Submission to the National Food Security Discussion Paper

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1 Executive Summary

Food security is national security. Australia's system is exposed to climate shocks, thin input supply lines, ageing freight, and land-use tensions. WSM shows how to translate national strategy into place-based delivery.

What we propose

- DAFF as the accountable lead, with food security recognised in national security settings.
- A national risk assessment cycle that spans inputs, production, logistics, processing, retail and access.
- Resourced regional leadership platforms, such as the WSM Regional Climate Adaptation and Resilience Group, to coordinate delivery and report results. CACR will lead system risk and coexistence; the Wimmera Food Security Network will anchor community access and referral pathways, with data shared into national reporting
- Coexistence planning across agriculture, energy and minerals to reduce conflict and lift resilience.
- Targeted co-investment in critical inputs, freight, workforce and local processing, including pilots for low-carbon liquid fuels and fertiliser substitution.

What success will look like

- Open freight corridors during peaks and floods.
- Fewer input stockouts and lower exposure to imported diesel and fertiliser.
- Smaller seasonal labour gaps with housing matched to demand.
- Farm-level resilience gains from coexistence frameworks.
- Falling household food insecurity in producing regions.

WSM is ready to serve as a pilot region to prove practical delivery and measurable results.

2 Introduction

Australia's food security is a national security priority, but it is experienced and managed in place. In the Wimmera Southern Mallee (WSM), food production intersects directly with competing pressures for land, water, energy generation and critical minerals. Without deliberate investment in regional leadership and capability, these pressures risk creating "either/or outcomes: food or energy, farming or mining."

A national food security strategy should enable coexistence, with regions equipped to broker outcomes that strengthen resilience across systems. WSM offers a testbed. We are climate-exposed and export-reliant, already coordinating across freight, workforce, land use and governance. As part of Commonwealth Future Drought Fund support, WSM Development formed a Regional Climate Adaptation and Resilience Group. The group aligns projects across councils, industry bodies, growers, research partners and services, shares evidence, and focuses resources where they deliver the greatest impact. With the right support, we can demonstrate practical, low-conflict delivery of national priorities on the ground.

3 Responses to the Discussion Paper Questions

3.1 Should food security be a national security priority?

Yes. Australia's food system is exposed to climate shocks, global input dependencies, and fragile domestic supply chains. In WSM, food security is tested daily by extreme heat, drought, fuel dependency, workforce shortages, and ageing freight corridors.

Food security and national security are linked. A disruption to freight, fuel, or energy in one region can have national consequences. The idea that being a net exporter makes us automatically food secure is misleading. Resilience depends on whether the system can continue to supply Australian households and markets during disruption.

Food security also means that people have enough to eat. Even in WSM, which produces far more food than it consumes and exports the majority, some households are food insecure. Any national strategy must recognise this reality and ensure that food security includes equity of access, not only production and export capacity. Food security also includes equitable access. Regions that produce significant export volumes can still have households facing food insecurity. Strategy must address access as well as production.

Local mapping by the Wimmera Food Security Network shows unmet need at the household level. Of surveyed services, 78 percent reported demand for more free food; most emergency providers still purchase food to meet gaps. The network has logged 300+ local stakeholders and can feed regular access indicators into the national system

This submission operationalises the Commonwealth's Agriculture and Land Sector Plan by advancing its three strategic objectives—low-emissions production, balanced landscapes, and community benefit—through region-led pilots that deliver the plan's foundational actions (innovation and on-ground action) in a real producing region.

3.2 How should food security be defined in Australia?

In practice, this means:

- Critical inputs such as fuel, fertilisers, energy, water, and workforce are secure and accessible.
- Regional systems can continue to function during disruption, supported by local leadership that coordinates across sectors.
- Communities have access to affordable and nutritious food, including in regions like WSM that export heavily but still have households experiencing food insecurity.

Australia's definition of food security should combine national and regional perspectives. National frameworks set the direction. Regional leadership ensures that implementation works on the ground.

3.3 What are the most pressing risks to Australia's food security ecosystem?

In WSM the main risks are clear. Freight corridors are vulnerable to flooding, bottlenecks and ageing infrastructure. Workforce shortages are already a constraint, especially during harvest peaks, and competition from energy and mining projects is adding pressure. Climate risks are increasing, with more frequent droughts, heat extremes, and water stress.

Our food system also relies heavily on imported inputs. Diesel and fertilisers are the most obvious examples. Agriculture is exposed if these supply lines are disrupted. That exposure will continue until alternative fuels and circular inputs are scaled.

There is also a risk from land use tensions. Energy generation and mineral development bring national benefits but reduce the land and workforce available for farming. At present, this is often seen as a clash and an either/or choice. Land use tensions are best treated as a coexistence design problem, not a zero-sum contest.

