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# **Food in My Back Yard (FIMBY) Implementing Urban Agriculture into Australian Suburbs**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The recent climatic events, economic uncertainty and peak oil are leading to greater levels of awareness of our vulnerability for food supply and security. During the summer of 2010/11 much of the east coast of Australia was inundated with record rainfall and proceeding flooding, which impacted on food delivery from regional production areas to urban markets. Consequently many of our major food outlets in suburban neighbourhoods ran critically low in supply and price increases were significant. These events have led to a wider dialog on where does our food come from and how can we ensure food supply as we enter into the dual challenges of rapidly increased energy cost and climatic shifts. Resourceful and progressive communities are taking action to address this issue with the implementation of urban agricultural in urban spaces that traditionally have been occupied by ornamental landscapes such as suburban back yards and parklands. This paper discusses what actions are taking place using various cases studies from local government, community groups and individuals across Australia.

**Keywords:** Urban Agriculture, green streets, green cities, sustainable cities, food security, local governments role in food production.

## **Introduction**

Climate change, peak oil, and the effects these events will have on the availability of fresh food in the coming years is gaining broader awareness. Many community groups, environmental organisations, and government bodies are currently undertaking research and working on initiatives to ensure food supply in their local and regional areas during peak events such as extensive flooding and fuel shortages. This paper undertakes a brief review of current urban agriculture policies/initiatives undertaken locally and regionally to highlight urban agriculture practices currently occurring. The findings emphasise the role of grass roots, community networks and local food supply on both a neighbourhood and regional basis.

To gain an understanding of what other local governments are doing in the area of food security and local food supply, an investigation was undertaken of existing government policies, strategies, initiatives, at all levels of government. Within this limited research scope the work indicates that a diverse range of initiatives are currently being implemented by government; however, action is evident predominantly at the local government level as opposed to state and federal led policies and initiatives.

Gold Coast City Council has identified local food security as a priority matter in detailing with climate change and seeks to create awareness of, and change attitudes towards, the reliance on existing food importation and trade dependency. In 2010 a political mandate was sanctioned by City Councillors, through the approval of Action 33 of Council's Climate Change Strategy where "*developing a scoping study for local food production and purchase on the Gold Coast*" was initiated.

The issue of vulnerability to the food network and supply chain became evident during the extensive flooding across the eastern seaboard of Australia in the 2010/11 wet season. People were broadly affected with delivery supply chains cut due to repeated flooding of highways and increased food cost such as tomatoes normally shipped from southern states and bananas from far northern Queensland witnessed price spikes due to severe crop damage.

In light of this and other climate change predictions, new initiatives for Gold Coast City's local food production and supply are being investigated. Through this process it is intended to establish a more sustainable local food production and distribution network in an effort to move away from current dependence on national and international food production and sales networks and to clarify local food production capabilities and shortfalls.

### **Local Government Climate Change Strategies**

In recent years a number of local governments have adopted climate change strategies. Brisbane City Council's "*Plan for Action on Climate Change and Energy 2007*," is a good example in how local agencies address local food initiatives. Of the plan's eight (8) key Topic Areas, three (3) of the topic areas deal with urban food initiatives with identified actions detailing how the matter will be specifically addressed.

Brisbane City Council plan has a high focus on food security and ensuring its residents have access to fresh and affordable local food produce. This is further supported by provision to update the City Plan to provide for different forms of urban agriculture across the city including the establishment of interim amendments to the City Plan and related policy issues. Similar actions could be incorporated into the Gold Coast Planning Scheme to give statutory weight to the initiatives particularly through new and refurbished development across the city.

In comparison when looking at the Gold Coast City Council and its Climate Change Strategy 2010, the document deals with urban food supply under the banner of „locally grown food“. The below table was compiled from the strategy's key actions and strategic outcomes to identify any urban food initiatives for the city.

<b>Urban Food Initiative</b>	<b>Key Action</b>	<b>Strategic Outcome</b>	<b>Performance Measure</b>	<b>Action</b>
Locally grown food	Planning and Regulation	Strategic Outcome 7: Council has a planned climate change response that meets its statutory responsibilities.	Percentage of locally grown food available to the Gold Coast community	Action 33: Develop a scoping study for local food production and purchase on the Gold Coast.

*Source: Compiled from Gold Coast City Council's Climate Change Strategy 2010*

Appendix B of the Strategy details a „climate change strategy risk response matrix“ for the city in dealing with climate change. Under „Social Sustainability“ identified risk, it was noted that „higher ground surface temperatures compromise food safety and increase food borne disease“, that its probability of happening is „likely“, which would be „catastrophic“ and is a „high“ priority.

