

National Food Security Strategy: Response to Discussion Paper

Skills Insight Jobs and Skills Council
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Skills
Insight

Skills Insight acknowledges that First Nations peoples have been living on and caring for country for thousands of years. This is respected in our values and the way we work.



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National Food Security Strategy

Response to Discussion Paper

Summary

Skills Insight welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the National Food Security Strategy. Food security is central to Australia’s resilience and prosperity, and the economies and social cohesion of Australia’s regions. It underpins other priority industries and the transition to net zero. Recognising these interdependencies will boost the productivity, resilience and security of the Australian food system.

Stakeholders see workforce and training as essential enablers of food security. A safe, effective and productive workforce requires investment in leadership to promote VET solutions, identifying current and emerging skills needs, improving accessibility of training across regions and populations, and building stronger data and evidence foundations. Without this focus, the sector’s ability to sustain and strengthen food security will be constrained.

The strategy must also support diversity in production models, safeguard agency for small, artisanal and native food producers, and prioritise the economic empowerment of First Nations enterprises. This will require collaborative approaches to extend across the VET and skills systems, and understanding of the positive and detrimental impacts of regulation and market standards, as well as investment in biosecurity skills and capacity and decisions about approaches to water access and rights.

Given the pace of global, market and technological change, stakeholders support a 5-10-year timeframe for the strategy.

Skills Insight Responses

Key Priority Areas

Section 2 of the Discussion Paper identifies key priority areas for a food security strategy.

Workforce and training are not specifically identified within the proposed scope of the strategy diagram, which identifies whole of system considerations and key priority areas, falling within the “People” whole-of-system consideration, which also encompasses access to food for health and welfare, and connection, heritage and cultural aspects. It is important that a safe, effective and productive workforce is not lost among the other considerations.

Our stakeholders have identified priorities for the Skills Insight workforce plan which are:

- **Leadership:** Support industry leadership to understand, facilitate and promote VET solutions.
- **Skills:** Identify current and future workforce skills needs and develop improved VET products.
- **Accessibility:** Encourage improved quality and supply of training delivery where, when and for whom it is needed.
- **Data and evidence:** Promote data improvements and evidence-based solutions to address skilling and employment barriers.

The Jobs and Skills Australia Report, *An essential Ingredient: the food supply chain workforce* (2005) demonstrates the importance of a safe, effective and productive workforce on Australia’s food security and includes 41 recommendations, presenting an argument for specific identification of workforce and training as a key priority area. It recommends to “Establish a workforce data unit within the Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Sciences” (recommendation 41), which is needed to improve workforce data to accurately reflect the actual workforce and skills required to maintain and improve food security.

A whole-of-system consideration should be the success and security of RRR communities and economies. The ability to design and implement place-based solutions will be important ingredients in the food security strategy. The opportunities in RRR to improve Multifactor Productivity are limited. Multifactor Productivity relies on a business's ability to invest in new, more efficient capital inputs, as well as labour productivity. There are many barriers that impede any RRR operation’s ability to create greater productivity. These are important considerations in a potential Food Security Strategy.

Stakeholders would also suggest that a Food Security Strategy needs to be inclusive, particularly relating to the economic empowerment and development of First Nations communities and enterprises. First Nations people and communities are not just participants to be engaged with. They can and should be economic leaders and partners, and the approaches of the First Nations Economic Empowerment Alliance should be central to reviews and development of policy. Respect should be paid to the rights of First Nations people recognised by Title and by the Courts over land and water, taking a principles approach to development of policy and strategy.

Improvements in the gender balance and employment of people with disabilities or limited access to resources will also assist in the implementation of any strategy.

The Dimensions of Food Security

The discussion paper provides a map and definition of the Dimensions of Food Security. One of the dimensions identified is Agency which is based on individuals and groups having choices and the opportunity to engage in policy along the whole of the value chain.

This requires the opportunity for variety at the production end of the value chain based on differing farm and business types. These may range from corporate farming, precision agriculture and irrigated properties through to small and artisanal operations, and native and niche food production.

Current global and national consolidation trends towards corporate farming, and plans to “pivot away from skills useful for small farms to skills for a modern commercial operation” (NSW Skills Plan, 2024, under *Revitalising agriculture through a skilled workforce*) may impede Agency as a dimension of food security. It may also establish barriers to the creation of new First Nations enterprises, trying to compete against well-funded international and national corporate agriculture and food operations.

Stakeholders have supported flexibility to encourage the remarkable range of Australian agricultural and food products, which in turn requires encouragement for the range of producers. This is becoming increasingly difficult, which at the very least will have impacts on the Agency aspect of food security. Stakeholders are concerned about potential market or competition interventions that may have impacts on the current mix of opportunities in the sector. Examples of their concerns can be seen in recent inquiries, reviews and studies of the behaviours of supermarkets.

Collaboration

It is noted in section 1.2 of the discussion paper that “*Food system stakeholders including from primary industries, community, business, research providers and investment partners all have important roles to play*”. Acknowledging that not everything can be covered in a discussion paper, education and training is also important, and educator, trainer, Registered Training Organisations and Vocational Education and Training (VET) system participants all have parts to play.

