



Fringe benefits: Professors Andrew Butt (left) and Michael Buxton. Picture: Simon Schluter

Urban sprawl puts crisis food production ‘at risk’

FRESH PRODUCE

Clay Lucas

Food grown on Melbourne's fringe has helped the city weather the coronavirus pandemic with supplies of fresh, locally grown produce relatively unaffected by the crisis.

But planning experts warn that urban sprawl is eating into productive farmland on the periphery of Australia's cities, leaving the nation ill-prepared to weather future crises.

If housing keeps concreting over land previously used for farming, they say reliance on imported food will become the norm.

“Urban sprawl and rural subdivision could halve Melbourne's peri-urban food production capacity,” said Professor Andrew Butt, from meeting 41 per cent of the city's current food needs now to just 18 per cent by 2050.

Professor Butt and Michael Buxton, two RMIT planning academics, have this month released a new book, *The Future of the Fringe*, published by the CSIRO. In it, they show that a quarter of Australia's agricultural production now comes from land on city fringes.

“In this pandemic, both food production and supply chains have proved increasingly vulnerable,” Professor Buxton said.

Dependency on international and interstate food assumes that stable conditions will continue, but long and complex supply chains can be disastrous in a crisis.”

Professor Butt said nearly half the vegetables consumed by Melburnians came from the city's fringe, along with two-thirds of the eggs, and “most of the city's chicken, herbs and berry fruit and 12 per cent of dairy”.

‘Long and complex supply chains can be disastrous in a crisis.’

Professor Michael Buxton

The two academics argue that rural land within 150 kilometres of the city is essential for human survival this century.

From the 1970s, under Premier Dick Hamer, Victoria began securing land on the periphery of Melbourne to act as the city's “green lungs”.

In the early 2000s, then-premier Steve Bracks codified this and placed an official “growth boundary” around outer Melbourne.

In 2009, though, Labor's John Brumby relaxed this urban growth boundary, releasing 43,000 hectares of land for housing. Since then, the expectation has only grown from many in the development industry that the outward sprawl will continue, with more farming land rezoned.

Professor Buxton said the current pandemic proved how valuable this farmland was to Melbourne, comparing it with big cities in Asia and Africa where in the worst cases 84 per cent of farming land around urban centres had been lost. “Cities that protect their peri-urban areas are best able to survive the inevitable and more severe crises.”

Melbourne's green belt is Victoria's second-most productive region for growing food (the most productive is in the state's north-west).

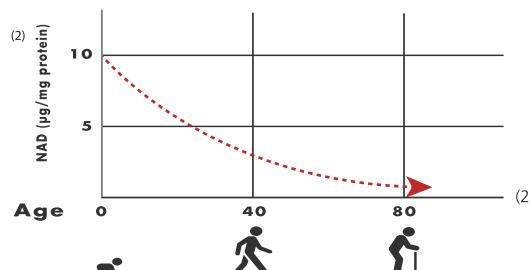
Land on Melbourne's fringe was also “one of the world's most bushfire-prone areas and the location for repeated catastrophic fires,” according to Professor Butt, “yet thousands of new dwellings continue to be permitted there.”

He said governments needed to learn both from the COVID-19 crisis, and the summer bushfires, that land zoned for farming uses on city fringes were a crucial buffer protecting the population against a variety of potential disasters.

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Scientific References:

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