food insecurity
- Fewer than 10% of Australian adults and children consuming adequate vegetables
- 32% of vegetable growers actively considering leaving the industry

Public food procurement alone will not resolve these crises. Yet as a strategic leverage point, even modest changes in procurement criteria and practice can trigger disproportionately large, system-wide transformations over time.

What This Report Delivers

The report makes four foundational contributions to understanding and action:



Mapping the national food procurement landscape – revealing who buys food, under what arrangements, and at what value, establishing a baseline for transparency, accountability and reform.



Identifying constraints and opportunities – examining the procurement rules, contract structures, renewal cycles and policy settings that shape current practice, while exposing barriers to First Nations and regional participation and pathways for meaningful change.



Modelling scenarios for transformation – testing outcomes across a spectrum from incremental improvement to transformative approaches aligned with health, sustainability and economic development goals.



Charting clear pathways to action – translating evidence into practical, implementable steps that governments, institutions and funders can take immediately.

The National Food Procurement Landscape

For the first time, this project has quantified the national value of publicly funded food procurement across major institutional settings. Australian governments spend, directly or indirectly, \$2.14 billion per year on food procurement:

- Residential aged care: \$1.07 billion
- Public hospitals: \$345 million
- Long day care: \$332 million
- Correctional facilities: \$158 million
- Defence: \$78 million
- Meals on Wheels: \$65 million
- Residential care (mental health and homelessness): \$58 million
- TAFE hospitality training: \$15 million
- School meals: \$4 million
- Antarctic bases: \$3 million

This represents something rare and valuable: stable, predictable demand. It is a powerful market signal capable of enabling farmers, processors and suppliers to invest confidently in healthier, more sustainable and more resilient food systems.

Understanding the Barriers and Possibilities

The obstacles to sustainable public food procurement are structural rather than technical:

- Fragmented responsibilities scattered across portfolios and levels of government
- Procurement systems designed narrowly for compliance and short-term cost efficiency
- Limited visibility into total food expenditure and its broader impacts
- Chronic under-investment in the infrastructure that connects producers, processors and institutions and market domination by extractive large multinationals
- Short funding and policy cycles that actively discourage long-term transformation

Yet beneath these structural constraints lies encouraging signals. There is demonstrated, strong public support from diverse communities, stakeholders and decision makers. This issue resonates because it offers a rare opportunity to address multiple crises – health, environment, economy, equity – through coordinated action.



Envisioning Transformation: What the Modelling Shows

Transformation also requires a shift in collective imagination. Australia has developed a cultural acceptance of institutional food as inherently poor quality, failing to recognise the role these settings could play in building a more nourishing food system. Many countries have successfully challenged this assumption, demonstrating that change is both possible and worthwhile. Australia needs a similar mindset shift.

The lack of political ambition in this space means Australia is falling significantly behind. While other high-income countries – and many low- and middle-income nations – have strategically deployed public food procurement for up to two decades, Australia has barely begun. Scenario modelling from international learnings reveals the substantial potential of sustainable public food procurement in Australia to:

- Increase consumption of vegetables, fruits and minimally processed whole foods across institutional settings
- Amplify economic multiplier effects for farming communities, regional economies and local food systems
- Enable farmers to transition toward regenerative practices with reduced risk, lowering the environmental footprint of our food system
- Elevate food quality and restore dignity to institutional dining
- Reduce long-term costs to institutions and the broader system by avoiding future health and environmental harms

Critically, these outcomes emerge not from isolated pilot projects, but through policy alignment, clear targets, coordination infrastructure and sustained investment. Australia possesses the institutional capability to adapt and implement these approaches across our federal, state and local government systems.



Goals and Principles to Guide the Path Forward

Throughout its analysis and recommendations, this report applies a consistent framework for sustainable public food procurement in Australia.

Drawing on international experience, the goals should be pursued collectively, without hierarchy:

- Ensure access to nutritious food for all Australians in institutional settings
- Improve biodiversity and reduce climate impacts across the food system
- Prioritise local procurement and regional economic development to build resilient communities

These goals must be pursued through approaches grounded in core values:

- Place and context specific – recognising that solutions must respond to local conditions, cultures and capacities
- Supportive of First Nations food sovereignty – centring Indigenous knowledge, rights and self-determination
- Prioritising community agency – ensuring those most affected have genuine voice and power in shaping food systems
- Embedding equity and justice – addressing historical and structural inequities throughout the supply chain

Together, these principles provide a practical and ethical framework for embedding sustainability into everyday procurement decisions, transforming how governments use their purchasing power to nourish people, strengthen communities and protect the living systems on which we all depend.

Pathways to Action

Through deep engagement with sustainable food procurement practice - studying international precedents while designing for Australia's unique context, diverse regions and complex governance landscape this report identifies five mutually reinforcing pathways to make transformation a reality.



1. Leadership

Sustainable public food procurement requires visible, sustained leadership across governments, institutions and regions, working collaboratively. International best practice approach includes establishing a non profit and independent coordinating entity with authority, resources and mandate to drive alignment, share knowledge and accelerate progress.



