

# AFCCC chairman calls on the industry to change cold chain

Cold chain culture must change if food waste targets are to be met, writes Mark Mitchell, chairman of the Australian Food Cold Chain Council.

I have made abundantly clear in earlier stories that the Australian cold food chain is well and truly broken in more than one place. Indeed, those involved in the industry, including food producers, distributors and retailers agree that there are problems that need fixing.

Those companies that have to face sometimes crippling insurance premiums or just cop the loss of food from a transport or storage asset that had to be dumped or discounted because it was out of temperature will know the feeling.

Wearing my AFCCC hat, I go to many meetings with a range of industry players. Invitations are plentiful and I guess it is because I am spelling out the unsavoury truths about the problems which are contributing towards the annual loss and waste of 7.6 million tonnes of produce every year, amounting to a value of \$25 billion. And it's not just the value of the food that is wasted, but its growing costs, water costs, energy costs and the annual greenhouse gas emissions amounting to 20 million tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>e.

The figures, for a so-called modern and progressive country like Australia are appalling, and everyone I speak to agrees.

What I am about to say will be unpopular, but someone has to say the bleeding obvious – if left to the cold chain industry at large, nothing will change and the potential for even bigger losses of food are ever present. I know that's generalising, and I know there are many industry groups that are following world best practice in the handling of their produce.

I could draw an analogy between the secrecy that contributes to the lack of sharing of essential temperature data as food passes through its sometimes-tortuous journey from farm to plate, and the reluctance that we didn't quite expect from many in the industry to share their data, upskill their front-line

staff, and adopt quality management measures that could easily change the situation overnight.

On the surface, this all sounds depressing, but with or without the support of the entire cold chain industry, changes are happening, slowly but surely.

I sensed this very recently as I presented at a three-day workshop for APEC, the Pacific economies that have adopted an aggressive program of investigation and action to reduce food loss and waste within their economies. This move began when I first attended a session in 2018, and this year, I noted a much larger contingent of influential people from government and industry who have picked up the banner and want to help.

On the national public front, the Commonwealth Government led the way by adopting the EU goal of 2030 to halve food waste and has financed detailed studies to determine the real extent and cost of food waste across all food types. The main report, released in early 2020 opened many eyes to the problem. Information is one thing – taking action on it is something else.

Realising that more had to be done to stimulate industry, the government has financed a huge program for Stop Food Waste Australia, a powerful partnership of committed organisations who operate along the farm-to-fork food supply chain.

They are focusing on four areas: developing new products for food that might otherwise be wasted or ploughed back into the ground; collaborating with industry partners to identify the root cause of food waste and the solutions to it; maximising food rescue from farms, creating new upcycled food and ingredients; and helping consumers get more value from the food and drink they buy.

Stop Food Waste Australia is signing up a minimum of 50 of Australia's major food suppliers to commit to a new food loss and waste accounting and reporting standard and devoting some of their resources and expertise towards achieving the goals of what will become known as the Australian Food Pact, due for official launching in August.

Instead of regulation, which the industry certainly doesn't want, the

Pact is a voluntary agreement that follows a proven international way of tackling food waste, focusing on prevention, reducing waste and food chain transformation and innovation. The AFCCC is part of this process.

And finally, even COVID has impacted on attitudes to Australia's food loss and waste in unexpected ways. People have stayed at home more and engaged in more home cooking, meaning food retailers have done well and even food growers have noticed more 'whole of crop' purchases by the supermarkets.

Consumers are starting to ask more questions about their food purchases. Their renewed interest in the raw food produce has triggered mounting questions about food safety, provenance, packaging and whether the food is Australian made.

Solutions are being applied to many of these post-COVID issues, but the fact remains that a significant culture change is needed throughout the cold chain industry, from farm to plate, if Australia is to have any chance of meeting its target of halving food loss and waste by 2030. **FB**



Industry leaders are being called on to overhaul the cold supply chain.