

## **Topical talk for the dinner table**

Dr. Peter Wylie, Courier Mail 15/12/07

Australia's imports over \$6 billion worth of food each year, much of which we can produce quite well in this country. Horticultural imports have been increasing and are now greater than exports, with a significant amount of 'seasonal' fruit and vegetables from the northern hemisphere.

We hear a lot about the greenhouse gas emissions from air travel, and the term "food miles" was coined in order to highlight that a lot of our food travels a long way before it is eaten. A lot of the imports of fruit and vegetables are transported by air, not just on passenger jets, but on freight planes.

A close look at food in the supermarket will show fruit and vegetables from many countries such as California, New Zealand and China, while many items of fancy foods come from all over the world.

Eating more local food will not only reduce 'food miles' and help to manage climate change, it will help Australian farmers and reduce the deficit on our balance of trade. There is less risk of importing disease and there is more surety for local food that the farming practices and processing are at high standards compared to imported food.

Greenhouse friendly buying habits involves enjoying fruits like grapes and melons when they are in season during our summer and moving onto apples and stonefruits in autumn, while the citrus harvest starts in early winter. Buying fruit out of season encourages imports.

*Farmers Markets* are a good connection with local produce. In Brisbane it is possible to have boxes of local fruit and vegetables delivered weekly, along with an explanation on which foods are not seasonally available.

But while there is concern about the greenhouse gases that are emitted by the vehicles which transport food, there are many other aspects of energy use in the production, packaging and cooking of food.

It also affects our pocket. For most foods bought in the supermarket, the packaging costs more than what the farmer is paid for the ingredients and it can use more energy than producing or transporting the food.

For example, the farmer receives around 30cents for the 750 grams of wheat in a packet of breakfast wheat biscuits, about the same cost as the box. The more fresh and unpackaged food we eat, the more we are likely to save money. At the same time we will eat better and help the environment.

Energy consumption is increased by the waste which occurs with fresh food because we are terribly fussy consumers. Fruit and vegetable growers will tell you they often throw away or plough in as much as they sell, because the produce is just not right for the supermarket shelf or there is a seasonal glut at harvest time. A lot of fruit is thrown out by shops, due to the way people pick over and squeeze the fruit on display. It all adds a lot to the cost.

Some foods require a lot of energy to produce. Meat production is under fire, with calculations that halving our average meat intake of 300 grams per day, will save 1.4 tonnes of greenhouse emissions per person per year, similar to reducing car travel by 4,700 kms per year.

However, most of figures used for beef production overstate the greenhouse emissions by accounting for methane at 21 times the value of carbon dioxide, where it should be 11 because the origin of the methane is from a renewable energy source. Greenhouse gas savings also depend upon the alternative. Pork and chicken convert grain into meat more efficiently, but may not be much different in total energy use than grass-fed beef. Fish is more efficient again and as the world runs short of food we are likely to see less expansion of beef feedlots and more grain used to produce fish.

Reducing the greenhouse gas output from food can arise from choices made at the supermarket shelves. Eating locally produced food, choosing more fruit and vegetables without packaging and rejecting those butter laden biscuits from Belgium and Scotland will make us healthier and our standard of living healthier as well.