2. Coordination and Capacity Building

Building the infrastructure that connects knowledge, people and supply chains. This includes establishing value-chain coordination mechanisms that link farmers to processors to institutions. It requires communities of practice across institutional settings, building collective understanding and shared learning. It demands investment in food systems literacy across procurement actors and the development of compelling narratives that capture public imagination and political will.



3. Governance and Partnerships

Effective governance must span sectors, government departments and all levels of government – federal, state and local. It requires formal structures for cross-portfolio collaboration and clear accountabilities. Critically, it must embed Indigenous leadership and support First Nations food sovereignty.



4. Measurable Action Coupled with Monitoring

This pathway requires co-designed targets, criteria and guidelines developed with institutions, producers and communities. This includes supportive regulation, transparent monitoring systems and applied research partnerships that track progress, identify what works and build the evidence base for continued improvement and investment.



5. Investment and Time

Sustained investment matched to short, medium and long-term goals requires three complementary capital sources working in concert. Governments deliver through policy, regulation and strategic grants that de-risk transitions. Philanthropic funding plays a catalytic role unlocking coordination, testing innovation and achieving scale. Impact investment bridges the gap by financing the physical infrastructure - on-farm and/or regional food hubs, processing facilities, cold storage and distribution networks - that sustainable procurement depends upon, providing patient capital that accepts modest returns in exchange for measurable social and environmental outcomes.

Pursued together, these five pathways create the conditions for sustainable public food procurement to move Australia from lagging behind to leading – delivering profound benefits for the health and livelihoods of our communities and the living systems that sustain us all.



Good Food Purchasing Australia

About Good Food Purchasing Australia (GFPA)

Good Food Purchasing Australia (GFPA) is a newly formed, action-oriented initiative that connects policy, research and practice to transform how Australian governments source and purchase food. GFPA was established as a direct response to the findings of this report, commissioned by the Macdoch Foundation and produced by a national team of food systems researchers and practitioners. GFPA will bring together experts across health, agriculture, environment, procurement and community wellbeing to advocate for a smarter, fairer and more sustainable food system. It works closely with communities, enterprises, farmers and institutional actors who are driving better food procurement in regions and cities across Australia.

For more information visit

www.goodfoodpurchasingaustralia.com.au

Executive Summary

Background—For the first time, we have mapped public food procurement in Australia—across hospitals, aged care, schools, corrections, long day care, defence and other major public institutions. Each year these institutions purchase enormous volumes of food—shaping production patterns, supply chains, nutrition, our health, environmental outcomes, and regional economies. Beyond the data we have captured diverse voices and perspectives to build momentum, and ensure the recommendations are grounded, actionable, and nationally relevant. This process establishes the report as authoritative, credible and practical.







What did we do?

-  **Mapped the National Landscape**
Identify who buys what, it's \$ value, and under what arrangements.
-  **Revealed Constraints & Opportunities**
Policy gaps in Australia and international solutions; contract practices and timelines; equity considerations, and First Nations perspectives.
-  **Developed evidence-based change scenarios**
Model impacts from "Business as Usual+" through to transformative procurement adopting targets on sustainability, health and nutrition, and economic outcomes.
-  **Set a Pathway for Action**
Provide practical and proven high-impact steps for governments, policymakers, and investors to act now.

What is the size of the opportunity?

 **\$2.13B**

Our best estimate is that annually Australian governments spend \$2,137,315,595 per year on the procurement of food

	Residential Aged Care	\$1,074,788,792
	Hospitals	\$344,919,324
	Prisons	\$157,608,112
	Defence	\$77,842,758
	Long day care	\$331,820,152
	Others.....	\$150, 336, 457

The Food System Sustainability Challenges



There are significant hidden costs in our food system


ENVIRONMENT \$225 billion **HEALTH** \$49 billion

Our food system contributes 1/3 of our emissions

 **1.3 million** households are food insecure








<10%  of Australian adults and children eat enough vegetables

2.8%  Our food system circularity rate is only 2.8%

~1/3  of vegetable growers are considering leaving their farms

There is currently insufficient investment in connection infrastructure and supportive policy to drive action

Our scenarios and policy solutions show that sustainable food procurement can:

-  Decrease food systems emissions
-  Increase vegetable and plant consumption
-  Increase food freshness and decrease waste
-  Increase local sourcing
-  Increase the multiplier effect in regional economies
-  Allow farmers to derisk the transition to more regenerative production methods
-  Reduce institutional costs

The Menu for success

Leadership

- Across the food system and governments
- In institutions
- In our regions, towns and cities
- Establish a new coordinating entity



Investment and time

- Set short, medium and long term goals
- There is no quick fix but over time the impacts accumulate and are transforming



Coordination & capability building through connection infrastructure to deliver

- Value chain coordination and support connecting producers/processors to buyers and kitchens in institutions
- Communities of practice for learning and sharing
- Food systems literacy including public campaigns



Governance & partnerships

- Cross-sectoral, across government, and including food system actors and civil society—at the level of action—regional, state and Commonwealth
- Include First Nations representatives and food sovereignty acknowledgment
- Expand food systems literacy knowledge



Measurable action coupled with monitoring

- Codesign and embed—targets, criteria, guidelines
- Regular monitoring of policy, practice and food systems impacts
- Include academics as partners in applied research



Visualising a regional demonstration model

