

By Bill Bulmer, chair of AUSVEG, the peak industry body for the Australian vegetable & potato industries

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed most aspects of our lives - how we live, how we work and how we interact with our friends and family.

But what has been made abundantly clear is the essential nature of the agriculture industry - particularly those who supply fresh vegetables.

Australia's vegetable industry has been central to ensuring the health and safety of the Australian public. Our industry worked hard with the agriculture supply chain to keep fresh produce available to consumers, it has kept workers in jobs and has ensured supply continues despite the challenging health and safety guidelines that have been introduced, all while attempting to keep up with consumer demands in the market place.

There have been many businesses that have been devastated by the restrictions that have been put in place due to COVID-19, particularly due to the disruption of the hospitality and food service sectors. Australian vegetable growers send just over \$1 billion worth of produce to the food services sector each year and vegetable growing businesses that service this sector have effectively had those taps turned off.

It has meant some growers, especially those who grow highly perishable crops, are left with the tough choice of whether or not to harvest their produce, and whether or not to plant the next crop.

Without a viable avenue to sell their fresh produce to consumers, businesses could be forced to shut their gates, meaning workers will lose their livelihoods. This of course would have devastating flow-on effects to the rest of the industry, including wholesalers, marketers and all other sectors throughout the supply chain.

The food service sector needs the support of government to get through this troubling time. Government must give restaurants, cafes, pubs and bars a clear indication that, if they comply with the required health and safety guidelines, that they will be able to increase their trade and open to more people.

Vegetable growers who service these markets need confidence that if they start planting perishable crops now that they will have an avenue to market when the crop is ready to

harvest.

Not having a clear plan to open the food service sector means that growers will plant less in the weeks and months ahead and that fresh produce that does not have an avenue to market will go to waste.

Consumers must also continue to support their local growers by keeping fresh vegetables on their weekly shopping list and keeping demand for fresh vegetables high by buying plenty of it.

We are all hurting during this time and it is important that we all work together and support each other through it.

We urge Australians to lift their consumption of fresh Australian produce so that growers can continue doing what they do best - growing high-quality, healthy and nutritious food for Australian families.

This piece was originally published on the [AUSVEG website](#).

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