The reality is that if managed well, the coexistence of energy and agriculture can increase the resilience of farming systems, providing new income streams and local energy security. That opportunity is being lost without support to plan for coexistence and ensure farmers and communities can benefit.

Finally, food security risks are not only about production. Even in regions like WSM that export large volumes, some households do not have reliable access to food. Any national strategy must treat equity of access as a core risk, alongside production and supply chain resilience.

3.4 How should risks be identified and mitigated across the food system?

Risks need to be identified in a way that covers the whole food system and not only individual sectors. That means looking at production, inputs, freight, processing, retail, and access for households. Each part has its own vulnerabilities but they interact, and a weakness in one area can trigger failures elsewhere.

At the national level there needs to be a structured risk assessment process that is repeated regularly and involves both government and industry. At the regional level, risks can be mapped in more detail and tested through scenarios. In WSM we are prepared to run: freight stress tests on key corridors, seasonal workforce mapping tied to housing availability, and climate-smart farm system pilots that trial local fuel and fertiliser substitutions. Results would feed the national process on a fixed cycle.

Mitigation will often rely on both sides. Government needs to ensure critical inputs are available and supported. Regions need to show how those inputs are used and what local actions will make the system more resilient. Local leadership capacity is essential to hold these pieces together and to make sure energy, food, water and mineral projects can be planned in ways that reduce, rather than add to, risk.

3.5 Which inputs pose the greatest vulnerabilities?

Diesel is the immediate vulnerability. Farming, freight and processing depend on it, and national stockholdings are thin. Transition pathways should include renewable diesel and e-fuels such as e-methanol, proven through regional pilots that protect food-for-fuel trade-offs and build local energy security. The challenge is to manage the tension between crops for food and crops for fuel so that the shift strengthens food security rather than undermines it. With community engagement and support, coexistence can create new income streams for farmers and increase local energy security.

Fertilisers and urea are another major exposure. Much of our supply comes from overseas, including through sea lanes that are vulnerable to disruption. Local production or circular substitutes would reduce this dependency.

Energy reliability is also critical. Cold chains only have days of buffer if the power goes out. Affordable and reliable electricity is essential for processors and distributors, and the current transition to renewables needs to plan explicitly for food system needs.

Digital connectivity is now a core input. Coverage gaps or cyber incidents translate directly into food system risk. From on-farm machinery to logistics and retail systems, the food system depends on reliable and secure networks.

3.6 What governance model would be effective?

Governance has to link national priorities with regional delivery. At the national level there needs to be one clear lead agency. DAFF is the logical choice, but food security also has to be recognised as a national security issue so that agriculture has a seat at the table with other critical infrastructure.

At the regional level, WSM Development convenes the Regional Climate Adaptation and Resilience Group under Commonwealth Future Drought Fund support. The group coordinates across agriculture, water, freight, energy and local government, removes duplication and directs resources to priority actions. Community Adaptation and Climate Resilience (CACR) group is a practical leadership forum that coordinates projects, shares evidence and directs resources to priority actions which can work when thinking about governance at a regional level.

For the access and community relief dimension, the Wimmera Food Security Network will act as the community-facing partner. It is a membership forum meeting quarterly, mapping providers, strengthening referrals and storage capacity, and sharing data to CACR and DAFF/TISN. The Wimmera Food Security Network (facilitated by Centre for Participation) was established in June 2025. Its functions include: system mapping, Data collation and management, referrals, storage and distribution capacity uplift, quarterly coordination forum and advocacy linkages.

Consistent with the Agriculture and Land Sector Plan, WSM will co-design pilots with Traditional Owners to ensure benefits and opportunities flow to First Nations communities, including roles in monitoring, land stewardship, and local processing. We will report these outcomes alongside technical metrics.

First Nations participation and benefit

A national model should therefore combine:

- DAFF as the accountable lead agency.
- Regional leadership platforms that can coordinate across sectors and report into national frameworks.
- Clear two-way channels for risk intelligence and investment priorities between national and regional levels

3.7 Should DAFF be the lead agency?

Yes. Food security needs one clear point of accountability within government, and DAFF is the right agency. Food security involves production, freight, processing, and retail, and DAFF already has links across those systems.

For DAFF to be effective, Food security should be treated as national security. DAFF should have standing representation in the National Security Committee of Cabinet and the Secretaries' Committee on National Security.. This would correct the current gap where agriculture is often treated as separate from critical infrastructure and defence planning.

DAFF also needs to work with regions. National policy cannot be delivered only from Canberra. Regional leadership structures must be supported to coordinate across sectors and feed information and priorities back to DAFF. Without this, national strategy risks failing in implementation.

