

**THE GOVERNOR SPEAKS AT THE FUTURE FOODS FOR
FUTURE HEALTH CONFERENCE AT THE AGE THEATRE,
MELBOURNE MUSEUM, CARLTON**

Wednesday 25th July, 2007

Acknowledgments:

The Honourable Bronwyn Pike MP

Minister for Health

Distinguished guests

Ladies and gentlemen

Good morning everyone. It is a pleasure to be with you on this second day of the Future Foods for Future Health Conference.

I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of this land, the Kulin Nation, and any elders who may be here this morning.

Let me start my commending the vision behind today's conference; that there exists a critical link between health, a sustainable food supply and a vibrant food industry.

We know that the global food supply system has changed dramatically over the past 50 years. Some of the changes that have been identified include:

- The globalisation of the food industry, with an increase in food imports and exports, and wider sourcing of food overseas;
- The concentration of the food supply base into fewer, larger suppliers, partly to meet consumers' demands for bulk year-round supply of uniform produce;
- Major changes in delivery patterns with most goods now travelling through supermarket regional distribution centres, and a trend towards use of larger vehicles; and
- The centralisation and concentration of sales in supermarkets, with a switch from frequent food shopping on foot at small local shops to weekly shopping by car at large supermarkets.

Victoria's food supply system can be seen to have mirrored the changes experienced worldwide, with similar resulting consequences – both in terms of a sustainable food supply, and the health of its citizens.

Aside from the challenges for the food supply system generally, the environmental challenges faced by our community also play a part in shaping the appearance of Victoria's system of food production.

We have heard much discussion of recent times about one's own 'ecological footprint'. A similar analysis is possible for the State of Victoria in terms of its food supply system. The Global Footprint Network and Integrated Sustainability Analysis of 2005 identified the ecological footprint as "the area of biologically productive land and sea a given population required to produce the resources it consumes, and to assimilate the waste it generates, using prevailing technology".

Clearly this analysis raises many issues and challenges that we, as Victorians, need to consider and resolve. In terms of resource allocation, how do we effectively and sustainably allocate the resources required to grow, produce, manufacture, store, deliver and sell food to Victorians, as well as successfully manage the waste generated in this cycle, including the production of greenhouse gases?

A few specific challenges come to mind:

Industrial farms produce massive amounts of animal waste that is known to release greenhouse gasses into the air. Aside from the air pollution that comes from farm waste, the industrialized food system also burns significant amounts of fossil fuels.

Industrial agriculture relies on machinery to produce food, and trucks to transport the food throughout the country or from country to country, which likewise consumes massive amounts of fuel and energy.

Most meals travel hundreds or even thousands of kilometres to reach your dinner plate. By eating food produced locally and buying locally, Victorians are able to help the environment and our local community. Sustainable farms work to minimize their energy use, and since their products are bought locally, minimal fuel is burned in order to transport their goods.

Agriculture has an enormous impact on the environment, but whether the impact is good or bad depends on the type of agriculture used. Sustainable agriculture puts back what it takes from the environment, while factory farming pollutes our air, water and soil.

As well as the ecological challenges faced by our community, there is also a clear and growing awareness of the connection between the health of our ecosystem and human health.

The tremendous gains in life expectancy in more affluent societies have been paralleled with an unprecedented expansion of consumption. We now face health problems associated with increased consumption and lack of physical exercise to balance the intake. This is particularly an issue for older men and our children, many of whom are overweight and therefore susceptible to the development of diabetes.

The major burden of disease in Victoria is chronic disease such as heart disease, cancer and diabetes. It has been shown that a poor diet contributes to the development of many of these diseases.

Estimates of diet-related ill health are in the region of 10% of chronic illness and mortality, almost equivalent to that of smoking.

Only last month (June 2007), the Victorian Auditor-General released a report entitled *Promoting Better Health Through Healthy Eating and Physical Activity*. Among its findings, the report stated that:

- The risk factors of physical inactivity and unhealthy eating have grown in importance over the last 30 years because of changes in society and how people have responded by adapting their lifestyles;
- These behaviours have led to many adults and children putting on weight, and to greater numbers becoming overweight or obese;
- The cost of treating chronic conditions is rapidly increasing. For example, the audit estimated that the direct cost of diabetes in Victoria has risen from \$361 million in 2001 to \$637 million in 2006 and, on current trends, will reach \$1 billion within 10 years.

Clearly it appears that an important factor in the state of the health of Victorians has been the shift over time towards 'Western-style diets' of meat, dairy, high simple carbohydrates, and reduced fruit and vegetable intake.

There are many understandable reasons behind this apparent shift:

- A changing food supply that is higher in fat content, sugar, and salt with higher volumes of meat, dairy, and alcohol;
- Prices of processed foods which are lower relative to staple foods;
- Exposure to new trends through mass media advertising, imports, tourism, specialist producers, and distributors; and
- The displacement of small family run stores by corporate food distributors, which encourage bulk purchases, special meal deals, convenience foods, and super-sized portions.
- The pressures of our society on the family unit resulting in the purchase of fast foods and the tendency, particularly in North America, to serve meals of gargantuan proportions, a trend that is starting to appear in some restaurants in this country.

No doubt, a transformation in community attitudes towards food consumption is necessary to reverse some of the trends we see today.

For this reason, it is vitally important that events such as today's conference bring together the many players in Victoria's food supply system to address these trends, and offer solutions to assist the health of the Victorian community and its environment.

There are a number of key players in today's conference: the Departments of Primary Industries, Human Services, Sustainability and Environment and Industry, Innovation and Regional Development; along with VicHealth and Food Science Australia. The partnership between these six agencies highlights the

commitment in Victoria to addressing these many complex issues in a holistic and sustainable fashion.

In pure geographic terms, Victoria is surely well placed to deliver positive outcomes to these challenges. We are a very compact State, and I know the Department of Primary Industries has acknowledged Victoria as one of the “world’s best recipes” for natural foods, with our temperate climate, a variety of soil types, a clean supply of water, extensive low input farming systems and skilled, efficient farmers who are environmentally responsible.

Let’s harness the energy, expertise and drive of all those present today to work towards a more sustainable food supply for our State. We are well placed to meet the environmental and health challenges facing our food supply, but we need to act now to make real and lasting differences to ensure the sustainability of Victoria’s food system. Together, we can make a difference, and leave a positive and lasting legacy for the many generations of Victorians to come.

Thank you.