Whilst the availability of urban food is dealt with broadly in this document, it is intended that further studies be undertaken for the city for land availability and soil quality. This action is important to scrutinise and validate land uses designations maximising potential crop yields. It is recommended that such strategies be evaluated frequently to ensure appropriate policy implementation via a planning scheme development code. It is possible that other urban food initiatives can be identified for implementation more broadly across the cities directorates. Political will on behalf of the local government to recognised this issue and give adequate support is of concern. Local politics is notorious for being motivated for short term gain where sustainable development policy can require long term funding for programs and implantations of effective measures.

Redland City Council’s 2030 Community Plan was established with considerable community participation. The Community Plan details key themes and associated goals for the city in relation to urban food initiatives. Community gardens are a priority factor in the plan. Community building and cultural capital is seen as of major importance for the Redlands plan, where there is a strong emphasis on how urban agriculture initiatives are to be achieved; “We grow and share food in homes and community gardens, schools and edible streetscapes; small crops are harvested from working farms; and people support locally grown produce at growers” markets within the city and throughout the region.” (Source: Compiled from Redland City Council’s 2030 Community Plan)

To assist in achieving policy objectives the plan included a „Green Lane Diary“ educational program for school children between the ages of 10-12; and „Growing Community Gardens“ whereby Council encourages groups to utilise Council grants as „seed money“ for their gardens.

### **Coffs Coast Draft Local Food Futures Framework 2010-2020 (NSW)**

The aim of this framework is to support the „development of a sustainable local food economy for the region“ through capacity building with community groups, educational organizations, local industry, local business, and government agencies. Here, it is intended that a capacity building program will enhance awareness of the issues surrounding local food supply, create interest and enthusiasm in dealing with local food, identify a „road map“ for action, engage all levels of government, whilst also enhancing networks and partnerships with other agencies, organizations, and industry. Some of the key initiatives identified within the Coffs Coast framework include:

- *Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)* encourages landholders with small farms located close to cities or regional areas to become productive in the provision of fresh produce to these urban/regional locales on a regular (weekly) basis;
- *Micro Credit for Small Scale Farms* encourages the establishment of small scale farms by assisting in the initial food production setup costs through the provision of credit schemes such as low or no-interest loans;

- *Local Food Directory/Database* aims at raising the profile of local food producers with commercial and individual consumers to ensure a secure customer/trade base is available to local farmers (ie ensure economic stability);
- *Farm Gate Trail* encourages tourist activity through the hinterland region by visiting and purchasing local produce direct from the farm; similar in concept to the winery route tours;
- *Buy Local – Branding of Local Produce* creates awareness to consumers that they are buying fresh local produce and supporting the local food industry;
- *Seasonal Produce Guide* creates consumer awareness of which fruit and vegetables are in season and available in local markets; and
- *Food Processing* locally will support the production and availability of fresh fruit and vegetables whilst also supporting the local economy through the provision of employment and training. Dependence and usage of oil/petroleum will also lessen through reduced travel and production techniques.

This document provides a holistic framework for dealing with local food production and security within a regional setting which was ascertained from a public/private collaborative process. Invaluable information from this document could inform a similar framework for South East Queensland regions and should be noted accordingly. Community outreach is difficult in the best of situations. The failure to adequately engage community activism is often experienced in the public policy arena. There is mechanism to overcome this tendency in the time poor condition commonly found in advanced economies.

#### **Northern Rivers Food Links (NSW)**

The Northern Rivers Food Links initiative was established through a cooperative process involving seven (7) Northern Rivers local government Councils and Rous Water in northern New South Wales to ensure a sustainable food future for the region. The Councils involved included Ballina Shire Council, Byron Shire Council, Clarence Valley Council, Kyogle Council, Lismore City Council, Richmond Valley Council, Tweed Shire Council, and Rous Water. This joint-partner project was made available by a \$2 million grant from the NSW Environmental Trust. One of the main benefits to come out of the initiative was the „Village Showcase Project“. This project sought to encourage a collective village community approach to improving the food chain system across the Northern Rivers Region. The Village Showcase Project was designed to fund one larger project in each Local Government Area (LGA) to the value of \$50,000 each LGA. Some of the projects envisaged by the scheme included: Community asset gardens (*eg aged care facilities, Neighbourhood Centres*) Community Food production maps and events (*eg Community Jams*) and Urban Agriculture Activity Hubs. A scheme similar to this could be offered on a regional scale in partnership with surrounding local governments to establish and strengthen a food supply chain for the South East Queensland region. Although broad scale regional approaches are highly valued in achieving sustainable development outcomes the coordination and longevity of such programs have been problematic in the past. Considerable resources can be required from cash strapped local governments. Federal and State funding is not always made available and limited longer term success is jeopardised.