Stakeholders become concerned about the development of plans and strategies affecting their industries when there is limited recognition of the requirements to train safe, effective and productive workers.

Food is central to priority supply and value chains

Sovereign capability, food security and advanced manufacturing directly include the whole of food value chains and are priority industries. They are also contributors to

the potential success, development and growth of other priority industries (as other priority industries, such as construction and clean energy, support food value chains).

A number of government agreements, discussion papers and consultations recently, including the National Skills Agreement and the Productivity Commission work, indicate that government policies at federal and state and territory levels are being or should be driven by considering the needs of priority industries, such as care industries, the transition to Net Zero and the construction industry. It needs to be recognised that food often plays a critical or central role in the supply chains of these, and other, priority industries.

One of the key requirements of the care industry is good nutrition and pharmaceuticals. These are dependent on food, beverage and pharmaceutical manufacturing, and key ingredients often come from other areas of the supply chain. Similarly in the transition to Net Zero, current reductions in greenhouse gases since June 2025 are being led by land use, land use change and forestry, and agriculture, all of which have strong connections to the food supply chain.

Construction of infrastructure in Regional, Rural and Remote Australia (RRR) is also dependent on food being available on site at reasonable cost, and with choices to help attract a variety of potential workers.

These are just some examples of the inter-relationships between priority industries. Stakeholders would encourage broader thinking when reviewing policy positions to consider these supply and value chain dependencies.

Regulatory Frameworks and Other Standards

The food security value chain is covered by an abundance of regulations, market standards, sustainability standards, levy agreements, climate compacts and social licence considerations. These have impacts on training, as well as on business operations. As a Jobs and Skills Council, it is important that Skills Insight and its key partner organisations, ForestWorks and MINTRAC, as well as key stakeholder organisations and business operations, have as much clarity as possible on these controls and guides.

It would be useful if the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry maintained a national register of as many of these standards as possible, (international, national and State/Territory as a minimum) as a central reference point for anyone looking to undertake business and workforce planning. While this is difficult and expensive to establish and will have costs to update and maintain, the benefits across business and workforce planning are likely to be considerable.

This would also be useful when looking at reviews and changes to standards, which occur regularly.

Biosecurity

Stakeholders have indicated some confusion around the use of the term “biosecurity”, with some associating it with major disease outbreaks, or compliance and enforcement roles.

The National Biosecurity Strategy defines biosecurity as the management of risks to Australia's economy, environment and community from pests and diseases entering, emerging, establishing or spreading within the nation and its territories. Occupations connected to biosecurity include:

- Land, water, animal and plant-based occupations that are responsible for ecosystem health and food safety, including animal pest and weed control, handling and disposal
- Ecosystem management roles including parks and gardens, landscaping, arboriculture, Rangers and similar roles
- Scientific occupations related to research, monitoring, and prevention and treatment development and applications, including support roles
- Quarantine, customs, border control and enforcement

All dimensions of biosecurity have the capacity to impact on Australia’s food security. Jobs and Skills Councils are currently considering how they may be able to assist the implementation of the National Biosecurity Strategy, including:

- Mapping current biosecurity occupations, and their skills, knowledge and licensing/regulatory requirements to existing training products at VET and Higher Education
- Mapping current biosecurity skills and knowledge to other occupations that may contribute to surge workforces, particularly in RRR
- Identifying any current data or skills gaps or updates required in VET
- Identifying RTOs and university offerings that sit within scope
- Identifying duplication in training
- Developing recommendations for workforce development and training, including examining the benefit of a national approach to a skills and capability Framework

However, because there is a lack of understanding of the full scope of biosecurity, stakeholders can struggle to understand the focus on this work. It may be beneficial to consider this during the strategy development phase. It is important for the pest and weed control approaches of the past to be modernised within a broader approach to the protection of Australia’s food security and environment, as well as the health and welfare of people. However, any national approach under biosecurity needs to continue to maintain focus on local pest, weed and water management.

Water access and rights

An important whole-of-system consideration is access to water and water rights. Australia's access to fresh water is limited, and it is clear that demand for water will increase. Water-based industries continue to grow through offshore and inland operations.

The claims of First Nations title holders need to be respected and considered, not just as a matter of principle, but also to help drive opportunities for economic growth and development. Food value chain industries have struggled for years with competing water requirements for the economy, ecology, health, nature positivity and culture.

The waters surrounding Australia are warming, leading to species changes in fish stock, plant life and seabeds, including corals and other major attractions for visitors to Australia. Inland waters are increasingly being consumed across a variety of users, while much of Australia's inland water is salt water.

For there to be a foundation for food security, the competing interests of water users will need to be a focus.

Timeframe for the Strategy

Industry participants are currently working through major changes driven by global and regional environments, market conditions and regulation, climate change and the impacts of rapidly developing technology, among others.

They have recently been involved in the development of industry compacts to help with climate change mitigation, and are trying to find ways to both attract and improve the professionalisation of the workforce to deal with modern conditions.

In these circumstances, it is suggested that the proposed 5-10 year timeframe is the most appropriate for the strategy.

Acknowledgement of use

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We agree to the Department guidelines and policies related to this consultation.

Skills Insight is willing to meet further with the Department to assist with this and previous submissions, or for any other purpose that will aid the Department.

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