3.8 How should accountability be embedded at all levels?

Accountability has to be practical and visible. National agencies should set priorities and track progress. States and regions should be responsible for delivery in ways that reflect local realities.

In practice this means:

- DAFF reports to government and the public on national food security priorities.
- States align their planning and investment to those priorities.
- Regions establish leadership platforms that bring sectors together and provide regular reporting into the national system.

In WSM this role is played by the Regional Climate Adaptation and Resilience Group. It brings together agriculture, water, freight, energy and local government, and can provide regular public reporting against agreed regional indicators if supported.

Accountability should not be left only to industry or government. Community trust depends on having place-based leadership that can show how decisions are being made and how risks are being managed.

3.9 How can government balance markets with intervention?

Markets alone will not deliver food security. The costs of freight, energy, fertiliser and fuel are shaped by global forces that regions cannot control. In WSM, growers face high freight costs and tight margins. Without targeted investment these pressures reduce resilience and increase exposure to shocks.

Government intervention should focus on areas where markets are weakest:

- Freight and logistics, where system bottlenecks limit national food movement.
- Critical inputs such as fertiliser and fuel, where dependency on imports creates risk.
- Workforce skills and housing, where shortages undermine resilience.

At the same time, government does not need to replace markets. It should co-invest with industry in ways that strengthen capability and reduce risk. Place-based leadership capacity is essential here. Local structures can help channel investment into projects that reduce tensions between sectors and build coexistence rather than competition.

A balanced approach recognises food as a public good. Markets remain central, but targeted public coinvestment is required where market signals under-provide resilience.

3.10 What role should regions play?

Regions are where food security is made real. National frameworks set direction, but resilience is built or lost in place. In WSM we see this every season. Freight routes flood, labour is short, and new energy or mining projects compete for land and water. These are not abstract risks, they are daily pressures.

Regions have three main roles. Regions produce the food, hold the relationships that enable coexistence, and provide the leadership platforms that connect communities, industries and governments.

A national food security strategy must resource and support this role. Regions like WSM can serve as pilots to show how national goals can be delivered on the ground. Without investment in place-based leadership and capability, strategy will remain on paper and the either/or conflicts between sectors will deepen.

3.11 How can industry, R&D and local government be engaged?

Engagement needs to build on what already exists. Agriculture already has industry levies and RDCs that provide strong structures for investment and coordination. These can be powerful partners in food security if their work is connected more deliberately to national strategy and regional priorities.

Research organisations and universities should be tied in through a Cooperative Research Centre focused on food security, linking industry levies and RDCs to regional pilots so research is tested in real conditions.

Local government brings knowledge of community needs and local infrastructure. In WSM, councils already work with agriculture and energy sectors through bodies like the Regional Partnership and the CACR Group.

The key is leadership. Industry, R&D and local government can all contribute, but coordination does not just happen on its own. Regional leadership platforms need to be resourced and supported so they can connect these partners and keep the focus on practical delivery.

3.12 Which coordination mechanisms are needed?

Coordination has to work at two levels. National structures need to set the overall direction and provide a way for information and risks to be shared. Regional structures need to link sectors and deliver on the ground.

Nationally, expand the Food and Grocery Sector Group within the Trusted Information Sharing Network to include processors, manufacturers and research bodies, with explicit links to regional leadership platforms It would allow industry, government and research bodies to coordinate more formally. This group should include processors and manufacturers, not only farm and retail interests.

At the regional level, mechanisms need to be place-based. In WSM, the CACR Group already plays this role, connecting agriculture, freight, energy, water and local government. With support, this type of body can feed into national coordination while also managing local delivery.

Coordination is strongest when there is visible leadership at the regional level. This ensures that sectors do not work in silos and that conflicts over land, water or labour are managed through coexistence planning rather than left to escalate.

3.13 How should food security link to regional trade and investment?

Australia's export reliability depends on resilient producing regions. WSM is a major contributor to Victoria's grain exports, but that strength relies on freight, inputs and workforce that are under strain. If these systems fail, exports and domestic supply are both disrupted.

Food security strategy should link regional resilience with trade and investment policy. This means:

- Recognising that investment in freight, workforce and inputs in regions like WSM directly supports Australia's reputation as a reliable trading partner.
- Ensuring that trade agreements and regional investment strategies account for the risks of supply chain disruption and support infrastructure that reduces those risks.
- Using concessional finance and export programs to back regional projects that strengthen resilience, such as alternative fuels, fertiliser production, and local processing.

Trade and investment strategy should not be separate from food security. They are part of the same system. Without investment in place-based resilience, Australia's export strength and domestic food security are both at risk.

