

Summary

Australia's fresh produce sector plays an important economic and social role in our nation's health and prosperity. This includes as a major employer and economic driver of regional communities, through the affordable and regular supply of fresh produce and the maintenance of food security and being a key contributor to the health and wellbeing of our population by providing access to nutritional, safe and fresh produce. A thriving and sustainable fresh produce sector is therefore vital to Australia's national interest.

Generations of fresh produce farmers and growers have practiced sustainable farming through responsible environmental stewardship, including the sustainable use of natural resources, and following ethical business practices focused on supplying Australian consumers with a reliable, safe, and healthy range of fresh produce. Australia's international reputation as a country renowned for the production of 'clean and green' produce is clear evidence of this.

The Australian fresh produce industry recognises that sustainability is about meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs – producing fresh produce in a way that is economically, socially, and environmentally responsible. The industry supports an approach to sustainability that is holistic, balances economic, social, and environmental factors in decision-making, policies and practices, and considers the long-term outcomes and consequences of today's actions.

A priority focus for the fresh produce industry is environmental sustainability which encompasses a broad range of issues, from reducing greenhouse gas emissions and adapting to climate change, to conserving biodiversity and protecting ecosystems, to reducing waste and more efficiently using and recycling natural resources, including water.

To best focus industry, government and stakeholder efforts, the fresh produce sector has identified three interconnected areas of priority for discussion, action and investment. These are Emissions, Waste and Packaging.

Ultimately, industry-wide advancements in environmental sustainability will be dependent on industry, retailers, government, and other key stakeholders taking a pragmatic and collective approach to overcome challenges and realise opportunities. By working together and recognising the necessity to balance environmental, social, and economic objectives and pressures, we can create a more sustainable and resilient future for Australian horticulture production.

1. Emissions

Available data demonstrates that the horticulture industry represents a very small proportion of total agriculture emissions, however, it is insufficient to develop an accurate and complete emissions profile of the industry. Furthermore, the existing research on Australian horticulture industry emissions varies in the application of boundaries and methodologies for calculating emissions. Addressing this lack of consistency is key to realising opportunities around emissions and what role horticulture could realistically play with respect to economy wide emissions reductions.

Without this data to guide conversations and inform decisions, the setting of targets and overt focus on emissions reduction is pre-emptive and not productive. The data gaps and outdated research around horticulture's emissions needs to be addressed to allow informed conversations, develop evidence-based policies and drive industry-wide action.

The AFPA are currently developing a framework for the capture and measurement of horticulture emissions. The AFPA's intention is for this work to form the foundation of a collective effort by industry and stakeholders to achieve a better understanding of the industry's emissions profile. A better understanding of this profile will assist in identifying opportunities, forming considered and deliberative policy, and coordinating both public and private investment.

The horticulture industry is naturally positioned to be a key part of the solution to reducing Australia's emissions and the achievement of other environmental ambitions. Indeed, there are numerous opportunities to explore in horticulture, including utilising existing capital and assets, such as the use of orchards for carbon capture and sequestration.



2. Packaging

The AFPA acknowledges and supports initiatives to reduce the environmental impact of plastics and packaging. While the fresh produce industry is a relatively low user of plastics and packaging, it is a highly visible user. It is therefore imperative to understand that the use of packaging in the fresh produce industry is critical to both reducing food waste and enabling consumers, both in Australia and overseas, to access fresh, safe fruit and vegetables at affordable prices. Packaging prolongs shelf life and protects produce in transit enabling better quality produce to reach consumers.

Australian consumers are concerned about the impact of plastics on the environment, from all sources, and the relative impact of their different purchasing decisions. Packaging plays an important role in the integrity and protection of fresh food as it travels through supply chains from farm to plate. Product safety, protection and increasing shelf-life should be the primary goal of packaging as food waste generally accounts for a larger proportion of negative environmental impacts than packaging does. To that end, embracing simplistic solutions needs to be resisted and the consequences carefully thought through. An example is the periodic call to ban plastics and/or remove packaging entirely for fresh produce. This fails to acknowledge the functional role of packaging in reducing food waste, the overall impact on the product, and the importance of material selection in meeting a primary objective – to ensure Australian households can access affordable, high quality (including shelf-life/longevity), and safe fresh produce.

The AFPA will continue to strongly advocate for the use of functional packaging for fresh produce, while working with industry, suppliers, recyclers, and retailers, to research and implement sustainable product and packaging combinations that are fit for purpose and help to prevent food waste. Action by industry must also be supported by action from government through investment in infrastructure to support the collection, recycling, and remanufacturing of (plastic) packaging.

The AFPA seeks to work with government, retailers, and industry to improve the understanding of the role and importance of functional packaging in the fresh produce industry and to develop solutions that build and sustain the infrastructure required to deliver and promote the use of recyclable and recycled packaging. Only then can we achieve the goal of a circular economy.

3. Food waste

Food waste is a global challenge that has environmental, economic, and social impacts. Food waste is a complex issue, and with most food being wasted in the home, more should be done to ensure consumers are provided with adequate strategies to increase their consumption of fresh fruit and vegetables, while simultaneously reducing food waste.

Many groups advocate to Australian fruit and vegetable producers for a range of solutions to food waste, including donating surplus or 'damage d' food to charity, manufacturing 'waste' into high value-add products and/or generating renewable energy onsite. While many of these options are worth pursuing, the reality is the best outcome for fresh produce businesses is to support agronomic practices that produce the most amount of first grade produce (and therefore the least waste) possible. Supporting food charities, supplying excess produce as animal feed or creating new value-added manufacturing streams require engagement both commercially (including access to significant capital), and at a policy level that is distinct from food waste. Combining these challenges in most instances is complex and will likely not provide a holistic solution.

The AFPA has released two research reports on packaging, food waste and recycling. Through our work it has become clear that understanding consumer behaviour, particularly in the home, is critical to addressing food waste. Ensuring that consumers can access fresh food, in a format that meets their needs is a goal that will address food waste and help Australians meet the necessary daily intake of fruit and vegetables to support health outcomes.

The AFPA seeks to work cooperatively with Government, retailers, and other stakeholders to take a holistic view on food waste reduction including the use of functional packaging to increase product shelf life and reduce waste at a consumer level; exploring opportunities to increase the amount of first grade product that is produced and supporting initiatives to enable consumers to better access fresh produce that is safe, maximises shelf life and is affordable.

The Australian Fresh Produce Alliance

AFPA is made up of Australia's key fresh produce (fruit and vegetables) growers and suppliers. AFPA members represent half of Australia's fresh produce turnover (\$10 billion) and a third of exports; more than 15,000 direct employees through peak harvest, 1,000 plus growers through commercial arrangements, and up to 25,000 employees in the grower network.