### **Queensland Conservation Council**

The Queensland Conservation Council (QCC) has been established for some 40 years. One of the key focuses QCC is currently working on is a strategy called the *Local Food Consumption and Production SEQ Community Strategy*. The strategy encompasses a geographic region of South East Queensland, northern New South Wales, and the Granite Belt and seeks to create a framework which facilitates the region to grow and consume fresh, local and ecologically grown food. Whilst the document is in its infancy, it has a clear set of strategies and actions to achieve its goal. The document also considers governance and the role of government at all levels in local food supply, production and security.

The document's core strategies and actions include stakeholder engagement, capacity building through strong local food networks, identify the perceived benefits and barriers in local food production for the region, provide education and enhance awareness to the community in regard to their food choices, develop a planning framework to identifying the needs for local food production (eg regulatory requirements, infrastructure, etc), promote local food systems, and review government policies in regard to urban agriculture and local food production. Now is the ideal time for government (ie Gold Coast City Council) to start collaborating and working in partnership with the community and other organisations to produce strategies and frameworks that could actually facilitate local food production in urban areas. These types of documents and forward planning provide an avenue for steps to be undertaken in implementing urban agriculture within urban settings and providing fresh local produce for all to enjoy.

### **Transition Town Movement**

The Transition Town Movement was originally founded in the United Kingdom in response to climate change, peak oil, and society's industrialised and resource consumptive way of living. The movement is a community action at the local level, which essentially involves the process of, *'...relocalising all essential elements that a community needs to sustain itself and thrive. It builds local resilience in the face of the potentially damaging effects of Peak Oil while dramatically reducing the community's carbon footprint. In this way, it addresses both Peak Oil and Climate Change.'* (Brangwyn and Hopkins). The movement has been well received across the UK and also internationally with Australia also having a number of transition cities being established. In fact, the Sunshine Coast was the first Transition Town in Australia and the first Transition Region outside of the UK (Conte, 2009).

### **Community Gardens**

Through all of the research undertaken in regard to urban agriculture, community gardens appear to be the most common initiative implemented throughout Australia, with the most progressive across New South Wales. In most instances, the establishment of community gardens is community driven; however, they cannot occur without the support of local government. A number of local governments have established policies and guidelines for the establishment and running of community gardens, particularly in New South Wales. It is noted that whilst the Gold Coast has three (3) established community gardens across the city located in Varsity Lakes, Ormeau and Southport; with another two (2) gardens under construction at Tugun and Southport (GCCC, 2010); there is no policy or guideline in place for the city.

Brisbane's Northey Street City Farm which is a not-for-profit organisation grows fresh produce on site to be on-sold to the community on market days (which is also on-site).



The city farm not only grows produce on site, but also conducts workshops and educates the community on gardening and farming within urban environments (ie permaculture). This facility would be an excellent case study to review with the intent of a similar facility/s being established by local governments.

### **Conclusion**

Research indicates that from a government perspective, food security and urban agriculture is being driven at the local level through local government strategic and climate change documents. Whilst most local governments have identified food security as a priority item, most progressive governments are in the early scoping stages with no firm strategy in place to address the issue. The exception is northern New South Wales with frameworks currently in place for the Coffs Coast Region and Northern Rivers Region as discussed in this paper.

It is evident that community groups and organisations are very active and in some instances are promoting their own initiatives such as the transition town movement, establishment of community gardens, and Queensland Conservation Council's Local Food Consumption and Production SEQ Community Strategy. Local government have the opportunity to work in partnership with these organisations to create a collaborative joint-venture policy framework for the city.

In terms of local food production, current focus is on a individualised micro-scale level where hobby gardens and veggie patches are being established mostly for self-consumption. Focus also needs to be placed on a larger scale food production within urban areas with the produce available to the general public through local outlets. This can be achieved by making underutilised areas productive such as incorporation of edible landscapes, streetscapes, rooftops and walls.

Currently from a convenience point of view, many people will purchase their produce from a large supermarket who imports much of its produce from international agricultural networks. If this matter is to be taken seriously, other options in terms of supply networks and convenient outlets are needed so that consumers have the option to purchase fresh, local, and affordable fruit and vegetables from a local outlet instead of purchasing from the major supermarkets. A marketing and educational campaign may be required to enhance community awareness in relation to local food initiatives and the importance of community support.

Local governments could include provision for this concept; however, establishment of a policy and design guidelines for a community would be required for inclusion within regulatory tools such as a Planning Scheme or via a Local Law. For example, positioning of edible streetscapes and verges could be located near community centres. There are many examples of successful initiatives in the urban agricultural movement where the organic permaculture model has been advanced. Places such as Cuba offer a number of lessons on how local food production becomes part of ones daily life and leads to healthier communities, reduced carbon out puts and urban resilience.

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