3.14 How should concessional finance and aid be used?

Concessional finance and aid should be directed to projects that strengthen both domestic and regional food system resilience. For Australia, this means backing initiatives that reduce dependency on imported inputs and keep local production systems viable.

In regions like WSM, concessional finance could support:

- Local production of fertilisers or substitutes to reduce exposure to global chokepoints.
- Development of low carbon liquid fuels to reduce agriculture's reliance on imported diesel.
- Investment in local processing capacity so that more value is retained in-region and supply chains are shorter.

Internationally, concessional finance and aid should support regional partners in the Pacific and Southeast Asia to strengthen their food systems. This not only improves stability but also builds the trade and investment links that Australia depends on.

Finance should be tied to explicit risk-reduction outcomes and to regional governance, so projects are aligned with community priorities and can report measurable benefits.

3.15 How should exports be balanced with domestic security?

Exports are essential to Australia's economy and reputation, but they cannot come at the cost of domestic food security. The key is to strengthen the systems that serve both. Trigger arrangements should prioritise domestic supply during declared disruptions, with transparent criteria and pre-agreed industry protocols.

In WSM, the same freight corridors and storage facilities move grain to export and to domestic markets. When those routes are blocked by flood or congestion, both exports and local supply are disrupted. The balance is not about choosing between domestic and export markets, but about making sure the infrastructure and inputs that serve both are resilient.

This means investing in:

- Freight corridors that can handle peak harvests and withstand climate shocks.
- Local storage and processing that gives flexibility when export routes are disrupted.
- Alternative fuel and fertiliser pathways that reduce the risk of supply interruptions.

With these investments, Australia can remain a reliable exporter and ensure its own communities are fed. Without them, both are put at risk at the same time.

3.16 Which policy options from the Green Paper do you support?

WSM supports options that align with what we see on the ground.

We strongly support:

- Treating food security as an ecosystem, not just a supply chain.
- Designating DAFF as the lead agency for food security preparedness.
- Elevating agriculture into national security decision-making, so that risks are assessed alongside other critical infrastructure.
- Expanding the Food and Grocery Sector Group to include processors, manufacturers and research bodies.
- Developing a structured national risk assessment process that looks across all domains of the food system.
- Creating a regional food security, trade and investment strategy that maps natural advantages and aligns with broader regional policy.

These options provide the national framework. WSM can serve as a pilot to test how they work in practice, particularly the combination of ecosystem framing, regional delivery, and coexistence of food, energy and mineral systems.

We do not comment on intelligence or ONI-led proposals, which are beyond our expertise.

This regional platform delivers the plan's emphasis on partnering and on monitoring, adapting and responding. With modest resourcing, CACR will publish an annual indicators pack into the national system.

3.17 What would success look like?

Success is time-bound and aligned with the plan's transition horizons. By 2030/35/50, WSM pilots will show year-on-year falls in input stockouts and freight delays; a rising share of low-carbon liquid fuels in agricultural energy; and documented farm-level resilience and income diversification from coexistence.

- Priority freight corridors remain open during peak harvests and major flood events, measured by days open and average delays.
- Secure access to critical inputs for farmers and processors, tracked by local price and stockout frequency.

We note fertiliser manufacturing and freight emissions are covered by other sector plans. Delivery therefore requires cross-portfolio alignment (Transport, Industry, Energy) with DAFF as lead, so regional pilots translate into whole-of-economy decarbonisation and resilience.

- Share of agricultural energy from low-carbon liquid fuels rises year on year, with pilots operating in at least one WSM precinct.
- Seasonal workforce gaps reduced, with housing availability indexed to peak labour needs.
- Coexistence frameworks in place for energy and minerals on farm, with participating farms reporting net resilience gains and income diversification.
- Household food insecurity rates in producing LGAs decline. Regional access metrics will be reported via the Wimmera Food Security Network's surveys and mapping, alongside state and national series.
- Regional leadership platforms are resourced and publish annual performance reports into the national system.

Success is not only measured in production volume but in whether the system is resilient, equitable and trusted by the community.

4 Conclusion

Commonwealth concessional tools, such as the Regional Investment Corporation, can anchor this co-investment, with regional platforms accountable for risk-reduction outcomes.

Keeping corridors open and inputs reliable is also how we maintain Australia's edge as a low-emissions, trusted exporter as markets decarbonise.

Australia can build a food security strategy that is strong in design and practical in delivery, but it needs national leadership linked to regional capability. WSM is ready to pilot that delivery. With support, we can show how coexistence across food, energy and minerals works in practice, how risk is reduced without adding conflict, and how communities see the benefits.